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Dramatis Personae

The Townspeople

AHDIOVIZUN; AHDIOMERVIZ; AHDIO—Proprietor of Sly's Place, a legendary dive within the Maze.

AYE-GOPHLAN—Captain of the palace guard before the arrival of Prince Kadakithis. Now he is one of three men charged with keeping the peace in Sanctuary.

LALO THE LIMNER—Street artist gifted with magic he does not fully understand.

GILLA—His indomitable wife.

GANNER—Their middle son, slain during the False Plague riots of the previous winter which signaled the end of severe civil unrest in Sanctuary.

VANDA—Their daughter, employed as nursemaid to the Beysib at the palace.

HAKIEM—Storyteller and confidant extraordinaire.

HORT—Son of a fisherman and now Hakiem's sometime apprentice.

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JUBAL—Prematurely aged former gladiator. Once he openly ran Sanctuary's most visible criminal organization, the hawkmasks; now he works behind the scenes.

MASHA ZIL-INEEL—Midwife whose involvement in the destruction of the Purple Mage enabled her to move from the Maze to respectability uptown.

MELILOT—Owner of a scriptorium where letters can be written or translated.

MRADHON vis—Nisibisi adventurer and sometime spy. He has betrayed almost everyone and been betrayed in return, but he is a consummate

survivor.

MYRTIS—Madam of the Aphrodisia House.

SHAFRALAIN—Sanctuary nobleman who can trace his lineage and his money back to the days of Iffsig's glory.

ESARIA—His nubile daughter.

EXPIMILIA—His wife.

CUSHARLAIN—His cousin. A customs inspector and investigator.

SNAPPER JO—A friend who survived the destruction of magic in Sanctuary. Now employed as a bartender in the Vulgar Unicorn.

ZIP—Bitter young terrorist. Leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Sanctuary (PFLS). Now he and his remaining fighters have been designated as officials responsible for peace in the city.

The S*danzo

ILLYRA—Half-blood S'danzo seeress with True Sight. Wounded by PFLS

in the False Plague Riots.

DUBRO—Bazaar blacksmith and husband to Illyra.

ARTON—Their son, marked by the gods as part of the emerging

diety known as the Stormchildren. He was sent to the Bandaran

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Islands for his education and safety—and to remove him from

Sanctuary.

LILLIS—Their daughter, slain in the False Plague riots.

TREVYA—A newborn orphan girl placed in their care by Walegrin.

MOONFLOWER—S'danzo seeress of remarkable obesity who was slain by

Beysib guards who had mistakenly attacked her husband.

THE TERMAGANT—Oldest of the S'danzo women practicing her craft in

Sanctuary.

The Magicians

ENAS YORL—Quasi-immortal mage cursed with eternal life and a constantly changing physical form.

ISCHADE—Necromancer and thief. Her curse is passed to her lovers who die from it. Her rivalry with Roxane drew her into the murky realm of Sanctuary's politics from which she has yet to extricate herself.

ROXANE; DEATH'S QUEEN—Nisibisi witch. Nearly destroyed when Stormbringer purged magic from Sanctuary, she is trapped inside a warded house and a dead man's body.

HAUGHT—One-time apprentice oflschade who betrayed her and is now trapped with Roxane.

TASFALEN—The dissolute Rankan nobleman, one oflschade's lovers, whose body has become Roxane's prison.

STRICK; TORAZELAN STRICK TIFIRAQA— White Mage who has made Sanctuary his home. He will help anyone who comes to him, but there is always a Price, sometimes trivial and sometimes not, for his aid.

AVENESTRA; AVNEH—Once a preteen prealcoholic barfly at Sly's

Place. Now Strick's very young receptionist with a sweet tooth.

FRAX—Former palace guardsman, now Strick's fiercely loyal guard.

WINTSENAY; WINTS—A down-and-out young Ilsig whose life has improved immeasurably since he began working for Strick.

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Visitors in Sanctuary

JARVEENA—A woman, once Melilot's apprentice, who, with Enas Tori's help, unveiled a plot to assassinate Prince Kadakithis shortly after his arrival in Sanctuary. In the intervening years she has been employed as Melilot's trading agent, and her many hideous scars have been slowly fading.

SAMLOR HIL SAMT, Trader from the north. His sister died in Sanctuary and his business sometimes brings him back to the city.

STAR—His seven-year-old niece. A single lock of white grows amid her black hair. The Beysibs claim this is the mark of the favor of their gods and the child does seem to have some strange abilities.

The Rankans Living in Sanctuary

CHENAYA; DAUGHTER OF THE SUN—^ beautiful and powerful young woman who is fated never to lose a fight. She is the prince's cousin and is working to raise an army of gladiators which will place him on the imperial throne.

PRINCE KADAKITHIS—Charismatic but somewhat naive half-brother of the assassinated emperor, Abakithis.

KAMA; JES—Tempus's daughter. 3rd Commando assassin. Sometime lover of Critias, Zip, and Molin Torchholder.

MOLIN TORCHHOLDER; TORCH—Archpriest of Sanctuary's wargod (whichever deity that is at the moment). Architect for the rebuilt walls of Sanctuary. Supreme bureaucratic administrator of the city.

RANKAN 3RD COMMANDO—Mercenary company founded by

Tempus Thales and noted for its brutal efficiency.

GAYLE—A member of that company.

STEPSONS; SACRED BANDERS—Members of a mercenary unit loyal to Tempus. Their years in Sanctuary have been among the worst in their history and they are eager to leave for anywhere else.

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CRITIAS; CRIT—Longtime mercenary in the company. An intelligence gatherer and assistant to Tempus. Also the partner of Straton, though that pairing has been in disarray for some time now.

STRATON; STRAT; ACE—Partner of Critias. Injured by the PELS at the start of the False Plague riots. He has been Ischade's lover and though her curse has not killed him, most of his former associates count him among Sanctuary's damned.

TEMPUS THALES; THE RIDDLER—Nearly immortal mercenary, a partner of Vashanka before that god's demise; commander of the Stepsons; cursed with a fatal inability to give or receive love.

WALEGRIN—Rankan army officer assigned to the Sanctuary garrison where his father had been slain by the S'danzo many years before. He is now one of three officers responsible for the peace in Sanctuary. He is also Illyra's half-brother.

The Beysib

SHUPANSEA; SHU-SEA—Head of the Beysib exiles in Sanctuary; mortal avatar of the Beysib mother goddess. Lover of Prince Kadakithis whom she wishes to marry.

CHABOSTU; CHA-BOS—A daughter born before Shupansea was driven into exile.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Lynn Asprin

Military units have never been noted for their punctuality, and the Stepsons were no exception. Even though their departure was originally planned for shortly after dawn, it was nearly noon before the first pair actually swung aboard their horses and headed off amid waves and good-natured catcalls from their comrades. This was not a regular army unit, but a free company of mercenaries, so the formations and columns one might expect in a troop relocation were nowhere in evidence. Rather, the men set out on their journey in pairs or small groups as they were ready, with no thought to waiting for the others. Indeed, it was doubtful they would even all take the same route to their new posting. However disorganized or leisurely their departure might be though, one thing was clear. The Stepsons were leaving Sanctuary.

Relatively few townspeople had gathered to witness their passing, but the first pair waved at them anyway as they set off. No one returned their salutation.

Of the watchers, two men were notable if only from the diversity of the pair. One was old, his hair more silver-white than gray, while the other was a youth barely out of his teens. The younger was dressed in the humble garb of the town's lower class, while the elder man's finery marked him as one who moved in richer, perhaps even royal, circles,

That they were together, however, was never in question. Not simply because they stood together and exchanged comments, though that would have been sufficient evidence for most. Even more apparent was their manner. While they conversed freely, their eyes never met, but instead remained focused on what was going on around them. Close

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attention was paid to the departing pair of Stepsons as if attempting to memorize their appearance and gear, then switched once more to the preparation of the remaining mercenaries.

Were they not so open in their scrutiny, the two might be mistaken for spies. As it was, they were ignored, for neither was unknown around the city. The younger was Hort, a lowly storyteller; the older, Hakiem, once a talespinner himself and mentor to Hort, was now adviser to the ruler of the Beysib.

"Well, it actually looks like they're going."

"Of course," Hakiem replied without looking at his friend. "Did you doubt it?"

"Yes, and so did you." Hort smiled. "But that didn't keep us from being out here at dawn. We should have known that even if anything happened, it wouldn't happen until later."

"True enough. Still, if we had slept in and they had decided to get underway on time, we would have missed it completely."

The younger man snuck a sideways glance at Hakiem.

"I can see where that would affect me," he said, "but why should it make any difference to you? Your storytelling days are behind you now."

"Call it habit," the old man grunted. "Besides, an adviser needs information as much as a storyteller, and the best information is still that which you gather yourself."

The men fell silent as another pair of Stepsons rode by

"Well, it actually looks like they're going," Hort repeated, almost to himself.

Hakiem hawked and spat noisily in the dust.

"Good riddance!" he declared with sudden vehemence. "The sooner

they're clear of the town, the better it will be for all of us! There has been nothing but chaos and death in the city since they arrived. Maybe now things will return to normal!"

Hort struggled, but lost his brief bout with silence-

"As I recall, Hakiem, there was chaos and death in Sanctuary long before the Stepsons put in their appearance. I don't see where they've been any worse than Jubal's hawkmasks used to be ... or your pet fish-eyed friends for that matter- It's wrong to try to blame the Stepsons for all our problems . . . and dangerous to think things will return to normal when they've left. I don't think I even know what normal is anymore."

Hakiem turned away, his eyes avoiding both Hort and the departing Stepsons.

"You're right, of course," he admitted. "Though the Beysib have been far gentler with our town than the Stepsons, who were supposed to be

INTRODUCTION

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guarding it. Water does not flow upstream, nor does time run backward. Sanctuary will never be what it was. Hawkmarks, Stepsons, Beysib - . . . they've all had their impact on the town, and their presence will never be

completely removed. Even the new laborers who are here to work on the walls will change our lives, though in what ways we have yet to find out.

All we can do is what we've always done: watch. Watch and hope."

"Speaking of the new laborers," Hort said with an almost forced casualness, "have you heard anything of people disappearing?"

"I assume you mean dropping out of sight without turning up dead later," Hakiem retorted drily.

"That's right." The youth nodded. "Able-bodied men you'd think would be able to take care of themselves. I've heard of three so far."

"It's news to me. Still, I'll keep my ears open."

A group of Stepsons walked their horses by, not even looking at the assembled watchers.

Though he would never admit it openly, the withdrawal of the Stepsons as well as the Rankan 3rd Commando from Sanctuary concerned Hakiem much more than the disappearance of a few common laborers. He wondered how much of what was happening in town Hort was aware of and simply not commenting on and how much he was actually oblivious to.

There was a fight brewing. A contest of wills, if not swords, between the town and the Rankan Empire. He did not for a moment believe that it was coincidence that the Stepsons were being pulled out of town just when the tax issue was reaching a head. The question was, would they be back? If the empire tried to enforce its orders by force, would the Stepsons be the whip for the empire or the shield for the town? Or would they stay away, maintaining a mercenaries' neutrality, and not return until the matter was resolved ... if they returned at all?

The old man studied faces, but could not find a clue to the future written anywhere: neither a hint of the future in the faces of the mercenaries, nor a glimmer of realization of the stakes that were being played for in those of the townsfolk.

CADE

Mark C. Perry

In another time, in another place, he could have been something else. He could have been a hero, or a general, a priest, or a king. But he was born in Sanctuary and that made him a killer.

Cade stood on a low hill looking down on the city. Sanctuary. He turned his head and spat Sanctuary, the capital of hell. He had left the city eleven years ago, after killing a man, his first. Now he was back, to kill again. Somewhere in that cesspit his brother's body lay rotting, all his

bones cracked by some torturer It was that someone whom Cade was going to kill

The wind shifted and the stench of the city assaulted him After the long nde through the clean desert the smell was a physical force, full of wet decay, the smell of man at his worst. Victim and hunter were all the same in Sanctuary The evil of his birthplace was alive, active, infecting everything that came into contact with it.

The sun was going down, dusk slowly covered the decrepitude of the city's ancient buildings, but the shadows could not hide it all, even from this distance. Cade was surprised to see a new wall going up around the town but it hardly helped the view, for surely that wall was not so much to keep enemies out as the inhabitants in. Even a madman would see there was no gain to be had by conquering Sanctuary

Cade smiled to himself at the thought Attack Sanctuary—better to fight for a beggar's bowl He turned to face west. A house or something burned sullenly there, ignored by the inhabitants of Downwind, the worst part of the whole place. Downwind .

And that, he told himself, is a place and a name you promised never to

have anything to do with again But of course he knew promises meant nothing in hell . .

If Sanctuary could be called the place of his birth, it was Downwind that had created him There he had lived between the age of six and sixteen There he had learned about the world, the real world, the truth behind all the lies that men blind themselves with He had learned about fear, fear in his poor brother's eyes, who had always tried to protect his younger sibling, even though it was Cade who was the real protector He learned of despair, as the money became scarcer and the food rarer, and their mother did anything, anything, so that she could keep her little family together

He remembered her tears when she heard he'd joined the gang, she was dead by the time he became their warlord His time with the Demons taught him the most valuable lesson of Sanctuary He learned about blood, and death

Cade was so talented then, talented in the harsh passion of the violent The street brought out the blood in all its miserable inhabitants, but some like Cade were born for blood and shed it and lost it with equal calm

He called it the waterfall, though he was eighteen before he ever saw a real one. It was the moment when you either let go and hit until you fell or you were pulled off and fear never entered into it at all That was the mark of the talent, because some could do it when they were backed in a

comer, all could do it sometimes, but Cade would do it every time

He wondered if any of the Demons were still there probably not, they were either dead, or they had gotten out and would never come back
What did it matter^ They were all punks anyway Still, some of them might remember him.

He laughed thinking about it, but there was no humor in that sound
Wouldn't they be surprised to see him again^ The local boy come back in triumph He had made good by Sanctuary standards He was much beyond most men's imagination, and powerful, very powerful

He had turned his talent into a very profitable art The art of death.
For a fee he killed He was more than an assassin and less than a murderer. For he did kill with passion, but never pleasure He killed in the name of mankind to free his victims from lies

For Sanctuary had taught Cade the most valuable of all lessons, it had taught him the truth In all its pain and agony, poverty and despair, was written the LAW, in ironclad runes of blood

And the LAW was one simple word Hell . .

For the world was not a hell, he knew that, it was the hell, the only true hell A man lived a life of pain, no matter who or what he was, the

punishment was daily. When he died, he either went somewhere better,

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or his spirit was annihilated for all time. It was simple really: the good, they went to their just desserts; the evil could sink no further, so they were destroyed.

All this ran through his thoughts as he stared down at the place he hated most. He was little concerned. He believed he had only killed the genuinely good or the genuinely evil, never those in-between. Now he was going to kill his brother's murderer and he was worried. What if the killer was neither good nor evil? What if he had not made the final choice—could Cade kill him then? After all, he was no soldier like his unknown father, butchering because someone told him to. He was very careful in accepting contracts, very careful in his death-dealing that whomever he brought the final moment to was either good or evil, either free or doomed. What if ...

"Enough!" he cried out loud. Somewhere in the Maze TerreFs family waited in fear, in fear for their lives and in agony over the dead man they had loved so much. Cade would protect them. Terrel would have wanted that, but Cade would do more; he would use them as he had always used anyone he needed. Use them to find the murderer and for the first time in his long career he would not kill cleanly or quickly. No matter who had

to die, or why, this time Cade would have vengeance!

He knelt down and cleared a space on the ground at his feet. He withdrew a dagger and began to make marks in the dirt. Here a slash for Tempus; there a curve for Ischade, others for Molin Torchholder, Jubal, Chenaya, the Stepsons, the PFLS, the Rankan 3rd Commando, Enas Yorl ... He had run out of room. Sanctuary had managed to become the most dangerous place in the empire. It was truly hell's own capital. And all its demon princes were fighting for its bitter rule.

His information was incomplete. He could barely believe Tempus would stay here with the whole empire falling apart around him. And if Tempus went ... he scratched out the marks for the Rankan 3rd Commando, and the Stepsons. He shook his head; it helped, but not by much.

Then he scratched in a fish eye. Beysibs. Now what the hell were they? Were they like other men? What happened when they died? Too, too many questions.

If it had been just magic, or men ... but there were gods here now.

All sorts of godly manifestations had taken place here, though his people had claimed that things had quieted down of late. Hardly a comforting thought-

He gripped the handle of the dagger tightly. It was all too unclear, too many random factors. Even Cade could not keep himself hidden from the

gods, frauds though they were. Still, part of him hoped the trail would lead to one of these gods- He had only ever killed one obscure demigod.

CADE

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To cast down one of the great ones, those masters of the great lie, ah, now that would nearly make Terrel's horrid death worthwhile.

There was no point in going in quietly; this town was a catastrophe just waiting to happen. Why, any of these—he ground his foot into the dirt erasing the names—could be his target. Or all of them. Many of them would have the ability to find him; some would certainly know his name, others would be intelligent enough to make the connection between him and Terrel. No, he would simply advertise his presence and let the killers come to him, or others approach him with information. He stood up.

"This is going to be messy," he said to the empty land around him. But he would slip into the city later tonight and check in with his people before he revealed himself.

"I'm coming home," he whispered.

Cade took another sip of the wine, his black eyes searching the face of the man across from him at the oaken table. Targ was a good man. He had never failed a mission, but he was dangerous. Cade would have to be very careful how he used this one, very careful.

"So," Cade said, "I was right about Tempus and the others. Still, there are quite a few with power remaining."

"The streets are safer than even a few months ago," Targ answered, his thick hand digging in his beard. "The coalition seems to be holding, at least for now."

Just then the door to the house was opened. A young woman dressed in a fine gown and a dark shawl walked in.

"I told you not to go out at night," Targ said, though his voice carried no concern.

"I was just checking on Sarah," she answered, staring unabashedly at Cade, who simply stared back. Targ waved a hand at Cade.

"Our employer," he said. Marissa stood by the door, a little unsure of how to react.

"Sit," Cade said, watching as the woman seated herself, near Targ, but not too near. So, Cade thought to himself, she fears him. I wonder how much she knows. "Targ," he said aloud, "says you have done well. My brother's wife trusts you."

"Yes." She nodded. "She and I have become friends, lord." Cade smiled slightly at the title but he didn't correct her.

"She doesn't know that you work for me."

"No, lord, she waits for you, knowing that you will, ah, help."

"Understand one thing." Cade's voice was harsh. "I have come for ^enge, nothing more."

"I think Sarah understands, lord."

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"And tell me how does it feel to be the Lady Marissa?"

"Better"—she smiled—"than it did to be the slave girl Donan." Cade did not answer her smile. Disguised as an old merchant, he had bought the girl's freedom. Then two months ago he had sent her here with Targ to set up a base for him. It was no accident that the house next to this was his sister-in-law Sarah's.

He tasted the wine while the other two waited for him to speak. Cade nodded his head once. Good, they had done well, the girl in particular-

She hardly resembled the anemic creature he had freed so many months ago. She had been a find, that one. Able to speak court Rankene, and read and write: a rare find

And she was strong. He could sense that in people. After what this girl

had been through it was surprising she retained her sanity. Cade had seen the scars that covered her back and thighs. He liked her; she was good and if he didn't need her he would free her from life's black curse, but

first . . .

"Some here might still know me," he said. "Terrel did not hide the fact

that it was I who bought his house, and his shop." He stood up. "Therefore I see no reason for further subterfuge on my part." He picked up his

sword belt and buckled it about his waist.

"Tomorrow," he addressed the two, "I will ride into town at dawn. I will go straight to Terrel's home. Let those who might care know that I am here. You two must remember: You do not know me, I do not know you. Since Lady Marissa is a friend of Sarah's, and I will be staying at her house, we will have plenty of opportunity to get to know one another."

He smiled and turned to go.

"Ah, one last thing, Targ." The mercenary just looked up. "Tomorrow, go to the guild. Get a few guards for this house, especially a good bowman. From now on I want both houses under constant surveillance."

"You expect someone to make a move?" Targ asked. Cade shrugged.

"If they do not, I will." And with that he was gone- Targ got up and locked the door. He could see no trace of Cade in the night, and if he couldn't, no one he knew could.

"Well, what do you think?" he said.

"I don't know. He's strange," Marissa answered, "scary."

Targ snorted. "He is a fanatic, a madman." Targ sat down and reached for the wine. "And probably the most dangerous man I have ever met."

There was fear in Targ's gray eyes, and that made Marissa shiver. Whatever could scare the strange mercenary was nothing she wanted to deal with. What had that old merchant Rotten her involved in?

CADE

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Targ opened the trapdoor to the roof, climbing up the ladder with silent agility. His sensitive nose welcomed the fresh air. The roof was flat, and a thin three-foot wall surrounded it. Targ moved to the wall, peering over at the house next door. The two-story building was cloaked in shadows; no light showed from behind the thickly shuttered windows. Targ stared at the dark shape for a long time, trying to spot any figures that

might be concealed in the shadows, but he could detect nothing.

His thick hands fondled the pommel of his sword. His eyes burned red in the night. Even if Cade was hidden somewhere in those shadows, Targ knew from long experience that he would be invisible. Cade. He swore under his breath. Cade.

He knew Cade was uncomfortable with this job; it wasn't their usual sort of job. This wasn't for money, or for the great war he always spoke about; this was for Cade. Targ looked over the roofs of the town; somewhere out there a murderer, a torturer was hiding, but it wouldn't do any good: Cade would find him and Targ refused to even try to imagine what that madman's vengeance would be ...

No, this wasn't their usual sort of job at all.

Targ shifted nervously, sniffing at the wind. The air carried its own messages, its own secrets, and the scents spoke to Targ, as they never could to an ordinary man-

Sometimes Targ wondered if Cade was a man. What really went on in his mind? Who could say? Only Cade, and he wasn't talking.

But together the two had shared much. If killing and blood could be considered sharing. How many had the two killed? Ten? Twenty? A

hundred? Targ had quit counting long ago.

Cade hated this place, hated Sanctuary. Only his brother's death could have brought him back. Targ knew Terrel had been the only person Cade really cared about and now he was dead.

"Gods," Targ mouthed. He heard a cry. It sounded like a woman. The lonely sound was lost in the wind. Was it fear in that sound, or madness? In Sanctuary it was hard to tell the two apart. Perhaps he should go and see, perhaps . . . but no. His illusions of being the great hero were long gone, lost in that same night that had taken his ordinary mortality away.

He would help Cade as he always did. First because Cade only asked him to help kill those who deserved it, the real bastards. And second because Cade knew, knew of his curse and never showed fear, or disgust ... or much of anything.

How could he explain to Cade that he liked Sanctuary? There was something here, something that soothed and calmed the curse. He had only needed to kill twice since he came here. For two months he had lived with the slave girl and successfully hidden the truth from her. And

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both of the kills had been ones who deserved it ... Targ growled softly in his throat, remembering the screams and the blood. Murderers and

rapists both, they had deserved it. They had.

He had heard there was a vampire here, Ischade. A vampire. In all the years he had been fighting the great war, never had he met a real vampire, or for that matter a real werewolf.

Cade watched the sun rise slowly, its light defining the harsh edge of Sanctuary. He reached back and slowly braided his long hair. It was an Ilsigi warbraid, something not seen in Sanctuary in a long time, something Cade had to do. He was returning, but he wouldn't do it quietly, or simply. He was back and the braid was his way of making one thing clear: No one and nothing would make him bow. He was not the same boy who had run away so long ago; run with the blood of a merchant on his hands, blood he had never meant to shed. But one thing was still the same. He had left as a killer and he was returning as one.

He gently stroked his horse on the nose, smiling as it tried to take a nip at his new braid, then lifted himself smoothly into the saddle and took a moment to settle his weapons.

He was no warrior, not in the normal sense- He did not fight in great battles, riding for honor and glory. He'd just as soon use a knife or a garrote in the dark as swing a sword, but that didn't mean he wasn't a dangerous swordsman. Indeed, only the best could match him in bladework, and even fewer were as adept with no weapons at all.

He had always known he would come back, though until this moment he had denied it. He had taken the gifts of Sanctuary and now he would bring them back . . .

He kicked the horse, heading it toward the main gate that pierced the half-finished wall. He sat straight in the saddle, comfortable with the gait of the horse. His cloak was thrown back to reveal the rich armor beneath. His sword alone was worth more money than most Sanctuarites could ever hope to see in their lives.

He smiled- It appealed to him, coming back like this, flaunting his wealth and his scars. The scars covered his hands, crisscrossed his features. His face was smooth-shaven; his hard smile emphasized the strong chin. The horse's steady pace brought him closer to the wall.

It loomed above him, beckoning him on, down the road into the ugly maw of hell. The other passengers of the road made room for him to pass. They knew trouble when they saw it. Maybe it was the tight muscles they sensed moving beneath the armor, or the sharp weapons that he carried. But maybe it was something else.

CADE 21

He had come home, to Sanctuary. He is Cade, here to return the city's gifts. He is Cade and he is riding into hell, with death his only follower.

Sarah walked about the main room in aimless circles. Her hand darted out to touch a chest here, a wall hanging there. There was no thought behind her motion; she tried not to think too much. She stopped, staring at a blank wall, fighting the urge to just cry—no, not cry but shout, scream, pound, and break things.

He's gone . . .

That was what it always led to, the thinking, that he was gone. Terrel, her husband, her love, Terrel, he's gone . . . She always tried to stop it there, but it continued, relentlessly, the memories still so fresh after almost half a year.

They had killed him right here in this room, while she slept. She heard nothing, nothing- Waking up, he wasn't beside her and she was always up first. Small annoyance, walking about, the children still asleep, going downstairs. Gods, she'd almost walked right past it. Even with all the blood.

His blood.

It had covered everything, the wall, the floor, even the ceiling and there in the middle, his skin so pale. His naked body looking tiny in that immensity of red horror. Spread out, bent at odd angles, the bones; the

embalmer said they had broken all his bones. All his bones. How could they do that? There were so many bones. How could they break them all?

He's gone . . .

Those dark eyes, so kind, so full of pain. His gentle touch, warm breath on her neck. He's gone and she didn't even know why they had killed him.

"Gods, have mercy," but there were no tears to punctuate her plea. They had dried up in the horror of the last months. If he had fallen, or gotten sick, if he had even just died, but this . . . that pale body. Sarah knew the memory would never leave her.

"He's gone," she said aloud, slumping down in a cool corner. Thank the All-Mother for the Lady Marissa. She had taken the children to the Bazaar with her. If they saw their mother like this . . . She shook her head violently. If it would just go away for a while. The harsh visions scarring her memory like blood staining the walls, drying slowly, covering everything, everywhere . . .

Sarah was startled by the loud thump thump of someone banging on the door- She got up, adjusting her clothes. But it wouldn't be Marissa;

^ had just left. Carefully she opened the door.

The sun was bright that morning and it streamed through the door-

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way, leaving her visitor in backlit shadow. He was tall, with broad shoulders, his armor glinting. For a minute she thought it was the guard captain Walegrin. He had actually been kind to her, almost gentle. Her thoughts jumped. News, did they have news? Who did it . . . ? But no, Walegrin was even larger than this man, taller, more muscular.

"Sarah," he said, and his voice was full of strange emotions. But there was something about him. Something. He stepped farther out of the shadows and she felt a sharp pain.

Terrel, she almost said. It was there in his face, though Terrel had never had such scars. This man's skin was tanned, weathered, hard like his armor and body.

"Cade," she whispered. He had come. He was here. For a moment he seemed at a loss- He seemed to retreat into shadow, but there was the memory of Terrel in that face.

"I wish to come in," Cade said.

"Oh, of course, please come in. I'm sorry, I was so startled, I mean, please come in." He moved past her, his weapons and armor jingling slightly.

"You should look to see who is at the door before you open it," he said.

"Yes, I should, I suppose, I mean. Do you want anything? To drink,

or . . ." Her voice trailed off, her confusion overwhelming her. He

turned to look at her.

She was attractive in a way. Her face was round, but thin. Her features seemed somehow disjointed, as if a thin veil covered them. Her eyes darted about, not meeting his gaze. But they were her best feature.

Brown in an ordinary way, now filled with knowledge and taut pain. She was pretty, her bare shoulder showing in the disarrayed dress. She was pretty. The thought surprised him. It was the sadness, always the sadness- When he saw it in women he could never turn from it, never ignore it; it always made them so pretty. He hoped his vengeance would cause

her no more . . . sadness.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. They both knew what he meant.

"Wine?" she asked, letting the moment pass.

"Wine." He followed her into the dining area, seating himself at the scarred wooden table. She handed him a goblet, the best she had. He poured the wine; the sound of the goblet filling reverberated loudly in the room. He put the decanter down, not looking at her, not touching the drink.

"You said in your letter," his voice was husky, "you said that Terrel was involved with the PFLS."

"I, Terrel . . ." She bowed her head. "I, yes. He ... helped."

"Money?"

CADE 23

"A little. He didn't like the Rankans"—her voice got softer—"but he wasn't really involved, not in a ... he didn't deserve . . ." but it was too much and she could say no more.

"I'm sorry," he said again. "Neither of us like Rankans. Mother always said they killed our father. He wore this."—he touched his war-

braid—"my father did."

"Cade." She dared to look up, but couldn't meet his steady gaze.

"Terrel, he—" She stopped. Could you talk of love to such a man?

Cade stood up. "I will get my things. You have a room for me?" She just nodded. "Good. Sarah, we will talk later. I am here. I cannot take away what has happened, but I am here. You need never fear." With that he was gone. She sat there staring at the goblet. She should get up, show him the room, the room she had prepared, prepared months ago, but he would find it, know it was for him.

The dim light from the window glinted off the enamel overlay of the goblet. He was . . . Terrel had never said much about Cade, not Cade as a man. He was full of stories of their childhood, of the slow decline into poverty, of the family holding itself together fiercely, as all around them melted into the grayness of despair. Terrel had said that Cade was the stronger. A fighter. Nothing could beat Cade.

But who was this man, this man with his weapons and armor clanking about him, his ridiculous warbraid—who wore those anymore? She knew so little of him. Terrel had said he was some sort of warrior, but rich. She knew that. He had set Terrel up in business, bought this house. Money, yes, but ... a shiver caught her by surprise.

His eyes, that's what it was. Not the scars of the sword, or even his

strange way of talking. It was his eyes. She could see them clearly, reflected in the odd light of the goblet, framed by the hard lined face, the thick heavy brows, the impossibly black hair. His eyes. They were black, black like Terrel's, but ...

She reached out and grabbed the goblet. His eyes, they were like weapons, spearing her, attacking everything they focused on, jabbing about, terrifying. She put the goblet down in front of her. It was bent, imprinted by his fingers when he had crushed it, unknowing. But Sarah did not see that. All she could see were those two black eyes.

Several days later Cade sat on a stone bench in the small courtyard behind Terrel's house sharpening his sword. With one hand he steadied the blade while with the other he held the whetstone, slowly smoothing out the minor imperfections in the razor-sharp edge. The sunlight danced across the blade, hurting Cade's eyes, but he ignored the discomfort. The

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slow, grating scrape of the whetstone on the blade punctuated his

thoughts.

Things were a lot more complicated than they had appeared on the

surface.

Scrape.

Terrel must have been much more involved in the PFLS than Sarah

thought.

Scrape.

He had been killed, tortured because of this.

Scrape.

Somehow, Terrel had crossed someone in a major way.

Scrape.

Damn them all!

Cade threw the whetstone across the courtyard, against the far wall.

Damn. Why hadn't he come to me?

And that was what kept eating at him, demanding an answer. Why hadn't Terrel asked Cade for help? He knew what his younger brother was, what he did. Cade had always protected Terrel, but this time Terrel had chosen to do it on his own. And he'd paid the price. Whom had he

crossed and how?

Cade ran over the information he'd uncovered so far- Terrel had stayed late at his pottery shop, remaining after his workers had left. He had done that for three months before his death. Why?

Then there were the shop accounts—confusing. During the worst period of chaos in the history of a town always on the edge of collapse, Terrel had shown a profit. By selling pottery? It made no sense.

Why did he stay late? What had he been doing? Cade reached into his tunic, pulling out several receipts. There was something else that bothered him about them. All the buyers had come to pick up their pottery at the shop, no deliveries. Fine. The orders had increased last fall. Terrel naturally ordered more clay. Everything had been paid on time, all for the proper price. Damn, it was here somewhere, he knew it; it had to be. Why had he been staying so late?

Cade mulled over the receipts for another half hour, getting more exasperated by the minute. He knew the answer was here, not on the streets. Targ had covered Sanctuary up and down, Cade had followed in the last five days retracing all the likely leads- All had led nowhere. Terrel was liked, respected, not known by anyone who shouldn't know him. His work was good. People were satisfied. None of it made any sense. Even with Terrel giving money to the PFLS, he hadn't given enough to make a

real difference. Half the town had been contributing to one faction or another at that time, although not always voluntarily. So why pick on

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Terrel? An example? Not likely; a bigger target would have served better.

Besides, the murder had hardly been public. No, something else . . .

Why had he been staying late? How had he been making a profit? How much money could he have given? Money. Late. Money. Late.

That's it. Terrel had been working to make more money. No. Something else. If it was to increase profits, why had he let the workers leave? Why not have them work with him? What had he been doing that he didn't want the others to know about?

Cade rifled through the receipts again, singling out the purchases.

"You fool," he said aloud, but whether he meant himself by it, or Terrel, even he didn't know. It was all right there. Terre's orders for clay had increased, but some of the clay was cheaper, much cheaper than that he usually used. And Cade was sure that when he checked on it, he would find the new clay totally inappropriate for making good pottery. Something not made to last, something made to break easily, something made for one purpose only: to conceal . . .

What was it, Terrel? he thought. What was it you were hiding for your zealots? Weapons? Money? Drugs? All three? What went through your head, brother, staying in that little shop, everyone gone/the light fading, the wheel spinning, your deformed hands forming the cheap clay, changing it. What was it you made—false bottoms, sides? Probably bottoms.

You little fool, did you think you were going to change things? Bring about a new Sanctuary, a new world? Make things better? Depose the Rankans you always despised so much? Ah, Terrel, don't you know, revolutions always fail in hell.

Cade stood up, sheathing his sword. He had the scent now. All he and Targ had to do was ask a few discreet questions, drop a few coins into sweaty palms. This trail would lead them to the truth, to the reason behind Terrel's horrid end. This would lead them to his brother's murderer.

Cade smiled. He had them now.

Sarah sat on the same bench Cade had used earlier that day. She watched the shadows sliding down the wall as the sun set and Sanctuary began its nightly ritual of madness. It was time to go inside, bolt the doors, lock the shutters. But why bother? That hadn't saved Terrel. In Sanctuary death followed you wherever you tried to hide. If it weren't for the children - . . .

Toth was a good boy; he tried. He understood what had happened and tried to help. Little Dru had no idea what was going on. She was always asking where Da was, and no matter how many times Sarah had explained to her that her father wasn't coming back, she refused to under-

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stand. And now, with Cade in the house, they were that much more confused. He had turned their lives upside down. Sarah couldn't decide whether she hated or feared Cade or if it was both.

He ordered everyone around like he owned them. Sarah still shook with anger when she recalled catching him teaching the children to fight with a knife.

Gods, they were still her babies.

Cade had accused her of coddling and smothering them. He had called her a fool and said that fighting was the only way to stay alive in a cesspool like Sanctuary.

But how could she explain it to him? Terrel was his brother—surely Cade knew about his brother's crippled hands. How could Cade forget? How could he continue to embrace violence? She and Terrel had consciously rejected it, and rejected it for their children.

She wasn't stupid, though. She knew he continued to teach Toth whenever she wasn't around. The bastard.

Toth worshiped Cade. For him, his uncle was a great warrior from one of the tales he'd once heard Hakiem tell in the Bazaar. But Sarah knew better. She had an idea now what Terrel had meant when he'd said Cade wasn't really a warrior. The man was a killer as sure as the sea is blue.

It was all so confusing. As much as Cade scared her, still he was kind in his own way, but not as Terrel had been. It wasn't gentleness; he was always grim. But he seemed so sad. Last night Dru had cried in her sleep calling for her Da; and when Sarah had gone to check on her she found Cade there soothing the child. He had held her, cooing soft words, unintelligible, but they calmed the child. She fell asleep in Cade's scar-ridden arms.

The door behind Sarah burst open and Toth ran into the courtyard.

"Ma, Marissa's here," he gasped out. Sarah looked at him for a moment. He wasn't tall, but his shoulders were beginning to broaden out. He had the Ilsigi hair and eyes of his father's family, but it was her nose and chin that denned his features. The boy shook the hair away from his eyes and beamed at his mother. She smiled back faintly. This last week he actually seemed happier; Cade at least seemed good for the children, for

some strange reason.

"Tell her to come out here," Sarah answered.

"Out here? But it's dark. Cade says—"

"Never mind what Cade says," she interrupted. "Tell the Lady Marissa to come out here."

He shrugged and did as he was told.

Marissa came out moments later, holding a lantern and a goblet of wine. She handed Sarah the drink.

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"I thought you could use it," Marissa said in her soft voice. Sarah smiled. Marissa was so thoughtful. At first Sarah had been put off by the other's title and light, Rankan good looks. Now she wondered if she could have made it this far without her friend.

"Thank you, Marissa. I think you're right." She took a sip of wine, letting the liquid numb her mouth, enjoying the sensation of it sliding down her throat.

"Cade's really getting to you, huh?" Marissa said with a raised eye-

brow.

"Oh, that man. I don't understand him." Sarah's voice dropped to a whisper. "He frightens me."

Marissa laughed. "He frightens everyone," she answered, "even Targ."

"I can't believe that." Sarah considered the notion that anyone or anything could frighten Marissa's strange mercenary and found it ludicrous. As ludicrous as, well, as thinking anything scared Cade.

"Oh, it's true," Marissa said. "Targ snorts and struts around every time Cade walks into a room." She smiled though Sarah thought it looked a little strained. "I swear his hair stands orTend." Sarah laughed at that. Targ's excessive hairiness had been a running'joke between the two for some time. The thought of all that red hair standing up straight was amusing. "Just like a little porcupine," she said, and the two laughed again.

"Marissa," Sarah said, her voice losing all trace of amusement, "why have you hired more mercenaries?" Marissa was quiet. She hated this. She liked Sarah and longed to tell her the truth, all of it. The lies between the two of them kept them apart, but she owed people and she had always paid her debts.

"Well, I'll tell you, Sarah," she said. "This town, it is so dangerous, I just feel safer- Gods know I have the money to spare."

"How many did you hire?"

"Three, not counting Targ, of course." Marissa bit her lip. "I'll tell you a secret." She looked around- "I've told them to keep an eye out on your house, too. So that . . ." She left the rest unfinished. Sarah looked away, but her hand patted her friend's knee briefly.

"Thank you, Marissa." She turned back. "But I don't think anyone is going to bother us with Cade around." She took a large swallow of wine.

"You know why Cade is here, don't you." It was a statement, not a question. Again Sarah was struck by Marissa's odd unease at her words. Marissa was hiding something, but Sarah did not intend to pry, respecting the other's private pain.

"Yes," Marissa said, "yes, he's here to find Terrel's, uh, murderer."

"He is going to kill whoever is responsible, Marissa."

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"Well, Terrel was his brother."

"I know, but it all seems"—Sarah shrugged—"so dramatic."

Marissa laughed. "Oh, really, Sarah, that sounds so silly."

"No, I'm serious." Sarah turned to her friend. "Six months ago I was the wife of a potter. I had"—she swept her arm in an arc behind her—"a nice house, nice things, two wonderful children, and a man I loved dearly," Marissa laid a hand on her friend's shoulder. "And now - . . ."

Sarah shook her head. "Now I don't know."

"My husband has been murdered, tortured to death in that same house, while my children and I slept. Why? I don't even know. Then this man shows up. This strange man. My husband's brother, but the two are not anything alike. My mysterious brother-in-law shows up. With his words and his armor, his dark looks, and dark ways. Suddenly, suddenly I find myself in the middle of a conspiracy, a piper's tale of murder and revenge." Sarah drank deeply again from the wine cup. "I don't understand anything anymore, Marissa, and I'm tired of being afraid."

Marissa had no answer for her. No words of comfort to offer. She knew all too well what it was like to fear, what it was like to have the world change overnight; to go from a warm, safe place to a world of sudden threats and shadows. What could she say to this woman? What comfort could she give, she who had no comfort in her own life?

"Sarah," she said aloud, "Sarah. I don't know what anyone can say or

do to help. But I'll tell you one thing." She almost flinched when Sarah turned to face her with those dark, sad eyes. "I think there is more of Terrel in Cade than you think. No matter what happens, he will do everything he can to help you and I don't think it's only because his brother would have wanted him to."

It was cold comfort, but in this new world it was often the only hope

Sarah was allowed.

It took two more days for Targ and Cade to put the rest of the pieces together. That Terrel had been running something for the PFLS was definite; what he had been running was another thing. Why was still a mystery. But Cade now had the most important answer. The contact was in Downwind. Downwind—the one place in Sanctuary Cade had avoided, though in his heart he had known, from the beginning, that it would be his destination.

But first he must talk to Sarah again. He wasn't looking forward to this conversation. The woman was half terrified, half fascinated by him. He was afraid he would have to reveal too much to her. There were things he might have to say, show, things he could never take back. But he had to find out what she knew. Accordingly, after dinner he ordered the chil-

dren to bed. This earned him a dark look from the woman, but he ignored it. He faced his brother's wife across a table still covered with the remnants of the meal.

"Sarah, we must talk."

"Indeed we must." Her voice was firm. "You can't order my children around like that. You have to—"

Cade interrupted. "No, Sarah, not now. We have to talk about Terrel." She grew quiet at that. "Sarah, Terrel was involved much more deeply with the PFLS than you thought."

"What do you mean?"

"He was running contraband for them."

"I know he gave them some money, but everybody was supporting one group or another."

"He was doing more than contributing a few spare coins." Cade sighed, his hand drumming against the table edge. "When Terrel stayed late, he was making pots, special pots."

"Cade, that is what he did for a living."

"I know that." Cade leaned over the table. "But these pots were built to hide things."

"What sort of things?"

"Who knows?" Cade shrugged. "Weapons, money, messages, even drugs, whatever it was doesn't matter now. What matters is that he did it for the PFLS. He was not just paying them; he was one of them."

"I don't believe it."

"Believe it." Cade leaned back, staring at her. "I've discovered a whole underground organization, very well coordinated, slipping all sorts of things through the different control zones of the town. Terrel was part of it, and it's because of that he was killed."

"Why?"

"I'm still not entirely sure. Could have been a lot of reasons—one of the other factions found out, one of his own people betrayed him, perhaps even the PFLS themselves were the killers."

"But why? If he was helping them, why would they kill him?"

"Lots of reasons: a shipment got lost, an internal upheaval." His voice was bitter. "Sarah, this town was a mess, insane. No one knew who was in charge of what. The control areas changed daily, hourly. Somehow, someone decided Terrel had broken a rule, and they made him pay." Sarah's face was pale and her lips trembled, but she could think of nothing to say.

"Well." he continued, "there are a few things we can infer." He waited but she was still silent. "Okay, they didn't torture him for information."

"How do you know?"

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"Because he was killed here, while you were sleeping. Yet you and the children never woke. Why? Magic—possibly. A sleeping draught—less likely. No one, anywhere, heard a sound the whole time Terrel was dying. I think magic, a spell to contain any sound he or his torturers made." He shook his head. "A lot of effort. Why not just kidnap him, take him somewhere else, interrogate him there? But, no, they did it here, therefore it had to be for one of two reasons: to set an example, or to exact revenge. Probably revenge."

"I don't understand."

"If he was killed as an example, well, there were other ways they could have done it, less hazardous ways, and more obvious ones. Besides, as I said, lots of people were doing what Terrel did. He wasn't a big enough fish to go to such lengths for. No, it has to be vengeance." Cade ground his teeth together, the skin of his face pulled tight, making his scars stand out in high relief. "They broke every bone in his body, Sarah. Think about it. That's not a normal torture, and as far as I can discover no one else has been killed this way. He was killed that way because ... because someone knew."

"About what happened, his hands," she said.

Cade looked surprised. So Terrel had told her. "Yes." He said no more.

The two sat, lost in their memories. She recalled a warm night, a storm coming in, her new husband sitting on the bed telling her the tale of his deformity in a monotone. He, his mother, and Cade had come to Downwind; forced there because, with the death of their father there was no money, and there was no family to help them. Terrel's mother found what work she could, buying Terrel a slate, working hard to find the chalk. It had made it all livable for him, given him a hope for another way of life.

Then one day, four years after they had moved, a gang jumped him, breaking the slate, the chalk, and the fingers that loved to draw; maiming him for life, so he could never be the artist he dreamed about . . .

But Cade had other memories. "Sarah." She looked up at him, now with a tear in her eye. "Terrel told you what happened. Do you know the rest?"

"The rest?"

So, Cade thought, he never knew. Well, that's something, I guess. Cade had never told anyone before, kept it to himself. Now he could not hold it in, though he could see no purpose in his honesty.

His voice was harsh. "He came home that night, his lip cut where he'd bitten it through, trying to hold back his cries. His hands—if he had come home sooner, maybe we could have set them. I don't know. They were ruined." He looked away from her. "He was in such pain.

CADE 31

"Mother—" He sighed. "Mother tried to heal those hands. Every night she held him, crying on the bent fingers, as if her tears could really take the pain away." He could still see them. Lying on the cot, the ragged cloth that divided their one-room shack tattered and frayed, not hiding the scene from his young eyes. She had rocked Terrel to sleep every night. He slept with her because of the nightmares, about the sound of the snap of bones that just wouldn't go away.

"I had nothing, we had nothing to give him," Then Cade turned to her, his eyes so fierce she looked away. "But then, I knew, I had one gift . . . Sarah, I had vengeance." His voice shook as he relived that time. He told her how he had found the rope in an alley full of mud and refuse, how he had pulled the brick from one of the few real buildings in Downwind. How he tied the brick to the rope and then waited.

"For three nights I waited,"—he stood up, his muscles taut with the memory—"until they went to sleep. Then I took my rope and brick, and one by one I found those who had done it." His eyes were wild. "I found them." He sighed. "I caught them and I smashed them with the brick." His hand pounded the air. "I smashed them over and over and over." He took a deep breath, then stood still.

"I found them. I didn't kill them. I found them and afterwards they never drew either." He sat down, not looking at her. "Terrel was thirteen. I was eleven . . ."

The room was quiet. Sarah stared at Cade, but he would not look at her. She realized he was embarrassed. He had told her something that he hadn't had to, at least not that way. He had showed her his secret. In it she knew was the real Cade, the answer to all his riddles, but she could not see it. All she could think of was Cade. He had only been about Toth's age . . .

"Sarah—" Now his voice was soft, and he hadn't used that tone with her before. "Whoever killed him knew; knew what had happened to him; knew of his fears."

"He still had nightmares," she answered.

"I thought so. They knew, Sarah, and I don't know how. But I do know the answer is in Downwind. And it's there I have to go . . ."

Cade stood at the end of the decrepit bridge. Across its rotting length lay his goal—Downwind.

The smell from the slow-moving White Foal River was noxious, full of refuse and dead things. Cade ignored it. After all, it should smell like home to him.

He wore old riding leathers with a weather-stained cloak thrown over them. He carried his sword openly, though several other weapons were

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concealed about his body. He looked like a down-and-out mercenary, between jobs, but one who knew his business well. Tough enough looking that the dregs of Downwind would leave him alone, obscure enough not

to draw attention, except from those who noticed the warbraid and knew what it meant.

The answer was here in Downwind. At first Cade thought he would have to find Zip, the leader of PFLS, and now apparently one of the military officers of Sanctuary. Cade didn't want to deal with the powers of Sanctuary if he could help it. There were several he'd rather not have to tangle with if possible. Take that madwoman Chenaya, building an army of gladiators. He smiled at the thought. Gladiators! Gladiators made poor soldiers, and were hardly equipped for the streets of Sanctuary. Everybody was insane here . . .

It seemed Zip had made several mistakes, and the PFLS had fractured into at least three recognizable factions. The hard-core stayed loyal to their charismatic leader, but some of the less patriotic and more power-minded had gone their own way. Cade followed the trail that led to money, and in a town like Sanctuary there were three quick ways of making money; prostitution, drugs, and slavery. The whorehouses were well controlled here. They were an important part of Sanctuary's economy. And the slavery, well it seemed Jubal used to control that, probably still did, but there were rumors on the streets of a new organization.

But whoever they were, they weren't in business yet when Terrel was caught, so the answer was drugs. That's where the faint trail became as clear as a paved road. Whatever Terrel had run first, he had ended up running drugs, something Cade doubted his brother had been too pleased

about. That didn't fit into his image of a revolution. But the goals of the revolution had been revised, and the new rules were made here, in Downwind.

The many gangs of Downwind had become more entrenched in the last few years, less like youth gangs and more like organized crime families. The largest, next to the beggar king's, was a gang called the Sharp Side. A gang that ran a good portion of Downwind, a gang that controlled Cade's old turf and it seemed, much more. A gang that had originally been part of the PFLS, but had re-formed in the last months, re-formed to take control of some of the contacts once run by Zip. A gang that now ran a third of the drug trade in Sanctuary.

So. It had all been there, easy to read, once you saw the pattern. Now Cade had to find the Sharp Side, and find out who had given the orders. Why they'd given them. And then he'd make them pay.

Casually he strolled across the bridge, giving no outward sign of the fast beating of his heart, his disgust and agony, his despair.

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Slowly he headed toward his old house, his inmost self creating an ineffective shield against the world that passed before his eyes. Downwind was pain, for its inhabitants and for any with the eyes to see. All

about him, as he wound his way through the filth-strewn streets, the nightmare was acted out. The adults were empty husks of aimless motion, the children dirty and mean. The toddlers plodded about, unwatched, their distended stomachs seeming to lead them about in their desperate search for anything remotely edible.

But that wasn't the worst. There were the carcasses of shacks, like decomposing animals, in which the inhabitants played out their desperate lives. The little girls, and boys, offering their bodies for a piece of bread. And of course the blood. Everywhere apparent, drying on the walls, spilling fresh from ragged wounds, and behind the eyes of every poor bastard who walked the empty streets. Every one of them seemed to carry an ugly scar, a reminder of some time when a blade met their flesh ... or a thrown rock ... or a fist.

He shuddered. Worse? What was worse? The term was meaningless. The blood? The hunger? No, the disease ... the corruption in everyone's veins. Scales and shingles covering thin limbs. Eyes oozing mucus, coughs racking whole frames. Their slow descent toward uncaring death.

That was it, of course, the heart and soul of Downwind. Death. Coming at them from so many angles, attacking them, and they had no chance to defend themselves. Like his mother: the hard work she'd endured, the food she'd denied herself so that her children could have one more mouthful. What was it that finally killed her? Was it one of the many diseases ravaging her? Was it the fear? No, she was past that in the

end. Past desperation. Past hope . . .

For her, as for so many, it had been the humiliation. The constant unending shame of being trapped, of having failed. The self-hatred for all those things she'd had to do just to survive. Cade still remembered the first night she had sold herself to a man. How she had bathed afterward in a decrepit washtub borrowed from a more fortunate neighbor. How he had stumbled upon her naked. The water red with her blood as she scrubbed and scrubbed, her skin floating like bits of dried leaves in the soft pink water.

He sobbed once at that memory, but he didn't cry. He had only cried twice in his lifetime. The first time when poor Terrel came home with his broken fingers, the pieces of his slate clamped between two swollen and useless hands. The second time . . .

His mother had been thirty-one when she died. She had looked much Older. He could remember it so well. Her once thick black hair was gray Sod thin, the skin wrinkled with grime caught in the folds, her eyes dull

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and empty as they had never been in life. He remembered the hollow thump as her hardened corpse was tumbled into the shallow pauper's grave. He heard the sound all the time, every day—thump-thump-thump

—as he waded through hell, his hands red with the blood of those he set free, to one fate or another.

It was agony to remember it all. His sensitive nose twitched at the familiar hateful smells. The harsh odor of human waste warming in the sun, the tang of sweat and urine, the thick reek of corruption. The sights, the smells, even the sounds. They built up about him, surrounding him like a vast sea of mud.

He moved through Downwind like a great black shark, swimming through the slime and seaweed of an ocean floor. About him were the remains of a thousand dark meals, bits of flesh and bone, floating in the silt-filled waters. Occasionally he bumped into a half-eaten corpse. And all around him were the unvoiced cries of the damned.

Finally he came to the end of his nightmare, to where it all began. He stood before a broken wall, four feet high. It outlined the remains of a building, the mud bricks cracked and decaying in the sun. This had been his home, so long ago. The home he still dreamed about at night, in the dark, alone. This pathetic shell was all that was left of the passion and terror of his childhood.

He walked through what had once been the doorway, though there had never been a door, just a ragged piece of blanket. Standing in the middle of the room he was surprised to see how small it was. The house had been a single room, a shack. But it had seemed larger somehow.

There had been no windows; the heat of the summer had been a living thing, latching on to him, drawing his strength out in a shuddering gasp. The winters were cold. He remembered choking from the smoke that never seemed to find its way out of the hole cut in the canvas roof. What monster conceived this? What had man ever done to earn such a payment? How could there be any being alive that enjoyed such perverse cruelty! Was there no one he could make pay for this? Nothing, no one he could attack? Must this sickening non-life be reenacted for eternity?

"Hey mister, you all right?" a voice intruded, calling him back. Cade was surprised to find that his two hands were held high above his head, making futile grasping motions in the air ... searching for a neck to grasp? Or begging for relief from pain? He couldn't understand what his actions meant. He didn't care, not anymore. He dropped his arms to his sides and turned to face the speaker.

It was a boy, young, barely into his teens. He wore little more than a stained loincloth. His ribs were sticking out, though he had large shoul-

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ders, and his legs were well-muscled. He also wore a wicked-looking knife at his side.

"What do you want?" Cade asked. It came as another shock to realize he had been wandering about for several hours, his mind caught in its mad reverie, a dangerous thing to do in Sanctuary.

"I, I just wanted to know if you were all right," the boy answered.

Cade looked at him again. He was Ilsigi, dark, dark. His thin chest had several scars, but he seemed in good health, if underfed. And he met Cade's eyes.

"Kindness?" Cade asked. "Or are you looking for something, boy?"

"Neither, who knows. Just asked." The boy's voice turned hard.

"Sorry I bothered you, pud," and he moved away, not quite showing his back to Cade.

"Wait!" Cade said. "Wait." He moved to catch up to the boy, but the youth kept his distance. "Who are you?"

"What's it to you?" The boy crouched a bit, his body tense. Not worried yet, but definitely wary. Cade threw the boy a silver piece which the lad caught deftly.

"I don't sel! myself, pud," he said.

"I don't want your body," Cade answered. He pointed at his head. "I want information." The boy looked interested. He bit the coin with

stained teeth and then made it disappear.

"Some information costs more than others. What did you want to buy, pud?"

"How much can I buy about the Sharp Side?"

"Shalpa's cloak," the boy swore, "you trying to get killed, friend?"

"You wear no colors, you're an independent," Cade said. "You must have been smart to survive that way. You have to know things. I want to know those things."

"Why?"

"Because they killed my brother." Cade knew he should have lied, but he could always kill the boy later. The boy was dead meat anyway; an independent wouldn't last very long around here.

"My name's Raif," the boy answered. He looked Cade up and down.

"Can you use that sword?" he asked skeptically. Cade reached down, searched the floor for a moment, then pulled up a small piece of wood four inches long, half an inch wide. He handed it to the boy.

"Hold it out." Raif did so, holding it in his right hand. Making no sign

of his intention Cade drew his blade right-handed and cut the wood in half; simultaneously his left hand withdrew a hidden knife and threw it—all at a blinding speed. The knife pinned the two-inch piece of wood to the ground. Raif just stared at the other half in his hand. Cade smiled.

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"I do all right."

"Shit." Raif shook his head. "I'll tell you what I know, if you pay me

another silver, then keep your mouth shut that I helped."

"Give me what I want, boy, and I'll put you under my protection." It was a lie, of course, but the boy's look was so open, so full of hope, and fear of that hope. Cade almost felt guilty about it.

"Follow me," Raif said. "I'll take you to a place we can talk." Cade followed, shaking his head at the lad's foolishness. Someone was bound to see the two of them together and Raif would pay for Cade's revenge. The boy was truly desperate. Maybe he could use him. He shook his head again. No, the boy was a dead man. Of course, it could be a trap, but not likely. Cade silently padded after Raif. He kept his thoughts off his face: a dead-eyed shark in the sea of hell.

Raif moved fast, avoiding all contact with anyone on the street. He led Cade through a series of winding alleys and unused paths. Eventually he stopped at a blackened wall at the end of a blind alley. Quickly he scampered over the wall. Cade followed warily.

On the other side, Cade found himself in a walled space about ten feet long and three wide. Raif went to his knees and dug through the garbage, revealing a small passageway. The two worked through the rank-smelling tunnel. Cade realized it was the remains of some sewer lines built in better times. For about ten minutes they crawled through the mud, taking several turns along the way. Finally Raif called a halt. There was a burst of light.

The light came from the sun. Cade was in a small brick-lined room. Raif had removed one of the bricks to let in a shaft of sunlight. The place smelled like a rotting corpse.

"This is my best hideout," Raif said. Cade smiled, acknowledging that the boy meant this as a gesture of trust. He looked Raif over again. The boy's face was lost in shadow but somehow those dark eyes gave the impression of giving off light, a silver light.

"Why do you hate the Sharp Side?" Cade asked.

"What makes you think I hate those punks?" Raif answered, but he couldn't hide his surprise at Cade's question.

"You want to help me, not just because you might get something out of me. You want to hurt the Sharp Side." Cade squatted down; the boy mimicked his movement slowly. "Besides, you're not stupid. People would have seen us together. If I hurt the Sharp Side they'll know I talked to you. They'll get to you." Again Cade surprised himself. Why was he being so honest? Raif was quiet for a moment, digesting Cade's words.

"You, do you know Downwind?" Raif asked, playing with his knife.

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"I grew up here."

Raif nodded his head. "You have the look." The boy shifted uncomfortably. "You can tell, the ones who don't know, but those who've been here, lived here, it marks you. Can't ever hide it." Cade just waited.

"Born here," Raif grunted, looking past Cade's shoulder. "Father's a drunk, mother's a drunk. They sold my sister to a caravan last year. Father hits mother, raped my sister. Mom will do anything for another drink. Sometimes works at Mama Becho's. But my brother . . ." Raif

said no more.

Cade understood. His family, destroyed by Downwind. He was an independent in more ways than one. He wasn't beat yet. And . . ."

"What of your brother?"

"Old Ilsigi family." Raif's voice was quiet and small. The place, his

"best" hideout, was cool, but Cade could smell the sweat on the boy.

"That's why I talked to you." A pale hand waved in the strange light of the room. "The warbraid, I know it. I remember what it means. Not many left who do."

"Your brother."

"PFLS. Thought, well, we're an old family." The boy shrugged. "He beat up my father real bad when they sold my sister. He and I left. He didn't make anything fighting, but we were fed. I ran errands. We worked Downwind, but my brother was due for a promotion." The light reflected off the boy's knife as he shifted to make himself more comfortable.

"The Sharp Side broke off when the Rankan god-warrior pressured Zip. Things split. My brother stayed loyal. Sharp Side slit his throat." He leaned back on the wall behind him and waited.

Cade could think of nothing to say. How old was this boy? Fourteen? Fifteen? They aged fast in Downwind; Cade knew that well enough. His whole story told in quick, short sentences. No explanation, no anger, no nothing. Just a story. The same story as always. The tale of the damned.

"What was your brother's name?"

"No name. They're all dead." And Cade knew that the boy included all his family in his statement. Cade sat unmoving. Behind him he heard the slow drip of water, the sound loud and monotonous. Time. It was time. Melting this pathetic refuge away. Until the boy was left standing in the sunlight. Alone. Sacrificed to the madness men thought of as life.

"Have you killed?" he asked.

"No."

**Have you raped?"

"No."

"Have you tortured?"

No answer. So there were things here, deeds here. Cruelty. If he killed

the boy would he free him? Or consign him to annihilation? Cade watched him for a moment. A choice must be made. It was so hard with the young. Kill them in their innocence and they are freed. Or are they? Is innocence ignorance? Mustn't they be given the chance to decide, to choose their path and therefore their destiny? Cade felt sorry for the boy, but then again he felt sorry for all men.

But this one had no chance. And he was so much like . . . but leave that thought. Still, one day Cade would die. Who would take up the war then? Who would defy the lords of hell when Cade finally felt and went to the emptiness? For of course Cade knew that there would be no better world for him. Madness can be a fine thing. Cade knew he was evil.

Still, he could give the boy the chance.

"Raif," his voice soft, "this is hell, do you understand?"

The boy just stared.

"In hell, all choices are hard." He took a deep breath. "We will sit here, you and I, in your best hideout. We will sit here and you will tell me of the Sharp Side. Then we shall leave together. And together we shall kill them all."

"All?"

"All. We might kill those we shouldn't, but we must kill them all, or they will retaliate, against you, against me. The burden is mine. I exceeded my allowed debt long ago. You shall have a chance." And then he laughed. Laughed truly. For Cade would do it. He would free this boy of Sanctuary's chains, let him roam and fight hell on his own terms. Give him a chance to be a hero as poor Targ was always dreaming of. Yes, that was it. He would do this as so long ago at the same age he dreamed of someone saving him. And Cade laughed harder. The sound reverberated in the dank tunnels, but somehow it was a comforting sound. It had power, and passion. But it was a gentle sound.

"Now"—Cade's laughter ended abruptly—"tell me of our enemies, young warrior."

It took nearly a week to set up. Raif acted as intermediary. They accepted that- Targ acted as the buyer, Raif his connection. Cade wandered about, following aimless leads to throw off any interested parties. The final act was almost ready to begin. He had the long-sought answers.

The why? Simple. The Sharp Side took over many of the operations of the PFLS, including Terrel's. It had taken Terrel a while to figure it out. When he did he had tried to warn Zip. The Sharp Side had caught him.

Who? Well, one of them was known as "The Beast," an interrogator

for the PFLS, now for the Sharp Side. A mysterious man, little was known about him. But it was rumored he was so unmanageable Zip was

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glad to see him gone. A man who enjoyed his work. A psychopath. He was the one who would have broken Terrel's bones.

Then there was Amuuth. The brain. The one who ran the gang, gave the orders. Born in Downwind, barely thirty, Amuuth had worked his way up through the ranks. Cruel, hard, uncompromising, and known to be arbitrary in his decisions. This man was the most feared man in Downwind. And his hands were broken.

Cade couldn't be sure. but it made sense. This man knew of Terrel's fear, because he was one of the original causes. He hadn't made an example of Terrel. His position was too unstable for him to go public. No, he didn't make sure Terrel died of his worst fear for political reasons. He did it for his own pleasure. For fun . . .

There were seven other hard-core members, good fighters all. Twenty auxiliaries rounded out the gang, but only three of these were so loyal that Cade would have to kill them. Twelve. Twelve lives for Terrel's. It

wouldn't even begin to balance the scales.

Cade, Raif, and Targ sat at the table in Marissa's House. The guards were on the roof. Marissa was with Sarah. The sun had set. One hour and it would be over. Terrel's death would be avenged-

"Are you sure the whole gang will be at the meet?" Cade asked.

"They always do it that way," Raif answered. "All nine of the insiders at a buy." The boy's voice was happy, and who could blame him? Certainly not Cade. This had been the best week of Raif's short life. Money to have good quarters in Downwind (and to buy his first woman, though he hid that from Cade), all the food he could eat, sword practice with Targ in the hot sun. Gods, his own sword. Though he didn't wear it. Cade and Targ had made it clear he would not be allowed to wear the sword until he knew how to use it. It was all like a dream to Raif, and even all this talk of murder and revenge made no dent in his new world.

Targ watched the youngster, keeping back a frown. Raif was a good boy, and damned smart. But he hero-worshipped Cade, like Toth did. Targ couldn't understand it. Children never feared Cade, always reacted well to him. They missed the madness there, and the years of killing. But then again, whatever Targ thought of Cade, he knew one thing Cade didn't know about himself: for all his self-aggrandizing introspection, Cade had never and would never kill a child.

"I still think I should go with you," Targ said aloud, though he did not look at Cade.

"No." The only light in the room came from the single lantern lying between them. Cade stared at the large shadow Targ cast on the wall

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behind him, like a giant leaning over to listen to their conversation. "You must get the other three. All must die tonight."

"They're expecting me to be there. The deal is with me. If they see you, they'll know what's up."

"They won't see me"—Cade's voice was firm—"not until I want them to."

"There's nine," Targ insisted, but Cade only answered with a shrug.

Targ could think of nothing else to say. Cade insisted on taking on the gang alone. The mercenary didn't like it. But there it was. Cade would do what he wanted, and he explained himself to no one.

"Why not take me?" Raif piped up. Targ just reached for the wine. He knew what Cade's reaction to that would be. "You've seen how good I am with the knife," he insisted. "They expect me to be there, too." His

voice trailed off at Cade's dark look.

"Raif, killing a man is not so easy."

"They killed my brother, too, damn them. I want my revenge."

Cade's hand banged on the table. "You're talking like a fool. Do you think this is one of your daydreams? Riding up on a white horse, saving the city to the cheers of men and women alike? Revenge is bitter, boy, and far removed from justice."

"But—" Raif started again, but this time he shut up when he saw the flash in Cade's eyes.

"You've had your revenge, boy. Your information, your help has set this thing up. Now leave it to us to finish it." He turned to Targ, but the mercenary just nodded. Cade could handle himself, and Targ's prey, well, they were as good as dead. Targ could live with this. Cade never asked him to do something his conscience would forbid. Targ's honor would not suffer from this.

Unconsciously, he bared his teeth, the sharp edges of his canines already beginning to show. Too bad it couldn't be a cleaner fight. But he hadn't succumbed to his particular curse in so long, and this night—well, these bastards deserved it.

Cade stood up. He wore leather armor stained black, a bow in one hand, various other weapons strapped on tightly. Targ pushed his chair back and faced the other. He wore only an old faded kilt, his sword strapped to his back. The two clasped arms.

"I'll take the others out," Targ said. "None will escape." Cade gave him a hard smile.

"Good hunting," he said softly. Targ's face twisted for a moment at Cade's choice of words, but the bloodlust was on him and he was eager to go. Neither said anything to Raif as Cade opened the door and they

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moved into the night. Raif stared at the open doorway for several minutes. Then he, too, got up and walked into the night's embrace.

Cade moved through the shadows to the waterfront district, taking care that no one followed him. The meeting was set up in a large warehouse there. The streets were quiet tonight. The moon was waning and a light cloud cover shielded the starlight- It was a perfect night for death.

There were four of the Sharp Side on outside guard duty, one on the roof, two in front, and one in the back. They were well hidden, but they moved about a lot. Sloppy. They were getting arrogant in their success. It

was only a matter of time until someone took them out.

The one on the roof was first and easiest. An arrow through the eye killed him instantly. No one heard the body fall. Cade moved to the roof, looking down on the dark silhouettes of the two guards in front. Another bolt, through the neck, and one was down. The second heard something. He didn't move. Smart.

Cade silently climbed down the side of the building until he was ten feet above his prey. He leaped. The guard was fast,^but caught by surprise. Even as he reached for his weapon. Cade drew a "knife across his throat. Cade stared down at the crumpled body, watching the blood pump from the neck, staining the ground liquid black. He shook his head; a waste of talent. This man had once been very good.

The guard in back was careless. Cade dropped a rope from the roof, caught the man around the throat, and lifted him up. His neck broke in the first five feet. Cade anchored him to the building. The body dangled ten feet off the ground. Cade was making an example.

He moved to the inside, through a trap door. The warehouse was full of boxes and crates, which surprised Cade. Since when did Sanctuary do enough business to fill a warehouse? There were things in town he did not know and could not understand. Silently he reconnoitered the building.

There were five left. Two with bows watched the remaining three.

Amuuth, the Beast, and another waited at a table in the middle of the warehouse, a small lamp on the table giving the only light in the building. It took Cade ten minutes to kill both the bowmen; the others were not alerted.

Cade lay on top of several crates, next to the body of the second bowman. From this vantage point he studied the remaining targets.

Amuuth sat at the table, facing the front entrance. His clothes were sure though dirty. His two gnarled hands ceaselessly played with the long ^Uace he wore. His black hair was worn short, in Rankan fashion; his ward was well trimmed. Cade could not see his eyes.

To the left of his leader stood the last of the regular gang members. He

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was a large man, big-boned and heavily muscled. He wore an expensive chainmail corset and carried a two-handed sword. From his hiding place Cade could see the blue eyes reflect the light of the lamp. No Ilsigi this one. Hired help, and by all appearances well worth whatever his pay was.

The last of the three stood to the right of Amuuth. Cade was surprised

at how small the feared Beast was. A little man, all huddled in his stained cloak. The torturer's face was hidden by a cowl; a knife glinted in his pale hands. The Beast ignored the others, his attention on something else. As Cade watched, the torturer began to hum to himself and slowly rock from side to side. Amuuth gave his servant a dirty look, but said nothing.

It was time to move. Cade rolled away from the ledge. From a leather sheath on his side he pulled out three thin black cylinders. Deftly he put the three together, forming one tube six feet long. He placed the object on his right. Reaching into a pouch at his belt he withdrew a three-inch needle. He twisted a bit of fleece about one end of the needle, then laid it beside the tube.

He rolled onto his back and slowly drew his sword, making sure those below him could see no gleam off the blade. Then he checked his bow, placing it and the sword on his right. Once again he moved to the edge of the crates.

He was about eight feet above the men, fifteen feet away. An easy shot. He held the tube to his lips, carefully balancing it. No one noticed the long tube sticking over the edge of a crate. Cade took the fleece side of the needle in his mouth, took a deep breath, and spat the needle through the tube.

The noise he made was covered by Amuuth's reaction. He swatted at his neck, tried to rise, went rigid, and fell over, chair and all. The Beast just stared. The guard turned quickly to his employer then spun to face the sound of the blowgun landing behind him.

The mercenary turned at just the right time for Cade's shot to catch him full in the neck, severing the jugular vein. Cade had time to feel a quick stab of remorse at this. It was no way to kill a warrior. Even as he thought it, he was leaping down off the crates, his sword now in hand.

The Beast hopped from one foot to the other, apparently at a loss as to what to do. Amuuth lay huddled, unmoving; the guard was dead. What was he supposed to do? He looked at the grinning Cade, tall in the lamplight, his sword held steady and pointing at the Sharp Side's torturer.

"Uh," he said, "uh, guards!" He shouted, "Guards! Attack! Murder! Guards!" Cade let him go on for a while, smiling the whole time, the

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"The guards are all dead," he said finally. The Beast stood to his full height, swinging his thin shoulders back. Cade could still not see his face.

"So," the torturer said, "so. All gone, ah, well." He did a little dance, then moved closer. "All dead. Well, dead." On the second "dead," he moved quickly and a knife appeared out of his long sleeves and spun toward Cade. But Cade was ready and knocked the weapon out of the air with his sword. The Beast just stood there, his other knife still dancing in his hands.

"Uh, so," he said. "Who are you?" he shouted.

"I am Cade."

"So."

"Terrel was my brother."

"Uh, so."

"Terrel was the man you tortured, the man whose bones you broke. All of them." The other was silent for a moment, digesting the information. Then he laughed, a high-pitched squeal.

"Oh, yes. Lovely bit of work, that." The madman's head moved to a song only he heard. "Yes, oh yes. Too bad, though. Only for fun, you realize. There was no information to get or anything/Still, nice bit of work. Spell was a nice touch, I thought." The Beast smiled, showing crooked and browning teeth. "He screamed and screamed, but the sound

didn't carry don't you know. Magic." He snapped his fingers. "Yes, well, you know—"

But Cade could hear no more. With a roar he leaped at the torturer. The other's knife tried to parry his blade, but it was shoved aside by the power behind Cade's swing. The sword crashed into the Beast's head, cutting deep into the skull, splitting it nearly in two. The Beast crashed to the ground, dead.

Cade moved closer to see the face. It was hard to distinguish among the purplish-red remains. The face was split to the nose. Cade made out watery brown eyes, quickly filming over, and the face of an old man. He looked like someone's grandfather, the silver-white hair now dyed with red streaks. Cade spat on the corpse. This looked like no beast. Hell was a funny place.

Cade heard the noise behind him, though few others would have. He spun in a crouch, his sword held before him, a throwing dagger already in the palm of the other hand. Who? All nine were taken care of. Slowly, a slight form moved out of the shadows and Cade relaxed-

"I told you to stay away, Raif."

**I thought you might need some help," the boy answered, looking round. He grinned at Cade, though his face was pale. "I guess you

<Hdn't."

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"This is no place for you."

Raif bit his lip, darting glimpses at the bodies around him. He slowly sheathed his knife.

"You said you would teach me to be a warrior," he said. He gestured at the dead mercenary. "I've seen death before. Cade."

Cade's eyes went dark. He grabbed the boy and pushed him to the ground by the corpse of the Beast. Grabbing the old man's collar, he pulled the corpse up to face the boy.

"This is death," he said, ignoring the still warm fluids sliding down his wrist. "Look at it, boy, see it for what it is." Raif tried to pull away but Cade held him firm. The smell of the blood was covered by the horrid stench of the corpse. The bladder and bowels had emptied at death, and their horrid mixture slowly leaked toward Raif's sandaled feet. The split face smiled at him, its dull eyes seeming to search him out.

"No," Raif gasped, pulling away. He got two steps before he vomited.

Cade held the boy while Raif emptied his stomach.

"The life of a warrior is the path of death," Cade whispered in Raif's ear. "This is the truth of it, boy: old men's brains spilling at your feet."

He turned Raif to face the dead mercenary. Cade pointed. "That's where it ends, boy. An arrow in the dark in a dirty warehouse, in a town all decent people have long ago forgotten about. What is so noble, boy, what is so grand about being a warrior?"

"But you're a warrior."

"No, boy, I am no warrior, because I choose not to be. I kill those who need it, or those who deserve it. I kill those I choose, not those others tell me to. People pay me to kill, Raif. Pay me to do what I was born to do. But don't you realize that I know that I lost my soul because of it?"

Raif said nothing, his voice lost in sobs he tried to hold in. Cade clasped the boy to him for a moment, then let go.

"I will teach you to fight, to protect yourself, nothing more. You needn't see this ever again. I will give you the chance to be free of hell forever." This was the moment: kill the boy now and he would be free. He would find that warm safe world that Cade's mother now danced in.

Free him. Free him, his mind chanted.

But Cade could not. It wasn't the risk of being wrong about Raif; he knew the boy was good. It was something else. A chance. Give the boy a chance to lead a life Cade could never have had. The life Targ dreamed of, but his curse kept him from. It was a hard thing to live in hell and dream of heroes.

"Ah, the gentle sounds of lovers' passion," a voice said. Raif leaped and drew his blade but Cade showed no alarm. He walked over to Amuuth and bent down on one knee.

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"So," he said, "starting to come out of it?" He rifled through the other's clothes.

Amuuth glared up at him.

"What did you do to me?"

"Thomneft," Cade answered. "Paralyzes you for about ten minutes."

Cade withdrew a knife from the other's clothes. The blade was double-edged and sharp. The handle was abnormally thick, allowing the gang leader to wield the weapon with his crippled fingers. Cade picked up the

chair and lifted Amuuth onto it. He moved across the table to stand by Raif.

"You'll come out of it in a moment."

"Why didn't you just kill me?" Amuuth hissed. His face showed no fear. With the black eyes and hawk nose, he looked fierce. Cade could see why this one was the leader.

"I wanted to talk to you."

"About your brother?" came the quick answer. Cade just lifted an eyebrow. "Oh, I know of you. Cade. The local boy made good. I was warned you were dangerous. I misjudged you. I didn't think you'd make the connection between—"

"Between you and Terrel," Cade finished.

"Precisely." Amuuth shifted his shoulders; feeling was beginning to come back, but it was painful. He would not show that. He had lived with the pain in his hands all these years.

"So you've come to avenge your brother?"

"Why did you break his bones?" Cade replied.

"I thought I would finish the job I started so many years ago."

Amuuth kept watching the other's eyes; the boy was no threat. Surely some of his own people must still be about. They would hear. He held onto that hope; he knew it was his only chance.

•That's why I didn't kill you."

"What?"

"I wanted to finish the job I started so long ago."

Amuuth gasped. He could not help it. Cade couldn't mean—

"It was me, Amuuth. Sixteen years ago I hunted you and the other three, with my brick and rope." Cade shrugged. "I don't know which one you were. When I caught you, I guess I should have killed you."

"You," Amuuth shouted, "you did this!" He held out his hands, trying to stand up, but his legs wouldn't move yet.

Cade smiled. "The legs take longer."

Amuuth said nothing. He knew there would be no help, no rescue. He ^as dead. He looked up at Cade, his eyes burning with hate. This is the ®an. The shadow he still woke up screaming from. The shadow from

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that night. Unseen, unheard. The whistling noise, the agony in his side, in his head, his legs, and finally his fingers. He wondered that he, himself, had not made the connection between his pain and Terrel's.

"I'm glad then," he hissed, "I'm glad I made him pay."

"No, Amuuth, you did not make him pay. You tortured him out of spite, because even with his ruined hands he made it out. Made a life. That's why you did it, for petty reasons. For envy. I have known evil in many faces, Amuuth, but I have never seen it so pathetic."

Amuuth sputtered, his mind refusing to give him words to match his outrage. This one, gods, all along. He could have had him long ago, had his revenge. But now . . .

Cade moved around the table toward him, like a great black cat, and he was the mouse. There was nothing definable in Cade's eyes or face. Amuuth had no idea how he would finally die.

"Finish the job," Cade whispered, moving closer, taking his time.

Amuuth shuddered. He was frozen, could not move, and it wasn't the drug that was holding him now. His broken left hand reached for the right. For the snake ring. Hitting a latch, long fangs extending. Could he get Cade with his own poison? Not likely ... he could kill himself, before the pain started. Or ...

Amuuth looked over at Raif. The boy stared at Cade, his face bloodless, his eyes wide. Amuuth remembered Raif's brother—he had feared that one. He had tried to entice Raif into the gang, hoping he could mold him as the older boy could not be molded. The boy could be dangerous. Amuuth was struck by a memory. Cade had run a gang for a while: the Demons. They had been terrible, violent, dangerous. They only ran a block and a half but they owned it. And Raif looked, looks, so much like the young gang leader Cade had once been.

Amuuth understood. Cade saw himself in the boy. Wanted to help. Change it. Vengeance can be sweet-

Amuuth tugged the ring off and looked at Raif.

"I'm dead, boy," he said. "You might as well have this ring." He threw it to Raif before Cade could react.

"No!" Cade shouted and lunged, but he was too late. Raif caught the ring, dropping it immediately when he felt a double sting in one of his fingers.

"What?" he said, but even as he lifted the hand to look, he stumbled, the air thick, too thick to breathe. The floor rose up to meet him. He panicked. He could not breathe. He was surrounded by stone, encased in it.

Cade reached him in time to stop the fall. But he could feel Raif's flesh

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already puffing up, the limbs getting rigid. He spun to face Amuuth, his eyes pinning the gang leader to his chair.

"The antidote!" he yelled.

"None." Amuuth's voice was harsh. "None. A gift from the finger of a dead fish-eye." Cade said nothing, not taking his eyes off his enemy. His hand reached down to touch the boy. He was already dead. All hope dies in hell's capital, in Sanctuary.

Cade was still for a moment, then slowly he tipped his head back until he stared at the ceiling.

"Mother!" he cried. He was on his feet, his sword cutting the air before he knew what was happening. The sword sliced through Amuuth's neck,

the head spinning away. It was so fast that the blood geysered up from between his shoulders.

Cade leaped at the body, chopping and cutting, screaming all the while. His yell was incoherent, but any who heard that sound would never forget the madness in it. Eventually he quit chopping the body, but only when it was no longer recognizably human. For a moment longer Cade stared down. His sword dropped from the red hand.

He collapsed next to Raif, holding the boy's head in his lap, but he could think of nothing. There was nothing to say, nothing to do. He sat, gently rocking the corpse in the warehouse full of corpses, the rats in the shadows the only witnesses to his agony. Rocking back and forth, the vast emptiness around him still seemed to echo with his cries.

Targ went to Sarah's house; he knew Marissa would still be there. The blood was off him. He had swum in the bay to get rid of its sight and scent. But it was bad. The curse had raged through his veins, alive with its deadly passions. Now it was all through, all done. If only the second one hadn't begged so much, if only he hadn't cried . . .

Inside the house Sarah and Marissa sat in the main room as if waiting. He guessed that Marissa must have told her friend that this was the night of Cade's vengeance. It didn't matter. He sat next to them, thankful for their silence, their lack of questions.

Cade came in an hour later. They were all shaken from their private thoughts by the sound of his fist on the door. Sarah went to the door and looked through the grate, her face turning white at what she saw on the other side. She unbarred the door to let her brother-in-law enter.

The smell of the corpse wafted in with the wind. Targ growled at the scent but he said nothing. Sarah stood to one side of the door. The other two sat facing it silently. Facing Cade.

He stood there, holding Raif's body. Behind him the gray night writhed, outlining his powerful form, along with his pitiful burden. The

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light was not bright, but it was bright enough to show his bloodstained clothes. Bright enough to show the one tear winding its way through the scars and drying blood on his face.

Cade had only cried twice before in his life. This, he swore, was the last

time he would, ever . . .

"I'm home."

WAKE OF THE RIDDLER

Janet Moms

Tempus was gone from Sanctuary, taking his Stepsons and the Rankan 3rd Commando with him, leaving only outcasts and dross behind.

In the wake of the Riddler's passing, the town seemed more changed than it should have been because one man (called variously Tempus, the Riddler, the Black, and more scatological appellations) had gathered his private army of less than a hundred and departed. Sanctuary seemed emptied, drained, frightened, and confused.

It cowered like a snow rabbit run to barren ground and surrounded by wolves. It shivered and sniffed the breeze, as if undecided as to which way to run. It hunkered in desperate paralysis, seeming to dream of better days while the cold spring wind blew wet promises of life inland from the sea and the wolves skulked closer, red tongues lolling in slaver-ing jaws.

Among fetid streets on this spring evening in question, militias are keeping order, stamping round comers with deliberate tread. Whores whisper rather than croon in their doorways. Drunks slither along white-washed walls, afraid to stagger boldly in gutters where beggars lurk with ready blades. And the wind comes in off the uneasy ocean with a chuckle on its breath; Tempus, his Stepsons, and the 3rd Commando have left the town to its fate, ridden off in disgust to new adventures capable of resolution, wars winnable, and glory attainable. Sanctuary is not only doomed.

but shunned by its last best hope, the Riddler and his fighters.

The wind thinks nothing of whipping the town vacant, of chilling its nobles to the bone, of locking the neutered sorcerers in the Mageguild

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and the impotent soldiers in their barracks. The wind is Sanctuary's own,

wind of chaos, gale of gloom.

Spring has never felt so ominous in the Maze as it does this season,

where the first rough gusts blow more detritus than rotting rinds and discarded rags through the streets. The sea wind rattles against the plate armor of the Rankan army regulars, clustered in fours as they police what can't be policed. It flaps the dark cloaks of Jubal the ex-slaver's beggars, his private force of cold enforcers who sell protection now at stalls and bars where Stepsons used to trade. It keens toward uptown and beats on the barred windows of the Mageguild where necromancers fear the unleashing of their dead now that magic has lost its power, more even than they fear the wrath of whores whose youth-and-beauty spells have

worn away.

And the wind sneaks uptown, where what is left in Sanctuary that is

noble tries to carry on, have its parties amidst the rubble left by warring factions of the various militias, by witches and warlocks, vampires and

zombies, ghosts and demons, worshipers and gods.

This wind is of the sort you may remember, coming out of a gray wet sky which makes an end to boundaries and hides horizons. Sounds seem to come from nowhere, go nowhere. There is no distance and no proximity, no future and no past. There is no warmth, even from the one beside you. When you reach out to take a hand for comfort, that hand is clammy as the grave. And the stirring of life these gusts portend is only legend, on such a day, as if the wind itself is here to reconnoiter the very earth and then decide if the world deserves another spring.

Or not.

Down by the docks, alone, Critias ponders that question. Do the beggar armies deserve the warm sun on their face? Do the vampire's undead, over in Shambles Cross, need the kiss of sunlight? Can there be a bright morning for the mages, barricaded inside their fortress where dusk always reigns? Will Zip and his nightcrawlers among the Peoples Front for the Liberation of Sanctuary tip the balance for or against the seasons'

change? And does it matter if spring ever comes to this blighted thieves'

world again?

For Tempus has gone, turned his back on everything and everyone. No

more eloquent an omen could be taken from a dozen slaughtered lambs
with jaundiced livers or the birth of twins joined at the lips.

Gone and left . . . what? Left Crit, is what—Crit, in putative charge
of the ungovernable, so that Crit's partner, Straton, had turned and
walked away without a word. Gone somewhere was Strat, and not to the
departed armies, either. No, Strat hadn't gone upcountry with the Rid-
dler, west to meet Niko and then embark on a secret sortie for Theron,

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emperor of Ranke. Strat, Crit was sure, had gone another way: down to
embrace the darkness that was his lover, Ischade the vampire who held
sway in Shambles Cross, down to the White Foal River where corpses
floated till they waked. Down into hell and this time it wasn't Crit's fault,
but Tempus's, who usually had more concern for the faring of his men.

But there'd been no reasoning with Tempus, who'd pulled the Stepsons

out en masse, and the 3rd Commando with them, leaving the town to its own devices.

Leaving Crit to take responsibility for fair and all. For unfair and all.

So there was a new pecking order in beleaguered Sanctuary, and one which was fair only to the extent that it insulted and imperiled everyone, while satisfying no one.

Put it down, Crit told himself, to the foul humor that caused Tempus to be called "the Black." Crit had the rest of the year to meet Theron's decree of a unified, pacified Sanctuary. If he couldn't manage it, Theron had promised to send the Rankan army here in force, a soldier in every hut and a fist in every face.

Not that Crit cared about the town per se. No, he didn't. But he cared about his reputation, about not failing, about always doing what he was charged to do.

Even though for the first time in his life he'd truly argued, threatened to quit, to mutiny, to bolt, when Tempus had charged him with imposing order where order had never been, Critias couldn't turn away from a job unfinished. No matter what it cost.

In short order it had cost him his only friends here: Straton, his right-side partner and Sacred Band brother; Kama, the Riddler's daughter, abandoned in Sanctuary along with those others who had most dis-

pleased her father; Marc, the weaponsmith who'd been his liaison with townies such as Zip; and Zip himself, the PFLS leader and third-shift commander, who now looked on Crit as the enemy because Crit was at the top of Sanctuary's reporting chain.

Where he'd never craved to be, and where Strat had struggled so hard to land.

Shaking his head, Crit started as moisture that had condensed on his unkempt hair spattered his brow and cheeks. In nondescript dockside garb, he was waiting for a contact. Doing what he knew how to do because Crit was a shadow mover, not an empire shaker. Tempus had left him with a shattered infrastructure he needed to fuse, somehow, into a working whole. Or lose. Fail. Crit knew how to do everything required of a soldier but that—he didn't know how to fail. He'd never learned. Was constitutionally incapable of learning, Strat used to say.

I Crit missed Strat like food and water. He missed Kama less, but still

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loved her. And still hated the gutterslime she'd taken up with: Molin Torchholder, the politicized priest of a pantheon unnatural to this Ilsig soil.

All the Rankan conquerors of this Ilsigi town of Sanctuary, and the Beysib invaders who had come after and made an uneasy alliance by marriage with the Rankan governor, Prince Kadakithis, mistook the townspeople here for the sort that were governable. And now Crit was responsible to see that at least the appearance of governance was instilled and maintained here, where the balance between gods and magic had suddenly crumbled and all that was left to do was rule Sanctuary by force of arms.

As commander-in-chief of the policing forces, he was responsible to the prince/governor Kadakithis, who was answerable to Theron and might lose more than his palace if the emperor's demands weren't met; responsible to Kadakithis's Beysib consort, Shupansea, who wasn't even human, but some sort of fish-woman from across a forbidden sea; responsible to Kama because she was the Riddler's daughter and, by all the gods that loved the armies, Crit's woman more than Molin's.

Kama had conceived a child with Crit and they'd lost it on a battlefield. Since then, she'd found whatever man she could to sleep with who'd be most hurtful to Crit when he found out. Which he always did, because she was her father's daughter and thought that women's ways were for lesser creatures, the way her father thought that men's limits applied only to his enemies.

Crit wanted more than anything to find Strat and simply leave, go up to Ranke and plead his case to Theron, get a new commission from the emperor. He was wasted here. Only Tempus knew what he'd done to deserve it.

But here he was, with the rest of the unloved, unvalued, and unwanted —with Strat; with Kama; with Randal, a warrior-mage who was the lesser half of a broken Sacred Band pair; with Gayle, the only 3rd Commando Tempus had told to tarry.

And with those they'd hoped to leave behind: Ischade, the vampire;

Janni the Stepson's half-reconstituted ghost; Snapper Jo, the fiend who had tended bar at the Vulgar Unicorn; and, uptown somewhere among the hellish ruins of last winter's incomprehensible war of magic, whatever

was left of Haught, the Nisibisi mageling, and of Roxane, the Nisibisi

witch.

Strat had said—the only thing he had said about the matter—that

Tempus had flat run out of nerve, turned tail and fled, leaving Crit holding the bag. The very bag that Strat wanted so badly in his grip, Crit had

thought but hadn't said.

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Waiting alone, with no backup (because with Strat gone to Ischade there wasn't a single man he'd trust at his back), down on the slippery dockside hoping his contact would show soon, Crit had had too much time to brood.

He knew it; he knew himself. For the kind of subterranean work he was trained to do, self-knowledge was a prerequisite. If it weren't, his distress over Strat and the horrid triangle of the two of them and the vampire might well have killed him before this. Might kill him yet, if he became too distracted by it.

He had a job to do. Lots of jobs. He'd made sure of that. He couldn't afford too much time for reflection. This task before him wasn't going to be simple, but he needed to occupy his mind with something besides the

conundrum of his partner. Tonight, it was finding and restoring Tasfalen, whose entire noble family was missing and had been missing far too long. Torchholder wanted the popinjay found. Or wanted Crit killed in the finding, so that there'd be no rival of consequence for Kama's affections by the time Molin did whatever he was planning about his current wife.

Crit wasn't mistaking Molin Torchholder: in the priest's mind, this was a suicide mission he'd forced on Crit, knowing Crit wouldn't delegate this sort of task to what men he had available. Zip's half-tame militia wasn't good for much but swaggering and street fights on their night shift; Walegrin's barracks of day-soldiers soldiered well enough, but knew nothing of covert means; and Crit wouldn't ask at the Mageguild—even with the Stepsons' mage, Randal, there, the price of magical aid in Sanctuary was always too high.

So that left only Jubal's thugs, one of whom Crit awaited. Jubal's faceless horde of enforcers would spit out one with a face tonight, and that one would lead Crit to Tasfalen.

Once Crit had verified the continued existence of the noble (or lack of it—a corpse would do), he could get Torchholder off his back. And see Kama. For Crit was about ready to force an end to that particular problem: either bring Kama back with him from the palace, to take up her rightful place in what was left of the Stepsons' barracks, or use her affair with Molin to blackmail the priest.

He wasn't sure which he liked better, but he liked both alternatives
dough to bare his teeth in a humorless smile as he waited.

, And waited. And waited. He stood. He sat. He paced. He leaned. He
heard his horse nickering, then pawing the cobbles. He checked its tack,
Stroked its nose. Strat's bay horse would have evoked the nicker he'd
heard, but Crit didn't see the bay horse anywhere.

Just as well; the bay made him nervous. Made everybody nervous who

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didn't like reincarnated horses with spots on their withers through which
a man could glimpse hell itself if the light was right.

Because of the nicker, Crit realized he didn't want to see Strat right
now. Not until he'd solved the problem of Kama and Torchholder. Not
now, when the gray sky and the gray buildings and the gray dockside
melded with the gray horse Tempus had left him, to take the sting out of
deserting him.

The gray was a prize, one of the best from the Stepsons' stock farm up

at Wizardwall. Worth more than a block of the Maze, contents included.

Worth more than the whole town, to some men's way of thinking.

But Crit would have given it to Strat gladly if Strat would only renounce the ghost-horse and the vampire woman who'd conjured it for him . - .

"Psst," said a voice from behind him and Crit refused to flinch, or jump, or betray the heart-stopping urgency within him that counseled a dive for cover, a drawn sword.

He turned slowly and said, "You're late, hawkmask."

"We aren't hawkmasks any longer," said an oddly accented voice from under a shadowing hooded cloak. "And I never was. We're just free-lancing, we are. Just workin' for pay. You like meres, bein' you was one."

A languorous, professional lilt in a northern-accented voice that nevertheless had a deadly, nervous edge to it.

Crit squinted into the gloom but the only thing he saw better for his trouble was the rigging of a small fishing boat bobbing behind the stranger, much farther down the quayside than the cloaked man.

Was it a masking spell, or a trick of the light that veiled this face in gloom? The fellow was out of reach, but just barely. And familiar, but so was half of Sanctuary. Someone he'd roused long ago, Crit's mind said, and started spinning through the years, seeking to match a face to the

voice he recognized.

Crit asked, to hear the voice again, "What do you want, honest work?"

There isn't any, not here. Prefer my service to Jubal's? Is that what you're getting at?"

"Yours? You've got a service, now? That's how come the black man sent me to help you out?"

The hooded man's ^s were sibilantly northern and the tension underlying his words was full of satisfaction.

Somebody they'd done something to once, for sure. Somebody the Sacred Band hadn't treated with softest gloves. Somebody who was enjoying this more than he ought, because he feared Crit and his kind more than he'd admit.

"Got a name, friend?" Crit said easily, shifting enough that he could

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slide his hand onto his belt and his fingers toward his knife's hilt without being either too obvious or too surreptitious. It wasn't a threat so much as a punctuation mark.

The contact saw, and tossed his head. "Vis. Ring a bell. Commander?"

Commander. Crit still couldn't get used to it, not in Sanctuary, not in this context, not with all its current connotations. Did Tempus still hold Crit's affair with Kama against him so venomously that he'd sentence him to years of hard labor here with violent death at the end of it?

For Crit remembered this "Vis" now, and what he recalled didn't put him at ease. Mradhon Vis, a northerner- Thief, malefactor, one-time partner-in-crime of the Nisibisi mageling, Haught. And gods knew of whom or what else. They'd beaten information out of Vis more than once, when the Stepsons were fighting the Nisibisi witch here. Strat, the Stepsons' chief interrogator, had. Crit had been in command of the intelligence unit then. They'd brought this fool up to the Shambles safe house, drawn the iron shutters, and taught him the sort of respect that turns to hatred if left untended.

There were dozens, perhaps scores, of Vises he and Strat had made in Sanctuary. If Crit lived long enough, one of them was going to try to kill him. Perhaps this one. Perhaps tonight.

"Vis," he repeated, his voice low. "Right, I remember. Well, let's go, Vis. Let's see what you've got."

"My pleasure. Commander," said the mercenary, and chuckled nastily. "If you'll follow me into those shadows there, the worst is yet to come."

"I'm telling you," whispered Kama intently to Straton over her beer,
"Zip's moving the altar stones uptown to the Street of Temples—moving
them and what they housed."

Finished, she sat back, eyeing the other patrons of the Vulgar Unicorn
surreptitiously. No one had heard, she was certain. She'd been careful of
her volume, as well as the drunken slur in her voice. No one human, that
is. The fiend who was tending bar late tonight had great gray ears and
eyes that looked every which way. His warty countenance was averted,
but that meant nothing. In the bronze mirror behind the bar he could be
watching them . . .

"So what?" Strat growled, truculent, one arm absently rubbing his
damaged shoulder. Perhaps once the best man with weapons among the
Stepsons, Strat was doubly wounded now: Ischade either couldn't, or
Wouldn't, heal his shoulder and there were no Stepsons here for him to be
Mnong.

"So, we've got to stop it," she said. Her heart ached for Strat, and for

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iem all, left here where nothing of consequence remained in the wake of
er father's leave-taking. She and Strat had something in common now—
amething more than Crit. They had to shore up the sagging bulwark of

ommand because Tempus might be testing them. None of the others salized it, but Kama did. If her father rode into town of a morning, sady to welcome them back to the fold if only they'd put the town to ights, Kama didn't want to be found wanting.

But the big Stepson was too drunk, or too deeply hurt, to understand /hat she meant. "Stop it? Why? So Zip's found some sort of pet demon r minor deity—some Ilsig spirit to worship. What difference does it nake? The gods fare no better here than magic—or fighters."

Strat believed only in the magic of Ischade, Kama knew. He'd seen too much, too many dead reborn, too many undead abroad in the streets at light. Strat had seen his doom and embraced it: he was as much the 'ampire's creature as any of her slaves.

"C'mon, Straton," she insisted blearily, tugging on the Stepson's leeve. "Come with me. I'll show you."

"You and your lovers," Strat grumbled over the screech of his stool's legs on sawdusted board, "What the frog you wanna do about it if you ind him lickin' his demon's feet?"

"Ssh." Kama warned, and put her small hand to the flat of Strat's >ack, pushing him toward the door like a wife who'd made a nightly trip o the Unicorn to bring her drunken husband home to bed. Snapper Jo

aluted her with his raffish inhuman grin, dipping his bristly chin in a gesture of respect.

Great. Homage from a fiend, friends in high places, estranged from her

•real friends because of that: because of Molin, who had another wife, Crit and Gayle and Randal avoided her like the plague. Only Straton, in similar circumstances, of all the men she'd campaigned with in the Wizard Wars, acknowledged her. And Zip . . .

As Strat had jibed, Zip was another of her lovers. Men used their muscle and their sex for intimidation, and no one thought ill of them for it. Kama was a different sort of operator, but used what she had to. Whatever worked to do the job. It stung her to the quick the way the

•men she'd fought beside treated her now, simply because she'd let the

-ligh priest wield his influence to help her.

If her father had had a dozen lovers, or a hundred victims of his holy

-aping member, no Sanctuarite would have snickered or presumed to

:riticize. Maybe she should strip her next bed partner at knifepoint,

prove herself her father's daughter to one and all. Maybe then Crit would

»top looking past her when they met . . .

Strat stumbled in the doorway, belched, and staggered down the stairs

to the street. The bay horse whickered, its ears pricked. Kama shivered.

The damned thing was dead as a doornail, just didn't know it. Strat didn't seem to know it either: he fumbled in his pouch, came up with a chunk of sugarbeet, and held it out on an open palm.

The ghost-horse's velvet lips delicately snatched the treat, and it snorted in pleasure.

Well, maybe not quite as dead as a doornail. But unnatural as hell.

Unnatural as Sanctuary, a place Kama was determined to leave completely out of the history she was writing of her father's exploits. Sanctuary deserved no chronicler, as it deserved nothing more than the obliteration it was so obviously seeking.

The town had its own genius, Kama was sure, an Ilsig spirit that had finally had its fill of interlopers and was nudging the place itself toward oblivion's precipice. She wanted only to be quit of it before Sanctuary was razed to the ground by Rankans, gutted and left to rot by Beysibs, or torn stone from off of stone by internal strife.

A historian, Kama knew all the signs of a town dying. Sanctuary didn't lack a one: its gods were impotent; its magic had lost its power; its populace was polarized by generations of hatred; its children wanted only

to destroy.

"What, Strat?" she said, startled by words undeciphered but still ringing in her ears. She looked up. The big Stepson was already mounted, reins in his right hand, his left arm carefully resting on one thigh.

"I said, finding Zip should be easy—it's his shift, the dead of night. You want him, let's go up to the command guardpost."

She shook her head- "Told you, he's moving those damned stones. And the porking whatever that lives in 'em, tonight. Heard it from a reliable source." The guardpost was safe for Strat, this time of night—Crit had the day shift; Strat's erstwhile partner spent his evenings in an old Shambles Cross safe house the Stepsons used to run.

"So where?" Strat's voice was suddenly uneasy.

"Down to the river, soldier. If you can handle it—the White Foal's banks, I mean, so close to Ischade's."

"Pork what I can handle, woman," said Strat, the booze getting to his tongue. "I've picked that snipe up by his collar more than he's picked up your skirts. You wanted help, you've got it. You change your mind, that's fine, too. But we can't just sit here."

She got her horse, her neck hot though the night was chill with the

bone-deep cold of a recalcitrant spring. Her fingers were numb on her slick reins and the roan she rode bucked and danced under her. The wrong horse for this job, too skittish, too green. But the Stepsons had taken their string, leaving only what wasn't held in common. Except, of

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course, for the single Tros-bred that should have been hers, but had gone to Critias because Tempus wasn't above that sort of insult.

It wasn't fair, but her father had never been. Didn't want a daughter, didn't care however much Kama tried to make him. A woman wasn't consequential, not to him. And her affair with Torchholder had made things worse, not better.

Was Tempus trying to tell her, by giving Crit the horse and forcing Crit to stay on along with her here, that if she went back with Crit, he'd forgive them both? Was Crit being singled out as an acceptable choice? Or did Tempus just not give a frog's fart?

The latter, most likely. She was going to try to do the same. Try not to care. Try to understand and overcome the trial that was Sanctuary, the

punishment of being stationed here. But because she was stationed here, assigned like any of his men to onerous duty, she hadn't had the heart to refuse to tarry. That would have been playing on her blood relationship, asking special favors, admitting that she, a woman, couldn't handle hard duty like the men.

Help the garrison commander and the hierarchy restore some order here, that's your job. You're a good intelligence collector. Collect, her father had said to her, but nothing more. Nothing personal, nothing beyond what was said in that meeting where the rear guard was singled out.

And Crit had stared boldly at her across the table in the safe house, knowing already whom Tempus was intending to name as commander-in-chief of Sanctuary's disparate armed forces. Knowing she'd have to come to him, be under his command.

It stank. She kicked her roan and slapped its poll and, under diverse and punitive instruction, it settled down. Jogging beside the half-drunken Straton toward the river, she wished she was anywhere else, doing anything else. Trying to keep Zip from making this sort of mistake wasn't her job, but Crit's.

Straton knew that, too, but hadn't voiced it. Crit was head of the combined militias, including the fifty grunts that made up Walegrin's regular army barracks, but Zip, like Aye-Gophlan, was an undercommander, responsible for the second and third shifts each day.

Only Crit, or someone from the palace hierarchy, could tell Zip to leave the riverside altar be and make it stick.

But Kama would die before she went to Crit and asked him to solve a problem she couldn't. Bringing Strat into it made the message she was sending the more clear: We who love you won't be treated this way. You've snubbed us both for your precious command, now live with it. But don't expect us to bow and scrape.

Strat had wanted Sanctuary's commission, should have had it. Crit

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couldn't have wanted it less, so he got it. And that kept the vampire with her hidden agenda out of things, but at a personal cost only Tempus could have decreed. Only Tempus, who had no conscience, could split a Sacred Band pair like he'd split the love-match that had once been Kama and Critias.

Suddenly, she found her eyes blurry. She swiped impatiently at them with the back of her forearm. She couldn't afford emotion now; it clouded her judgment. Her anticipation of men was generally good. Of Critias, it was woefully inadequate.

Of Strat, her forewarning was little better. Or maybe it was just the fact that Strat was drunk and his horse a numinous creature that caused them to take a shortcut over the White Foal Bridge and down a road leading past Ischade's Foalside home.

Zip was transported, in an altered state where every night noise was new and hostile, down by the White Foal's edge where he could barely see the eerie lights from Ischade's house up the bank. He had a wheelbarrow and, at the bank's crest, a wagon. He had three of his militia guarding the wagon, but he'd permitted none to come down here. Not to the shrine.

No one should touch the piled stones but him, the thing he served had told him. As it had told him to bring it blood, and worse, it had decreed the time and manner of its uptown move. It wanted to live on the Street of Temples, with the gods. Zip had found it a place, an alley behind the Rankan Storm God's temple, and there it swore it would be content to stay.

And he'd found it a new sacrifice, a special gift that one of his girls had brought him. The girl wanted a job on the Street of Lanterns and deliverance from Ratfall. In exchange for what she'd found on the Downwind beach, Zip was happy to oblige. The red-eyed thing that lived inside the stones would take its new gift, Zip was sure.

He hunkered down beside the knee-high pile and said, "Look here,

Lord, I've got a present for you, when we're moved. But now I've got to start on the stones, by myself if you won't let my boys help."

He waited for a reply, but only a glimpse of a burning red eye and a sound like shifting weight came to him in response.

What was it he served here? Most times, it didn't speak. He was prompted without words to do this or that. He'd get a feeling of a presence, and the things he brought it—pieces of human flesh, skins of warm blood, precious baubles—would disappear. Was it inimical only to Rankans, or to everyone? He wanted it to be his friend. He wanted it to

>0 AFTERMATH

?e the Ilsigs* friend, guardian of the revolution, since he was bound to have one.

He wanted it to show itself, magnificent and powerful, and help bring down Zip's enemies. So far, all it had done was take the sacrifices, give him bad dreams, and let him know it wanted to move uptown.

So did they all. So did all of Zip's Ratfall movers, everyone trapped in the Maze and policed to wits* end. So did the twelve-year-old mothers and one-legged fathers of Zip's revolution, which he'd never wanted. He

might have disavowed the struggle if Tempus hadn't tagged him. But

Tempus had.

Zip didn't understand why the Rankan powers wanted Zip's help, or the PFLS on its side. The Rankans wouldn't believe that there really wasn't a PFLS when he tried to explain that a score of gang members with lamb's blood and paintbrushes didn't make a political movement.

But since his thieves and mendicants would receive the protection of what police Crit had in Sanctuary if they took the night shift, and Zip took responsibility, his entry into the power structure and polite . . .

society . . . had just happened.

It wasn't being co-opted by the enemy that bothered him the most.

What bothered him the most was that his bad boys and girls were doing exactly what they'd done before—extort, blackmail, roust and rough-house, bum and plunder—and doing it now with the protection and for

the benefit of the state.

It didn't make any sense, until it made all the sense in the world. And when Zip realized what Tempus had done to him, it had been too late.

Zip was already part of the establishment, a hated enforcer, a dog with a Rankan collar, and his militia no better than any of the cannon fodder in

Walegrin's demoralized army. They hadn't triumphed over the opposition, they had become it.

They weren't the revolution, they were the sustaining force behind the injustice that had created them.

When he'd said that—shouted it, actually—to Crit in fury, the cynical Stepson had flashed white teeth and said, "The more things change, pud, the more they stay the same. What's your problem? Not having fun now that you're legal? It's all your type knows how to do, and this way you won't end up handiess or headless because of it. You're talent, and we're the talent scouts. Thank your slime gods you've been discovered and put to work before you ended up greasing some slaver's wagon wheels."

That was another thing that bothered Zip: Critias seemed to know more about Zip's affairs than anybody could. "Slime gods" was an obvious reference to the altar. And as for the slavers . . . Zip had sold more than one soul down that river of sighs, to finance the revolution. But then

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it had been a matter of conscience. Now it was a godsdamned state

business, for pork's sake.

Gayle, the 3rd commando liaison man, had told him not to mind it, just make his list of expendables. He hated himself these days, as much as he hated Kama, the twit who had gotten him mixed up in all this, and her damned 3rd Commando ethos that excused the foulest misdeeds as exigencies. "Whatever works" might work for the Riddler's daughter and her lot of death dealers, but it didn't work for Zip.

Especially when, if he wasn't careful, he was going to become just like them. So here he had this altar, this god or whatever it was, this eater of sacrifices that never exactly said it could expiate his sins, wipe him clean, but surely must mean it. It was the thing in the altar with its red eyes that was making him believe there was some method to all his madness. It had a plan. It wanted Zip to infiltrate the Rankans and the Beysibs, to learn how to command and the weaknesses of their joint enemies. It was a living thing in there—or at least a real thing, which other gods weren't, as far as Zip could tell. It had wants and needs.

It wanted flesh and it needed blood and it wanted to move uptown and it needed Zip to be the militia commander to serve it. He had to serve something. He couldn't justify what he and his little band of rebels were doing otherwise. He had to have a Cause and the red eyes in the altar, the slurping sound of fresh blood being drunk and the godlike belches afterwards, these were his Cause.

And only the river god knew what it wanted of Zip, but it did want him. Nobody had ever wanted him before. Then came, all at once, Kama and the Riddler and the river god and . . . No, Kama had come before the god, but that didn't matter.

It mattered that he got the stones uptown. With a quill he marked each stone as he lifted it from the pile into his wheelbarrow. When the barrow was full, he could almost see into the heart of the altar.

But then he had to wheel the barrow up the slope, no easy task, and when he'd done that and given the stones to his boys to load on their ass-drawn wagon, someone came out of the gloom and hailed him.

"Yo," he called back, while motioning his boys to cover the stones in the wagon. "Who comes?"

One horse, out of the gloom; a single rider. He walked toward it, hand on his beltknife, his neck aprickle, back stiff.

Finally the rider answered, "Zip, it's me."

"Frog," Zip cursed under his breath. "Kama, stay there. The footing's tricky. I'll come up." He turned his head and said to his rebels, "Get down there, load the rest of the stones, take 'em where I told you. Careful to mark them and put them back just like they were. I'll catch up."

AFTERMATH

But he knew he wouldn't. And he knew the god was going to be angry, though he didn't know what form the god's wrath might take.

But then he thought he did: Kama was beautiful, sliding off her horse under the diffuse light of a hidden moon. She always hit him that way, no matter how he told himself he didn't need the kind of trouble she represented.

And she was trouble, in doeskin boots and leggings, smelling like new-mown hay with trail dust in her hair. And all about her person, as clear as her velvet thighs and firm breasts as in her face or her sweet breath, were the indications of her class: her speech, her bearing, the gulf that lay between them and never could be bridged, no matter how he tried. And he tried then again, wordlessly and desperately, as if laying her on her back in the mud was somehow going to do it. But it didn't. It never would, never would.

She laughed softly and accommodated him until urgency overtook her, but it was always the high-born girl with the velvet skin who was humming, who found him exciting for all the wrong reasons, who played with him casually when touching her was probably worth his life if Crit

r Molin found them.

So when she said, as she quivered, her mouth to his ear, "Strat's here
^ith me, somewhere back there. Don't panic, just be quick," all his
assion threatened to ebb, then exploded when her nails ran down his

ack.

"Damn you," he said, rolling over and off her, the best rejection he

ould manage and far too late.

"Stand in line for that," she chuckled, her fingers reaching for him,
railing along him, tapping him intrusively with unspeakable truths. "It's

>een too long since we've done this."

He was staring up at the clouds which hid the moon like a translucent
ity wall. "Not long enough by half. Not when you're sleeping in with
>riests and commanders-in-chief. I'm a lowly watch officer, remember?
'm gettin' over you. Got something of my own now."

Like he hadn't, before. He bit his lip and almost looked away from her.
3ut he couldn't. It was her damned body that did this to them both,
•very time. Riddler's daughter, enemy of the blood, twice his experience
ind probably twice his brains. What did he think he was doing?

Then he thought he knew what she was doing: "Zip," she said in a
deductive tone he wished he'd heard long minutes earlier, "don't move
that pile of stones. You don't know what you're disturbing. None of us
to."

He sat bolt upright. "Now I get it. You ask nice, and Strat's along to
ask nasty if I don't agree, right? Well, it's none of your business, Rankan

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whore." He jerked to his feet, fumbling with his pants. He couldn't see
his fingers clearly and blinked fiercely, trying to lace himself together.
"Don't come around me no more, hear? Not on your father's business or
because one of your boyfriends thinks I need it. I don't. And I never will,
not this way."

She was up, too, calling his name. He couldn't run from her, not from
a woman where some of his boys might see. He remembered the time
she'd nursed him back from the grave's edge, and the way she'd started
all this, kissing him when he was too weak to do the sensible thing and
bolt.

She liked 'em helpless, hurt, battle-scarred and war-weary, he knew.
He couldn't figure what Molin had, but power was a legendary aphrodis-

iac. And like her father, she spread it around.

He couldn't handle her. He kept wanting to treat her like a Ratfall girl—claim her, claim exclusivity with her. He had a comical vision of himself sitting at some strategy table with her, all silked and leathered and shiny brass-plated in Ranke where her kind moved jade pieces representing armies on marble mapboards. And jammed his hands in his pockets, walking hurriedly away.

"Zip," she called, catching up, reaching out, and he couldn't seem to jerk his elbow away. "We need you. /need you. And you owe me this—"

He stopped. He should have known it would come to that- "Right, we're all working together now and anyway, one time you saved my ass so I'm yours to command? No chance, lady. These're Ilsig matters, and you ain't one. Understand, or do I have to say it in Rankene?"

"I understand that you found some sort of talisman on the beach and that if you give it to that . . . thing . . . you've been feeding human flesh to, you might not be able to finish what you start. If you've got to move the stones, I'll make a deal with you."

He crossed his arms and looked down at her. At least he had that advantage: he was taller. He said; "Go on, let's hear it."

"I won't tell anyone about the altar, or what's in it, as long as no perceptible trouble comes from it, if you'll give me the talisman you were going to give to it."

"How do you find this crap out?" he blurted. "Is it Randal, your pet mage? You been following me? What?"

She just looked up at him, her eyes full of a surety and power that her little, female body shouldn't have been able to contain, let alone radiate. It was Tempus's blood in her, some more-than-human attribute, he was certain.

He said then, "No. I'm not doing anything like that. Why should I?" and turned to go back down the hill.

^ AFTERMATH

And Straton was there, on that freakish bay horse everybody knew
?out, come from nowhere, out of nothing, leaning on his saddlehom,
.eaning his thumbnail with a glittering blade. There, right between Zip
nd the path down to the riverbank.

"Going somewhere, pud?" said Strat.

"Strat," said Kama, "I can handle this."

"I was just leaving," Zip replied.

"No you can't," said Strat to both of them. Then: "Zip, what she
/ants, you give her. What she ordered, you do. Or deal with me. Kama,
here's something more important than piffles going on out there. Finish
/ith your boy toy and let's get going."

Kama winced but held out her hand steadily and said to Zip, "Either
ive me the talisman, or Strat and I are going down there and crush five
T six of those stones. Do you want to risk that, and what will follow if
he three of us have a falling-out?"

Zip looked from the big fighter to the slight woman and saw a shared
mrpose there; an implacable, uncaring deadliness common among those
ure that their Cause was worth serving. He had to learn to match their
pirit. Until then, he'd never win against them.

He reached into his belt pouch and handed her the object a girl had
bund in the seawrack. It hardly glittered. It wasn't even gold, just
ironze. "Here, take it. And take out your lust somewhere else, from now
)n. I don't want to mess with you no more."

He heard Strat's raw titter as he stalked away, and it scratched blood from his soul- He wondered if the thing in the altar would consider the extenuating circumstances under which he'd lost its gift.

And what would happen if it did not.

Ischade's Foalside home was dimly lit, numinous. When they got there, Kama recognized Crit's gray horse and squeezed her eyes shut. No wonder Strat had come running to get her: Crit at Ischade's was naphtha too close to a torch.

"Gods, Strat, we both still love him, you know?"

"I figure," Strat agreed in an odd tone. "But he doesn't love us. Get him out of there, Kama. If I go in, it's just more trouble. She isn't going to take kindly to him sticking his nose in where it doesn't belong."

Kama was already off her horse, handing Strat its reins. "I know. You stay here, there's no use of you two getting into a brawl over this." Poised to sprint for the door, she turned back: "Strat, we have to get used to things the way my father left them. It hurts all of us. Crit didn't want this command. Not this way."

"That and a soldat will still get you laid at Myrtis's."

Bitterness unanswerable. Kama sprinted for the door she'd always shunned, behind which was something she didn't want anything to do with: Ischade.

Through the gate, up the steps, and stop, hearing your own breathing, wondering what you'll do if she's hurt him, ensorcelled him, gotten her claws into him like Strat, and Janni, and Stilcho and the rest . . .

Knocking with your heart pounding louder, suddenly aware of more than one male in there behind that forbidding door, and hoping those other voices aren't undead voices. You've only seen the undeads at a distance, and even the memory raises gooseflesh . . . "Ah, Madame Ischade, I'm here for Crit." Blurted like a fool in a voice higher than you've heard yourself use since school days.

Inky eyes deeper than any uncursed well, a pale face whose features are somehow indiscernible, and a hand cold as anything Kama could remember touching.

"Good," nodded the creature in her cowl. Behind her were colors, rioting jewel tones, but Ischade was all white and black. Black. "Come in." Black eyes, so deep you could sleep in them. -

Don't fall into any trap. Don't look at her too long. "Crit?" On tiptoes.

"Crit?" The swathed shape moves away. "C/7Y?"

There he is, with two men she recognized: Vis, and a beggar with a stutter, a creature called Mor-am. Wrong company, wrong place, wrong something going down here.

Kama shivered and felt throwing stars she'd gotten from Niko nestled in her belt. Could you kill anything here? Would it stay dead? Could she take out the beggar, the mere, and Ischade if Crit needed that much help?

She could try, couldn't do less. But then Crit came slowly to the door, his gait telegraphing annoyance, but nothing worse. "Good evening," he said and Kama couldn't figure where the vampire had disappeared to.

"What brings you here, Kama?"

He somehow shouldered her outside and then the door was closed, his hands on her shoulders, tight and hard, digging. "Fool," Crit whispered, "don't mix in this. I've got enough troubles." His lips hardly moved when he spoke; the hollows under his cheeks were too deep; his whole bearing was wrong and she was terrified.

"Crit, gods, whatever it is, you can't do it alone. Strat's with me, we're here to—"

"Strat? With you? He bunks here, Kama. Sleeps here. Does whatever

he does here. For her. Not us. Go away. I'm finding someone for Torchholder. Special orders."

She tried to shake off his grip. It wouldn't shake. She said defiantly, "Whatever you're doing, I'm doing. Special orders."

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AFTERMATH

He couldn't verify that, not without going to Randal. And Randal might lie for Kama, might say Tempus had sent a message.

The touch of him made her ache and she suddenly wondered whether if, for just one night, every lover in Sanctuary could be in the right bed, things might straighten out.

Critias's usually handsome Syrese face had none of its gentility tonight;

it was a fright mask, just shields for eyes and a slash where his mouth should be- He tucked in his chin, bowed his head to stare into her face, then shook his head infinitesimally: "You want in, fine. We're going up-town to the ruined blocks, see if we can't find Tasfalen in one of the houses left standing there. That's where she says to look. Me, the two backstreeters she owns, and you. But no Strat."

"Crit, he—"

"Can't be trusted. Too much her creature. Tell him to back off, out of sight till I leave. Tell him if he wants to talk to me, get rid of the horse as a sign of good faith. Or of returning sanity. I don't need a ghost horse, or a ghost rider, which is what he's becoming. Go on. Tell him. Then meet me at the gate."

He gave her a little push and she wished he felt so strongly about her, even if those feelings were as hard and fierce as what he felt for Strat.

Like a page in court, she ran back to Strat's horse and said, "He says he's going uptown to find Tasfalen for Torchholder. Doesn't want you involved. We'll talk to you later. You stay with Ischade. If this goes wrong, we need someone on the outside who knows where we went and what happened. And we may need Ischade's—your help."

"He didn't say that."

*"No, he didn't. I'm going with him, and I'm saying it."

"I'll come—"

"He did say that, Strat. He wants you here, just in case . . ." It

sounded like what it was, a whitewash.

Strat's horse backed a few steps and from there she heard Straton say, "Go on, then. Ischade's warned him off, told him something. I'll find out what. You need help, you'll get it." His voice was thick.

She was glad she couldn't see his face. She ran blindly to her horse, grabbed a handful of mane, vaulted to its back, and urged the skittish roan toward the iron gate where weird flowers bloomed. In her belt, the talisman she'd taken from Zip seemed hot against her leathers, hot enough to make her sweat.

It was the proximity to Ischade's wards, she told herself- Nothing to fret over. She had plenty to worry about without adding the talisman into the bargain.

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Crit crossed one leg over his saddle's pommel and lit a smoke, staring at the building across the street. No sign on its steps or to either side of the rubble they'd passed getting here, of the whirlwinds and firestorm of destruction that had ravaged Tasfalen's ancestral home.

This building was intact, its shutters drawn. The vampire had been

certain of where to look, but uncertain that looking was wise.

"She said," Crit told Kama, "that Tasfalen's in there, with Haught.

You remember Haught."

"I remember," Kama said through clenched teeth.

Mor-am and Vis were off to one side, ordered to accompany them by Ischade, who evidently was in charge of more than her Foalside cottage. Damn Tempus, for putting Crit between sorcerous rocks and political hard places. Vis had brought him to Mor-am, who'd grinned and brought him to Ischade with more satisfaction than Crit liked.

And the vampire had been civil. Both of them had kept Strat's name out of the conversation. "Our mutual friend" was what they called Straton, and because of that friend, Ischade was willing to tell Crit where to look.

And to warn him: "There is more, Critias, in that home than just two men in a house. Do not go inside, but merely open the doors—if you can."

This was said for Strat's sake, Crit knew, not his own. He unclenched a fist with difficulty and found he'd dug his nails into his palm, that his fingers were stiff from the clench. "She said," he told Kama, "you'd have the right key for this lock."

"Excuse me?" The woman on the roan kned her mount closer.

"You heard me. Got anything on you that might do the trick?"

"You're sure she didn't mean that metaphorically?"

And Crit knew what Kama was alluding to: Tempus and an inhuman sprite had coupled before a magically locked door uptown, and things had happened.

"I don't care what she meant, we're not trying anything like that.

What have you got that might work?"

"Keys," said Kama with maddening common sense. "Lots of keys. To my place, the guardhouse, the Shambles safe house, Molin's—"

"Spare me the list. Let's try some." He swung first one leg and then the other over his gray's withers, reaching for his crossbow as soon as his feet hit the ground. A bolt might smash the lock, even if it were a stout one.

They drop-tied the horses without a word, a sign both of them were thinking this might not be survivable. Crit cast a look at Kama, wondering how she'd managed to insinuate herself into this so fast, so deftly.

And admitting he was glad to have someone there. He was a Sacred

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AFTERMATH

Bander, trained to depend on a partner. He wouldn't have tried this alone, and Vis wasn't the sort of man you could trust your right side to.

Not that Kama was any sort of man at all.

Having crossed the street, Crit looked back once because he'd heard Vis's voice—not words, just a tone. And saw a wave of farewell so eloquently hostile and so gloating that he almost shot the mere there and then.

But Kama read his mind and touched his arm. "They're Ischade's.

They'll wait. They'll run back with word if we don't come out. We need

that.*

"Crap," Crit said.

"Agreed," Kama said with a ghost of her father's smile.

Then they climbed the steps and Crit put his back against the stone, crossbow ready, attempting to cover every avenue of attack while Kama tried key after key and cursed like a Nisibisi freeman.

Finally she said, "No luck. Nothing works." And slumped against the doorjamb.

They looked at each other too long, and Crit had to look away. It was in that silence that they heard something move inside, behind the stout wood of the door.

Then they looked at each other again,

"Want to knock?" Kama said lightly.

"I don't think so," Crit replied in the same tone. "We could start digging at the wood with—"

"Wait," said Kama, simultaneously digging in her belt. "This, maybe."

She held out a piece of bronze about half the length of her hand and

shaped like a knobbed bar or rod.

"Never fit," he said critically, still holding his crossbow at the ready, still glancing from shadow to shadow down the quiet street. Still watching Vis and Mor-am as best he could.

"Might not have to. It washed up on the beach. I heard about it from some of my ... people. Turned a gold coin to lead, and copper to clay, in the finder's purse."

"So?"

"So, let's see if it'll do something to that metal."

"We're here." Crit shrugged, trying to ignore the implications. Kama wasn't the finder. Kama had appropriated this thing from someone, for her own purposes- And she'd heard about it through some informer of whom Crit was totally ignorant. Nothing was going to work right in Sanctuary unless they all started pulling together. But what he wanted to do to Kama right then wouldn't facilitate anything of the sort.

She shrugged, too, added a sour twist of her thin lips, and bent to the

door. He didn't dare look away to watch, but he heard her tap bronze against bronze. And curse. And tap again, and chortle.

"So?" he said when she stood up and carefully put the talisman back in her belt.

"So, do we want to be polite, now that the lock's no problem?"

He took one hand away from the crossbow and, balancing it on his hip, felt for the lock. It was gooey. He brought his fingers to his lips and smelled White Foal mud, rank with rot. He swore and asked her to explain herself.

"I heard," she said, "it might be something like this. That's all."

"Great." He spat over his shoulder. "Next time you 'hear' of something like this, you come to me with it."

"I did."

"Beforehand," he said, just as there was a scuffling sound and then a dragging noise behind the door and he and Kama jumped back in unison.

The door opened like a casket's top. And there, behind it, stood some-

thing very much like Tasfalen, the popinjay noble who'd been missing so long. "Yessss," said the noble in an entirely horrible voice, a voice that seemed not to have been used for a thousand years.

And behind this shape, Crit could see another: Haught.

And over those two images, he saw superimposed the glowing countenance of Ischade, a slight crease between her eyes, and Ischade was shaking her head, her lips forming a word.

And that word was "Run." In his inner ear, he heard it again; Run, if you value your soul.

"Come on, Kama. Sorry to disturb you, Tasfalen," said Crit as he backed down the stairs, Kama's arm in a deathgrip and still holding the loaded crossbow one-handed. "We just needed to verify your whereabouts. Stop by the palace when you can—Molin Torchholder wants to see you."

By the time he'd finished saying all of that, he'd dragged Kama halfway to the street and she was whispering urgently, "What's the matter with you? Lost your mind? Your nerve?!"*

"Finished, that's all. We're finished here. I have no reason to arrest that man. I only had to find him." His voice was shaking and Kama heard it.

He didn't look at her as they made for their horses. He couldn't stand to see scorn in her eyes. But he saw it in the eyes of Ischade's two waiting minions, and it burned like hellfire.

"What's the matter, Stepson, Tempus take your balls upcountry?" Vis shouted from a safe distance as Crit mounted up.

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AFTERMATH

He got off one quarrel, but his aim was half-hearted. It smashed harmlessly against the brick beside Vis's head.

And then there was Kama to deal with, slouched in her saddle, frowning.

He said, "We have to report this to Torchholder. I need you. Let's go."

She reined her horse after his, either unwilling to dispute his statement or unable.

One way or the other, he'd let the matter of the talisman go if she'd

just give him a chance. How he was going to keep Kama with him tonight, Crit couldn't fathom, but he was going to give it a try.

Torchholder would have to make do with a written report. It was just too damned cold in Sanctuary to sleep alone tonight.

The sky was beginning to lighten, turning regal above the temple tops. Zip's black sweatband was sopping though the waning night was as chill on the Street of Temples as it had been at the White Foal's edge.

He straightened up from the piled stones in the alleyway, hand to the small of his back. He was alone now. He'd sent his boys scurrying with a flurry of invective when he'd realized what they'd done.

Or what he'd let them do. They'd touched the stones, because of Kama and Strat. Worse, they'd mismarked the ones they'd touched.

Zip had spent the rest of the night trying to sort out the mess. And all he had to show for his labors was an empty pile of stones that wouldn't sit exactly right, wouldn't form the beehive shape they'd had down at the riverbank.

One more time, he put the stones he was sure of—the top three—in place. And one more time they fell inward, toppled others, and ended in a jumble in the alley beside the Storm God of Ranke's temple.

And again, as the stones rolled and at last came to rest, the ground beneath Zip's feet seemed to tremble. This time, he hardly noticed the earth's tremors over his own.

The rivergod wasn't pleased, he could feel it. Maybe it was gone, or just wouldn't come here because he'd botched it, but Zip had an awful feeling that the red-eyed thing was more than a little miffed about the disarrayed condition of its home. Worse, he wasn't sure any more whether this site was good enough, being not quite on the Street of Temples, but somewhat off the thoroughfare.

If only his boys had marked the stones. If only Kama and Strat hadn't interfered. If only the day would stay its coming a little while longer. Zip had been in tight spots before. Given time and calm, he could sort the

matter out.

There were thirty-three stones in all. Some of them had Zip's careful

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marks. It couldn't be impossible to figure out which stones must comprise the bottom row.

But it was. He couldn't do it. He'd tried four times. And now the dawn was threatening to break. First the sky would regain its blueness, eating

up the stars. Then royal purple would creep along the temples' walls, then goutts of red and orange flame to eat the darkness. And when the celadon and rose of true dawn came, with them would come the priests and acolytes, padding toward their morning duties.

Zip would be discovered where Ilsigs feared to tread, in the reaches of a Rankan temple. And then the rivergod would have its revenge.

He knew it was that. He was shaking all over, anguished and weak.

Too weak to run, too tired to hide. It was as if all his spirit had leeches away with the darkness, as if his soul was as dismantled as the home of stone he couldn't rebuild.

He squatted down beside the tumbled blocks of half-dressed limestone, nearly in tears. He wanted to make amends, he hadn't meant to let the unclean hands of his rebels desecrate the rivergod's temple. He'd tried to do the right thing ...

And, in extremis like so many men before him over thousands of years, Zip began to pray: Lord, he asked wordlessly, eyes closed, hands upon the stone he'd marked himself, the capstone of this puzzle he couldn't solve, O Lord, forgive thy servant. Evildoing has befallen me. In my foolishness, I have sinned against thee. Forgive thy servant and help me to make things right. Help thy servant to make thy temple and I will bring the blood of a virgin under twelve, the eyes of an ox, the penis of a Rankan noble—whatever thy desire is, just make it known to me and I will do that

thing. But help me not fail in the making of thy temple, and give me a sign that this place is acceptable to thee. Before I get my ass hauled off to jail in the bargain, he added, still silent, eyes yet closed.

For he'd heard a sound that stiffened him as if he were turned to stone as unyielding as the blocks over which he labored: the click of a horse's hoof against a pebble, the scrape of an iron shoe on cobble.

Holding his breath, he heard more: the swish of a long tail, the creak of leather, the jingle of harness. Frog, I'm porked for good and all.

Obviously, he told himself, this was the god's wrath come upon him. He was going to open his eyes, turn around, and there would be some palace hotshot, some regular army mover, some Beysib lady fighter, waiting to take him off to the Hall of Justice for screwing around on the grounds of the Storm God's temple. Not even his commission as watch officer could save him now. Not from the penalty for desecrating holy ground when that ground was holy to Rankans.

He opened his eyes and looked straight ahead, at the jumble of altar

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stones. Well, he'd tried. He wondered what was going to happen to the altar stones, to the god's home, and to the god himself. Would it magically get itself and its stones back to the river where it was safe?

And if it couldn't, what would then befall poor Zip, who'd managed to pork up a god's life as well as his own?

He bit his lip and then, decided, turned from the waist to face his fate.

There, behind him, was a single horseman. The horse loomed in the gloom, its great dark chest seeming to stare at Zip with a panther's eyes, a panther's gaping, toothsome jaws.

Zip blinked, and realized that what faced him was no creature half cat, half horse, but a warhorse wearing a pantherskin shabraque. And the panther who had given its skin to blanket this horse had been large, with glowing eyes, and so magnificent that its head had been not merely skinned, but stuffed so that glassy eyes stared at Zip as angrily as living eyes might have.

The horse was the color of White Foal clay, its mane and tail and stockings black. Its bridle and reins were of woven stuff like swampgrass, and from it wafted a marshy odor. It pawed the ground, neck arched, and only then was Zip's attention drawn to the rider, who was dismounting.

Zip never remembered scrambling to his feet, only the swing of the rider from his saddle, the cloak as dark as the predawn sky, and the feathered helm that inclined toward him as the rider said, "What have we here?"

"Uh, I'm just trying to put this back like it ought to be." Zip waved vaguely behind him, toward the altar stones tumbled there, trying to protect the unassembled shrine with his body.

The rider's helmet turned slowly. His visor was down. He was armored in browns; bronze or hardened leather or some combination, Zip couldn't tell. But armored in the way of well-to-do professionals: arms free and bare but for wrist braces, cuirass and loinguard, greaves below his knees, and all of it fitted custom to his body. Slung at his hip was a cavalryman's sword and equipment belt. Behind, on the saddle, Zip could see two shields, long and short, and a bow and quiver, but in the rider's hand was only a spear.

Coming toward him without another word, the man used the spear as a staff, digging the ground with its butt. And then, when this faceless apparition was nearly upon him and Zip was beginning to wonder if there were really eyes behind the frightful visor, he finally spoke again: "I see

your problem."

And he walked right by Zip, whose nose was wrinkled at the salty

smell of marsh emanating from him, and on toward the pile of stones.

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"No, don't! Please! Nobody's supposed to touch—" Zip lunged un-
thinkingly toward the armored man and the horse behind him screamed
and reared, hooves flailing.

Zip threw up his arms and dived to the dirt as the horse stalked up-
right toward him.

At the same time, the armored man turned slowly, from the waist, and
held up his spear. The horse came down on all fours and bowed its head,
snorting.

Zip scrambled to his feet. "Look, like I said, nobody's supposed to
touch—"

The armored man's head swiveled toward him and the voice from
behind the visor said, "This one first." His spear pointed to a certain
stone, then jabbed toward it commandingly when Zip only stared. "This
one. Now."

Zip found his hands on the stone. And then on another, the one that the spear touched next. And another, and another. Zip labored there, under the direction of that spear, until the sky was red and gold and he held the final stone in both his hands, chest heaving.

Poised over the pile, afraid that attempting to place the last stone would tumble all the others. Zip blurted breathlessly, "You're sure?"

The helmeted head nodded once, up and down, and the spear jabbed forward commandingly.

Zip placed the stone atop all the other stones and a spark seemed to jump from the rocks. It bit his hand, crawled up his wrist. It hurt like fire.

He staggered back, squinting at the stones suddenly too bright, as if they'd ignited. He shielded his eyes from the glare. A trick of the dawn light, he told himself when he opened his eyes again and the pile was still there, neither burning nor singed, not even smudged, but squat and sturdy.

Squat! Sturdy! A rough beehive of stones, solid as the temple wall in whose shadow it rested. Success! Relief flooded Zip. Before he knew it, he was on his knees at the low opening, peering inward, trying to see if the rivergod was there.

And he saw something, red and glowing, restless in its appointed dark.
And reached out to touch the stones, which were cool and real and snug
in place.

He pushed on one. It didn't shift. He pushed on two. They didn't
budge. He chuckled and then he grinned. He put his cheek to the cool
stone, knowing now that the spark that had seemed to bite him was just
some phosphorescent insect and the rest had been illusion, a moment of
Waking dream.

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Because the god was not angry at him—it had come to abide in the
temple he had built it!

He gave a wordless shout and then remembered the armored man. He
got up from the altar, hand already outstretched to thank the stranger,
but there was no one there. No man in fighter's garb. No horse in
pantherskin shabraque with panther feet dangling from its back.

Nothing but increasing daylight in an alley where no Ilsig dared be
caught, not even Zip, the third shift watch officer of Sanctuary.

"Gotta go, but I'll be back. Lord," he muttered, giving the shrine a final pat before he fled. "I'll be back."

Kama's roan had bolted during the night, found some way to slip its harness and make away. "She does it all the time," Kama said to Crit, who was sure someone had gotten into the barn and stolen the mare. "There's no door that beast can't open, no knot she can't chew through. She'll be out at the Stepsons' barracks, mark my words."

And that stopped all conjecture about the horse, and Kama's attempt to lighten Crit's mood. It wasn't the Stepsons' barracks any longer, not with so few Stepsons left. Nobody stayed there now. It was too lonely. The place was used for storage of gear and extra horses, but Crit stayed here, at the Shambles safe house; Strat stayed . . . where Strat stayed. Randal, who could have claimed the right, was sleeping in the Mageguild, and Kama herself preferred any number of beds with men in them to a solitary one full of unhappy memories.

"I'll go out and check," she said lamely. "You've got to go to work, anyway. See you toni— later?"

"Tonight's fine with me," said Crit gently, and then with more fire in him: "If you want to join me over at Ischade's—I can't let this thing with

Strat go on like this. I've got to get him out of there."

"Why?" Strat had been there for them, in his way. When they'd come back to the guardpost to write their report he'd been waiting, full of Ischade's warnings and a more honest concern. But Crit couldn't unbend, wouldn't let Strat have an opening so that amends could be made.

"She says," Strat had offered, using the unadorned pronoun, as they always did, to represent Ischade; "that there's more trouble coming out of that house than you or youi's can handle. Leave it to us, all right?"

Crit hadn't said a word to that at first, just stared at Strat in that way he had that made you want to sink into the earth right there and then. And after too long a pause, he'd said what Kama hoped he wouldn't:

"Us, is it? You and her, you mean? Or some of your soulless zombies under mutual command?"

Strat had been braced for it, by then. Kama wanted to crawl under the

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table, pretend she didn't understand what was happening and suggest they all go to breakfast—anything but sit there, a mute witness to the

rending of a Sacred Band oath.

Strat had said only, "Crit, I signed off" on your paperwork, what more do you want? You can't handle this. We won't tell anyone if you don't. Tasfalen's . . . our business. So's Haught. Keep your people away from them, that's all I'm saying." And with that, Strat had left.

There was a time Kama would have taken Crit to her bosom on this son of rebound and felt like she'd won something. But the comfort he needed wasn't hers, and all the acrobatics he'd put both of them through so that he could finally fall into an exhausted sleep didn't help what was ailing Critias.

Or didn't help enough. Still, she said, "Wait for me tonight," and left him, thinking that, if things were going from bad to worse with Strat, Crit might really need her help. He needed someone's. And Kama knew that, no matter what trouble it caused with Molin or anybody else, whatever Crit needed, she had to try to give him,

Love tends to be like that, even in Sanctuary.

Alone in his office, Critias pretended to work on the duty roster until his eyes started to sting. Then he gave it up, having made little progress, and began to put his papers away, thinking that he'd go down to Caravan

Square and see if he could find Kama another horse.

But as he was leaving, Gayle came in, muttering that there was "some porker outside you'd better take a look at, sir—personal like."

"I'm not in the mood," Crit snapped, then said: "Sorry, Gayle, it's not you. It's that damned Zip. Anybody report anything odd last night?"

It was Zip's shift, so as to whatever had happened about the stone shrine, Crit didn't expect anything like an honest report from the watch officer. Wouldn't have, even if Zip could write more than his name.

"That's what I'm sayin'. Commander: you'd better come have a look at this guy, came in last night to the meres* hostel, claiming all sorts of privilege.-Now he's lookin' for Tempus." Gayle shrugged and grimaced, anticipating Crit's next question. "Didn't tell him anything, either way."

"Just where 'outside' is this fellow?"

"Down at the Storm God's temple, like he owned it. Nice horse, nice gear, lots of loose change."

"Right. I'm on my way." They all knew the type—they were the type, before Tempus had welded them into something more usable by Empire.

Gayle was still hovering and Crit understood why: "Somebody's got to

watch the shop, friend."

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Gayle screwed up his face. "Forking waste, all this porked-up paper work's somethin' any porkin' fool can do."

"Not when it's mine, it isn't. Molin comes by, keep him here, tell him we're making copies and need his signature on something—anything. Try to find out what he's up to on this Tasfalen matter. And let him know that, far as we're concerned, it's closed: we found the man in question, he's not accused of anything, there's nothing more we can do."

Gayle was nodding intently, trying to memorize all of that, as Crit left.

His gray horse was still where Crit had tethered it, Enlil be praised. If that one disappeared, then it was going to become police business, and fast. But it hadn't. He rubbed its nose and it whickered softly as he mounted up and headed off into the early morning sunlight.

The worst thing about this new duty was getting used to sleeping at night, working in the daytime. For Crit's money, sunlight was something you left to the cattle. In Sanctuary, like most other venues he'd worked,

what was worth doing got done at night.

But command made its demands, and when he got to the Storm God's temple he wished he'd commanded his mage, Randal, to come to the Street of Temples with him.

The horse that was tied in front of the temple screamed money and power from every trapping and the pantherskin shabraque it wore was of a style and quality Crit had never seen before.

"Where's the owner of this horse?" he demanded of the temple acolyte who'd obviously been paid to watch over it and was doing that from a distance: the shabraque wasn't the only part of this beast with teeth.

"In back, Commander, down that alley." The acolyte rolled its eunuch's eyes heavenward as if to say. Don't ask me why these warriors do what they do.

Crit looked at the tethered warhorse, whose saddle had hung on it both a large and small shield, and other implements of close and regimented fighting, and blew out a long, slow breath.

Crit's dues to the mercenary's guild were still paid up. He rode, rather than walked, down the alley on the southwest side of the Storm God's temple until he came to a man eating a skewer of lamb and drinking from

a wineskin, leaning up against the temple wall near a pile of stones.

"Life to you," Crit said cautiously, keeping rein contact with his horse's mouth with one hand and his other on the crossbow he could shoot without disengaging from its saddle hook.

"And the rest, as follows," said the other man whose helmet, on the pile of stones, was of an ancient style from far to the west. "I'm looking for Tempus."

"You've found his first officer." Old habits died hard. "I'm holding the

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bag here till he returns." Everything about this fighter screamed trouble;

the fact that he was looking for the Riddler didn't mitigate that: whoever Tempus wanted for his sortie, he'd already contacted.

"You'll do, then."

"Thanks. Do for what?"

"I'm offering my services- Tempus needs a little help here, I was told."

The man was Crit's height but somewhat heavier, in his middle years, scarred enough by war and wind and sun to prove him mortal. His head was broad and strong and resembled, more than anything else, a human version of the helmet he'd set on the piled stones. The red-brown eyes in that face held Crit's implacably, and the Stepson had the unmistakable impression that he was being judged.

"He's not here, I said."

"But the problems are, and you're short-handed, so they say up at the guild hostel."

"Who sent you?" Bluntly put. If this fighter was a mere, as he said, the guild records could tell him something about the man he was looking at—if Crit needed to know any more.

A quirked smile that showed no teeth. "Your need, for certain—and the Riddler's. The Storm God, if you like."

Crit hated this sort of innuendo- The man he was looking at was of a fighting class not usually under his command, and if the newcomer was staying in Sanctuary, some accommodation between them would have to be made. The last thing he needed was a man like this working against him. And if he was what he seemed—an acquaintance of Tempus—then he might represent a light at the end of Crit's personal tunnel.

The man leaning against the wall merely chewed on his stick of lamb chunks and eyed Crit and the gray horse until Critias knew he must dismount or create an enemy,

When he'd done that, the newcomer threw away his stick of lamb and came toward him. When he reached the pile of stones, he put one foot up on it and retrieved his helmet. "I'm known as Shepherd," he said, and held out his hand.

"I bet you are," Crit replied, taking it. Between them was the pile of stones and, somehow, Crit didn't want to touch it. He remembered what Kama had said about Zip and the stones, but it didn't seem anywhere near as important as the man before him. "Well, Shepherd, I'm not using my war name here, so it's just Critias." He disengaged his hand and unconsciously wiped it against his hip.

Behind Crit, his horse snorted. Duly prompted, the Stepson said, "We've got plenty of work for the right sort of man, but what kind

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depends on how long you're staying. And what sort of references you can produce. More, I hope, than just evidence of the Storm God's favor."

"More than gods' favor, yes," said Shepherd, tapping his foot on the pile of stones. "Gods: can't live with 'em, can't shoot 'em." He shook his head in mock disgust, to make it clear that the remark was a joke, but it seemed strange to Crit, as strange as this Shepherd come to Sanctuary in the wake of the Riddler.

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David Drake

"You need a dagger, caravan master," said the stranger to Samlor hi) Samt as he began to bring a weapon slowly out from under his cloak.

The man hadn't spoken loudly, but there were key words which rang in the air of the Vulgar Unicorn. Weapon words were almost as sure a way to get attention in this bar as the mention of money. Conversation stopped or dropped into a lower key; eyes shifted over beer mugs and dice cups.

Samlor was already in the state of tension which gripped any sane man when he walked into this bar in the heart of Sanctuary's Maze district. More than the word "dagger" shocked him now, so that his right hand slipped to the brass pommel and hilt—of nondescript hardwood, plain and serviceable like the man who carried it—of the long fighting knife in

his belt sheath.

At the same time, Samlor's left arm swept behind him to locate and hold his seven-year-old niece Star. She was with him in this place because there was no place in the world safer for her than beside her mother's brother . . . which was almost another way of saying that there was no safety at all in this life.

Almost, because for forty-three years, Samlor hil Samt had managed to do what he thought he had to do, be damned to the price he paid or the cost to whatever stood between him and duty.

The stranger shouldn't have called him "caravan master." That's what he was, what he had been ever since he had determined to lift his family from poverty, despite the scorn all his kin heaped on him for dishonoring Ordonian nobility by going into trade. But no one in Sanctuary should

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have recognized Samlor; and if they did, he and Star were in trouble much deeper than the general miasma of danger permeating this place.

There were people in Sanctuary who actively wished Samlor dead.

That was unusual; not because he'd lived a life free from deadly enemies,

but because fate or the Cirdonian caravan master himself had carried off

most of those direct threats already.

When he bedded his camels at night on the trail, Samlor walked the circuit of the laager prodding crevices and holes with a cornel-wood staff flexible enough to reach an arm's length down a circuitous burrow.

If there were a hiss or an angry jarring of fangs on the staff, he either blocked the hole or, as the mood struck him, teased the snake into the open to be finished with a whip-swift flick of the staff. That was the only way to prevent beasts and men from being bitten when they rolled in their sleep onto vipers sheltering against mammalian warmth.

The caravan routes were a hard school, but applying the lessons he learned there to human enemies had kept Samlor alive longer than would otherwise have been the case.

Sanctuary, though, was a problem better avoided than solved—and insoluble besides. Samlor had no intention of seeing and smelling the foulness of this place ever again, until the messenger arrived with the letter from Samlane.

It could have been a forgery, though the Cirdonian script on the strip

of bark-pulp paper was illegible until it had been wound onto a message staff of the precise length and diameter of the ones Samlor's family had adopted when they were ennobled seventeen generations before. But the hand was right; the message had the right aura of terse presumption that Samlor would do his sister's will in this matter . . .

And the paper was browned enough with age, despite having been locked in a banker's strong room, that the document might well have been written before Samlane died with her brother's knife through her belly and through the thing she carried in her womb.

Samlor couldn't imagine what inheritance could be worth the risk of bringing Star back to Sanctuary, but his sister had been foolishly destructive only of herself. If the legacy which would come to Star at age seven were that important, then it was Samlor's duty as the child's uncle to see that she received it.

It was his duty as the father as well, but that was something he thought about only when he awakened in the bleak darkness.

So he was in Sanctuary again, where no one was safe; and a man he didn't know had just identified him.

Star put a hand on her uncle's elbow, to reassure him with her presence and the fact she understood the tension.

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The trio of punks by the door glanced sidelong with greasy eyes. They were street toughs, too young to have an identity beyond the gang membership they proclaimed with matching yellow bandannas and high boots that made sense only for horsemen. They were dangerous, the gods knew, the way a troop of baboons was dangerous. Like baboons, they stank, yammered, and let vicious hostility to outsiders serve in situations where humans would have found intelligence to be useful.

Four soldiers, out of uniform but obvious from the way their hair was cut short to fit beneath a helmet, sat at a table near the bar with a pimp and a woman. The pimp gave Samlor and the situation an appraising look. The woman eyed the caravan master blearily, because he happened to be standing where her eyes were more or less focused.

And the soldiers, after momentary alertness to the possibility of a brawl, resumed their negotiations regarding a price for the woman to go down on all four of them in the alley outside.

There were a dozen other people in the tavern, besides the slope-shouldered tapster and the barmaid—the only other woman present—who slid between tables, too tired to slap at the hands that groped her and too

jaded to care. The drinkers, solitary or in pairs, were nondescript though clothed within a fair range of wealth and national origin. They could be identified as criminals only because they chose to gather here.

"I don't need a dagger," said Samlor, releasing Star to free his left hand as his right lifted the wedge of his own belt knife a few inches up in its sheath. "I have my own."

There was nothing fancy about Samlor's weapon. The blade was a foot long with two straight edges. The metal had no ornamentation beyond the unsharpened relief cuts which would permit the user to short-grip the weapon with an index finger over the crosshilt. It was forged of a good grade of steel—though, again, nothing exceptional.

Recently, a few blades of Enlibar steel had appeared. These were forged from iron alloyed with a blue-green ore of copper which had been cursed by earth spirits, kobolds. The ore could be smelted only by magical means, and it was said to give an exceptional toughness to sword blades.

Samlor had been interested in the reports, but he'd survived as long as he had by sticking to what he was sure would work. He left the experiments with kobold steel to others.

"You'll want this anyway," said the stranger, lifting his dagger by its

crosshilt so that the pommel was toward Samlor.

Not a threat, only a man with something to sell, thought the Cirdonian
•s he sidled away from the stranger to get to the bar. Harmless, almost
certainly—but Samlor moved to his left, guiding Star ahead of him so

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that his body was between her and the weapon that the other man in-
sisted on displaying. The fellow had sized up Samlor as he entered the
Vulgar Unicorn, guessing his occupation from his appearance. A con
man's trick, perhaps, but not an assassin's.

There was no reason to take chances.

"When are we going to sleep, uncle?" asked Star with a thin whine on
the last syllables which meant she was really getting tired. That was
understandable, but it meant she was likely to balk when she needed to
obey- She might even call him "Uncle Samlor" despite having been
warned that Samlor's real name would make both of them targets.

Star was an unusual child, but she was a child nonetheless.

"Two mugs of blue John," said the Cirdonian, loudly enough for the tapster halfway down the bar to hear him. They already had the attention of the fellow, an athlete gone to fat but still powerful. He was balding, and his scars showed that he had been doing this work or work equally rough for many years.

If something had cost him his left thumb during that time—he was still the one walking around to tell the tale, wasn't he?

"I want—" Star piped up-

"And two beers to wash it down," Samlor said loudly, cutting her off. As his left hand reached down for his belt purse, he let it linger for a moment where Star's hood covered the whorl of white hair that was the source of her name. She quieted for the moment, though the touch was gentle.

Star's mother had immersed herself in arts that had ultimately killed her—or had led her to need to die. Her child had terrifying powers when

necessity and circumstances combined to bring them out.

But Samlor hil Samt had no need of magic to frighten anyone who knew him as well as the child did. He would not cuff her across the room;

not here, not ever. His rage was as real as the rock glowing white in the bowels of a volcano. The Cirdonian's anger bubbled beneath -a crust of control that split only when he chose that it should, and he would never release its destruction on his kin, blood of his blood ... his seed.

Star was old enough to recognize the fury, and wise enough to avoid it even when she was fatigued. She patted her protector's hip.

The coin Samlor held between the middle and index finger of his left hand was physically small but minted from gold. It was an indication to the sharp-eyed tapster that his customer wanted more than drink, and a promise that he would pay well for the additional service. The man behind the bar nodded as he scooped clabbered milk from a stoneware jug under the bar.

There was no drink more refreshing than blue John to a dusty traveler,

tired and hungry but too dry to bolt solid food. It was a caravaner's drink—and Samlor was a caravaner, obvious to anyone, even before he ordered. He shouldn't have been surprised at the way a stranger had addressed him.

Samlor wore a cloak, pinned up now to half-length as he would wear it for riding. When he slept or stood in a chili breeze, it could cover him head to toe. The fleece from which it was tightly woven had a natural blue-black color, but it had never been washed or dyed. Lanolin remaining in the wool made the garment almost waterproof.

The tunic he wore beneath the cloak was wool also, but dyed a neutral russet color. Starting out before dawn on the caravan road, Samlor would wear as many as three similar tunics over this one, stripping them off and binding them to his saddle as the sun brightened dazzlingly on the high passes.

The bottom layer against his skin was of silk, the only luxury Samlor allowed himself or even desired while he was on the road.

He was a broad-shouldered, deep-chested man even without the added bulk of his cloak, but his wrists would have been thick on a man of half again his size. The skin of his hands and face was roughened by a thousand storms whipping sand or ice crystals across the plains, and it was darkened to an angry red that mimicked the tan his Cirdonian genes did

not have the pigment to support.

When Samlor smiled, as he did occasionally, the expression flitted across his face with the diffidence of a visitor sure he's knocking at the wrong address. When he barked orders, whether to men or beasts, his features stayed neutral and nothing but assurance rang in his chill, crisp tones.

When Samlor hil Samt was angry enough to kill, he spoke in soft, bantering tones. The muscles stretched across his cheekbones and pulled themselves into a visage very different from his normal appearance; a visage not altogether human.

He rarely became that angry; and he was not angry now, only cautious and in need of information before he could lead Star and her legacy out of this damnable city.

The clabbered milk was served in masars, wooden cups darkened by the sweaty palms of hundreds of previous users. As the tapster paused, midway between reaching for the coin now or drawing the beer first, Samlor said, "I'm trying to find a man in this town, and I'm hoping that you might be able to help me. Business, but not . . . serious business."

That was true, though neither the tapster nor any other man in this dive was likely to believe it.

Not that they'd care, either, so long as they'd been paid in honest coin.

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"A regular?" asked the balding man softly as his hand did, after all, cover the gold which Samlor was not yet willing to release.

"I doubt it," said the Cirdonian with a false, fleeting smile. "His name's Setios. A businessman, perhaps, a banker, as like as not. Or just possibly, he might be, you know . . . , someone who deals with magic. I was told he keeps a demon imprisoned in a crystal bottle."

You could never tell how mention of sorcery or a wizard was going to strike people. Some very tough men would blanch and draw away—or try to slit your throat so that they wouldn't have to listen to more.

The tapster only smiled and said, "Somebody may know him. I'll ask around." He turned. The coin disappeared into a pocket of his apron.

"Uncle, I don't like—'

"And the beers, friend," Samlor called in a slightly louder voice.

There was little for a child to drink in a place like this. Star didn't have

decades of caravan life behind her, the days when anything wet was better than the smile of a goddess- The beer was a better bet than whatever passed for wine, and either would be safer than the water.

"This is a very special knife," said a voice at Samlor's shoulder.

The Cirdonian turned, face flat. He was almost willing to disbelieve the senses that told him that the stranger was pursuing his attempt to sell a dagger. In this place, a tavern where unwanted persistence generally led to somebody being killed.

"Get away from me," Samlor said in a clear, clipped voice, "or I'll put you through a window."

He nodded toward the wall facing the street, where wicker lattices screened the large openings to either side of the door. The sides of the room were ventilated by high, horizontal slits that opened onto alleys even more fetid than the interior of the tavern.

Samlor meant exactly what he said, though it would cause trouble that he'd really rather avoid.

Star wasn't the only one whom fatigue had left with a hair trigger. The man wasn't a threatening figure, only an irritating one. He was

shorter than Samlor by an inch or two and fine-boned to an almost feminine degree. He wore a white linen kilt with a scarlet hem, cinched up on a slant by a belt of gorgeous gold brocade. His thigh-length cape was of a thick, soft, blue fabric, but his torso was bare beneath that garment. The skin was coppery brown, and his chest, though hairless, was flat-muscled and clearly male.

The stranger blinked above his smile and backed a half step. Samlor caught the beers that the tapster glided to him across the surface of the bar,

"Here, Star," said the Cirdonian, handing one of the containers down

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to his charge. "It's what there is, so don't complain. We'll do better another time, all right?"

The beer was in leathern jacks, and the tar used to seal the leather became a major component of the liquid's flavor. It was an acquired taste—and not one Samlor, much less his niece, had ever bothered to acquire. At that, the smoky flavor of the tar might be less unpleasant than the way the brew here would taste without it.

The tapster had crooked a finger toward a dun-colored man at a corner table. Samlor would not have noticed the summons had he not been sure it was coming, but the two men began to talk in low voices at the far end of the bar.

The tavern was lighted by a lantern behind the bar and a trio of lamps hanging from a hoop in the center of the room. The terra-cotta lamps had been molded for good luck into the shape of penises.

There was no sign that the clientele of this place was particularly fortunate, and the gods knew they were not well lighted. The cheap lamp oil gave off as much smoke as flame, so that the tavern drifted in a haze as bitter as the faces of its denizens.

"Really, Master Samlor," said the stranger, "you must look at this dagger."

The Cirdonian's name made time freeze for him, though no one else in the Vulgar Unicorn appeared to take undue notice. The flat of the weapon was toward Samlor. The slim man held the hilt between thumb and forefinger and balanced the lower edge of the blade near the tip of his other forefinger—not even a razor will cut with no more force than gravity driving it.

Samlor's own belt knife was clear of its sheath, drawn by reflex without

need for his conscious mind to reach to the danger. But the stranger was smiling and immobile, and the dagger he held . . .

The dagger was very interesting at that.

Its pommel was faceted with the ruddy luster of copper. The butt itself was flat and narrow, angling wider for a finger's breadth toward the hilt and narrowing again in a smooth concave arc. The effect was that of a coffin, narrow for the corpse's head and wider for his shoulders until it tapered toward his feet again.

The hilt was unusual and perhaps not attractive, but the true wonder of the weapon was its blade.

Steel becomes more brittle as it becomes harder. The greatest mystery of the swordsmith's art is the tempering that permits blades to strike without shattering while remaining hard enough to cleave armor or an Opponent's weapon.

A way around the problem is to weld a billet of soft iron to a billet of

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steel hardened with the highest possible carbon content. The fused bar can then be hammered flat and folded back on itself, the process repeated until iron and steel are intermingled in thousands of layers thinner than the edge of a razor.

Done correctly, the result is a blade whose hardness is sandwiched within malleable layers that absorb shock and give the whole resilience; but the operation requires the flats to be cleaned before each refolding, lest oxide scale weaken the core and cause it to split on impact like a wand of whalebone. Few smiths had the skill and patience to forge such blades; few purchasers had the wealth to pay for so much expert labor.

But this stranger seemed to think Samlor fell into the latter category—as the caravan master indeed did, if he wanted a thing badly enough—

The blade was beautiful. It was double-edged and a foot long, with the sharpened surfaces describing flat curves instead of being straight tapers like those of the knife in Samlor's hand. The blade sloped toward either edge from the deep keel in the center which gave it stiffness—and all along the flat, the surface danced and shimmered with the polished, acid-etched whorls of the dissimilar metals which comprised it.

Because of their multiple hammered refoldings, the join lines between layers of iron and steel were as complex as the sutures of a human skull.

After the bar had been forged and ground into a blade, the smith polished it and dipped it into strong acid which he quickly flushed away.

The steel resisted the biting fluid, but some of the softer iron was eaten by even the brief touch. The iron became a shadow of incredible delicacy against which the ripples of bright steel stood out like sunlight on mountain rapids. Even without its functional purpose, the watermarked blade would have commanded a high price for its appearance.

Samlor's eyes stung. He blinked, because in the wavering lamplight the spidery lines of iron against steel looked like writing.

The stranger smiled more broadly.

"Unc—" began Star with a tug on the caravan master's left sleeve.

The iron shadows in the heart of the blade read "He will attack" in Cirdonian script. A moment before they had been only swirls of metal.

The stranger's hand slid fully onto the hilt he had been pinching to display. He twisted it in a slashing stroke toward Samlor's eyes.

Samlor didn't believe the words written on steel. He didn't even believe he had seen them. But part of his nervous system—"mind" would be too

formal a term for reflex at so primitive a level—reacted to the strangeness

with explosive activity.

The Cirdonian's left hand shot out and crushed the stranger's fingers

against the grip of his weapon, easily turning the stroke into a harmless

upward sweep- The metal that Samlor touched—the copper buttcap and

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the tang to which scales of dark wood were pinned to complete the hilt—

were cooler than air temperature despite having been carried beneath the

stranger's cape.

Samlor's right hand slammed his own dagger up and through the

stranger's ribcage till the crosshilt stopped at the breastbone. The cara-

van master could have disarmed his opponent without putting a foot of

steel through his chest, but reflex didn't know that and instinct didn't

care.

The stranger—the dead man, now, with steel from his diaphragm to

the back of his throat—lifted at the short, powerful blow. His head

snapped back—his mouth was still smiling—and hammered the hoop

which suspended the lamps. They sloshed and went out as the heavy oil

doused their wicks.

"Star, keep behind—" Samlor ordered as the light dimmed and his right hand jerked down to clear his weapon from the torso in which he had just imbedded it. The stranger flopped forward loosely, but the blade remained stuck.

Somebody's hurled beer mug smashed the lantern behind the bar. The Vulgar Unicorn was as dark as the bowels of hell.

Samlor ducked and hunched back against the bar while he tugged at his knife hilt with enough strength to have forced a camel to its knees.

There was a grunt and an oak-topped table crashed over. Somebody screamed as if he were being opened from groin to gullet—as may have been the case. Darkness in a place like this was both an opportunity and a source of panic. Either could lead to slaughter.

Samlor's dagger wouldn't come free. He hadn't felt it grate bone as it went in, and it didn't feel now as if the top were caught on ribs or the stranger's vertebrae. The blade didn't flex at all, the way it should have done if it were held at one point. It was more as if Samlor had thrust the steel into fresh concrete and were coming back a day later in a vain attempt to withdraw it.

One advantage to winning a knife fight is that you have the choice of your opponent's weapon if something's happened to yours. The Cirdonian's left hand snatched the hilt from the unresisting fingers of the man he had just killed, while his right arm swept behind him to gather up his niece.

A thrown weapon plucked his sleeve much the way the child had done a moment before. The point was too blunt to stick in the bar panel against which it crashed like a crossbow bolt.

Star wasn't there. She wasn't anywhere within the sweep of Samlor's arm, and there was no response when he desperately called the child's name.

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Steel hit steel across the room with a clang and a shower of angry orange sparks. Someone outside the tavern called a warning, but there was already a murderous scuffle blocking the only door to the street.

That left the door to the alley on the opposite side of the tavern; stairs

to the upper floor—which Samlor couldn't locate in the dark and which were probably worth his life to attempt anyway; and a third option which was faster and safer than the other two, though it was neither fast nor safe on any sane scale.

Samlor gripped the body of his victim beneath both armpits and rushed forward, using the corpse as a shield and a battering ram.

His niece might still be inside the Vulgar Unicorn, but he couldn't find her in the darkness if she didn't—or couldn't—answer his call. Star was a level-headed girl who might have screamed but wouldn't have panicked to silence when Samlor shouted for her.

He was much more concerned that she had bolted for the door the instant the lights went out, and that she was now in the arms of someone with a good idea of the price a virgin of her age would fetch in this

hellhole-

Somebody brushed Samlor from the side—backed into him—and caromed off, wailing in terror. Samlor did not cut with his new dagger at the contact because Star could still be within reach of his blade . . .

He was willing to be stabbed himself to avoid making that sort of

mistake.

Samlor stumbled on an outstretched limb which gave but did not
twitch beneath his boot. Then the corpse hit the screen to the right of the
door and the Cirdonian used all the strength of his back and shoulders to

smash the wickerwork out into the street.

The screen was dry with age, and many of the individuals withies were
already splitting away from the tiny trenails that pinned them to the
frame. The wicker still retained a springy strength greater than that of
thin board shutters, and Samlor felt a hint of infuriating backthrust

against his push.

The frame snapped away from the sash, letting the corpse carry the

collapsing wickerwork ahead of it into the street.

There was enough haze to hide the stars and silver moon, but the sky
glow was enough to fill the window sash after the lattice had been torn
away. Samlor dived over the sill, keeping his body as low as possible. He
could have boosted himself with his empty right hand so that he landed
feet first instead of slamming the street with his shoulder . . .

But if he had done that, the knife that flicked through the air above his rolling body would instead have punched between his shoulder blades.

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Some brawlers, like sharks in a feeding frenzy, don't need a reason to kill;

only a target.

"Star!" the caravan master bellowed as he hit, the shock of impact turning the word into more of a gasp than he had expected. His cloak and shoulder muscles had to break the fall, because his left hand, the downside hand, held the long knife that could be the margin of survival in the next instants.

The door of the tavern beside Samlor was blocked by two men, the larger holding the smaller and stabbing with mindless repetition. The only sound the victim made now was the squelch of his flesh parting before the steel.

A watchman had stepped from a door down the street. The lantern he raised did not illuminate figures, but its light wavered from metal in the hands of half a dozen men scurrying toward the altercation.

Samlor had heard that there were local militias raised from every few blocks of the Old City. They differed from street gangs in their expressed determination to keep order and protect their enclaves—but that didn't mean it would be healthy for an outsider to fall into their hands after starting a brawl on their turf. Militiamen rarely saw the need for a trial ; when there was already a rope or a sword handy.

;; The squad marching toward the noise from the other direction was .^ paid to enforce the law, but the priorities of the men comprising the unit J? tended to be more personal- They were regular army, and the quicker H 'they silenced the trouble, the quicker they could get the fuck back to the H patrol station where they didn't have to worry about showers of bricks € and roofing tiles.

I One of the soldiers carried a lantern on a pole. The glazing was pro- | tected by wire mesh, and similar metal curtains depended stiffly from the I'brims of the squad's dented helmets. They carried pole arms, halberds, "|and short pikes, and they shuffled forward with such noisy deliberation jthat it was obvious they hoped the problem would go away without any ""Wed for them to deal with it.

Samlor was wilting enough to do that. The problem was how.

Star wasn't in the street and wasn't answering him. He'd find her if he ad to wash Sanctuary away in the blood of its denizens, but first he had 3 get clear of this mess into which Fate seemed to have dropped him

tirough no fault of his own.

Why had that clumsy, suicidal stranger attacked him? Why had the
silow even accosted him?

But first, survival.

Samlor switched the dagger to his right, master hand, and dodged into
*° alley nearest him.

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The passageway was scarcely the width of his shoulders, but a door—
strapped and studded with metal—gave onto it from the building on the
other side. The Cirdonian slapped the panel as he dodged past it. Had it
opened, he would have dived in and dealt with those inside in whatever
fashion seemed advisable.

But he didn't expect that; and, as he expected, the door was as solid as
the stone to either side of it,

The alley jogged, though Samlor didn't recall an angle from inside the
Vulgar Unicorn's taproom. He slid past the facet of masonry, into an
instant of pitch darkness before someone within the tavern reignited a
lamp.

There were two slit windows serving this side of the taproom. The grating still covered one, but the light silhouetted the crisp rectangle of the other from which the wickerwork had been torn since the caravan master last saw it inside-

Even so, the opening was too narrow to pass an adult.

Samlor's mouth opened to call, but the child in the midst of four men was already screaming, "Uncle Samlor"

There were three of them between him and Star, packed into the passageway so that the child's dust-whitened garments were only a shimmer past their legs. They were the punks from the table by the door. Beyond them was a fourth man, tall and hooded, closing Star's escape route.

Light in the passageway was only the ghost filtering through the tavern windows and reflected from the filth-blackened wall opposite, but it was enough for Samlor's business. He drew the push dagger from its sheath under the back of his collar and held it so that its narrow point jutted out between the fourth and middle fingers of his left hand.

Before the caravan master could lunge into action, the hooded man stepped past the cringing Star and held his staff vertically to confront the trio of toughs. Either the hood was flapping loose or something tiny capered on the fellow's shoulder.

"What are you doing with this child?" he demanded in a clear voice.

"Begone!"

"Hey," said the nearest thug, doubtful enough to step back and jostle a companion.

The staff glowed pale blue, a hazy color which seemed to hang in the air as the object trembled. The face beneath the hood was set with determination which controlled but did not eliminate the underlying fear. The staff shook because the man holding it was terrified.

Reasonably enough.

Samlor paused. If the toughs did turn away in fear of what confronted

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them, he didn't want to be launched into an attack intended for their backs.

He didn't know what was going on. Sometimes you had to act anyway—but just now, Star was out of immediate danger, so there was no point in going off half-cocked.

Something—a man, there was no damned doubt about it, but he was only a hand span tall—stood on the right shoulder of the man with the

glowing staff. The little fellow hopped up and down, then piped, "Do not be afraid to do that in which you are right!"

A thug swore and swung his weapon at the staff.

Instead of blades or ordinary clubs, this trio of street toughs carried weighted chains which Samlor had mistaken in the tavern for items of armor or adornment when they were coiled through an epaulette loop on each youth's shoulder. Each chain was about a yard long, made up of fine links which slipped over one another like drops of water. They were polished glass-smooth and then plated for looks—silver for two of the thugs, gold for the third who now swung his weapon in a glittering arc.

Both ends of the chain were weighted by lead knobs the size of large walnuts, armed with steel spikes. The knobs were heavy enough to stun or kill but still so light that they could be directed handily and with blinding speed. A skilled man in the right situation could pulp an opposing knife artist, and he could do so with the sort of flashy display which on the street counted for more than success.

It was the wrong weapon for an alleyway which even at its widest point was straighter than the span of the chain fully extended, but the hooded man seemed to have no idea of how to defend himself. The weighted end of the chain wrapped itself tight against the staff—it clacked like wood, despite the glow which suggested it was of some eerie material—and the tough jerked it toward him.

The hopping manikin disappeared with a high-pitched shriek of terror.

The hooded man staggered forward, managing to keep a hold on his staff only by lurching toward the punk whose weapon had snatched it. The blue glow was snuffed out as if the gold-plated chain had strangled the life from the wood.

The hooded man was a magician, had to be with his staff and capering manikin. Samlor—and probably the street toughs as well, though psychotic pride ruled the actions of their leader—expected magical retribution for the attack. A thunderbolt might shatter them, or icy needles from nowhere might lace their bodies into bloody sieves.

Nothing happened except that the leading thug gripped his opponent by the throat and shouted, "Finish 'im, dungbrains!" to his fellows as the victim struggled to free his chain-wrapped staff.

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The caravan master waded in to do the job that magic wouldn't take care of after all.

One of the three youths hung a half step behind his fellows. Samlor punched the base of his skull left-handed. The steel cap concealed beneath the bright bandanna rapped the knuckle of the Cirdonian's index

finger, but the bodkin point of Samlor's push dagger plunged in to its full length.

The youth turned and cried out, pulling clear of the two-inch blade that left a trickle of gore crawling toward the collar of his studded vest. He'd been spinning his chain between the thumb and index finger of his right hand, waiting for an opening to slap the weight into the hooded man. One of the balls gouged Samlor's thigh, but that was accident rather than deliberate counterattack.

The youth dropped his weapon and stumbled off down the alleyway, kicked in passing by the man still struggling for his staff- Star flattened herself against the wall to let him go. Her eyes and the white swirl in her hair were pools of reflected light as she stared at her uncle.

Samlor cut at the neck of the next thug with the watermarked dagger while drops of blood still winked in the air as they flew from the neck of his first target. The hilt of the unfamiliar weapon was slimmer in his hand than the knife he'd left in the corpse, but the blade's relative point-heaviness gave heft to the slashing blow. The youth got his left arm up in time to block the edge with his forearm while his leader sprayed curses and tried to clear his chain from the staff which now held it rather than the reverse.

There wasn't enough hilt for Samlor's hands. The shock threatened to jar the knife away from him as the blade sank deep into the leading

armbone and cracked it through as the Cirdonian twisted. The youth squealed in hopeless panic, but luck or practice spun one end of his weighted chain in a loop around the weapon that had crippled him.

Samlor punched the tough in the chest left-handed, then jerked down on the butt of his coffin-hiked dagger. The youth's leather vest was sewn with flat metal washers; the narrow point in Samlor's left hand scratched across the face of one before it sank deep enough into unprotected flesh to prick a lung.

Whether or not the metal in the dagger blade had spelled Samlor a warning, it served well enough for a fighting knife. At the Cirdonian's swift tug, the edges sawed through the silvered chain and freed themselves. The severed knob spun to the muck on the alley's cobblestones with its bit of attached chain twitching like a lizard's tail.

The thug lost his footing and fell backward. He should have tangled himself with his leader, but the youth with the gilded chain danced clear.

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On his toes, buttocks flattening against the tavern wall as his fellow sprawled beneath him, he whirled a spiked knob at Samlor in a downward arc that split the difference between vertical and horizontal.

The stranger's hood had flopped back and his cape was twisted so that its broach closure was at his left shoulder instead of his throat. When the street tough dropped him to deal with Samlor, the man raised a hand and began to stutter words in a language the caravan master did not know. As the spike chain spun at Samlor's skull in a curve as dangerous as a sword stroke, the stranger stopped talking and prodded the youth between the shoulders with his staff-

Samlor dodged back to avoid the spikes, forgetting the bulge in the wall behind that rocked him to a halt. The knob sparked across the stone and tore the Cirdonian's left ear as the youth tried to recover from the push that sent him off balance.

He didn't get the chance,

The youth wore a necklace strung with the protective charms of at least a dozen faiths, and the front of his vest was strengthened with gilt and silvered studs. None of that helped him when Samlor stabbed upward from the groin level. While the punk thrashed like a gigged frog on the twelve-inch blade, the caravan master punched him repeatedly with the push dagger, aiming at the base of the jaw just below the bandanna and the steel cap it covered.

The youth collapsed. His eyes were open and his lungs were still working well enough to form bubbles in the blood that drooled from the corner of his mouth. A mixture of body fluids and digestive products

followed the blade of the long knife as Samlor withdrew it. Their foetor was briefly noticeable even in this alley.

He was probably fourteen years old or so. He looked younger, but bad diet pinched and stunted the faces of those bom here into permanent childhood,

"Now the others," chirped a little voice. "Do not kill a snake and leave its tail!"

The caravan master was on his knees. He did not recall closing his eyes, but he opened them now. The man with the staff was on his feet again and straightening his disordered cape. The manikin was back on his shoulder, strutting proudly with hands on hips.

"You," said Samlor very distinctly. "Shit it in or you'll join 'em."

The little figure yelped and disappeared again.

Samlor, Star, and the stranger were alone with the dying youth. The other two toughs had disappeared down the alley, and no one else seemed to have entered the passage behind the caravan master. There were voices

from within the taproom, deep and hectoring, but Samlor didn't care enough to try to understand the words.

His niece, shivering also, minced over to him without looking down and put her arms around Samlor's shoulder. "I'm sorry you hurt your ear, uncle," she said in a voice that trembled with the child's attempts to control it. "I shouldn't have—"

She hugged him harder. "But I thought I could climb up from the bench when it was dark and I didn't know where you were—" Her words tumbled out like flotsam in the current of the sobs wracking her little body.

"—and the, those men came and I couldn't do anything!"

"You did fine, darling," the Cirdonian muttered. He encircled the child with his left arm, careful that the point of his push dagger was turned outward. He couldn't put it away until he cleaned it, the way his right hand was wiping the watered steel of the longer knife on the pantaloons of the boy whose breathing had ceased in a pair of great shudders. "But you've gotta listen to me, or really bad things could happen."

The blade of the long dagger showed a nick midway up one edge, but it had come through the struggle at least as well as any other knife was likely to have done. Samlor tried to sheathe it and found the new blade was a trifle too broad near the tip to fit the scabbard meant for the knife it

replaced.

He slid it beneath his belt instead; wiped the push dagger; and rose with that miniature weapon in his right hand while his left arm guided Star behind him again.

"Who would you be, my friend?" Samlor asked the man who was fingering his staff now that his cape was rearranged.

"My name is Khamwas," the fellow said in a cultured voice that tried to be calm. The peak of his hood must have added several inches to his height, because he was clearly shorter than the caravan master as well as much more slightly built. "I'm a stranger here in your city."

The manikin silently reappeared on Khamwas's shoulder. The tiny features were unreadable in the dim light, but the figure's pose was apprehensive.

"Did you have a friend in that tavern?" asked the caravan master softly. When his right thumb turned to indicate the wall of the Vulgar Unicorn, the point of the push dagger winked knowingly toward Khamwas's eyes. There was an ethnic if not familial resemblance between this man and the one who had died in the Vulgar Unicorn.

"I don't know anyone in this city," Khamwas said with cautious dig-

nity. "I'm a scholar from a far country, and I've come to ask a favor here from a man named Setios."

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"Uncle, that's—" blurted Star, catching herself before Samlor's free hand could waggle a warning.

"A bird who flies to the nest of another," chirped the manikin sententiously, "will lose a feather."

"What in hell is that?" asked the caravan master deliberately, pointing at the manikin with his right index finger. The bodkin-bladed push dagger paralleled the gesturing finger as if by chance.

The manikin eeped and cowered. Khamwas reached across to his right shoulder with his cupped right hand, as if to shield and stroke the little creature simultaneously.

"He does no harm, sir," the self-styled scholar replied calmly. "I—when I was younger, you understand—prayed to certain powers for wisdom. They sent me this little fellow instead. His name is Tjainufi."

The manikin stared balefully at Khamwas, but his own arm reached out to pat the hand protecting him. "A fool who wants to go with a wise man," he said, "is a goose who wants to go with the slaughter knife."

Samlor blinked. He was confused, but that probably didn't matter, not compared to a dozen other things. "You know my name, then?" he said, harshly again, sure that Khamwas had to have some connection with the stranger in the tavern. A sorcerer who knew your name had the first knot in a rope of power to bind you . . .

"Sir, I know no one in your city," Khamwas repeated, drawing himself up and planting the staff firmly before him with his hands linked on it. "I have a daughter the age of your niece, so I—tried, I should say, to intervene when she seemed to be in difficulties."

He paused. For an instant his staff flowed again. The grain of the wood made ripples in the phosphorescence, and a haze of light wrapped Khamwas's hands like a real fog.

Star reached past her uncle and touched the staff.

The glow flicked out as Khamwas started, but a tinge of blue clung to the child's fingers as she withdrew them. Samlor did not swear, because words had power—especially at times like these. His left hand caressed his niece's hair, offering human contact when he could not be sure what help, if any, the child required.

If Khamwas's toying had done any harm, he would be fed his liver on

the point of a knife.

Star giggled while both men watched her with fear born of uncertainty.

She opened her fingers slowly and the glow between their tips grew and paled like the sheen of an expanding soap bubble. Then it popped as if it had never been.

Khamwas let out his breath abruptly. "Sir," he said to the caravan master, "I didn't realize. Forgive me for intruding in your affairs."

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Tjainufi, who had disappeared when Star lifted light from the staff, now wagged an arm at Khamwas and said, "Do not say, *I am learned.' Set yourself to become wise."

Khamwas would have stepped by and continued up the alley, but Samlor restrained him with a gesture that would have become contact if the scholar had not halted, "You saved Star from a bad time before I got here," he said. "And likely you saved me, besides distracting the little bastards. My name's Samlor hil Samt." He sheathed the little dagger behind his collar. "You and I need to talk."

"All right. Master Samlor," agreed the other man, though the way his lips pursed showed that the suggestion was not one he would have made himself. He gestured up the passageway, the direction from which the

Cirdonian had come, and added, "There are more suitable places to discuss matters than here, I'm certain."

"No," said Samlor flatly, "there's not."

It wasn't worth his time to explain that the direction in which Khamwas was headed would be a no-go area for at least the next hour. The passageway was narrow enough to be defended by one man, and both flanks were protected by masonry that would require siege equipment to breach. If their luck were really out, they could be attacked from both directions simultaneously, but that risk was better than being trapped in a cul-de-sac with no bolthole.

Given the nature of Sanctuary, this was probably the safest place within a league in any direction.

"What do you know about Setios?" the caravan master demanded, no more threatening than was implicit in the fact that he had already demonstrated his willingness and ability to kill,

Star was squatting, her skirts lifted and wrapped around her thighs to keep the hem from lying in the muck. A tiny glow spun within the globe of her hands as she cooed. Its color was more nearly yellow than the blue which had washed Khamwas's staff.

The glow was reflected faintly by the eyes of the dead youth.

Khamwas's face worked in something between a grimace and a moue of embarrassment as he watched the child. "Ah," he said to Samlor.

"That is, ah—are you . . . ?"

The caravan master shook his head, glad to find that the question amused him rather than arousing any of the other possible emotions.

"On a good day," he said, "I might be able to recite a spell without stumbling over the syllables—if somebody wrote 'em out for me really careful." That was an exaggeration, though not a great one.

"My sister, though," he added, embarrassed himself for reasons the other man should not be able to fathom, "that was more her line."

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To the extent that anything besides sex was Samlane's line.

"I see," said Khamwas, and he continued to glance down at the child even as he returned to the earlier question. "I don't know Setios at all," he explained, "but I know—I've been told by, well—"

He shrugged. Samlor nodded grimly; but if this fellow called himself scholar rather than wizard, he at least recognized that the latter was a term of reproach to decent men.

"Serve your god, that he may guard you," said Tjainufi, stroking his master's—could Khamwas be called that?—right ear.

"He has," Khamwas went on after the awkward pause, "a stele from my own land, from Napata—"

"Of course," Samlor interrupted, placing the stranger at last. "The Land of the River."

"The river," Khamwas agreed with a nod of approval, "and of the desert. And in the desert, many monuments of former times"—he paused again, gave a gentle smile—"greater times for my people, some would say, though I myself am content."

"You want to ... retrieve," said Samlor, avoiding the question of means, "a monument that this Setios has. Is he a magician?"

"I don't know," said Khamwas with another shrug. "And I don't need the stele, only a chance to look at it. And, ah, Samlor—?"

The caravan master nodded curtly to indicate that he would not take offense at what he assumed would be a tense question.

"I will pay him well for the look," the Napatan said. "It's of no value

to him—not for the purpose I intend it—without other information. It will give me the location of a particular tomb, which is significant to me for other reasons."

The light in Star's hands was growing brighter, throwing the men's shadows onto the wall of the alley. Khamwas's face looked demonically inhuman because it was illuminated from below.

Samlor touched his niece's head. "Not so much, dearest," he murmured. "We don't want anybody noticing us here if we can help it."

"But—" Star began shrilly. She looked up and met her uncle's eyes. The light shrank to the size of a large pearl, too dim to show anything but itself.

"She didn't know how to do that before," said Samlor, as much an explanation to himself as one directed toward the other man. "She picks things up."

"I see," said Khamwas, and maybe he did. "Well."

He shook himself, to settle his cape and to settle himself in his resolve.

"Well, Master Samtor," the Napatan continued, "I must be on." He nodded past Samlor toward the head of the alley.

"Not that way," said the caravan master wryly, though he did not move again to block the other man.

"Yes, it is," Khamwas replied with a touch of astringence. He stiffened to his full height. The manikin on his shoulder mimicked the posture, perhaps in irony. "The direction of Setios's house is precisely"—he extended his arm at an angle toward Samlor; hesitated with his eyes turned inward; and corrected the line a little further to the right—"this way. And this passage is the nearest route to the way I need to follow."

"Do not do a thing you have not first considered carefully," Tjainufi suddenly warned.

The caravan master began to chuckle. He clapped a hand in a friendly fashion on Khamwas's left shoulder. "Nearest route to having your head stuck on a pole, I'd judge," he said. The Napatan felt as fine-boned as he looked, but there was a decent layer of muscle between the skeleton and the soft fabric of his cape.

"Look," Samlor continued, "d'ye mean to tell me you don't know where in the city Setios lives, you're just walking through the place in the straightest line your . . . friends, I suppose, tell you is the way to Setios? Are these the same friends who gave you wisdom?" The caravan master nodded toward Tjainufi.

"I think that's my affair. Master Samlor," said Khamwas. He strode forward, gripping his staff vertically before him. His knuckles were white.

The manikin said, " 'What he does insults me,' says the fool when a wise man instructs him."

Khamwas halted. Samlor looked at the little figure with a frown of new surmise. There was no bad advice—only advice that was wrong for a given set of circumstances. And, just possibly, Tjainufi's advice was more appropriate than the Cirdonian had guessed.

"All I meant, friend," Samlor said, touching and then removing his hand from the other man's shoulder, "was that maybe there aren't any good districts in Sanctuary—but your straight line's sure as death taking you through the middle of the worst of what there is."

Star had stood up when Khamwas started to walk away. The light which now clung to her left palm had put out tendrils and was fluctuating through a series of pastels paler than the colors of a noontime rainbow. Impulsively, she hugged the Napatan's leg and said, "Isn't it pretty? Oh, thank you!"

"It's only a—little thing," Khamwas explained apologetically to the child's uncle. "It—I don't know how she learned it from seeing what I did."

Samlor noticed that the staff glowed only when Khamwas could concentrate on it, but that the phosphorescence in Star's hand continued its

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complex evolutions of shape and color even while his niece was hugging and smiling brightly at the other man.

The light glinted on the bare blade of his new dagger, harder in reflection than the source hanging in the air seemed.

The caravan master blinked, touched his tunic over the silver medalion of the goddess Heqt on his breast, and only then slid the weapon back from its temporary resting place in his belt. The twisting phosphorescence gave the markings a false hint of motion; but they were only swirls of metal, not the script he thought he had again seen.

Khamwas watched with controlled apprehension. Deciding that it was better to go on with his proposal than to wonder why Samlor was staring at the knife whose guard still bore dark stains, the Napatan said. "Master Samlor, you understand this city as I do not. And you're clearly able to deal with, ah, with violence, should any be offered. Could I prevail on you to accompany me to the house of Setios? I'll pay you well."

"Do not walk the road without a stick in your hand," Tjainufi said approvingly.

"We need to find Setios, Uncle Samlor," said the child in a voice rising toward shrill. She released Khamwas and instead tugged insistently on the elbow of her uncle's right sleeve. "Please can we? He's nice."

Cold steel cannot flow, twist, parse out words, thought the caravan master. The nick in the edge was bright and real: this was no thing of enchantment, only a dagger with an awkward hilt and a very good blade.

Star pulled at Samlor's arm with most of her weight. He did not look down at her, nor did his hand drop. That arm had dragged a donkey back up to the trail from which it had stumbled into a gulley a hundred feet deep.

"Please," said the child.

"Friend Samlor?" said the Napatan doubtfully. The knife was only that, a knife, so far as he could see.

Go with him, spelled the rippling steel at which Samlor stared.

The words faded as the glow in Star's hand shrank to a point and disappeared.

"I was ready." said the caravan master slowly, "to find a guide in there."

He did not gesture toward the tavern. He was speaking to himself, not to the pair of living humans with him in the alleyway. They stared at Samlor, his niece, and the stranger, as they would have stared at a pet lion who suddenly began to act oddly.

"So I guess," Samlor continued, "we'll find Setios together. After all"—he tapped the blade of the coffin-hilted dagger with a fingernail; the metal gave off a musical ping—"we're all four agreed, aren't we?"

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Star leaned toward her uncle and hugged his powerful thigh, but she would not meet his eyes again or look at the knife in his hand. Khamwas nodded cautiously.

"We'll circle out of the Maze, then," said Samlor matter-of-factly.

"Come on."

The way down the alley meant stepping over the body of the youth he had just killed.

This was Sanctuary. It wouldn't be the last corpse they saw.

The body sprawled just inside the alley would have passed for a corpse if you didn't listen carefully—or didn't recognize the ragged susurrus of a man breathing while his face lay against slimy cobblestones.

"Mind this," said Samlor, touching first Star, then Khamwas, so that they would notice his gesture toward the obstacle. Human eyes could adapt to scant illumination, but at this end of the alley the dying man's breath was all that made it possible to locate him.

The manikin on Khamwas's shoulder must have been able to sense the situation, because he said, "There is no one who does not die." Tjainufi's voice was as high as a bird's; but, also like a bird's, it had considerable volume behind it.

The Napatan "scholar" reached toward his shoulder with his free hand, a gesture mingled of affection and warning. "Tjainufi," he muttered, "not now - . . ."

Samlor doubted that Khamwas had any more control over the manikin than a camel driver did over a pet mouse which lived in a fold of his cloak. Or, for that matter, than Samlor himself had over his niece, who was bright enough to understand any instructions he gave her—but whose response was as likely to be willful as that of any other seven-year-old.

Now, for instance, a ball of phosphorescence bloomed in the cup of the child's hand, lighting her way past the dying man despite the caravan master's warning that illumination—magical or otherwise—would be more risk to them than benefit, at least until they got out of the Maze.

Star put a foot down daintily, just short of the victim's outflung arm, then skipped by in a motion that by its incongruity made the scene all the more horrible. The ball of light she had formed drifted behind her for a moment. Its core shrank and brightened—from will-o'-the-wisp to firefly intensity—while the whirling periphery formed tendrils like the whorl of silver-white hair on Star's head.

The child turned back, saw the set expression on Samlor's face, and jerked away as if he had slapped her physically. The spin of light blanked as if it had never been.

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"Is he ... ?" asked Khamwas as he stepped over his mind's image of where the body lay. "One of those we ... met a moment ago?"

"The gang who came after us with chains, sure," said the caravan master as he followed with a long stride. The passageway was wide

enough for him to spread his arms without quite touching the walls to either side; in the Maze, that made it a street. It held only the normal sounds of feral animals going about their business and, from behind shutters, bestial humans. "They're all dead, the two who ran off as sure as the one who didn't. Turn left here."

"The House of Setios is more to the—"

"Turn fucking left," Samlor whispered in a voice like stones rubbing.

"Do not be a hindrance, lest you be cursed," said Tjainufi on the Napatan's shoulder. The manikin bowed toward Samlor, but the caravan master was too angry to approve of anything.

Mostly he was angry at himself, because he'd killed often enough during his life to know that he really didn't like killing. Especially not kids, even punk kids who'd have caved his skull in with weighted chains and raped Star until they sold her to a brothel for the price of a skin of wine ...

Sanctuary might be incrementally better off without that particular trio; but Samlor hil Samt wasn't Justice, wasn't responsible to his god for the cleansing of this hellhole.

They got out of the Maze with no problem worse than a pair of thugs—who fled in terror as Khamwas's staff sent a manlike phantasm of light

staggering down the street toward them. Broader pavements made walking easier, and many housefronts were lighted by lanterns in barred niches.

The lanterns weren't an act of charity toward travelers. They were intended to drive lurking footpads into somebody else's doorway.

Khamwas paused, then directed them up one arm of a five-way intersection, past a patrol station. The gate to the internal courtyard was lighted by flaring sconces, and there was a squad on guard outside. An officer took a step into the street as if to halt the trio, but he changed his mind after a pause.

They were in the neighborhood of the palace now, a better section of the city. The residents here stole large sums with parchment and whispered words instead of cutting wayfarers' throats for a few coins.

And the residents expected protection from their lesser brethren in crime. The troops here would check a pair of men, detain them if they had no satisfactory account of their business; kill them if any resistance were offered.

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But two men carrying a young child were unlikely burglars- Most

probably, they were part of the service industry catering to Sanctuary's wealthy and powerful . . . and the rich did not care to have their nighttime sports delayed by uniformed officiousness. Samlor had no need for the bribe—or the knife—he had ready.

"We're getting close, I think," Khamwas remarked. He lifted his head as if to sniff the air which even here would have been improved by a cloudburst to ram effluvium from the street down into the harbor.

Samlor grimaced and looked around him. He wanted to know how Khamwas found his directions ... but he didn't want to ask; and anyway, he wouldn't understand if the scholar/magician took the time to explain.

Worse, Star likely would understand.

"I wonder what Setios is keeping for her," the caravan master whispered, so softly that the child could not hear even though Samlor's lips brushed her fine hair as he spoke.

"Is it going to rain?" Star asked sleepily from the cradle of Samlor's arm.

The caravan master glanced at the sky. There were stars, but a scud of high clouds blocked and cleared streaks across them at rapid intervals. There was an edge in the air which might well be harbinger of a storm

poised to sweep from the hills to the west of town and wash the air at least briefly clean.

"Perhaps, dearest," the Cirdonian said. "But we'll be all right."

They'd be under cover, he hoped; or, better yet, back in a bolted chamber of the caravansary on the White Foal River before the storm broke.

Khamwas began to mutter something with his fingers interlaced on the top of his staff. Star shook herself into supple alertness and hopped off her uncle's supporting arm. She did not touch the Napatan, but she watched his face closely as he mouthed words in a language the caravan master did not recognize.

Left to his own devices—unwilling to consider what his niece was teaching herself now, and barely unwilling to order her to turn away—Samlor surveyed the houses in their immediate neighborhood.

It was an old section of the city, but wealthy and fashionable enough that there had been considerable rebuilding to modify the original Ilsigi character. Directly across from Samlor's vantage place, the front of a house had been demolished and was being replaced by a two-story portico with columns of colored marble. A lamp burned brightly on a shack amid the construction rubble, and a watchman's eyes peered toward the trio from its unglazed window.

The other houses were quiet, though all save the one against which

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Samlor's party sheltered guarded their facades with lamplight. At this hour, business was most likely to be carried on through back entrances or trap doors to tunnels that were older than the Ilsigs . . . and possibly older than humanity.

It might be a bad time to meet Setios; but again, it might not. He'd been an associate of Star's mother, which meant at the least that he was used to strange hours and unusual demands.

He'd see them now, provide the child with her legacy—if it were here. If it were portable. If Setios were willing to meet the terms of an agreement made with a woman now long dead.

Samlor swore, damning his sister Samlane to a hell beneath all the hells; and knowing as he recited the words under his breath that any afterlife in which Samlane found herself was certain to be worse than her brother could imagine.

"This is the house," said Khamwas with a note of wonder in his voice.

He and the child turned to look at the facade of the building against which the caravan master leaned while he surveyed the rest of the neigh-

borhood.

"Looks pretty quiet," said Samlor. The words were less an understatement than a conversational placeholder while the Cirdonian considered what might be a real problem.

The building didn't look quiet. It looked abandoned.

It was a blank-faced structure. Its second floor was corbeled out a foot or so but there was no real front overhang to match those of the houses to either side. The stone ashlar had been worn smooth by decades or more of sidewalk traffic brushing against them; the mortar binding them could have used tuck pointing, but that was more a matter of aesthetics than structural necessity.

The only ground-floor window facing the street was a narrow slit beside the iron-bound door. There was a grate-protected niche for a lantern on the other side of the door alcove; the stones were blackened by carbon from the flame, but the lamp within was cold and dark. It had not been lighted this night, and perhaps not for weeks past.

There was no sign of life through the slit intended to give a guard inside a look at whoever was calling.

"Perhaps I'm wrong," said Khamwas uncertainly. "This should be the

house of Setios, but I—I can't be sure I'm right."

He made as if to bend over his staff again, then straightened and said decisively, "No, I'm sure it must be the house—but perhaps he doesn't live here anymore." The Napatan stepped to the street-level door and raised his staff to rap on the panel.

"Ah . . ." said Samlor.

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The caravan master held the long dagger he had taken from the man he killed in the Vulgar Unicorn. The weapon belonged in his hand when they prowled through the Maze, but it wasn't normal practice to knock on a stranger's door with steel bare in your hand.

On the other hand, this was Sanctuary; and anyway, the new knife didn't fit in the sheath of the one Samlor had left in the corpse.

"Go ahead," he said to Khamwas. The Napatan was poised, watching the caravan master and waiting for a suggestion to replace his own intent.

Khamwas nodded, Star mirroring his motion as if hypnotized by tiredness. He rapped twice on the door panel. The sound of wood on wood was sharp and soulless.

"Won't be anybody there," said Samlor. His own eyes were drawn to the watermarked blade of the knife. His knife, now; the owner wasn't going to claim it with a foot of steel through his chest. The whorls of blended metals, iron black against polished steel, were only memories in the distant lamplight. There was no way Samlor could see them now, even if they began to spell words as he had watched them do—in defiance of reason—twice before.

The caravan master shook himself out of the clouded reverie into which fatigue was easing him. He needed rest as badly as his niece did, and it looked as though there was no way he was going to clear up his business tonight anyway.

"Look," he said, irritated because Khamwas still faced the door as if there were a chance it would open. "There's nobody here, and—"

Metal clanked as the bar closing the door from inside was withdrawn from its staples. The door leaf opened inward, squealing on bronze pivots set into the lintel and transom instead of hanging from strap hinges.

"No one will see you," said the voice of the figure standing in the doorway. Whatever else the doorkeeper might be, it was not human.

The creature was shorter than Star. Fur clothed its body and long tail in ashen luster, but the frame beneath was skeletally thin. Its features had

the pointed sharpness of a fox's muzzle, and there was no intelligence whatever in its beady eyes.

"Wait," said Samlor hil Samt as the doorkeeper began to close the portal again. He set his boot against the iron-strapped lower edge of the door. "Your master holds a trust f-for my niece Star."

"No one will see you," the creature repeated. Behind it was another set of door leaves, reinforced like the first, combining to form a closet-sized anteroom which could probably be flooded with anything from boiling water to molten lead.

If there were anyone alive in the house to do so. The doorkeeper spoke in a thin, breathy voice, but its chest did not rise and fall.

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•It isn't real," Khamwas was saying in a universe in which Samlor was not focused in terrified determination on the unhuman—unalive—doorkeeper of this house. "It's a simulacrum like the—"

"No one will see you," the doorkeeper repeated without emphasis. It swung the panel shut, thrusting Samlor violently backward even though he tried to brace himself by stiffening his supporting leg behind him.

"I will have Star's legacy!" the caravan master shouted as he hurled

himself back against the door, slamming into it with the meat of his left shoulder.

The panel thumped but did not rebound. The bar crashed into place.

"I will!" Samlor cried again, "Depend on it!"

His voice echoed, but there was no sound at all from within the house.

"It wasn't really present," said Khamwas, touching the other man's shoulder to calm him.

"It's there enough for me," said Samlor grimly, massaging his bruised shoulder with the faceted knife hilt. "Might've tried t' stop a landslide for all I could do to keep it from slamming the door."

At a venture, he poked his dagger blade through the slit beside the door, in and out quickly like a snake licking the air. Nothing touched the metal, nor was there any other response.

"He who shakes the stone," said—warned?—Tjainufi, "will have it fall on his foot."

"I mean," said Khamwas hastily to deflect possible wrath from his manikin, "that it's no more than a part of the door. A trick only, without

volition or consciousness. It's carrying out the last order it was given, the way a bolt lies in its groove when the master releases it. No one may be present."

"If we go in there," said Star distinctly, pointing at the door, "we'll be . . . krrk." The child cocked her head up as if her neck had been wrung. "Like chickens," she added as she relaxed, grinning.

Samlor's breath wheezed out. He had thought . . .

"Well, Star," said the Napatan scholar, "I might be able to keep the wraith from moving for a time, long enough for us to get past the - . . zone of which it's a part. I might. But I think we'd best not go in by this door until Setios permits us to pass."

The two of them smiled knowingly at one another.

Samlor restrained his impulse to do something pointlessly violent. He looked at the blade of his knife instead of glaring at his companions and began in a very reasonable tone, "In that case, we'd best get some sleep and—"

"Actually," said Khamwas, not so much interrupting as speaking without being aware that Samlor was in the middle of a statement, "nei-

ther of us have business with Setios himself, only with items in his possession. I wonder . . ."

"I want my gift now," said Star, her face set in the slanting lines of temper. Either she tossed her head slightly, or the whorl of white strands in her curly black hair moved on its own.

Go IN NOW read the iron letters on the blade at which Samlor stared in anger. There was too little light for the markings to be visible, but he saw them nonetheless.

"Heqt take you all to the waters beneath the earth!" shouted the Cir-donian in fury. He slashed the air with his dagger as if to wipe away the message crawling there in the metal. "I'm not a burglar, and coming to this damned city doesn't make me one."

"When you are hungry, eat what you despise," said the manikin on Khamwas's shoulder. "When you are full, despise it."

"Anyway," said Star, "it's going to rain. Uncle Samlor." She looked smug at the unanswerable truth of her latest argument. The caravan master began to laugh.

Khamwas blinked, as frightened by the apparent humor as he had been

by the anger that preceded it. Emotional outbursts by a man as dangerous as the caravan master were like creakings from the dike holding back flood waters.

"Well," the Napatan said cautiously, "I suppose the situation may change for the better by daylight. Though of course neither of us were considering theft. I want to look at a slab of engraved stone, and you simply wish to retrieve your niece's legacy from its caretaker—who seems to be absent."

"We don't know what it is," said Star. "My gift."

"Ah," said Khamwas, speaking to the girl but with an eye cocked toward her uncle. "That shouldn't be an insurmountable problem. If we're inside"—he nodded toward the door—"and the object is there also, I should be able to locate it for you."

"Will you show me how?" Star begged, clasping her hands together in a mixture of pleading and premature delight.

"Ah . . ." repeated the Napatan scholar. "I think that depends on what your uncle says, my dear."

"Her uncle says that we're not inside yet," Samlor stated without particular emphasis. "And he'll see about getting there."

Without speaking further to his companions, the Cirdonian walked to the corner of the building.

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Setios's house was two feet away from the building beside it. There were no ground-floor windows in the sidewall either, but the second story was ventilated by barred openings.

Samlor stepped through the gap, too narrow to be called an alley anywhere but in the Maze. He ignored his companions, though they followed him gingerly in lieu of any other directions.

The vertical bars of the window above him were thumbthick and set with scarcely more room than that between them. Star might have been able to reach through one of the spaces, but the caravan master was quite certain that his own big hands would not fit.

"Are there going to be things like that door-monkey waiting by the windows?" Samlor asked the other man quietly. He nodded upward to indicate the opening he had studied.

Khamwas shrugged in darkness relieved only by the strip of clouded sky above them. "I would expect human servants if anything," he said.

"They're . . . more trustworthy, in many ways. And from what I've

gathered, Setios is a collector the way I'm a scholar. Neither of us, you understand, are magicians of real power."

He paused and tucked his lip under his front teeth in doubt, then added, "The way your niece here appears to be, Master Samlor."

"Yeah," said the caravan master without emotion. His left hand tousled Star's hair gently, but he did not look down at the child. "And he collected a demon in a bottle, among other things."

Samlor grimaced, then went on, "Let's get out t' the street again. You wait, and I'll go talk to the fellow across the way there."

"Ah, Samlor . . . ?" Khamwas said.

"Just wait here," the Cirdonian repeated. "I'm going across the street to talk with the watchman there." He nodded toward the guard shack on the construction site opposite.

"Yes, of course," Khamwas said with enough disinterest to hint at irritation. "But what I wanted to say was—Setios, you see, may not be avoiding you. There's been a recent upheaval in the structure of, you see, magic. He may have become frightened and fled from that."

The Napatan grinned. "He'll have left behind the stele I want to read, surely. Probably his whole collection, if that fear is why he left. And, as

for this child's legacy"—he touched Star's cheek affectionately—"if we don't find it here, I'll help you locate it. Because you've helped me. And because I am honored to help someone as talented as your niece."

"The plans of gods are one thing," said the manikin on his shoulder.

"The thoughts of men are another."

"Yeah, well," said the caravan master, then strode across the street with a swaggering assurance which immediately set him apart in a city

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where lone men habitually slunk. The watchman edged back from his window so that his eyes no longer reflected light.

It took five pieces of Rankan gold and ten minutes cajoling the nervous watchman at the construction site before Samlor returned to his companions with the house jack he had borrowed.

"Khamwas," he said gruffly, "come help me with the window."

Star was curled in the corner of the door alcove, dozing with the Napatan's cape for a pillow. Khamwas stood in front of her, watching the street as well as the caravan master. He was very slim without the bulk of the outer garment, and his bare chest was no garb for this night.

"I, ah," he said, looking down at the child. "I thought it would be good if she got some rest, so - - - She's very like my own daughter, you know."

"Wish I had more talent for what she needs," said the caravan master quietly, staring at the child also. "Wish I knew what she needs, what any kid needs. But you do what you can."

He grimaced again. "Bring 'er along, will you? I need you at the side to hand me this jack when I'm ready for it"—he fluffed his cloak open to display the tool—"and I don't want her in plain sight on the street, even though it means getting her up again."

The sky had closed in above the passage between the two buildings. It was as dark as a narrow cave, and for the time being the air was as motionless as that of a cavern miles below the ground. Samlor found his location by subconscious memory of the six cautious paces which had brought him beneath the window when he could see it.

Samlor climbed to the window by bracing his hands and feet against the closely adjacent buildings. That wasn't hard, but he almost fell when he bent to take the jack which Khamwas raised to him. He was tired, and it was affecting him.

Already.

The window grate might have withstood a battering ram. The screw jack, butted against the stone sash, exerted its pressure sideways across the bars and their frame. The grating crumbled as the Cirdonian inexorably levered the jack through it, ignoring what the effort was doing to his fatigued muscles.

With the last of his strength, Samlor lurched through the opening he had just torn and sprawled onto the floor of the room beyond.

"Praised be Heqt in whom the world lives," murmured Samlor as his senses returned him to the world beyond his own effort and necessities. The marble floor beneath him was cold and slick with water. The glazed

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windows had not been closed the last time it rained; and that, from idle chatter overheard at the caravansary, had been more than a week ago.

Khamwas called from the alley, his words blurred but the worry in them clear.

"It's all right," the caravan master said, then realized that he wasn't

sure he could understand the croaked words himself. He gripped the window ledge, fragments of the grate chiming around his knees.

"It's all right," he repeated, leaning back through the opening by which he had entered. "Just a minute and I'll find"—his hand brushed a tapestry beside the window—"yeah, just a second and I'll have something for you t' climb by."

He ripped the hangings down and dangled them from the window for his companions. Samlor no longer cared what damage they did to this place—so long as they got out of it soon.

The window was scarcely visible as a rectangle, and the still air smelled of storm.

There was a discussion below. Star came up the tapestry, flailing her legs angrily behind her. There was a pout in her voice as she demanded, "What is this old place? I don't like it."

Maybe she felt something about the house—and maybe she was an overtired seven-year-old and therefore cranky.

There wasn't time to worry about it. The caravan master gripped the child beneath the shoulders with his left arm and lifted her into the room. Star yelped as her head brushed the transom, but she should've had sense enough to duck.

"My staff. Master Samlor," said Khamwas.

The Cirdonian leaned forward and caught the vague motion that proved to be the end of an ordinary wooden staff when his fingers enclosed it. Behind him, the room lighted vaguely with pastel blue.

Star shouldn't have done it without asking; but they needed light, and a child wasn't a responsible adult. Samlor slid the staff behind him with his left hand while supporting the tapestry with his right hand and his full weight to pin the end to the floor.

The Napatan scholar mounted gracefully and used Samlor's arm like the bar of a trapeze to swing himself over the lintel. Only then did the caravan master turn to see where they were and what his niece was doing.

Star had set swimming through the air a trio of miniature octopuses made of light. A blue one drifted beneath the ceiling frescoed with scenes of anthropomorphic deities; a yellow one prowled beneath the legs of a writing table sumptuous with mother-of-pearl inlays.

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The third miniature octopus was of an indigo so pale that it barely showed up against the carven door against which it bobbed feebly.

"Where's . . ." Samlor said as he looked narrowly at Khamwas. "You know, your little friend?"

Tjainufi reappeared on the Napatan's right shoulder. The manikin moved with the silent suddenness of an image in an angled mirror, now here and now not, as the tilt changes. "The warp does not stray far from the woof," he said in cheerful satisfaction,

"Khamwas," the Cirdonian added as he looked around them, "if you can locate what we're after, then get to it. I really don't want t' spend any longer here than I need to."

"Look, uncle," Star squealed as she pranced over to the writing desk.

"Mommy's box!"

Samlor's speed and reflexes were in proper form after his exertions, but his judgment was off. He attempted to spring for the desk before Star got there, and his boots skidded out from under him on the wet marble. Because he'd swept the long dagger from his belt as part of the same unthinking maneuver, he had only his left palm to break his fall. The

shock made the back of his hand tingle and the palm bum.

Khamwas had retrieved his staff. He stopped muttering to it when the Cirdonian slapped the floor hard enough to make the loose bars roll and jingle among themselves. "Are you . . . ?" he began, offering a hand to

the sprawling bigger man.

"See, Uncle Samlor?" said the child, returning to the caravan master with an ivory box in her hands. "It's got mommy's mark on it."

"No, go on with your business," said Samlor calmly to the Napatan. He felt the prickly warmth of embarrassment painting his skin, but he wouldn't have survived this long if he lashed out in anger every time he'd made a public fool of himself. "Find the stele you're after, and then we'll see what Star's got here."

He took the box from the child as quickly as he could without letting it slip from his numbed fingers. Even if it were just what it seemed—a casket of Samlane's big enough to hold a pair of armlets—it could be extremely dangerous.

Much of what Samlor's sister had owned, and had known, fell into that category, one way or another.

Khamwas's face showed the concern which any sane man would feel under the circumstances, but he resumed his meditation on—or prayers to—his staff.

Star's palm-sized creatures of light continued their slow patrol of the room. The caravan master seemed to have broken into a large study. There was a couch to one side of the door and on the other the writing

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desk with matching chair. The chair lay on its back, as if its last occupant had jumped up hastily.

"Open it, uncle" Star demanded.

Khamwas still murmured over his staff, so the caravan master got up with caution born of experience and walked over to the writing desk. A triple-wicked oil lamp hung from a crane attached to the desk top. It promised real illumination when Samlor lit it with the brass fire-piston in his wallet.

"There's no oil, Uncle Samlor," said Star with the satisfaction of a child who knows more than an adult. She cupped her hand again and turned it up with a saffron glow in the palm. The creatures of light still drifting about the room dimmed by comparison. "See?"

The bowl of the lamp was empty except for a sheen in its center, oil beyond the touch of the wicks. Only one of the three wicks had been lighted at the lamp's last use. When the flame had consumed all the oil, it reduced the twist of cotton to ash. The other wicks were sharply divided into black and white, ready to function if the fuel supply were renewed.

Setios had really left in a hurry.

"Fine, hold the light where it is, darling," Samlor said to his niece as calmly as if he were asking her to pass the bread at table. The casket wasn't anything which the Cirdonian remembered from his youth, but the family crest—the rampant wyvern of the House of Kodrix—was enameled on the lid. Beneath it was carved in Cirdonian script the motto

AN EAGLE DOES NOT SNATCH FLIES.

Samlor's parents had never forgiven him for running high-risk, high-profit caravans like a commoner instead of vegetating in noble poverty. But they'd lived well—drunk well, at least—on the flies he snatched for them, and the money Samlor provided had bought his sister a marriage with a Rankan noble.

Which couldn't save Samlane from herself, but was the best effort possible for a brother who didn't claim to be a god.

The lid did not rise under gentle pressure from his left thumb. There was no visible catch or keyhole, but the little object had to be a box—it didn't weigh enough for a block of solid ivory. Samlor put his dagger down on the desk to free his right hand . . .

And read the superscription on the piece of parchment there, a letter barely begun:

"To Master Samlor hi! Sami

If you are well. it is good. I also am well.

I enclose w

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The script was Cirdonian, and the final letter trailed off in a sweep of ink across the parchment. Following the curve of that motion, Samlor saw a delicate silver pen on the marble floor a few feet to the side of the desk.

Samlor set down the ivory box, and he very deliberately kept the

weapon in his hand. From the look of matters, Setios might have been

better off if he'd been holding a blade and not a pen a week or so earlier.

Instinctively, the caravan master's left arm encircled Star, locating the child while he turned and said, "Khamwas. This is important. I think I've been doing Setios an injustice, thinking he'd ducked out to avoid me."

The other man was so still that not even his chest moved with the process of breathing. The absolute stillness was camouflaged for a moment by the fact that the octopuses threw slow, vague shadows as they circled the room- The manikin on Khamwas's shoulder was executing some sort of awkward dance with his legs stiff and his arm akimbo.

"Khamwas!" the caravan master repeated sharply. "I think we need to get outta here now."

Tjainufi said, "Do not say, 'I will undertake the matter,' if you will not."

Almost simultaneously, the Napatan shook himself like a diver surfacing after a deep plunge and opened his eyes. He stood, wobbling a little and using the staff for support. His face broadened with a smile of bright relief.

"Samlor," he said, obviously ignorant of anything that had happened

around him since he dropped into a trance. "I've found it—or at least we need to go down."

"We need to—" began the caravan master angrily. Tjainufi was watching him. The manikin's features were too small to have readable expression in this light, but the creature must think that . . .

"Look," Samlor resumed, speaking to—at—Tjainufi, "I don't mean I want to get out because we found what / wanted, I mean—"

"Oh!" said Star. There was a mild implosion, air rushing to fill a small void. "There's nothing inside."

She'd opened the box, Samlor saw as he turned. His emotions had gone flat—they'd only be in the way just now—and his senses gave him frozen images of his surroundings in greater detail than he would be able to imagine when he wasn't geared to kill or run.

A narrow plate on the front of the ivory box slid sideways to expose a spring catch. When the child pressed that—the scale of the mechanism was so small that Samlor would have had to work it with a knife-point—the lid popped up.

To display the inner surfaces of the ivory as highly polished as the exterior; and nothing whatever within.

Star was looking up at him with a pout of disappointment. She held the box in both hands and the ball of light, detached from her palm, was shrinking in on itself and dimming as its color slipped down through the spectrum.

For an instant—for a timeless period, because the vision was unreal and therefore nothing his eyes could have taken in—Samlor saw blue-white light through a gap in the cosmos where the whorl of white hair on Star's head should have been. It was like looking into the heart of the thunderbolt . . .

And it wasn't there, in the room or his daughter's face—for Star was that, damn Samlane as she surely was damned—or even as an afterimage on Samlor's retinas when he blinked. So it hadn't really been there, and the caravan master was back in the world where he had promised to help Khamwas find a stele in exchange for help locating Star's legacy.

Which it appeared they had yet to do, but he'd fulfill his obligations to the Napatan. He shouldn't have needed a reminder from Tjainufi of that.

"Friend Khamwas," Samlor said, "we'll go downstairs if you want that. But"—his left index finger made an arc from the parchment toward the fallen silver pen—"something took Setios away real sudden, and I wouldn't bet it's not still here."

Khamwas caught his lower lip between his front teeth. He was wearing his cape again, but the caravan master remembered how frail the Napatan had looked without it.

"The man who looks in front of him does not stumble and fall," said the manikin with his usual preternatural clarity of voice.

"Samlor," said the Napatan, "I appreciate what you say ... but what I seek is here, and I've made a very long—"

"Sure," the caravan master interrupted. "I just mean we be careful, all right?"

"And you, child," Samlor added in a voice as soft as a cat's claws extending. He knelt so that Star could meet his eyes without looking up.

"You don't touch anything, do anything. Do you understand? Because if the only way to keep you safe is to tie you up and carry you like a sack of flour—that's what I'll do."

Star nodded, her face scrunched up on the verge of tears. The drifting

glows dwindled noticeably.

"Everything's going to be fine, dearest," the caravan master said, giving the child an affectionate pat as he rose.

It bothered him to have to scare his niece in order to get her to obey—while she remembered—but she scared him every time she did something

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innocently dangerous, like opening the ivory box. Better she be frightened than that she swing from his arm, trussed like a hog.

Because Samlor didn't threaten in bluff.

Khamwas said something under his breath. His staff clothed itself in the bluish phosphorescence it held when the caravan master first met him in an alley. With the staff's unshod ferule, the Napatan prodded the study door, lifting the bronze latch. When nothing further happened, he pulled the door open with his free hand and preceded Samlor and Star into the hall beyond.

Samlor touched the latch as he stepped past it. Not a particularly sturdy piece—typical for an inside door, when the occupant is more

concerned with privacy than protection. But it had been locked, which meant somebody had paused in the hallway to do so with a key after he closed the door.

Otherwise, it would have to have been locked from the inside by somebody who wasn't there any more.

In the old Ilsigi fashion, a balustraded hallway encircled a reception room which pierced the second floor. There was a solid roof overhead rather than the skylight which would have graced a Rankan dwelling of similar quality.

The stairwell to the ground floor was in the corner to the left of the study door. Khamwas's staff, pale enough to be a revenant floating at its own direction, swirled in that direction.

"The, ah," Samlor said, trying to look in all directions and unable to see anything more than a few inches beyond the phosphorescent staff.

"The doorkeeper. It's not ... ?"

"We wouldn't meet it even if we opened the front door ourselves from within," said Khamwas as he stepped briskly down the helical staircase.

"It isn't, you see, a thing. It's a set of circumstances which have to fit as precisely as the wards of a lock.

"Though it wouldn't," he added a few steps later, "be a good idea for

anyone to force the door from the outside. Even if they were a much greater scholar than I. Ah, Setios collected some . . . artifacts . . . that he might more wisely have left behind."

The reception room was chilly. Samlor thought it might have something to do with the glass-smooth ornamental pond in the middle of the room. He tested the water with his boot toe and found it, as expected, no more than an inch deep. It would be fed by rainwater piped from the roof gutters. Barely visible in the shadow beneath the coaming were the flat slots from which overflow drained in turn into a cistern.

Except for the pond, the big room was antiseptically bare. The walls between top and bottom moldings were painted in vertical pastel waves

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reminiscent of a kelp forest, and the floor was a geometric pattern in varicolored marble.

"Well, which way now?" the caravan master demanded brusquely, his eyes on the doorway to the rear half of the house. Star was shivering despite wrapping her cloak tighter with both hands, and Samlor didn't like the feel of the room a bit either.

"Down still," said Khamwas in puzzlement. He rapped the ferule of his staff on the floor, a sharp sound that contained no information useful—at least—to the caravan master. Perhaps it just seemed like the right thing to do.

"There'll be a cistern below," said Samlor, gesturing with a dripping boot toe toward the pond. "The access hatch'd be in the kitchen, most likely. Not in this room."

He started for a door, ill at ease and angry at himself for that feeling of undirected fear. Part of his mind yammered that the Napatan was a fool who again mistook a direction for a pathway . . . and Samlor had to avoid that, avoid picking excuses to snarl at those closest to him in order to conceal fears he was embarrassed to admit.

Star poked a hand between the edges other cloak. She did not look up;

but when her finger cocked, a bright spark swam rapidly from it and began coasting the lower wall moldings.

"D-dearest," said the caravan master, glancing at the withdrawn, miserable-looking face of his niece, then back to the light source. Star said nothing.

The droplet of light was white and intense by contrast with the vague

glows that both—he had to admit the fact—magicians had created earlier in the evening. It might even have looked bright beside a candle, but Samlor had difficulty remembering anything as normal as candlelight while he stood in this chill, stone room.

Pulse and pause; pulse and pause; pulse . . . He'd thought that the creature of light was a minnow, or perhaps no more than a daub of illumination, a cold flame that did not counterfeit life.

But it surely did. A squid rather than a fish, too small to see but identifiable from the way it jetted forward with rhythmic contractions of its mantle.

The marble floor was so highly polished that it mirrored the creature's passage with nearly perfect fidelity, catching even the wispy shadows between the tightly clasped tentacles of light trailing behind. The colors and patterning of the stone segments created the illusion that the reflection really swam through water.

"Star," the caravan master demanded in a restrained voice. "Why are you—"

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The reflection blurred into a soft ball of light on a slab of black marble,

though the tiny creature jetted above it in crystalline purity. The squid pulsed forward and hung momentarily over a wedge of travertine whose dark bands seemed to enfold the sharp outline.

Then source and reflection disappeared as abruptly as they had spurted from the child's gesture.

"What?" said Star, shivering fiercely. She scrunched her eyes shut so that her uncle thought she was about to cry. "What happened?"

Samlor patted her, blinking both at the sudden return of darkness and his realization of what he had just seen. Star might not know what she had done or why, but the caravan master did.

"Khamwas, come over here, will you?" he said, amused at the elation he heard in his voice as he strode to the sidewall where the thing of light had disappeared. "You know, I'd about decided we were going t' have t* give up or come back with a real wrecking crew."

"A hundred men are slain through one moment of discouragement," said the manikin on Khamwas's shoulder.

"In this town," the caravan master responded sourly, "you can be slain for less reason 'n that."

"I, ah," said the Napatan scholar. "What would you like me to do?"

"Star, come closer, sweetest," Samlor cajoled when he realized his niece had not followed him. Something was wrong with her, or else she was reacting strongly to the malaise of this house—which affected even the relatively insensitive caravan master.

She obeyed his voice with the halting nervousness of a frequently whipped dog. Her hands were hidden again within her cloak.

Samlor put his arm around her shoulders, all he could do until they'd left this accursed place, and said to the other man, "Can you make it lighter down here? By the wall?"

Khamwas squatted and held his staff parallel with the edge molding. The phosphorescence was scarcely any light at all to eyes which had adapted to the spark from Star's finger, but it was sufficient to distinguish the square of black marble from the pieces of travertine to either side of it in the intaglio flooring.

Samlor could not discern a difference in the polish of the black marble from that of the rest, but the way it blurred the light which the others had mirrored proved what would have been uncertain under any other conditions.

He tried the stone with the tip of his right little finger; the rest of the

hand continued to grip the hilt of his long knife. The block didn't give to light pressure, neither downward nor on either of its horizontal axes, but it didn't seem to be as solid as stone cemented to a firm base ought to be.

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"Is there something the matter with the floor, here?" asked Khamwas, resting easily on his haunches.

Samlor would rather that the Napatan keep an eye out behind them, but perhaps he couldn't do that and also hold the staff where it was useful. The glow was better than nothing.

Besides, he doubted that any danger they faced would be as simple as a man creeping upon them from the darkness.

"This block doesn't have the same sheen as the others," explained Samlor as he stood up slowly. "It's not on any path, particularly, so maybe it's been sliding or, well, something different to the rest."

He stepped gingerly on the block, which was only slightly longer in either dimension than his foot. By shifting his weight from toes to heel and then to the edge of his boot, the caravan master hoped he could induce the marble to pivot on a hidden pin. He was poised to jump clear at the first sign of movement,

There was none.

Well, then ... if he pressed the block toward the wall—

Samlor's hobnails skidded, then bit into the marble enough to grip as he increased the weight on them. The black stone slipped under the molding with the silent grace of mercury flowing.

There was a sigh from behind them. The two men jerked around and saw that the ornamental pond was lifting onto one end. The water, which had dampened Samlor's boot a moment before, did not spill though it hung on edge in the air.

There was a ladder leading down into the opening the pond had covered.

"Collector, you called him," said the caravan master grimly as he watched the reflection in the vertical sheet of water.

"A good trick," responded Khamwas, nettled at the hinted contrast of his knowledge against that of the missing Setios.

The Napatan stood and began muttering in earnest concentration to his staff. Samlor assumed the incantation must have some direct connection with their task and their safety.

When the phosphorescent staff floated out of Khamwas's hands, dipping but not quite falling to the ground, the Cirdonian realized that it was merely a trick—a demonstration to prove that Khamwas was no less of a magician than the owner of the house,

It was the sort of boyish silliness that got people killed when things were as tense as they were just now.

Apparently Tjainufi thought the same thing, because he turned and said acidly into the scholar's ear, "There is a running to which sitting is preferable."

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Star's hands wavered briefly from the folds of her cloak; Samlor could not be sure whether or not the child mumbled something as well. Flecks of light shot from her fingers. They grew as they shimmered around the room, gaining definition as they lost intensity—jellyfish of pastel light, and one mauve sea urchin, picking its glowing, transparent way spine by spine across a "bottom" two feet above the marble floor.

The staff clattered and lost its phosphorescence as it fell. Samlor snatched it before it came to rest on the stone. He handed it back to his male companion. "Let's take a look, shall we?" he said, nodding to the ladder. "Guess I'll go first."

"No, I think I should lead," said Khamwas. "I—"

He met the caravan master's eyes. "Master Samlor, I apologize. It'll be safer for me to go first, and I'll spend my efforts on making it safe."

The multicolored jellyfish made the reception room look as if it were illuminated through stained glass. The sea urchin trundled its way forward to the opening in the middle of the floor, then continued downward at the same staccato pace as if the plane on which its spines rested lay in a universe in which sideways was up.

That might be the case.

The two men walked to the opening and looked down while Star hugged herself in silence.

The room beneath the floor was a cube or something near it, ten feet in each dimension. Mauve light filled the volume surprisingly well, though the simulated urchin did not itself seem bright enough to do so. The floor shone with a sullen lambency.

The furnishings were simple. A metal reading stand, high enough for use by a standing man and empty now, waited near the center of the room.

To its right stood an elaborate bronze firebox on four clawed legs, a censer rather than a heating device. The flat sides of the box were covered by columns of incised swirls, more likely a script unknown to the caravan master than mere decoration. The top was smooth except for a trio of depressions—an inch, three inches, and six inches in diameter. Aromatics could be placed there to be released by the heat of charcoal burning in the firebox beneath.

At each corner of the top was a decorative casting. They were miniature beasts of the sort which in larger scale could have modeled the censer's terrible clawed legs. The creatures had catlike heads, the bodies of toads with triangular plates rising along the spine for protection, and the forelegs of birds of prey. Serpent tails curled up behind them, suggesting the creatures were intended as handles for the censer; but anyone

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who attempted to put them to that purpose would have his hands pierced by the hair-thin spikes with which the tails ended.

There was no other furniture in the room, but a pentacle several feet in diameter was painted or inlaid on the concrete floor to the reading stand's left. It was empty. The floor and white-stuccoed walls were other-

wise unmarked.

Khamwas's lips pursed.

"Go ahead," said Samlor with a shrug. "Maybe your stone's on the ceiling where we can't see it."

"Yes," said the Napatan, though there was doubt rather than hope in his tone.

Khamwas thrust his staff as far into the mauve light as it would go while his hand on the tip remained above floor level.

Nothing happened, but Samlor was not fool enough to think it had been a pointless exercise. His companion was doing what he had promised, concentrating his talents—better, his knowledge—on the task at hand.

Still holding the staff out in his direction of travel, Khamwas backed awkwardly down the ladder. The ferule banged accidentally on the censer as he turned. It made Khamwas jump back but did not concern Samlor, who saw what was about to happen.

But the crash and shattering glass from upstairs spun the caravan master, his teeth bared and his left hand groping for the throwing knife in

his boot sheath.

"The wind," murmured Star, the first words she had spoken since the three of them left the study upstairs. She wasn't looking at her uncle or at anything in particular.

But she was right. A door banged shut, muting a further tinkle of glass. One of the window sashes had not been secured properly. A gust had slammed it fiercely enough to shatter the glass.

"Are you all right?" called Khamwas.

The question impressed Samlor, for it sounded sincere—and in similar circumstances, he himself would have been worried more about his own situation than that of his companions.

"We're going to get drenched when we leave here," the caravan master said. "Leaving'll still feel good. Any luck yourself?"

The Napatan grimaced. "The room's empty," he said. "The brazier's as clean as if it was never used. I'm not sure it's here at all."

"Do not ask advice of a god and then ignore what he says," snapped Tjainufi, who was rubbing his tiny face on his shoulder like a bird preening.

"Step back," said Samlor. "I'm coming down."

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He turned to his niece and said, "Star, dearest? Honey? Will you be all right for a minute?"

She nodded, though nothing in her face suggested that she was listening.

The quicker they found what Khamwas needed, the quicker they— Samlor—could sort out his niece's problem. He jumped into the cubical room without touching the ladder.

Samlor landed in perfect balance, feet spread and his left hand extended slightly farther than the right so that leverage matched the weight of his long dagger. Despite Samlor's care, his hobnails skidded and might have let him fall if Khamwas hadn't clutched the Ordonun's shoulder. The floor was dusted with sparkly stuff, almost as slick as a coat of oil.

Jumping might not have been the brightest notion, but the caravan master hadn't liked the idea of doing exactly what an intruder was expected to do.

The concealed room had an underwater ambiance which wasn't

wholly an effect of the glowing sea urchin trundling across an invisible bottom at waist height. The mauve light had ripples in it, but neither the furniture nor the two men cast distinct shadows on the walls.

"What does your"—Samlor said, making a left-handed gesture to indicate either Khamwas's staff or nothing at all—"your friend say about what you're looking for?"

"That I've found it," Khamwas replied, turning his head to view surroundings which were no less void on this perusal than on earlier ones.

Samlor stamped his foot. Sparkling dust quivered, but the concrete was as solid as the bedrock on which it was probably laid.

Then he kicked the nearest wall.

Stucco blasted away from the hobnails as they raked four short, parallel paths and squealed on the stone beneath.

"Well, I think we know where to look," said the Cirdonian in satisfaction.

The stucco his boot had scraped was covering two distinct blocks of stone—a slab of polished red granite, and another of marble shadowed with faint streaks of gray. Both stones were inscribed, though on the softer marble the markings had been weathered and were further defaced by Samlor's boot.

He brushed at the stucco with his left hand, flaking away a patch his kick had loosened The writing on the granite slab was Rankan but of a form so old that the doubled consonants and variant orthography made all but a few words unintelligible to the caravan master

"Why, this is wonderful, my friend," said the Napatan with a smile brighter than the mauve glow as he bent over the cleared patch

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Tjainufi beamed and added, "There is no good deed save a good deed done for one who has need of it."

"We're not outta the woods yet," said Samlor with a dour glance at the walls around them If they had to clear all the stucco—or even half, if their luck were average—which it probably wouldn't be—it was going to take a lot longer than the caravan master wanted to spend in this place

"No, that's all right," explained the Napatan with the uneasy hint of mindreading which he had displayed before. "I'll use a spell of release and the covering will come away at once He must use the ancient writings because they focus the power with which the years have imbued them."

Maybe that was what Setios used to do with them, Samlor thought as his companion knelt before his upright staff again, but he'd bet Setios hadn't much use for them or anything else in the world just now.

Khamwas was whispering to himself and his gods Samlor looked at him, looked at the dagger—saw that the watered steel blade was only that, only metal, probably all it ever was, except in his mind.

"Star?" he called toward the rectangular opening. "You all right, sweetest?"

He could barely hear the reply, "All right . . .," but a couple of the pastel jellyfish were drifting over him in placid unconcern. She'd be fine, Star would.

If any of them were, she'd be fine.

Samlor squatted and squeezed up dust from the floor on the tip of his left index finger. It was colorless (save for the mauve light it reflected) and much too finely ground for him to be able to tell the shape of the individual crystals.

A caravan master has plenty of opportunity to examine decorative stones, jewels and bits of glass cut and stained to look like jewels in the dim light of a bazaar. The dust could be anything, powdered diamond even, but most likely quartz, spread in a smooth layer across all the flat

surfaces in the room . . .

Except for streaks—shadows, almost—stretching from the reading stand and the legs of the bronze censer. The dust seemed to have been sprayed violently from the direction of the pentacle in which Khamwas was almost standing

"K—" Samlor began in sudden surmise.

The Napatan had been whispering, but now his voice rose in a crescendo Khamwas's eyes lifted also, they were wide open but obviously not fixed on anything in the room.

Stucco shattered away on all sides, raining over Khamwas and the caravan master who reached for the ladder with his left hand and swung

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his blade at anything which might have slipped behind him as he

crouched.

Nothing had. The choking flood of sand and lime dust filling the air as

the walls cleared themselves made Samlor pause where the attack he feared would only have driven him to swifter motion.

The slow tumble of the mauve light source continued, though the mineral-laden air absorbed the illumination. A ball a few feet in diameter glowed in place of the urchin's sharply limned spines and carapace. As dust settled out, the glow spread and paled while the features of the source at its heart slowly regained definition.

"Khamwas," said the caravan master. His eyes were slitted and a fold of his cloak covered his mouth and nose, a response made reflexive by years of dry storms whipping across his caravan routes. "Where did Setios keep his demon in a crystal bottle?"

"The gods preserve me from such knowledge, friend!" said the Napatan as his eyes swept the upper levels of the walls which could already be viewed with sufficient clarity. He filtered the air through his cape; a desert-dweller himself, Khamwas must have more experience with dust storms than Samlor did. "Believe me, Setios was mad to keep such a thing by him—and you and I would be even madder to carry it off ourselves."

"That's not what I mean," the caravan master said. He raised his voice so that it could be heard through the muffling cloth—and because he was

at a desperate loss to know what he should do next. He would have climbed out of this place at once, except for his fear of what might follow him to where Star stood shivering.

No wonder the child had been terrified into a near coma. She must

have known . . .

"•Here it is!" cried Khamwas, brushing the reading stand as he swept

closer to a wall. "Here it is!" he repeated, then sneezed.

The walls of the sunken room were formed entirely of inscribed stones, but the pieces had little commonality beyond that. Some were squared columns, set with one face flush and the other three hidden even now that

the stucco had fallen away.

A few bore symbols which were not writing at all. One of them was a small block of peridotite, polished smooth before a single diagonal was cut across its coarse crystals. The block had marked the victim's place in a temple of Dyareela. Samlor could not imagine anyone removing it from its original location—or being willing to have it close to him thereafter.

The Napatan was brushing his left palm across the face of a slab of

gray granite, cleaning it of dust that had settled there after the spell of release. The stele was about three feet high and half that across. Figures

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—presumably gods—filled the upper portion, and there were about twenty vertical lines of script beneath them.

"—to the blessings of Harsaphes," Khamwas said, his index finger pausing midway down one of the later columns. "Harsaphes. not Somptu as I'd always assumed, and the ruins of the temple of Har—"

"Khamwas, listen to me!" Samlor shouted. He gripped the scholar with his left hand, though that meant dropping his cloak while there was still dust in the air. "You say something happened to magic a little bit ago. Would that have broken the crystal that held Setios's demon?"

"The townsman," said the manikin who was not in the least affected by the choking atmosphere, "is not the one who is eaten by the crocodile."

And men who leave magic alone, translated Samlor as he whirled toward glimpsed motion, aren't destroyed by its creatures.

A hand was emerging from a slab of limestone on the far wall. It was tenuous enough that the settling dust coexisted with the limb, which was

so thin that it would have been skeletal were it not for the gleam of a scaly integument.

The three fingers each bore a claw an inch long and sharp as shattered glass.

"Get up the ladder!" Samlor shouted as he leaped for the apparition behind the watered steel blade of his dagger. The hilt was adequate for his big hand when he slashed with it, though it was shaped wrong and would have been uncomfortably short had he chosen to thrust . . .

Which would have done as much good; as much, and no more.

The clawed hand twisted to grip the blade while an arm as wire-thin as the hand continued to extend from the wall. Steel parted the limb like smoke, and the claws slipped through the whisking dagger as if it in turn had no substance.

Another hand was reaching through the stone beside the first. The blur above and between them was growing into a narrow reptilian face.

"Get out!" the caravan master shouted again when a glance toward the ladder showed him that Khamwas stood where he had. He had crossed the top of his staff with his left forearm.

"No, run!" Khamwas replied. He had been chanting under his breath, and his face spasmed with the effort of breaking back into normal speech.

"I released it again, but I can hold it for long enough."

The demon's head and torso had emerged from the wall. One leg was striding forward in slow motion. The creature was half again as tall as Samlor, and it was thinner than anything could be and live.

One hand shot out and snatched the sea urchin which shattered beneath the claws into a cascade of mauve sparks. As the demon's arm

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withdrew, the sparks formed again into their original shape. The creature of light continued to pick its way through the air.

Samlor was quite sure that if the claws closed on his niece, their effect would be permanent.

"Run. Star!" he shouted, afraid to turn from the demon. It continued

to pull itself from the stone.

Khamwas hadn't moved, though his mouth resumed its unheard chanting. Maybe Samlor could jump for the ladder himself since the fool Napatan refused to do so. Slam the lid back over this hellish room—if the lid would close without a search for another mechanism. Run out the front door with Star in his arms, praying that he could work the bolts swiftly enough . . . praying that the doorkeeper would ignore them as

they left, the way Khamwas had said it would . . .

Samlor stepped forward and swung at the demon again. He wasn't going to abandon Khamwas to the creature unless there were no other choice.

He chopped for a wrist. Instead of slipping through like light in mist, the caravan master's steel clanged as numbingly as if he had slashed an anvil. The demon seized the blade and began to chitter in high-pitched laughter,

All of the demon but its right leg had pulled free of the wall. That leg was still smokily insubstantial, but the claws of the left foot cut triple furrows in the concrete as they strained to drag the creature wholly out of the stone. The left hand—forepaw—was reaching for Samlor's face while the right gripped his knife.

Samlor's mouth had dropped open as he breathed through it, oblivious of the dust that would have made him cough another time. He jerked straight down on the dagger hilt, ducking from the swipe that started slowly as a boulder rolling, then completed its arc at blinding speed.

The blade screeched clear. If a man had held it, his fingers would have been on the floor or dangling from twists of skin.

The demon's paw was uninjured, and its claws had streaked the flat of the blade against which they were set.

Samlor caught the throat-clasp of his cloak. He could throw the garment like a net over the creature and—

—and watch the claws shred it as the demon, steel strong and more than iron hard, leaped free to dispose of the men before it. The creature's eyes had no pupils and glowed orange, a color which owed nothing to the urchin which still tumbled innocently around the room.

"Khamwas!" the caravan master shouted, because the demon was already in the air and perhaps Khamwas could get up the ladder while the

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Cirdonian occupied the creature with the process of being slaughtered . . .

The demon halted in midair, its left foot above the concrete and its right leg, spindly and terrible as that of a giant spider, lifting to deliver a kick that would disembowel Samlor. Dust settled and the urchin of light rolled jerkily forward, one spine at a time, but the creature hung frozen

like an idol of ravening destruction.

Its eyes were as bright as tunnels to hell.

Samlor started another cut at the demon. Light reflecting from the triple scratch on his blade reminded him how useless that would be. so he turned instead to Khamwas.

Who had not moved since last Samlor had leisure to glance at him.

Khamwas hunched slightly forward, his left forearm crossing the top of his staff and his eyes fixed on the demon with a reptile's intensity.

Tjainufi still perched on his shoulder.

The Napatan's lips had been moving soundlessly, but now he said in a cracked whisper, "Go on ... quickly."

The demon was not quite frozen. The movements the creature began before Khamwas's spell took effect were still going on. The leg that stretched toward Samlor at a glacial pace quickened noticeably when the Napatan spoke, and the demon's mouth gaped slowly to display arrays of interlocked teeth like needles in the upper and lower jaws.

"But how can you—" the caravan master began as he slipped a step back, beyond the present arc of the claws. The demon bent at its girl-slim

waist as it leaped, because otherwise its flat skull would have banged the ten-foot ceiling.

"Samlor," said the Napatan scholar, "get out! I brought you here!"

The demon had trembled back to near stasis for a moment. Now it lurched far enough forward in its unsupported motion that it was clear one hand was reaching for Khamwas's head even as the kick extended toward the Cirdonian.

"There is none who abandons his traveling companion whom the gods do not call to account for it," said Tjainufi.

"Fuck your gods," said Samlor, who was already sliding the knife back under his belt to free his hands. He encircled the Napatan's waist, underneath the cape for a firmer grip, with his left arm.

"No—" said Khamwas desperately.

"Do yowjob," Samlor snarled back as he lifted the smaller man. The air swirled with the demon's renewed movement, but the claws now behind the caravan master did not rend him as he stepped with regal determination to the ladder.

Focusing on the creature from the stone was for Khamwas. Samlor hil

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Samt had the responsibility of getting them both back up the ladder while his companion did that job, eyes, arm, and staff locked into their duty

Khamwas's body was muscular, but weight wasn't the problem. Carrying him upright while Samlor's right hand needed to grip the ladder for balance was brutal punishment, and it reminded him of how badly he had strained himself getting into this damned house

One foot above the other, each step a deliberate one because a jolt at the wrong time might break Khamwas's concentration irrevocably No way to tell what was happening behind him, nothing to do about it if things weren't well One foot and then the other.

A gust of wind shocked Samlor as his head lifted above the floor of the reception hall Fabric, a curtain or a counterpane, had been snatched from a room on the upper floor and was flapping from the railing

Star was calm as molten glass as she watched her uncle struggle up the ladder with the other man clamped to his side At his first wild glance, Samlor thought the whorl of white hair on the child's temple was one of the creatures of light which pulsed through the reception hall It was so

bright

He couldn't bend over to balance with his palm on the floor as he neared the top of the ladder, so the caravan master mounted the last three rungs at a quickened pace. Toppling backward would mean the floor killed them if the demon didn't, but if Samlor sprawled on his face the result would be no better. He'd seen the creature start to move, it would be on them in an instant if Khamwas were flung out of his concentration.

Samlor stepped from the top rung to the marble floor, sucking in his lips as he strove to move as smoothly as a duck gliding on water. He set the Napatan down, conscious of the man's weight only after he was free of it, and with the same motion strode for the wall and the latch mechanism.

Khamwas's voice was audible again, breaking with strain as he chanted over and over again a dozen or so words. Sweat from the Napatan's face had splashed Samlor's left forearm as he climbed.

The caravan master's boot skidded when he tried to slide back the piece of marble which was half withdrawn beneath the molding. Instead of trying again with his hobnails, Samlor knelt and scrabbled at the black stone with both sweaty palms. It moved into position with the same greasy certainty with which it had opened.

The pond of mirror-smooth water slipped down to cover the demon
soundlessly

Samlor skidded as he ran from the sidewall to the front door Hobnails
weren't the footgear for these polished stones . . and this house wasn't

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a place for humans Not now, and probably not before Setios's pet got
loose

There was no inside door latch

"You didn't let them out, Master Khamwas," said Star, patting the
hand of the scholar who had knelt and was sobbing with exhaustion
'They're playing with us "

"Come on," Samlor shouted There was certainly a way to open the
inner and outer doors from here, but he didn't have time to fool with it.

"We're leaving the way we came"

"There's six of them. Uncle Samlor," said Star. "They're playing with
us"

Something emerged from the pilaster beside the stairs to the second floor. It was a clawed hand like that of the demon below. Instead of streaming like smoke from the stone, it broke free as a chick emerges from an egg. Rock shattered away from the groping limb, and a section of the wall started to lift.

Khamwas rose to his feet. His face was blank and his body swayed with fatigue. He crossed his arm over the staff again and began a whispered chant.

The wall from which the demon crashed, already formed, was load-bearing. Tortured roof beams squealed as plaster in chunks of up to a hundred pounds broke away. A big piece hit the center of the pond and blasted water out across the reception hall.

Samlor caught his niece with one arm and Khamwas with the other. He flung them, all three together, to the floor against the nearer sidewall. A block of stone, notched for the butt of a crossbeam, tumbled from the roof to the rail of the second-floor walkway, then caromed to the floor in a shower of dust and chips.

"We'll get out through the back!" said the caravan master who doubted that they would. The wall beside where they hunched under cover of the walkway was crumbling as gray claws harder than the stone emerged from it.

Across the reception room, the other sidewall was disintegrating in a shower of bits and blocks. They hid but did not disguise the cause of the destruction. One of the demons was clasping a dismembered human leg. Samlor figured he knew where Setios and his servants had gone.

Six of 'em, Star'd said. Likely five more than they'd need, but you didn't quit. Just because you couldn't win.

The three humans rose and scuttled for the room's back wall and the door there. They were bent over because the walkway's partial roof was no protection against blocks bouncing from the floor at crazy angles.

The front half of the house staggered forward into the street with a

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roar. The sound did not seem loud until Samlor realized that he could not shout with enough volume to be heard by the two companions he had dragged with him into the temporary safety of the door alcove.

Skeletal, inhumanly tall figures minced toward the trio, shrugging off the tons of rubble that had thundered down on them. There were four, and the mound of stone and timber covering what had been the floor of

the reception room heaved as the creature in the room beneath rejoined its fellows.

Sheets of pain flapped across Samlor's body from a center where his right hip had blocked a ricocheting chunk of stone that weighed as much as he did. The crosswall dividing the house was built as solidly as the exterior. It remained essentially undisturbed when the emerging demons had shattered the front of the house. That portion of the building had demolished itself as brittle stone shifted in a vain attempt to find new foundations.

The door in front of Samlor was locked or possibly jammed when ruin made the house twist, but the panel was only thin wood inlaid with horn and ivory in patterns which were probably significant as well as decorative. Khamwas pounded it with the ferule of his staff, breaking off scales of ivory without doing anything to get them through the doorway.

Samlor would have kicked the latchplate, but he was pretty sure that his right hip would neither support him alone nor lift his boot high enough for the purpose. Wondering how many seconds they had before a demon lunged onto them, he rotated on his left heel and grabbed a torso-sized block from the wreckage that had spilled inward during the collapse.

The demons were advancing with tiny steps, chittering in self-satisfaction. When they chose to, they picked their way over the piled rubble, but one of the four figures strode through the tons of jumbled rock like a man wading in the surf. The fifth of the creatures heaved itself into sight with the ease of a toadstool bursting pavement to reach the open air,

"Care—" cried Samlor, turning with the block in his hands. The movement was so painful that he could feel only his scalp, his palms, and the ball of his left foot.

"—ful!"

The stone splintered the door and carried on, crashing on the floor of the hallway beyond and then bouncing harmlessly from the legs of the sixth demon poised there with its arms spread across the passage.

The air was dead still. The caravan master turned again, no more conscious of his pain than a fox is conscious of the way its lungs burn from its running when the hounds encircle it for the last time.

"The sky," Khamwas said hoarsely. "Look."

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Samlor drew the long dagger from his belt and lifted Star to his chest

with his free arm. The semicircle of demons waited, crouching slightly, with their spindly, steelstrong arms interlocked. They were close enough that if one of the creatures leaned forward, it could rip the caravan master's face away in its pointed teeth.

"Look!" Khamwas screamed, and even so his voice was smothered by a sound like the scream of a giant snake.

Samlor looked up. He could see almost a mile into the sky, up the lightning-lit throat of a descending tornado funnel.

The lower end was shaggy with tentacles of water vapor condensing in the lowered pressure surrounding six separate suction vortices. They extended toward the ruined house.

"Down!" cried the caravan master, but Star twisted like an eel from his arms and stood while the two men tried to flatten themselves.

One of the demons leaped away, covering twenty feet of the distance toward the street before being caught by a suction vortex- The creature reeled upward into the main funnel, like a crab being lifted into an octopus's crushing beak. Blue-white lightning licked soundlessly but with coronal radiance from one side of the void to the other-

The funnel hovered at the level of what remained of Setios's roof. A miniature vortex snaked past Star's erect head, so close that it should

have touched her hair but didn't. It was no more than the diameter of a wine jar, spinning widdershins though the main cloud rotated with the sun.

Samlor lay on his back, clutching the medallion of Heqt in his left hand as he watched transfixed. The broken door panel exploded into splinters. They cleared themselves up the shaft of the screaming vortex. The demon flashed out in the grip of the wind, upright and battling momentarily while its hinder claws gouged pieces the size of a man's fist from the stone of the doorjambs. Then the creature was gone, falling upward into the sky in a helix so tight that its limbs had been plucked from the body before it disappeared into the tunnel of lightning.

The tornado was lifting and folding in on itself like a purse whose drawstrings were being tightened. Samlor hadn't seen what happened to the four remaining demons, but they had vanished when he knelt to look around.

"If you are not slack," said Tjainufi in a perfectly audible voice, "then your god will be active for you."

Samlor uncurled his fingers from the amulet of Heqt; but it had not been to the toad goddess that he screamed his prayers in the last instants . . .

"I thought Mommy's box was empty," said Star as her eyes met the caravan master's "But it wasn't "

The tornado funnel flattened into the overcast almost a mile above Sanctuary Only then did the normal wind return, a huge gust of it, and with it the start of a cold downpour It was as dark again as the inside of a tomb.

But the whorl of hair on Star's temple burned for a moment like the heart of the lightning

A MERCY WORSE THAN NONE

John Brunner

By lamplight, by firelight, on a winter evening, Jarveena of Forgotten Holt sat at dinner with the less-than-man whose foreign agent she had been for these seven years.

In the years since she had served him merely as a scribe-interpreter, Master Melilot had changed but little He was portlier, admittedly—the satin robe he splashed with grease as he gnawed at the carcass of his third

wild duck stretched smooth across his ample paunch—but his suety face was equally innocent of wrinkles and would no doubt remain so till his death

Most certainly of all, his inner nature had not altered Though he was a great deal richer than of yore—Jarveena knew that for a fact, having put several immensely profitable deals his way, and having laid the foundations of a fortune for herself—the outward signs of his prosperity were few He was still reluctant to part with money save when it was unavoidable, food still came to his table from the fire shared between the kitchen and the bindery adjacent to the scriptorium on the entrance floor, and those who clambered up and down the ladderlike stairs with wine jars and full and empty dishes were still the same sort of apprentices, not engaged just now in copying or studying A thousand others would have flaunted their wealth by buying slaves, or installed one of the hoists of late so popular in Ranke, which delivered food piping-hot by way of a shaft sunk in the wall Not Melilot He knew that an excessive display of worldly goods was a sure way to attract the interest of thieves, and he had no wish to be at the expense of hiring armed watchmen It was cheaper to rely, by day, on the constant vigilance of his staff, and by night

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on the geese he had installed on the roof, in what formerly had been the nauseous dwelling of the drunken nobleman whose ancestors had built this once fine mansion. He had gone to his repose; now the geese could be trusted to disturb everybody's at a nocturnal shout or footfall, a complaining bolt, or the creaking of a shutter jimmied open.

Besides, here in Sanctuary, what guards were available were as likely as anyone else to rob their employers if they felt they could get away with their loot.

Despite his visibly good appetite, Melilot was uneasy. As well as Jarveena, another guest sat at his table. It was not his custom to admit strangers to his private quarters. Had the fellow not been vouched for by Jarveena personally, he would never have set foot outside the public areas below.

Yet he had been vouched for in a most disturbing fashion. Had he somehow ensnared the girl—woman, Melilot corrected himself, remembering how much time had elapsed—perhaps by magic? Was their presence part of some secret plot against him? It was second nature to all in Sanctuary to think in such terms, from lifelong habit.

Keeping up, between mouthfuls, a flow of gossip as entertaining as

might be heard anywhere in the city and a sight more trustworthy than most, given that it was based on what he daily gleaned from the documents given him to transcribe or translate, Melilot studied Jarveena from the corner of his eye. She had changed more than he had in the past decade—and small wonder, given the difference in their age and bodily condition—but she still affected mannish garb, boots and breeches and laced jerkin. She was still, moreover, patterned with vicious scars, though they were far less conspicuous than formerly. Therein lay the reason for her annual returns to Sanctuary, and also why she was not already as rich as Melilot. Spells were not cheap, particularly when one must apply to Enas Yorl for them: one of the three greatest wizards in the land.

Under his care, the lash marks on her hands and arms had faded until they were no more than a tracery beneath her tawny skin—and no doubt elsewhere on her body, for her once unequal bosom swelled identically now on left and right, signifying that the old brown keloid had been spirited away and left her form as shapely as that of anyone her age not yet a mother, and more than most thanks to her active way of life. Oddly, though, she had not begun where most young women would have, with her face as being most exposed to public view. Still, when she tossed her head in laughter at some especially extravagant yam recounted by her host, one might glimpse the hideous cicatrix she could reveal by drawing

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down her eyebrows, that mark which in the days when she resided here she had used to such effect in cowing disobedient junior apprentices . . .

Oh, she had always been a strange one, this Jarveena! He had been positively glad when she decided to take ship away from Sanctuary after that unpleasant episode involving an enchanted scroll, treachery on the part of a trusted officer, and an attempt to assassinate the Prince.*

Yes, indeed. Life was a great deal more comfortable knowing that this unpredictable person, half loyal employee and half explosive spitfire, was safe at sea or bargaining on his behalf in distant ports. The times when she came back to claim her pay, and spend the greater part of it again in a single day, were far from the happiest of Melilot's existence . . .

And now she had arrived, for the first time ever, with a companion.

Male, at that. Discarding the third duck, belching unrestrainedly and calling for more wine, he shifted his attention to this stranger even as he launched into the best and funniest of the rumors he had lately garnered.

It concerned the plight of a rascally sea captain, Stong by name, half mariner, half smuggler, who had taken aboard, all unwitting, both a chestful of silver put long ago by Mizraith under a geas that sooner or later would compel its restoration to its rightful owner, and also the victim of a S'danzo curse designed to drive him away from Sanctuary for all time. He decorated the tale with all sorts of risible detail, much of

which he invented on the spot, and Jarveena, relaxed by his good wine, enjoyed it to the full. One of the changes she had undergone during her extensive travels was the acquisition of a keen sense of humor. In her teens she had had little to laugh at, or about.

Her companion, however, made no pretense even of smiling. His glum face remained as impassive as a stone idol's except at reference to the S'danzo curse, whereupon he favored Jarveena with a scowl.

What, Melilot asked himself, could have persuaded her to bring this boorish fellow here? So far he knew nothing about him save his name, and that was outlandish and nearly unpronounceable, something like "Klikitak" except that it ended with a rasp: Klikitagh?

Of course, a few hints could be deduced from his appearance. His shoulders were broad, his chest deep, his hands large and sinewy: the figure of a man of action. Moreover he was of a striking color, for between his fair beard and bushy fair hair his cheeks and forehead were windburned to a pale clear red after so many days at sea.

But never in all his life, not even when dealing with some nobleman's illiterate wife desperate to know whether letters brought secretly to her husband and intercepted described her infidelities, had Melilot seen such

* See "Sentences of Death," in Thieves' World.

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unalloyed misery on a human countenance Why, even Enas Yorl, sport of a thousand mindless spells that changed his shape, his sex, and now and then his species, contrived to extract a certain wry and resigned humor from his predicament . .

He ended his story, and Jarveena, hooting with laughter, clapped her hands. The pretty ten-year-old girl who stood silently in one corner beside the wine jug mistook her applause for a signal to replenish their mugs, and made haste to obey Melilot did not correct her He had hopes of loosening the stranger's tongue, and in that project liquor was his chiefest ally

"I note, sir," he said with disapproval that was only partly feigned, "you were not amused by the plight of Captain Stong Is one to take it that it was because you are unfamiliar with crucial references therein, as to the S'danzo curse and legendary Mizraith's skill as an enchanter^ You have the air of a far-traveled man, not acquainted with the ways and notables of Sanctuary."

Klikitagh stirred, and for the first time uttered more than a discourteous grunt; he had not even expressed thanks for the generous repast that had been set before him

"No, sir," he returned "Is because in part I can not well to understand your saying "

Hmm' That aroused Melilot's professional instincts What could this fellow's native language be? The accent was none that he recognized, nor was the curious turn of phrasing Mayhap Klikeitagh was literate in some language lacking from the list posted at the door of his scriptorium, though that was longer by three, possibly four, than the best his rivals had to offer If only to learn how to recognize a script he hadn't run across before, it would be worth his while to pick the stranger's brains

Before Melilot could formulate any proposal, however, the other had gone on

"And in other bigger part because is not a matter for make jest, a curse Speak as pitiable victim knowing well from agony anti-justice, cruelty, of making curse against innocency man, me, self"

That emphatic addition occurs in Yemzed, but never at the end of a sentence . . . Oh, I'm really on to something here' Excited, Melilot beckoned the girl back from her corner to pour still more wine

But Klikeitagh refused, covering his mug with a broad palm

"Tired I to sleep Must go, we "

As though taking Jarveena's consent for granted, he gathered the sword belt he had hung on the back of his chair and rose, extending his hand to help her up also

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She ignored it

A sudden angry flush deepened the color of Klikitagh's cheeks He said, "You not—"

"I have business to discuss with Melilot," she cut m "One of the kids will show you to the guest apartment I'll join you later "

Hastily, for fear of Klikitagh provoking a quarrel that, as surely with Jarveena as with any haughty bladesman of the city, might become a fight, Melilot forced his immense bulk out of his chair.

"That is so, sir," he confirmed. "But I assure you I shall keep our conversation as brief as may be " He hesitated, trying to gauge the depth and cause of Klikitagh's ill temper "If perchance you fear I may trespass on some right of intimacy the lady has, for the time being, granted to yourself, I pray you consider the—ah—visible signs of my incompetence m that regard "

Klikitagh's face remained blank Melilot realized he was so nervous that out of habit he had used formal, high-flown terms, incomprehensible to this foreigner He made hasty amends

"It is as Jarveena has said My guest apartment is at your disposal During your stay at Sanctuary I look forward to chatting with you about your native country and its script and language, it would be most interesting, indeed a positive pleasure, to hear you on the subject Accordingly, rather than dismiss you to some flea-ridden tavern like the Vulgar Unicorn, I suggest you make my home your base until you have completed whatever business brings you here Feel free to come and go . . ."

His words trailed away Klikitagh was scowling worse than ever His hand would have fallen to his sword hilt—he had refused to be parted from the weapon, bad manners though it was to bring it into his host's dining room—had Jarveena not caught his fingers in her own, slimmer but almost as strong With a sour gnn she said, "You've upset the poor bastard Not surprising I'll take him away and pacify him, and come back "

"Pacifying" Klikitagh took so long that Melilot, growing drowsy from the fumes of wine, was on the point of postponing further conversation with Jarveena to the morrow—the street outside having reached that pitch of quietness after which almost any noise might set his geese to

cackling—when, silent as a shadow, she returned wearing nothing but her skin and slumped back into her chair He noticed that his guess about the keloid on her chest had been correct

"Foof" she exclaimed, though she kept her voice low "If I'd known what a handful Klikitagh can be I'd never have agreed to help him Still, you can't help feeling sorry for the poor devil, can you?"

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"Personally," Melilot grunted, "I find it the easiest thing in the world to avoid doing so. What spell has he cast on you, who never before to my knowledge felt sorry for anybody save yourself—and maybe Enas Yorl?"

She pantomimed hurling her wine mug at him, but cancelled the movement with a wry smile at his reflexive flinch. The mug turned out to be empty. Glancing around, she saw that the little girl in the corner had dozed off. Remembering, perhaps, the days when she, too, had had to wait on Melilot's pleasure after dinner, she went to help herself. Having taken a swig and topped it up a second time, she resumed her place.

"All right." She sighed. "I guess I'd better tell you Klikitagh's story."

"I'd rather hear about the deals with—"

"Tomorrow will do!" she interrupted. "Or more likely the day after."

"I was afraid of that," the master scribe muttered. "On the first full day of each of your visits to Sanctuary, you invariably have urgent business . . . Still, if this time you can afford to have Enas Yorl charm away the scar on your forehead"—brightening—"you'll no longer present such an alarming aspect every time you shake aside your forelock."

"It's true that I intend to wait on Enas Yorl tomorrow, as I always do." Jarveena wasn't looking at him, but at the fading glories of the painted ceiling, on which the lamps and the flames from the dying logs combined to cast curious and intersecting shadows, as though some magician were eavesdropping on them and letting his attention wander now and then from the spell that assured his invisibility. "But this time, not for my own sake."

"For . . . his?" Reaching for his own mug, Melilot was so astonished he almost spilled the contents.

"Yes indeed."

After that there was a lengthy silence, broken only by the occasional sputtering of a jet of gas boiled out from the dampest and longest-lasting log across the fire dogs.

Eventually noise drifted from outside: the tramp of booted feet on cobblestones. One of the night patrols was passing, composed of men trained locally to Hell-Hound standards of discipline; yet even they did not dare to venture abroad except in twos, so lawless and unruly was this premier melting pot of cities. The geese were accustomed to the sound of their passage, and the boss gander marked it with no more than an evil-sounding hiss.

Having watched the gleam of the patrol's lantern approach and fade on the curtains that masked his streetward window, Melilot said, "Are you sure he has not cast a spell on you? Last year you said this was to be the time of your final visit to Enas Yorl, at least for personal reasons. You

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said that after it your face would be restored to the same condition as your"—he coughed behind one plump hand—"the rest of you."

"I'm having second thoughts," Jarveena muttered. "It's sometimes not a bad thing to be able to turn off an unwanted suitor just by doing this." And she drew her eyebrows down, glaring at him from beneath their two graceful arcs. At once Melilot's gaze, against his will, was drawn away from the rest of her face and horribly concentrated on the livid cicatrix that marred her forehead and instantly made her handsome features more repulsive than the worst invention of Sanctuary's hawkmasks.

"You haven't done it to him." Melilot suggested.

"Yes. At first. It had no effect. That was what got me interested Klik-itagh." She had perfectly mastered the final sound of the name; Melilot, to his shame, knew that he would have to practice it half a dozen times aloud and in private before he dared address the man directly.

"What, then, followed?"

"The discovery that something worse could happen to a person than what I went through as a child."

For an instant her face reflected memories of long ago and far away. Melilot, knowing what was in her mind, shivered. To have been raped repeatedly, then whipped and left for dead among the ruins of her native village Holt—not for nothing now referred to as Forgotten—when she was no more than nine . . . Was that not sufficient horror to enter into anybody's life?

Yet she had found someone who, in her view, had suffered even more.

What monstrous events, then, lay in the past of Klikitagh?

Huskily he said, "Tell me his tale."

"Let it begin," she said after reflection, "with the reason why he took offense at your offer of free lodging. I know you'd not have made it had you not expected quid pro quo. It's all, of course, beside the point, but what he might be able to tell you of his mother tongue would be quite useless. Whether he can write I've not inquired; the same applies."

"Still, knowledge of any distant language—"

"Even a dead one? Dead for centuries?"

"What?" Melilot jolted forward on his chair, one careless elbow over-setting his mug—but it was empty, and he lacked the energy to rise and fill it for himself.

"Do you not believe there were great magicians in the past?" Jarveena challenged.

"You mean . . ." Melilot sank back slowly into his usual pot-bellied slouch, staring into nowhere.

"Out with it!"

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"He's under an immortality spell?"

"That's only the half of it. Don't imagine you should envy him!"—in a sharp tone of warning. "On the contrary! He is the most pitiable creature I have ever met, and in your service I have traveled back and forth across the whole known world. Is that not so?"

Melilot nodded dumbly.

"Then listen." She leaned toward the fire with chin on fists; the flames made patterns of darkness dart across her face and body. "What lies on him is no mere spell, but a tremendous curse. In it consists the reason why he was angry when you offered him lodging. He cannot accept. Nor will he eat your dinner tomorrow or on any other evening. You see . . ."

She weighed her words with care.

"He is bound never to sleep two nights in the same bed, nor eat a second meal from the same table. And this has been his doom for a thousand years."

Now for a great while Melilot sat motionless, save insofar as the play of fire- and lamplight kept up a constant illusion of movement throughout the room. Finally he had to stifle a yawn. But behind his plump, inscrutable face it seemed his mind had been working hard enough, albeit along lines that were familiar in Sanctuary more than any other place.

"Would this not imply that he cannot be kept in jail?" he suggested.

"Why, you—!" Jarveena leaped to her feet, brandishing her mug as though to brain him with it. Only a warning hiss from the gander beyond the ceiling prevented her. But her face was aglow with fury as she sat down again. "Is that all you can think about? How would you like to be in his shoes?"

"Not at all," the fat one answered candidly. "I'm sorry; I hadn't thought the matter through ... To what is owed this fearful geas, then?"

"I've no idea. Moreover, nor does he."

"But that's ridiculous!" Melilot stared at her. "You mean he won't admit—"

"I mean precisely what I said!" Do you think I haven't pestered him with questions? Do you think I haven't put him under oath? He has sworn by all the gods and goddesses whose names I recognize, plus one or two I never ran across before, that he believes the curse to be unjust. He says, and I've been able to confirm, that he has consulted every magician whom he could afford to pay, and none has given him surcease. What is more, none has contrived to relieve his misery by telling him the curse indeed is warranted. Were he aware of what he is accursed for, he might at least attempt an expiation. Can you think of a crueller fate than

his? He is being punished—endlessly, horribly punished—for something he has no memory of having done! Is he not truly to be pitied?"

A shudder plus a vigorous nod made Melilot's gross body wobble under his fine robe.

"But how does he make shift aboard a ship?" he demanded. "If he may not sleep twice in the same bed—"

"He brought a hammock, and each night slung it from two different posts or hooks. This is permissible."

"Then: eating twice from the same table?"

"Until this evening I had not seen him eat from a table at all. Aboard ship, he carried his dish to a different spot on deck or in the 'tween-decks, but this strategem did not entirely serve; our voyage, as you know, was prolonged by a contrary wind, and for the last two days he did not eat at all. In the tavern where I met him, where he had already spent a week, he had to bribe its keeper to move him each night to a different bunk or pallet, and since there were only two tables for the customers he was reduced to eating on the floor, like a dog. He was much mocked in

consequence."

"Has he described what happens when he tries to defy the curse?"

"He cannot. He says he's never had the power to do so. It is, he says, as though he has become a well-trained animal. Though he might sit down to your table tomorrow, be he never so hungry his hands would remain in his lap, refusing to lift food to his lips; though he might fall upon the softest couch in the world, weary to the marrow of his bones, only the first time would he be allowed repose. Thereafter he would toss about all night, unless exhaustion drove him to prefer the floor. He must, he says, avoid the highest and the lowest sorts of lodging: the former because the wealthy often buy antiques, the latter because the poor make shift with what's been handed down or looted from abandoned homes. This carven table might be one he ate from centuries ago, that horsehair pallet might have been in use elsewhere. The curse still holds, even at so remote a reach; he starves, he grows red-eyed with lack of sleep, until he wanders on and falls exhausted."

"How does he live? What trade is open to him?" Melilot demanded.

Jarveena shrugged. "I think when all else fails he has to rob. But there are tasks even a wanderer may undertake. He goes a lot to sea; sometimes he enlists to guard a caravan; he has hinted at having been a courier, and carried confidential mail. Naturally, though, he can't serve long on any given route."

"Naturally," Melilot said in a dry tone, and had to hide another yawn.

"Well, my dear Jarveena, if it's any consolation, you have indeed elicited my sympathy. Your vivid picture of his unendurable existence must move

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the stoniest of hearts—which mine, as you're aware, is not. Let us hope for both your sakes that Enas Yorl relieves the curse tomorrow. Go now and tell your friend I wish he may sleep soundly in my guest room, since it may only be this once. And leave me your report and your accounts, so I may peruse them while you're with the wizard."

"You'll find them all in order."

"Are they not always so?"

"Of course. How otherwise could I have kept on your right side so long?"

Rising with a chuckle, she headed for the door. Passing his chair, she bent to plant a kiss on his shaven pate.

"Thank you for allowing Klikitagh to stay. It can't be often that he enjoys such luxury."

Said Melilot: "I didn't notice him enjoying it . . ."

And his little joke sent him contentedly to bed.

Waking, but with eyes still closed, Jarveena abruptly grew aware of another presence near at hand, apart from Klikitagh. She tensed, sliding her fingers beneath her pillow in search of the knife that never left her reach.

It wasn't there. Come to that, neither was the pillow!

She sat up with a jerk, eyes wide in alarm. Melilot's guest room had vanished. This was another place entirely, a long low-ceilinged stone-walled hall, wherein she found herself on an oblong padded couch, Klikitagh still at her side. The air was pleasantly warm, pervaded with fragrance from dried herbs sprinkled on a brazier.

Looking down on her, clad in a many-layered cape, was a tall and rather handsome youth . . . but where a normal person's eyes would be, there burned two red betraying sparks. She exhaled with a gasp.

"Enas Yorl!" she exclaimed.

Her voice roused Klikitagh. He came together all of a piece, instantly swinging his legs to the floor—which was spread with soft pelts, sable,

marten, and sea otter. He cast around for his sword, but there was no sign of it, or of his clothing. Perceiving in the unknown youth a captor and perhaps a rival, he shook sleep from his brain and advanced with both fists clubbed,

Or rather, tried to do so. When he set his foot down a second time, his limbs slowed, as though he were forcing his way through deep water against a fierce contrary current. With vast effort he achieved another step, but that was all; eventually he remained utterly still, balanced absurdly on his left leg, mouth ajar in a face that had become a mask of fury and frustration.

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Jarveena knew how he was feeling. Just so had she been trapped at her first unexpected entry into the magician's palace. Guarded by basilisks, it lay beside and beneath Prytanis Street, to the southeast of the Avenue of Temples.

Except, of course, when it was somewhere else . . .

Licking her lips, for even after all these years it awed her to be in the presence of Enas Yorl, especially naked—there was no point in adding "and defenseless," for few there were in all of the known world who could withstand the power of such a wizard—she said, "Sometimes I

wonder why you keep basilisks and yet enforce that spell in person. Do they not jest about the man who kept a dog and barked himself?"

"Who fold you there was no trace of basilisk in me?" replied the seeming youth in mocking tones. "Welcome back to Sanctuary, Jarveena. You were most royally entertained by Melilot the pinchpenny last night. The flavor of those roasted ducks must have been excellent!"

Even as he spoke, his face was slowly altering. His eyebrow ridges in particular were thickening. Meantime his shoulders, gradually hunched. Jarveena knew what such a rapid change betokened. •

"You've been engaged in a considerable magic," she deduced. "Were you indeed one of the shadows that played around the fat one's dining room?"

He inclined his head.

"Can you have been that eager to see me again? Did you wish to find out whether I'd added any more scars to my toll, making more work for you in fading them?"

But these gibes were a mere cover for her nervousness. Besides, Enas Yorl was paying them no heed. He was contemplating Klikitagh with a frown. After a moment he touched the man's temples gently and briefly with his forefingers.

He said at length, "I heard his story as you recounted it last night.

Now I can tell you one extremely curious fact. He does believe, with all his heart, that the curse upon him is unjust. But in my centuries of life—brief though they be compared to his, of course—I have read, been told, found though experience, that to impose so powerful and durable a spell on an innocent victim is, if not forbidden, self-defeating. It must turn again upon the one who cast it. So say all the best authorities."

"Might there not have been exceptions in the past?" Jarveena ventured- "Could there not have been ancient powers that since have been forgotten?"

"How can that be so, when Klikitagh has trudged from wizard to enchanter to magician for a thousand years, telling them his tale and

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begging them to strike off the fetters of his life⁹ There's more to this than meets the inward eye Come' Let us start the day with food "

That was not the usual first engagement she had with the wizard.

Puzzled by the change, though not especially dismayed, she ascribed it perhaps to his unwillingness to engage in the lists of love with a third party present—though she was sure he must have rendered Klikitagh

blind and deaf and lost to the passage of time

In her heart of hearts, though, she knew it was because he was interested much more by the stranger than herself

Turning away, Enas Yorl made a pass in the air and the far end of the immense hall drew obediently closer There stood a table set with bread and fruit and bowls of steaming broth, along with stoups of fragrant wine Assuming a high-backed chair, as though by afterthought he said, "Oh—clothe my visitors "

Unseen hands wrapped Jarveena in a silken gown, even to the point of fastening its sash She glanced at Klikitagh, a robe of homespun cloth as harsh as sacking fell around his awkwardly posturing frame

"You will not let him join us?" she suggested

"He is feeling neither hunger nor thirst," replied the wizard "Besides, I may need to loose his tongue by conventional means, as Melilot essayed to do last night with scant success How can I, if he has already eaten from my table?"

"But surely . ." she began, and bit her lip

"You were going to say," came the resigned reply, "you have such confidence in my abilities, you fully expect him to be set free by nightfall

Well, if so he will of course be dead—had that point not occurred to you?

But the outcome is by no means certain. Join me! Sit down! Toast your return beneath my roof!"

She obeyed, having no alternative. The wizard's wine, as ever, was superb. Compared to it the best of Melilot's was sharp as vinegar.

The food, too, was exceptional, but she found she had little appetite, though Enas Yorl ate briskly enough. He had let slip, long ago, that magic was a tiring business, draining the practitioner of energy as much as any normal kind of plain hard work. Jarveena, however, was distracted by the way his face and hidden body kept on changing, as the minutes ebbed away . . .

At last she could contain herself no longer. She burst out, "Old friend—if I may call you so—what drew your interest to Klikitagh?"

"Old friend?" Enas Yorl repeated, wiping lips that now were broader and flatter than before, beneath a broader, flatter nose and beetling brows. "Why, there are few so kindly disposed to me as to call me friend at all—and that, of course, is by design! Nonetheless, I'll not hold your

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choice of words against you!" He gave a harsh laugh and drained his

goblet

"Know, then, that it was much despite my will I guard myself from sentimental ties that might bind me to this world, hoping for the day when I myself can be released by death I would not care to overlook the chance of escape because I regretted leaving anyone, or anything, behind . " He seemed oddly reluctant in his speech, as though making a shameful confession

"Nonetheless I have developed a certain attachment to yourself There is, admittedly, an element of sensuality involved, that apart, however, I prefer to keep it on the level of—shall we say⁹—respectful admiration Few who have so much reason to devote their lives to seeking revenge break away from their obsession, you have done so "

"Because the taste of vengeance was not sweet," Jarveena muttered

"It turned to ashes in my mouth "

"Even so, even so ... Reverting to the point when I discerned that you had taken up with a companion, I rejoiced I watch you sometimes in my scrying glass, you know "

"I didn't" she said, startled "I don't know whether to be flattered, or —Never mind' Continue"

"As I say I rejoiced, hoping that our attachment would thereby be

weakened Despite my best intentions, though, I grew curious concerning him what manner of man, I asked myself, could win Jarveena from her wild, her willful ways? Inevitably, in the moment I found out, I was ensnared "

"I don't see— Oh!" Jarveena leaned her elbows on the table, goblet cradled in brown hands "If he is truly innocent, the curse on him must be stronger than the spells that bind yourself Break his, and you may find the way to break your own "

"Did I not know you to be ungifted in that area, I might well say you read my mind "

There was silence between them for a while At last Jarveena looked him straight in his unhuman eyes

"What are you going to do?"

"I have already begun You would not know what day it is today, the calendar that counts it has been long disused But it was necessary that you and he should come here now—not yesterday and not tomorrow Otherwise one would have had to wait a quarter year "

"You conjured up the wind that delayed our ship!"

"It was imperative "

"Then you must think there's a chance"

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"Of freeing Klikitagh? Perhaps. First, though, I must learn the reason why the curse is on him."

"But you said already that he doesn't know! So how—?"

"Wait." The magician raised one hand which no longer matched his handsome youthful countenance—not that he was so handsome any longer, either. "What I said was that he honestly believes it was put upon him unjustly. That does not mean there was no reason for it. I assure you, even a thousand years ago no one would have undertaken such a work without a reason. Klikitagh may indeed be innocent; if so, there is a great and long-outstanding blame to visit on the perpetrator of a crime against him. Or, more like, descendants of those who benefited by its perpetration."

"But how can he not be innocent, having sworn by—? I waste my breath. You must already know."

"Indeed I do. That is perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the matter."

Enas Yorl rose. "Now I must further the business. Time is wasting."

"May I wait? May I be of assistance?"

"You may not," The wizard's tone was final. "You will go hence about your own affairs. About now Melilot is rising, and he will be eager to discuss your trip. He will display great reluctance to mention Klikitagh, and you yourself will give the fellow not a second thought, save perhaps to hope occasionally that I can rescue him. Until sundown. At the moment when the sun cuts the horizon, you may return. Approach the entrance on Prytanis Street; address the basilisks by name—I'll teach you how—and they will let you by. If the work is not complete by dark, it will have failed."

"But these winter days are so short!" Jarveena cried.

"That is precisely why you must go now. It lacks less than an hour of dawn. Be on your way! No, wait! There's one thing more."

"Yes?"—as she turned to obey.

"No need to bring your customary fee. Reserve that for my final onslaught on your scars. It is enough that you have given me my greatest challenge in a hundred years of weary life, the first of all that holds out hope for me ... Begone!"

And she was gone, with further words unspoken on her lips.

All transpired as had been promised. Jarveena spent the morning closeted with Melilot, snatched a brief lunch, and in the afternoon went to the wharf where goods that she had purchased with the money he advanced her had been disposed in tidy piles: here, bales of cloth; there, jars of wine and oil; over there again small chests of spice, ingeniously

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carpentered, that had a resale value of their own when empty. A certain portion being set aside for her, he paid her due commission on the rest. He might at one time have dreamed of cheating her, as he was used to cheating everybody else; her friendship with the powerful magician Enas Yorl prevented that. Besides, there was an additional advantage. It was not done to steal what Jarveena or any other associate of Enas Yorl's left on the wharf before it was transferred to guarded warehouses. Or not done more than once, at any rate . . .

"Well, that concludes our business for the day!" said the master scribe heartily, handing his compendium and his account scrolls to a boy-in-waiting. "And in good time, what's more; it isn't even sunset, quite. Now I'm athirst. Shall we adjourn to yonder ale house and sample their mid-winter brew? Unless, that is, you're eager to rejoin your man and find him different lodging for tonight—"

Klikitagh!

Jarveena clapped hand to forehead. How was it possible? All day, since finding herself back at Melilot's, she had thought of nothing but cargo manifests and market prices and percentages! And^ the fat one had not even commented on her willingness to spend the time with him, when normally she would have been with the magician . . .

And sundown now impended!

"No! No!" she cried. "Don't hold me back an instant more!"

Incontinently she took to her heels,

The way from the harbor to Prytanis Street had never seemed so long, or so beset with moving obstacles. She lost count of the number of people she jostled against, the number of futile curses that were hurled after her. the times she herself cursed patrolmen shouting to know why she was running, imagining her to be a thief or cutpurse fleeing from her latest victim.

Somehow, though, they realized: she was not running away from, but toward . . .

The twin pillars of her destination loomed in the gloaming, accorded a wide berth by the foot passengers on their way to sunset service at the nearby temples. And small wonder. At the foot of each reposed a sleeping basilisk, secured at neck and leg with silver chains. As Jarveena rushed toward them, they became alert. Heads raised, they snuffed the air and listened, pondering in their slow reptilian way whether or not to open their eyes and cast their petrifying glare upon her.

Enas Yorl had said, "I'll teach you how to call them by name—"

But he hadn't!

She stopped dead, searching the corridors of memory. No! She had no idea what she must say!

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"He forgot!" she moaned, clenching her fists in rage.

And then, suddenly, she heard a groaning, grinding sound that made the pavement shudder underneath her feet. Looking up, she saw that the bronze door of the palace was sliding open, revealing a hall full of luminous mist. And on its threshold—

"Klikitagh!" she exclaimed.

Still in the homespun robe, barefoot, he seemed to respond to her cry. Shaking his head, he staggered down the five marble stairs that fronted the doorway. He accorded Jarveena a brief glance, but it was vacant, as though she meant no more to him than any chance-met passerby.

"Klikitagh?" she said again, uncertainly.

He struck her aside with violence, and staggered off into the darkness. In a moment the throng of temple-bound worshipers concealed him from Jarveena's view, while their chattering drowned out her shouts.

"Death and destruction!" she exploded. She spun on her heel and dashed up the marble steps, desperate to pass the door before it ground shut again.

The basilisks relaxed; lay down; resumed their former immobility.

She was inside the misty hall before she realized what had happened-

A great metallic slam announced the final closure of the door. She was alone, and more terrified than she had ever expected to be again in this life. The mist, though bright, was dense; she could not make out the walls. When she glanced down, she could barely see her own two feet.

Abruptly she was gripped with pure cold rage.

"Enas Yorl!" she shouted. "Damn you! What have you done?"

Her surroundings shifted in unpleasant fashion, as though someone had taken normal space in either hand and given it a spiral twist. She felt she was about to lose her balance, though the weight remained on her soles. Clawing her knife from its scabbard, she prepared for an attack, knowing even as she clasped the hilt that any physical action here must be pointless.

Then the mist cleared, and she recognized the subterranean hall where she had first met Enas Yorl against her will. There was the table so long it could have seated the entire nobility of Sanctuary; there was the caped figure seated at its farther end; and all around her she heard echoes that brought shivers to her spine, as of cantrips which had set the thick stone walls to ringing like a new-stuck bell.

She stood as immobile as on that first occasion, this time not by constraint, purely from her mingled fear and anger.

"You failed!" she accused.

Her words, themselves echoing along the monstrous room, drove away the fainter echoes. At long last Enas Yorl bestirred himself.

"No," he said in a thin voice. "I succeeded."

"What?" Jarveena took a pace toward him. It seemed not to diminish the distance that separated them; in any case, she had no wish at this moment to be in his presence at all, let alone come closer. "Then why did Klikeitagh brush past me without a sign of recognition—worse: shove me out of his way like a persistent streetwalker?" Recollections crowded in. "Besides, you said that if you did succeed, he'd die!"

"Yes, so I did. Nonetheless . . ."

As she stood striving to unriddle the mystery, he heaved a sigh.

"Come hither. I'll explain."

The hall and table contracted to more customary dimensions; in a twinkling she found herself where she had been at daybreak, seated in the same chair. Unseen hands, as ever, had set it behind her knees just as she was about to lose her self-control completely.

Cautiously she returned her knife to its sheath, staring at the magician.

But for the emberlike glow underneath his brows one could not have guessed this to be the same personage. His arms, in particular, were far too flexible. His? Might one not better say its?

But the voice remained, and was uttering slow words, as though each syllable exacted agonizing effort.

"I did succeed, Jarveena. At what cost I dare not say. Perhaps the cost of every shred of hope left in my inmost heart. I worked a rite such as has not been attempted in living memory—not, certainly, in mine . . . And worked it well."

"With what result?" she whispered.

"I learned the reason for the curse on Klikitagh."

She waited. When she could bear the waiting no longer, she demanded.

"Tell me"

"I shall not. This only will I say: His punishment is just."

"I don't understand!"

"Better you should not. Better that no one should. Had I known what a burden of knowledge I was taking on—no! Condemning myself to!—I'd never have set out to offer help."

Guessing at the meaning behind the words, Jarveena bit her lip. Tears sprang unbidden to her eyes, and yet were welcome, for they disguised

the ghastly form that Enas Yorl was melting into.

"Here, then, in brief, is the secret Klikitagh has hidden from everybody in the world, himself included.

"His punishment is just. He told me so."

"It cannot be! No one could deserve that fate!"

"Until today I would have said the same," Enas Yorl said solemnly, shifting on his chair as though his new form had grown unsuited to it.

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"But how can he have told you so?" Jarveena persisted.

"I chose this of all days rather by enlightened guesswork than by proper knowledge. As it happened, I was right. On one day of the year, in the proper circumstances, he is able to remember why he deserves his curse."

"Tell me! Tell me!" Jarveena pleaded.

"Though you crept to me on hands and knees, bleeding in the extremity of death, begging to be told before your final breath, I would not let

description of such foulness pass my lips!"

Not that, strictly speaking, it was lips he now must use to speak
with . . .

"Know only this: after committing it, he bethought himself of his
crime and repented. Haunted by self-loathing, he became a court to try
himself, and passed the only sentence that was fitting. He wanted so to
suffer that no person who had heard about his evil deed, and might be
tempted to emulate it, would fail to hear as well about its perpetrator's
punishment and change his mind—not considering that the time might
come when any such would be long dead and all his victims totally
forgotten. Therefore he made the sentence cruel past conceiving—save by
one who was evil to the fiber of his nerves.

"He decreed that for all time he would believe, in total honesty and full
conviction, that he'd done not a thing to warrant such a doom- Perhaps
this affords some insight into the enormity of his misdeed."

"But what can he have done?" Jarveena shouted.

"You'll never guess. It isn't in your nature to imagine, let alone enact,
so foul a crime."

"Has it tainted you?" She leaned forward accusingly, glad that she
could only vaguely see the shape he now endured. "Has it deformed your

mind as much as your body?" That was cruel, too, in its way, but she uttered the words regardless. "Have you no mercy? Is not a thousand years enough for even the foulest of villains?"

"Oh, yes." Enas Yorl's voice had become like the sough of wind in bare-branched trees. "More than enough, in my view.

"Not in his."

"You—you mean . . ." Jarveena's mouth was suddenly dry. "You mean you tried to release him from the curse he wished upon himself?"

"I did."

"And he refused to let you, being a more powerful magician?"

"Not exactly."

She threw her hands in the air. "For pity's sake, Enas Yorl! Whether or not you pitied him, pity me who calls you friend! Never in my life before

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did I find anyone with better reason to hate the world than had I myself at nine years old! Make plain what you have done and not done!"

"I will try . . ." The voice grew fainter all the time. "But words must strain to compass these events. The spells required are half outside the normal universe ... I did succeed! No other wizard now alive could have accomplished what Enas Yorl achieved today, not even he at Ilsig whom they call most skilled, not he at Ranke who at- serves the court.

"Jarveena: I gave Klikitagh his freedom."

There was a long stunned silence. When it had become more than she could bear, Jarveena husked, "But you said it would have killed him!"

"Which it did."

"What?"

"I speak in plain words, do I not? Despite the deformation I endure!"

The tone was savage now, and sent new shivers down Jarveena's spine.

"Well, maybe your nature fights acceptance. Words plainer than ever must be tried.

'7 gave him his release! He died! And even dead,- so dreadful is the power of that spell, he rose again and said—praise all the gods that no one save myself could hear those awful words!—'Dead or not dead, I am condemned to walk the world. I may not eat a second time from the same table, nor may I sleep a second time from the same bed. It is decreed. By

me. It shall continue!"

From his recital of the quoted words rang forth a hint, an echo, of the force that had endowed the curse on Klikitagh with its original power. It was unbearable. Crying aloud, her brain assailed by hideous visions, Jarveena slumped fainting from her chair.

In the light of torches, both her cheeks gleamed wet.

She woke, once more at dawn, and found herself alone at Melilot's, as had often happened to her in the past. Not this time, however, was her frame pervaded by the truly magic skill of Enas Yorl's caresses. Only a dull sense of deprivation filled her mind as she kicked aside the covers and moved to use her chamber pot, then douse herself with the contents of the ewer on the nightstand. Then, unconcerned as ever about nakedness, she dragged the curtains back and threw the shutters wide to the new day-

Cold air combined with cold water to bring her back to full alertness.

She reached for her clothes—and checked, catching sight of her reflection in the tall and expensive mirror that hung beside the window.

There was no trace of any scar upon her body. Not the faintest, lace-like, weblike hint beneath the skin could be discerned. She was as perfect

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as though no wire-lashed whip had ever whistled through the air to break blood from her tender flesh.

Amazed, then astounded, she flicked back her forelock. Surely the cicatrix her forehead bore—?

Gone as well

"But I told him!" she said aloud. "I mean. I told Melilot, and he was listening! I said I wanted to keep that for when it came in useful . . ."

The words died away. She let her hands fall to her sides.

"Oh, you're in there, aren't you, Enas Yorl? You've sown a counterpart of yourself inside my brain! It's the same trick that taught me the names of your basilisks! Maybe you have too much on your mind to hear me at the moment, but I'm damned well going to treat your projection the same as I would yourself! Now answer me! Why did you take my forehead scar away before I gave you leave?"

The reply came, not in speech, but in a sense of warm and private intercourse, reaching below the deepest level of her mind. If it resembled anything at all, it might be likened to the impact of hot spiced wine on a cold day.

"Not me," said the mental duplicate of Enas Yorl in words that were not words. "Not by my intention, anyway. Listen, Jarveena, and remember all your life!

"Not to recall what he had done was for Klikitagh a mercy. I state this on the basis of what I have found out. To live with recollection of such horror . . . ! You must concede this."

She nodded, participating in this nonexistent dialogue.

"However, it became exacerbation of his punishment. It made his sentence unendurable. Indeed it was a mercy worse than none. He knew it, and condemned himself regardless."

Again a nod, tinged this time with terror.

"Yet you took pity on him!"

"Yes, I did!"—defiantly. "And I still feel the same!"

"You were the first to do so in a thousand years."

For an instant she stood rigid. Then:

"I can't have been!"

"He told me so when I interrogated him, invoking a power greater than any god's. Not once, till he met you, had anyone felt pity for his plight."

"Then I weep for our sick world!" Jarveena cried—and abruptly it was true. Tears that had so long been unfamiliar to her flowed as freely down her face as they had last night.

"And well you may," the illusory Enas Yorl confirmed.

There was a pause.

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"For you have worked a miracle."

"I don't understand." Snuffling, fighting to regain control, Jarveena resumed the donning of her clothes.

"How are your scars today?"

"Why ask? You cleared them, didn't you? And took away the one I'd thought of keeping!"

"Not I, Jarveena, but yourself."

She froze in midmovement, bending to strap her boots.

"Go forth, as soon as you are dressed, into the street. Do not ask why;

you will at once find out. I worked a greater magic than I knew. For the moment, then: goodbye. Don't try to call on me until I send for you. The names I give my basilisks are daily changed. Sometimes I cannot give them names pronounceable by human tongues- That's why I have not spoken words to you this morning . . ."

The contact faded in a garble of discomfort that left Jarveena imagining for several seconds that she had four stomachs and a mouthful of regurgitated hay.

The sensation passed. The laces of her jerkin still unfastened, she dashed down the slanting ladders that served this house for stairs and cuffed aside a sleepy apprentice who tried to stop her unbarring the main door on the grounds that Master Melilot was still asleep. Beyond, in the wan gray light of dawn, she saw a form upon the cobblestones, face turned aside, one arm outflung, chest smeared with blood still red thanks to the sharp cold: victim, presumably, of some chance robber's knife . . .

"Klikitagh!" she whispered, dropping on one knee beside the ...
corpse?

It was indeed. No pulse was to be felt. A rime of frost had formed
upon its hair, its beard, its hands , . .

Slowly she straightened, gazing down in wonder.

"So your journey ended here, in Sanctuary," she murmured. "Well,
death was what you most desired. And . . ."

A thought occurred, as wonderful as it was terrifying.

"If I'm to believe what Enas Yorl asserts—and who but him should I
believe in such a matter?—it follows that the worst crime in the history of
the world has been committed. It was yours, my Klikitagh. And yours
alone."

It was going to snow any moment. The air was so cold, the lips she
licked were numb. She half expected to taste ice.

"But even you have reached the last stage of your pilgrimage in search
of expiation. What now becomes of you will be no matter. Let your
shroud be snow. Let dogs and thieves assail your body—you won't care.

Perhaps you should have come to Sanctuary sooner. It cannot just have been because of meeting me that you were saved! I won't believe it!"

So saying, she spun on her heel and marched back into the scriptorium. Much relieved, the apprentice slammed and barred the door behind her. White flakes swirled down outside as she went to seek a breakfast of hot broth and dumplings.

By nightfall—for such had been the will of Enas Yorl—she cared no more for Klikitagh save in the sense that all misfortune must be pitied, and he had been least fortunate of all. He lingered in her memory as myth and symbol; meantime she had a life to lead herself.

"Mayhap," thought the wizard who sprawled across stone flags in guise but ill adapted to such human artifacts as chairs, "that snow enshrouding Klikitagh, by his own verdict foulest villain of all time. will cover me in turn. Let it be soon!"

Whereafter he composed himself to patient meditation, tinged with regret that for the duration of their present encounter he and Jarveena would be unable to make love.

SEEING IS BELIEVING

(BUT LOVE IS BLIND)

Lynn Abbey

Illyra awoke to the sound of an infant's crying and a sudden stiffening of the muscles in her neck and shoulders. She stayed that way, tense—almost cringing—until she heard the wet nurse shove her blankets aside, then stumble across the night-dark room. The crying changed to contented sucking sounds; Illyra closed her eyes and shrank back into Dubro's arms. He hugged her reflexively but the infant had not interrupted his sleep. Why should it? Children were women's work and this child was not even his.

The S'danzo seeress matched her breathing to her husband's and waited for sleep to touch her again. She listened to the wet nurse tuck the infant back into her cradle and return to her own bed where she swiftly resumed her gentle snoring. Dubro's strong arms were no longer comforting but had become an encircling trap from which she could not free herself—tangible symbols of the weight she had felt since summer when her half-brother, Walegrin, had appeared with the newborn girl-child in his arms.

It had never seemed like a good idea. Three years ago Illyra had borne twins: a boy-child and a girl. Now they were both gone. The boy, Arton, had been taken from the mortal world. Caught up in the influence of the demigod, Gyskouras, he had sailed for the Bandaran Islands this past spring and if he returned at all, it would not be as her son, but as a

wargod stranger. Worse, Lillis, her blue-eyed daughter had been hacked into pieces by ravening street gangs during the Plague Riots at about the same time. Illyra had tried to protect her daughter with her own body—with her own life—but fate had denied her sacrifice. There was a purple

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scar running across her belly but it went not nearly so deep as the scars mourning had left on her heart.

She had nurtured her grief and had wanted nothing to do with living or joy. She had hated that squirming bundle Walegenn had thrust into her arms. Had wanted to dash its head against the doorposts because it lived and Lillis did not. But it had wrapped its fragile fingers around hers and stared into her eyes. And Illyra had Seen that this child would remain at her side.

Strange how the S'danzo Sight worked. It rarely focused on the self, family, or loved ones but brought the abstract, the uncared-for, into clarity. Illyra did not love—would not allow herself to care for—this not-daughter they called Trevya and so the infant flashed constantly in her mind's eye where the Seeing visions grew.

Had not Trevya's legs been crippled in the prolonged birthing that had claimed her blood-mother's life? Had not Illyra Seen, superimposed over

every other vision she commanded, a construct of baleen and leather guiding the infant's soft bones into a healthy alignment? Had not Dubro made such a brace, following her precise instructions, and was not that twisted little leg already growing straighter as the Sight had foretold?

Illyra had wrought a miracle for Trevya, who was not her daughter and whom she did not love. She had given Trevya freedom and built an unyielding trap for herself. Hot tears squeezed out from her eyes and puddled in the crook of Dubro's arm. The young woman who had once been a mother prayed that they would not awaken him and waited the long hours until dawn when she would be released.

This not-daughter consumed more of Dubro and Illyra's time and money than their own children had, for they kept Trevya with them in the Bazaar rather than send her behind the fortress walls of the Aphrodisia House where working merchants often kept their precious children. So they had had to hire a wet nurse, a woman—scarcely more than a child herself—whose baby had been stillborn and who had come to live with them alongside Dubro's forge. But there wasn't enough room for them, Trevya and the waiflike Suyan, so they'd hired workmen to make their home larger. And, of course, Suyan must have food, and clothes, and medicine when she grew sick.

Fortunately there was plenty of work to be had in Sanctuary these days. The new city walls were being made from cut and dressed stone;

there were picks and mauls in need of constant repair and replacement. Dubro had both a journeyman and an apprentice working beside him at the forge these days, and he talked of building a larger furnace beyond the rising walls. Verily, a fortune could be made these days in Sanctuary,

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but the pump needed priming and it seemed to Illyra that their coin hoard shrank rather than increased.

She was half S'danzo, fully gifted with their preternatural clairvoyance but bereft of their tolerance for haphazard poverty. She was half Rankan, through her father's blood, and craved the material security that was the heritage of that empire's middle class. And, of course, her S'danzo Sight could offer no assurances to her Rankan anxieties. Even without Trevya, Illyra would have lost many a night's sleep this season.

As it was, she balanced on the edge between dreaming and waking, and her thoughts spiraled far beyond her control. Trevya's face drifted toward her, like a leaf on the wind or driftwood with the tide. Illyra called her mind's eye back, but it did not come and the face grew into a full Seeing of a child running through a neat flower garden, arms outstretched, silently laughing and singing a single word over and over again.

Illyra cried out, breaking the thrall of the Seeing but not disturbing her husband who, in truth, was accustomed to her cries in the night. The seeress, still bound in Dubro's protection, stared into the night determined now to remain fully awake. The vision would not be denied and inserted itself into her thoughts, demanding interpretation.

That was easy enough. If Trevya ran, then her legs grew straight and strong. If she ran through a garden, then she became a child in a place where beauty was an affordable luxury. If she sang as she ran, then she was happy. If that word was Mother . . .

But no, Illyra would not acknowledge that part other Seeing—though it could have told her she would have the material security she craved. She preferred the loneliness other anxiety and clutched its darkness tight around her until slits of dawn light came through the shutters.

Dubro stirred, freeing her as he did. The soul of routine and regularity, the smith rose with the first dawn light year around and had his forge ready when the sun peeked over the horizon. Usually the sight of his broad shoulders as they vanished beneath his worn leather tunic was enough to banish Illyra's night-born doubts, but not today—nor did she share any aspect of her visions with him. She remained huddled in the bed until Suyan had the baby at her breast and even then Illyra gathered her brightly colored garments as if in a trance.

"Feel you poorly?" Suyan asked with sincere concern.

Illyra shook her head and laced a rose-colored bodice lightly over her own breasts. The girl's voice—her odd, but lilting, syntax—grated with extra harshness this morning, and Illyra was, without forethought, determined to ignore her.

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"Herself cried but once in the night, though if that come at a bad time, it's enough to keep you waking until dawn?"

Always a curl to her voice. Everything was a question that needed—no, demanded—an answer. But this time it would not work.

"There's herbs left from Masha zil-Ineel—from Herself's congestion—that could be brewed up?"

"I'm fine, Suyan," Illyra said at last. "I slept fine. The baby didn't bother me. You didn't bother me. And I don't need any herbs—just . . ." She inhaled a pause and wondered what she did need. "I'm going uptown today. What I need is a change of scenery."

Suyan nodded. She did not know her mistress well enough to sense

how little Illyra needed change of any kind—and would not have done any different if she had.

Shunning her pots of kohl, Illyra brushed her hair into a thick chignon and wrapped a concealing, drab-colored shawl around her shoulders. She would never be mistaken for a woman who followed any of Sanctuary's fast-changing fashions but neither would she be taken for a S'danzo.

"You'll be wanting breakfast?" Suyan asked from the corner, the lilt making her maternal and chastising.

"No, no breakfast," Illyra replied, meeting the other woman's eyes for the first time, and watching them grow fragile with self-doubt. "I've got a craving for the little tarts Haakon sells; I'll get some on my way."

Those huge eyes grew bright and knowledgeable. "Aye, cravings ..."

Illyra found her fist clenching into a warding sign. Suyan had her own need for security, and security for a wet nurse was her mistress's pregnancy. Not a day went by that somehow, buried in the lilting questions, the subject of Illyra's barrenness was not raised. As Illyra forced herself to relax, the unfairness of it all swept over her and she knew if she remained one more moment she would dissolve into tears that would only make her world worse.

"I'm going now," she muttered in a voice that sounded almost as bad

as she felt.

Dubro was instructing the new apprentice in the finer arts of squeezing the bellows. His voice was deep and even with hard-held patience; there was nothing to be gained by interrupting him so Illyra gripped her shawl against the chill harbor wind and hoped to slip away.

"Madame . . . Madame Illyra. Seeress!"

Illyra shrank against the walls, unable to pretend that she had not seen or could not hear the young woman racing through the market-day crowd.

"Oh, wait, Seeress Illyra. Please wait!"

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And she did, while the other woman caught her breath and pressed a filthy, battered copper coin into her hand.

"Help me, please. I've got to find him. I've looked everywhere. You're my last hope. You've got to help me."

Numbly Illyra nodded and retreated the few steps to the anteroom where she kept her cards and the other paraphernalia of the S'danzo trade. She could not refuse—though not because of the coin as the suvesh commonly believed. It was not payment that compelled the Sight but, sometimes, the contact of their flesh with her flesh. Already she was growing dizzy with the emergence of another reality. It would be a hazard to her if she attempted to deny the vision.

She pushed the deck across the table as she half collapsed onto her stool. "Make three piles of them," she commanded; there was no time to shuffle them.

The visitor's hand shook as she separated the deck- "Find my Jimmy before it's too late!"

Illyra swallowed the notion that it was already too late, then surrendered herself to the emerging images: the Lance of Air, Seven of Ships, Five of Ores, reversed—the Whirlwind, the Warfleet and the Iron Key transformed into a lock. The lock wound through a chain and the chain grew from the belly of a dank, swaying ship—not an anchor chain, but a galley chain from keel to ankle, from ankle to wrist, from wrist to oar. The air reeked of drugged wine and echoed with a whip's crack.

It was too late. Illyra saw slaves' faces, one clearly, the rest wrapped in fog, and heard—as was the way with her gift—Jimmy speak out his own name. She separated herself from the Seeing and sought words to blunt

the despair her answer must contain.

"Another card," she heard herself whisper. "Seek beneath the Whirlwind."

The suvesh, the ordinary non-S'danzo folk of the world, might not know any of the Seeing rituals but they knew the way things were supposed to go after they'd put their coin in a seeress's palm—and any deviation was certain to mean bad news. Illyra's visitor was sobbing openly as she reached for the first pile.

Two—not one—cards slipped free: the light-and-dark tunnel of the Three of Flames and the dark-faced portrait of the Lord of the Earth. Illyra absorbed them both and grew no wiser.

"He's been taken onto a boat," she said slowly, gathering the now lifeless chips of vellum into a single stack. "His leaving was not of his choosing," she continued, putting a high gloss over his enslavement before adding, without much conviction, "nor will he choose the time or manner of his return." Illyra could not bring herself to say that the best

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Jimny would likely get out of his future was a grave under the soil rather than the waves.

"Is there no hope? There must be something I can do. Something, anything. Which temple should I go to? Which gods should I pray to?"

Illyra shook her head, then spoke as a woman rather than a seeress.

"There is always hope—but hope doesn't come from a handful of

S'danzo cards."

Her visitor shuffled awkwardly to her feet. Illyra confirmed her suspicion that she was a few months shy of giving birth and poorer than Suyan had been when they'd found her.

"Take back your coin."

"Will it change things?"

"No, but it will buy you today's food and tomorrow's, too."

"I won't need food tomorrow," the girl shouted through her sobs as she ran from the room.

But she will, Illyra thought, weighed down by the Sight of a pale

woman and a scrawny child. There's no death for her. And no life either.

The clanging of three hammers brought her out of her visions. Dubro was tapping the cadence and the other two were beating the red-hot iron. One of them had it right—tap, bang; tap, bang—but the other, probably the apprentice, was off the mark and stuttered against the metal. The forge reverberated with an unnatural rhythm that penetrated deep behind Illyra's weary eyes.

"Can't you get it right!" Illyra snarled, thrusting head and shoulders through the anteroom drapes.

The percussive chorus came to an immediate halt with an aghast look on the faces of the younger men and a knowing, concerned one on

Dubro's.

"Learning's not easy," her husband said cautiously, his blue eyes narrowed to unreadable slits.

"What, then, is he learning? How to give me a headache?"

Dubro nodded twice, once to his men who laid down their hammers and the second time to his wife as he approached her. He wrapped his arm gently around her and brought her into the anteroom beside him.

Just as the forge was his true home—a place built to his scale and comfort—so the scrying chamber was Illyra's true home and it made him seem an unwelcome giant scraping his head on the rafters, yet unable to sit, as the visitor's chair would not take his weight.

"Lyra, I'll send them home, if you want, but I think it's not the hammering that's wrong. What ails you, Lyra?"

Illyra on her scrying stool had taken command of the room. She would have had to arch her neck to see Dubro's face, but she had no intention of

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meeting her husband's eyes. She spoke to the table instead, in a soft voice that emphasized the smith's awkwardness. Yet she was no more comfortable than Dubro; her hands sought the scrying deck and her fingers rimed through the cards.

"Everything and nothing, husband. I do not know what ails me—and I'm almost past caring." The cards broke free of her nervous fingers to scatter across the green cloth.

Heaving a sigh as he moved, Dubro dropped to one knee; he could look into Illyra's eyes and force her to look into his. "Read the cards for me, then. Ask them what I must do to make you happy."

Illyra avoided him, watching the cards as she gathered them into a rough-sided stack. "You know I cannot. I love you. I cannot See what I love."

She raised her eyes, thinking to shame him but was herself shamed by what she read, without Sight, in his face. He doubted her love and, now that the notion flowed within her thoughts, he had a right to, because she doubted it as well. The worst pain Illyra had ever known shuddered along her spine. The cards spilled onto the table when she hid her face behind her hands. She never imagined Dubro would study and remember each image in the moment before he reached across the table to massage her neck and shoulders.

"Had we rich relations or a hidden villa surrounded by lakes and trees, I'd send you away. It's Sanctuary herself who's hurt you," Dubro said with an eloquence few others knew he possessed.

Illyra imagined the villa and recognized it from her predawn vision of Trevya. Fresh sobs came loose within her as she shook herself free of the villa and her husband.

"What, then?" Dubro asked, a trifle less understanding.

"I don't know. I don't know . . ." but then, though she still could not discern the nature of, much less the solution to, her problems, Illyra

stumbled across something that could, under different circumstances, have accounted for her despair. At least to Dubro.

"I woke this morning with a foreboding around me," she admitted, not yet lying but working herself up to the sort of half-truths she routinely fed her visitors. "I thought to escape, but that woman came and the foreboding became a Seeing. She wanted to know where her lover had gone and I found him—in chains in the belly of a ship somewhere. And though I only saw his face clearly, I saw as well that he was not alone and that many men had been pressed into slavery."

Dubro grew thoughtful, as she had known he would. Chains were made from iron, and Dubro knew every man in Sanctuary who knew that metal—in any of its forms—against his flesh. The blue eyes grew un-

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focused as he, like any other ungifted suvesh, ordered and made sense of his thoughts.

Ulyra watched his pupils move as each mote of knowledge fell into place. Her sense of guilt lessened; she had tricked him into thinking about something else—but a good issue might yet come of it. She gath-

ered her cards and wrapped them in a square of silk, never noting which

ones had lain exposed.

"This is something for your brother, Walegrin," Dubro decided with a

firm nod of his head.

"You tell him then. I'm going for a walk, maybe I'll find a garden

somewhere. I don't want to go to the barracks."

Dubro grunted and Illyra suppressed a sigh. A year ago, less even, and her husband would have gone into a rage at the mention of Walegrin's name. He had blamed all their misfortunes on her straw-haired brother. Now, since Walegrin had deposited Trevya in her arms, the commander was welcome in their house and the two men often spent the evening in a tavern. Dubro had even gone so far as to share the cost of posting the child to citizenship in the increasingly meaningless Rankan Empire.

Illyra couldn't imagine conversation, let alone friendship, between the two taciturn men, had never really tried, then realized they talked about her. She had pushed them together with the wall she had built around herself. But the understanding brought no desire for reform.

"Talk to him then. Maybe eat with him as well. I don't think I'll be

back until after sundown."

She straightened her shawl and eased past him to the door, never touching him, even with her skirts. The journeyman and the apprentice were gone. Trevya was squalling despite Suyan's best efforts to sing her quiet. None of it caught Illyra's heart. She was into the market-day

crowd without a backward glance.

There were perhaps two dozen S'danzo in Sanctuary, counting the female children. The men and the children moved unnoticed through the city—especially now that it had become the workplace of the empire with strangers still arriving each day. But the women, the seeresses true and false, put down their roots in the Bazaar and rarely left its confines. Illyra recognized many of the faces she passed, but none recognized hers. As free as she felt, she was also very much alone and shrinking with each step farther from the Bazaar and the forge.

She was all but invisible when she reached the main gate of the palace.

She was known here, and recognized, from the many visits she had made to her son when he lived in the royal nursery with the god-child, Gyskouras. She was not greeted, as she passed into the interior corridors, for much the same reason.

There were others here who knew her, who mumbled a greeting with their eyes averted from hers as they picked up their pace to be gone from her shadow as quickly as possible. It was, perhaps, a great honor to be the mother of a godling. Certainly the slave-dancer who'd been the mother of the other child did well by her servants, suite, and jewels, but such motherhood did not inspire mortal friendship. In truth, though, Seylalha, with her lithe beauty, would have found her nest of luxury without Gyskouras's help and Illyra, confidante to half of Sanctuary, had never had any friends.

Aside from Dubro and Walegrin, whose relationship to her was defined in ways other than friendship, there was only one to whom Illyra could bare her soul: Molin Torchholder. And it was a sorry state when a godless S'danzo claimed counsel with a Rankan priest.

At that moment, however, Illyra wore her isolation like armor and strode by the stairway that would have taken her to Molin's cluttered suite. She had her destination clearly in mind; a sheltered cloister that caught the sun without the chill wind. A place certain to have flowers even this late in the year.

The little courtyard was empty—deserted for considerable time and given over to weeds. Two hardy roses held onto brown-edged blooms,

their scent all the stronger for the frost that had doomed them. The rest was yellow-top, white lace, and, in the most sheltered corner, a patch of fiery demons-eyes. Illyra was grateful she had no allergies as she gathered an armful of the blooms and settled onto a sunlit stone bench to weave them into a garland.

She'd learned the flower braiding in a vision once. Her mother had certainly never taught her, nor Dubro, nor Moonflower, who'd told her what she'd needed to know about womanhood and her gift. She'd learned other things as well: bits of song and poetry, snippets of lovemaking, tricks for killing with a knife or sword. She knew too much to be just one person—and she'd loved Lillis because she yearned to share herself with someone, anyone, who would understand.

Trevya could never understand.

The sun warmed her shoulders, finally loosening the knots that had been there since that late winter day when she'd last held a living daughter of her own blood in her arms. Illyra turned her face upward, eyes closed, imagining an ageless Lillis: child, woman, and friend. She took that predawn vision and changed it until it was her own daughter and she could hear the laughter and the single word: mother, mother, mother . . .

But the laughter, Illyra realized after a blissful moment, was real—echoing within the cloister—not in her imagination. She opened her eyes

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and gazed upon the passel of children who had invaded her retreat with their games. There were none that she recognized from her visits to the nursery—save that two were clearly Beysib. Both were girls and, by their apparent ages, immigrants like their parents.

"It's your turn now!"

"And no peeking!"

The designated child, the younger of the Beysib pair, separated reluctantly from the group. Her arms and legs, which extended well beyond her fine but dirty and shapeless tunic, were still pudgy with baby fat; her gait was still flat-footed, after the manner of toddlers, rather than rolling. Her face pulled back into a near-bawling grimace as the distance between herself and the others increased but none of the children had as yet noticed Illyra sitting still and quiet on her bench.

The little girl squared her shoulders and put her hands over her eyes.

"Out loud. Count out loud, Cha-bos!" the other Beysib girl com-

manded.

"One . . . two . . . th'th-three . . ."

By the count of four the other children had vanished, squealing and shouting and quickly dispersing through the tangle of rooms and hallways of their home. The little girl, Cha-bos, heard the silence and lowered her hands from her tear-streaked face. She noticed Illyra for the first time.

The nictating membrane that distinguished the exile community from the continental norm flicked over the child's amber eyes and she stared. Illyra, despite her best efforts, started backward just as reflexively. But Cha-bos was apparently immune to that gesture—or at least already able to conceal her own reactions.

"I can't count to one hundred," Cha-bos declared, confident that she had explained everything, and Illyra learned that Beysibs could cry while they were staring.

"Neither can I," Illyra admitted—not that she had ever had need to count so many things.

Cha-bos wilted. What use was an adult who knew no more than she did? "It doesn't matter," she told herself and Illyra. "They don't want me to play anyway."

Caught up in those huge, fixed eyes, Illyra saw that Cha-bos was right. The older children had not continued with the simple game but were, even now, regrouping for a greater adventure.

"I'm sorry. You'll grow up soon enough."

"They won't ever grow down."

Illyra felt herself squirming to get free of the child's endless eyes. She realized why the other gifted S'danzo women stayed so close to their

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families—where familiarity, if not love, inhibited the curse of Sight and the scrying table turned vision into a cold business. She especially did not want to know that Cha-bos was no ordinary child—even for a Beysib—

but the daughter of the Beysa Shupansea, and already her blood was laced with potent poison.

"You can't have any friends, can you?" she blurted.

Cha-bos went solemn and shook her head in a slow arc, but the membrane flicked back and she blinked. "Vanda. She takes care of me."

Vanda was a name Illyra recognized from before. An Ilsigi girl who had somehow gotten herself made nursemaid to the polyglot menagerie of the palace nursery. Illyra had not seen her since Arton had been sent away and had, for no good reason, assumed the young woman had been swallowed back into the city.

"Is Vanda still here?"

"Course she's here. I need her."

Cha-bos's faith in Vanda was as strong as her gut-level certainty that the world—in the proper order of things—revolved around her personal needs. She was willing to lead Illyra through the palatial maze to an interior chamber which by its chaotic condition and the size of its beds had to be the current location of the the nursery.

Vanda sat with her needle and thread amid heaps of children's ravaged clothing. Her face glowed with genuine welcome when Cha-bos an-

nounced herself but cooled and became mature when she saw Illyra.

"It's been a long time," she explained, shaking the mending from her lap and bowing slightly—as was proper in the presence of one who was the mother of a potential god. "Fare you well?"

Illyra nodded and was at a loss for words, wondering what she had hoped to accomplish by visiting. "Well enough," she stammered politely.

Living with children had preserved some of Vanda's audacity and forthrightness. "What brings you here?" she asked, taking up the mending again.

Illyra felt her mind carom wildly from one mote of knowledge to the next. Vanda was the daughter of Gilla and Lalo the Limner. Gilla had watched as her children embarked on the journey of adulthood, and had buried one who had not at the same time Illyra's Lillis had been laid in her grave. Gilla had also nursed Illyra through the bleak weeks of their mutual mourning. Vanda would know what her mother knew, and Vanda knew children . . .

"I have a child," Illyra began from somewhere deep in her heart.

Surprise and suspicion flickered across Vanda's face. "Oh," she sighed as a calm mask formed over her features. "How fortunate for you." It

was a voice to quiet the insane.

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The S'danzo couldn't help but feel the emotional distance Vanda hurriedly created between them. But her despair was a throbbing, emotional aneurysm and, having finally found its voice, it would not be stilled. She described how Trevya had been literally dumped in her arms and how the child gave her no peace. She spoke of Trevya's twisted leg and the psychic intrusions that had led to the construction of the baleen splint which, though it was straightening her bones, chafed her skin and made her cry for hours at a time.

Then Illyra told herself and Vanda about the changes that had come over Dubro since Trevya's arrival. Come over him and between them as if children were interchangeable and a woman's love flowed to any infant that squirmed in her arms. Not, of course, that it was just one child; there was also Suyan who was little more than a child herself. And the new apprentice who, though he still lived with his family in the town, expected that she would care for him . . . about him.

And through it all Vanda sat attentive and blank, polite, and growing more reserved with each syllable the S'danzo uttered. Until Cha-bos, who had gotten infinitely bored very early in Illyra's oration, inserted herself into their attention.

The child had unearthed one other ti-cosa, the miniature version of the Beysib court costume, padded and embroidered so it bulked as much as Cha-bos herself.

"Fix it!" she demanded as she began a run across the room.

Ribbons trailed from the robe's seams and edges, imitating the poisonous Beynit vipers that dwelt with the older female members of the Beysa's intimate family-

"Cha-to-s-tu!" Vanda shouted the child's full name as the impending catastrophe came closer.

Emerald and ruby silk serpentine around the child's legs. Cha-bos lurched forward, unaware at first that she was no longer in control of her unbalanced burden. She shrieked as she tumbled forward, becoming a confused mass of cloth and child. The nursery was frozen and quiet when her motion ceased. For a moment Illyra and Vanda believed no harm had been done, then a wail of heartrending terror erupted from the tangled embroidery.

Vanda reached her first, fairly shouting her reassurances as she separated Cha-bos from the cosa. A splinter as long as the child's finger protruded from her forearm. (The floors, this high up in the palace, were constructed of wooden planking that had seen better days.) Chabostu,

second daughter of Shupansea and witness to all that had driven her mother into exile in Sanctuary, was transfixed by the sight of her own

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blood. Her whole body stered in the rigid Beysib way; her only movement came during her spasmodic gasps between screams.

Vanda could not relax the child's arm and when she yanked the splinter free the blood followed in bright red spurts.

"Dear Shipri preserve me," the nursemaid intoned as Cha-bos's wide-open eyes went completely white. "Hold her!"

The child was thrust into Illyra's unwilling arms as Vanda shouted for the palace guards and crawled toward the unmended clothing to tear a compress. Illyra rocked back on her heels and went almost as rigid as Cha-bos herself as the warm blood trickled along her fingers.

This was no ordinary child—no ordinary blood. That was foul and potent venom gathering in the crevice between her thumb and forefinger. Illyra gulped, shuddered, and nearly fainted as the fluid streamed over her wrist and out of sight beneath her cuff. There was nothing she wanted to do more than heave the little girl across the room and get as far from her as mortally possible. But Vanda was back, ripping strips of cloth with her teeth, and the corridor resounded with approaching guards.

Illyra could do nothing but contain her revulsion ^as Vanda tended the wound and Cha-bos twitched and shuddered in her arms. The nursery shimmered with surreal absurdity: what manner of contagion could possibly take root in a child whose very blood was poison? Then the visions came.

She was in the Beysib Empire, Seeing a nightmare world with a child's eyes. Giants stormed from living shadows with red-dripping steel in their hands. Cold, unyielding hands held her from behind and made the world go wild as they moved her from the familiar to the horrible.

A face swam before her: a face half her mother and half hard, grimacing giant—and the other part, the part that was not her mother, was in control. But mostly there was blood as the last fortress loyal to Shupansea fell to their enemies and the noblest individuals of the empire scrambled for their lives like lowiy peasants.

Illyra, whose childish memory held scenes no less graphic, shared Chabostu's terror—and an unhealable outrage that not one of those giants who habitually controlled her world took notice of her. Worse, her mother, Shupansea, seemed herself to have been reduced to gibbering.

In the starkly judgmental mind of young Cha-bos, Shupansea had usurped the attention and comforting that belonged to her. Cha-bos was

unable to comprehend this inversion of the universe and so had transformed it into something she could understand: She had never felt like this before and she'd never seen so much blood before, so blood must cause the feeling. Must lead to the feeling inevitably.

And blood became the ultimate terror in her world.

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Vanda worked furiously to cleanse and conceal the child's wound, well aware of the child's progressive fears if not of their cause. Though the guards had been assured that the injury was neither serious nor the result of any malfeasance, they raised a racket in the nearby corridors—primarily designed to prove to Shupansea (who had also been summoned) that they were diligent in their duties. Illyra watched the commotion from a greater distance. She had freed herself from the child's visions, thereby insulating herself somewhat from her own fear of the poisonous fluids still staining her arm. She had wisely resisted returning completely to the world of the frantic nursery.

The seeress remained detached from her surroundings until Shupansea crossed the threshold with Prince Kadakithis and a dozen courtiers in her wake. The Beysa dropped gracefully to her knees and attempted to take her daughter into her arms. Chabostu would have none of it and fought like a little demon to avoid her mother's attention.

"Your Serenity . . . ?" Vanda interjected cautiously, cocking a finger ever so slightly to the bandage.

Knowing what would happen if the wound bled again, Shupansea withdrew her arms. "It has been very difficult for her," she explained softly and quickly to Illyra, speaking like any mother who had been shamed or rejected by her offspring rather than as the de facto ruler of Sanctuary-

Illyra, though she was the mother of a probable god, had no idea how to speak to one who was personally both goddess and queen. She cast a furtive glance toward Vanda whose nod, she assumed, meant she should treat Shupansea with the same calculated familiarity she accorded her paying visitors. "Children have their own minds," she said with a trace of a smile.

The Beysa had the good manners, not to stare, but her pet viper chose that moment to rustle through her undergarments and poke its jewel-colored head above her collar. It tasted the air, revealing its crimson maw and ivory fangs, then, while the women held motionless, it lowered itself onto Illyra's sleeve.

"Don't move," Shupansea cautioned unnecessarily.

The immense NO remained imprisoned until the beynt investigated

the clotted blood on Illyra's sleeve with its darting tongue. Any thoughts of instant death were insignificant compared to the reality of the serpent's touch. With a stifled gasp, Illyra propelled herself out of the circle, flinging the serpent and the child in opposite directions.

Cha-bos cried, the snake disappeared, and Illyra was surrounded by a mixed cohort of palace guards. Rankan, Ilsigi, and Beysib by the look of

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them. they were united by the steadiness with which they kept their well-sharpened spears pointed at her throat.

The guards saw their duty; no one would blame them for not following procedure when the child of an avatar of one goddess was bounced on the floor by the mother of another. For once Sanctuary proved itself a place of law and due process. Not even the protests of the prince and the Beysa combined could free the S'danzo from the ordeal of reporting to the watch commander.

"There's nothing to worry about," the prince assured Illyra as he joined the bristling circle escorting her from the nursery. (Shupansea remained behind, watching her daughter and looking for her snake.) "It's just a formality. Sign your name a few times and it will all be over."

This brought little comfort to the seeress who signed her name with an

X like almost everyone else in Sanctuary.

It might have been different if Dubro had accompanied his wife—for he had begun life destined to be a scribe, not a blacksmith, and remembered what he now had little use for. Unfortunately Deibro wasn't even at the forge when a liveried palace servitor made his appearance there, and Suyan was awed into incoherence.

Not that Dubro had told her where he was going when he banked the fire and lowered the leather awning that separated the entrance to his workplace from the entrance to Illyra's. He could hardly admit to himself that he was going to the back wall where the other S'danzo seeresses made camp, to ask their advice.

He thought of Moonflower and was not the only person in Sanctuary that day or any other to gently mourn her untimely death. She'd been barely taller than Illyra but in all other respects she was built on Dubro's scale and he'd felt comfortable around her.

He reconsidered his whole plan as he entered the incense-rich, S'danzo quarter. He had decided to turn around and retreat to his own familiar world, when he was caught in the appraising glare of the woman who had replaced Moonflower as most indomitable among the seeresses.

"Greetings, blacksmith," the tall stick of a woman called. "What

brings you up here?"

It was not done to walk away from the Termagant. She was the living embodiment of every tale ever whispered in the dark about the S'danzo.

No sane man doubted that she would and could curse anything that crossed her path in the wrong light.

Dubro crumpled the lower edge of his tunic in his fists and took a step in her direction. "I have a question to ask—about the cards."

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She looked him up and down, which took a moment or two, then pulled aside the curtain to her scrying room,

"Then come, by all means, and ask it."

The Termagant lived alone. No one dared ask or remember if she'd ever had a family. As far as the other S'danzo and all the rest of Sanctuary were concerned she had always been exactly as she was. An aura of timelessness hung over her—by gaudy S'danzo standards—austere chambers. Her wooden table was worn black and shiny from years of use.

Her cards were tattered at the edges, their images both faded and stained. She was a seeress who let no one but herself touch the amashkiki: the cards, the Guideposts of Vision. They cascaded from one

knobby hand to the other as she settled on her stool.

"Tell me where to stop. Choose your first significance."

Dubro thrust his hands, palms outward, between himself and the flitting paper. "No," he stammered. "I do not choose cards. Illyra chose them."

The cascade came to an abrupt halt. "If she chose, what is your question?" she inquired, though surely she suspected the answer.

"She cannot read for those she loves. She would not lay down the cards—but certain ones fell from her hands. I believe that she cannot read for us—but I do not believe she cannot choose."

"For an overly large man, you are not without perception," the Termagant said between self-satisfied cackles. Dubro folded his hands and said nothing. "Very well, describe the cards you saw."

"There were five. I've heard her name them Orb, Quicksilver, Acom, Ocean, and Emptiness."

For ten or more years Dubro had stood outside Illyra's workroom, pointedly ignoring the wherewithal of her craft. Yet he had absorbed something despite the banging of his hammer. His eyes met hers and

were not put off by the disbelief that grew there.

"Prime cards each and all," he averred.

Not to be outdone, the seeress set her own cards back in their silken nest with imperturbably steady hands. "I don't suppose you noticed the relation of the cards one to another as they lay? Reversed or covering?"*

"They're from her hands," he repeated.

"I see." A lengthy pause between them. "Well, then, I suppose it's safe to assume the simplest message: all images erect and alone. It will be easiest that way. You do want the simplest interpretation, don't you?"

Dubro nodded, unfazed by her sarcasm. They'd had dealings with this woman before. Her acid was as normal a part of her as a smile was to Illyra—or had been to Illyra.

"I take it you know that among the amashkiki there are five families:

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fire, ore, wood, water, and air, as correspond to the five elements from which the universe was made. Each family is led by its Prime and defended by its Lance. There are, of course, cards which do not fall into the families but they are of no concern here for you described only Prime

cards. Every Prime card."

Again Dubro nodded. He had known that. The amashkiki had been generally adapted by the larger society around the S'danzo, though only they preserved its arcane functions. A gaming hand showing five Primes was worth a heavy bet.

"The Lances defend. They are rigid, sharp-edged, defined. The Primes, though, are the start of things." The gray-haired woman grinned. "And also the ends. Magicians like the Prime cards because they mean everything, you know. The appearance of a Prime simplifies the reading, she may have told you this; two Primes and it practically shouts. Five Primes is absurd—and you, blacksmith, I think, know that."

This time he grunted, but it meant the same as a nod.

"Perhaps she had just ordered the amashkiki and merely dropped the end cards?"

"She'd just sent out a visitor. If I thought it were an accident, I'd not have come here."

"Then you and she stand on the cusp. All has already been revealed to you. It wants only your feet upon the path."

Dubro nodded to himself, letting her statements shore up his own convictions. The old S'danzo's eyes narrowed. At her age, Sight was a secondary gift. Her chiefmost asset was her long knowledge of mortal behavior. The Termagant could read as much in a gesture as the S'danzo Sight might have revealed in her cards.

"If she waits much longer," the crusty woman admitted, "that path may well rise up to bite her feet. It is not to be denied."

"But she will deny it, amoushka"—a S'danzo diminutive for grandmother or elder seeress. "She sees Trevya wherever she turns, but her heart only grows harder."

The Termagant snorted. "She is a little fool who should by now know what happens when children get tangled up in the Sight and fate."

Even swollen with strong-backed workers from every comer of the empire, Sanctuary was still a small place where no one was by more than three or four degrees a stranger to anyone else. It took a determined insularity to live in rumorless ignorance; it was utterly impossible to live in privacy. The entire city had known about Illyra's first children and the Termagant was informed about her well-cared-for but unwelcome not-daughter.

"The longer your wife denies what her Sight has shown her, the more

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inevitable it becomes, blacksmith. Glimpsed once, fate is a weak thing subject to change and uncertainty—especially for the young. But repeatedly glimpsed and denied, as Illyra has done . . ." The Termagant shook her head and chortled softly to herself. "Ah, nothing in this life is accidental. Perhaps she knows what she's doing; not even Illyra is stronger than fate."

The interview had come to an end. There was another visitor hovering beyond the curtained doorway. Dubro scrunched down to pass under the lintel-

"Mind you," the old S'danzo added as the curtain slid across his back, "if you and yours are pawns in fate's game, you will not feel its hand upon your back."

Dubro shook his head and kept moving. He was suvesh; he expected clear answers when he went to an oracle and he ignored the ones that

weren't. Visiting the S'danzo quarter had been a long shot at best: a rare submission to the gambling urge. He was satisfied that he had not lost anything by the inquiry and was not unduly distressed that he went away no wiser than he'd arrived.

It was about midday. The crowds were thick and his two assistants were gone for the day. He could go back to his forge and do a few hours of business in the old way—by himself—or he, like everyone else in his extended family, could take the rest of the day off. And, as it seemed a day for impulses, Dubro decided against the forge for once. He made his way through the town to the palace.

Walegrin and his men had the first of three great watches these days, coming on duty in the cold, predawn hours, then relieved at just about this time. Even if the man hadn't been his brother-in-law, Dubro would have chosen him over the other two watch commanders, the eminently corruptible Aye-Gophlan or the murdering Zip, to tell about Illyra's visions.

And lately, as Illyra suspected, they'd found a comfortable subject of conversation in their concerns for her. A hearty meal and a few mugs of ale in the all-male taproom of the Tinker's Knob might be just the cure for his own irksome malaise. The market-day crowds parted before him once his destination, the palace barracks, was fixed in his mind.

"There, you see, I told you it was nothing," Prince Kadakithis said with rather too much surprise in his voice to be entirely convincing.

Illyra nodded weakly. They might have at least warned her that her examiner would be none other than her own half-brother—and whatever other flaw Walegrin might have, his sense of family loyalty was above

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reproach. He'd made it plain that it was reasonable to panic when one of those infernal snakes was around.

"I'm certain the kitchens have got more than enough food. Shall I have the guards escort you there? I'd go myself, but . . ." The prince cast his eyes upward—in the general direction of not only the nursery but the Hall of Justice and Torchholder's suite of exchequer and registry. Neither husband nor ruler, yet somewhat more than a decorative figure-head, Kadakithis showed his adolescence more these days than he had seven years ago when he had first arrived as a naive puppet. He was growing but not yet grown.

"Thank you, I can find it myself," Illyra assured him.

He seemed genuinely relieved and took off at a decidedly unregal trot.

Illyra had a flash vision of him seated on a steel-colored stallion, then nothing, as her thoughts turned to the aromas wafting out of the beehive-roofed kitchen. They'd recognize her there and accord her the same distant politeness the other palace retainers did: they knew they were better than some S'danzo wench from down in the Bazaar even if she did have the ear of royalty and the gods.

With a tightly woven basket, worth more than the food it contained, slung in her shawl, Illyra strolled into the bright forecourt. She might wander along the General's Road to the hills where the trees had turned a hundred shades of red, gold, and orange. Or she might go to the Promise of Heaven which was usually deserted by daylight. Or she might . . .

Illyra's musings stopped short when she caught sight of a familiar figure passing under the West Gate. Dubro—and though she herself had told him to seek out Walegrin her heart began to pound. Once or twice—when she'd been a child and the blacksmith her protector, not her husband—she'd run away from him, but never in recent years. Until now. She scooted behind a water cart, crouching over her basket, pretending to examine its contents.

She waited, cried, and thought of Cha-bos who hadn't known how to count to one hundred. When her tears had dried she decided it was safe. She headed in the direction she was now facing—to the back corner of the palace, past the ornate gate where priests and gods made their communion with temporal authority.

The palace stoneyard was here, ready for the next round of palatial repairs, and the huge water cisterns to sustain the inner fortress in times of siege. Though far from lost—she could still see the water cart—Illyra had entered unfamiliar territory and did not know the name of the little gate she discovered there. Or even if it was a deliberate gate and not one of Molin Torchholder's bright ideas. It seemed, judging by the dust, to be the main conduit between the work gangs and the palace.

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"Hey, sweetheart, got anything in there for me?" a half-naked roustabout called from farther down the path.

"No, just my own meal."

"You're sure? A pretty little piece like you shouldn't be out here eating alone . . ."

Illyra understood, then, what he had in mind. She blushed radiantly;

he laughed heartily and she ran through the nameless gate into the jumbled red sandstones piled beyond it. Indignation got the better of her; she wished all manner of minor disasters upon the workman who had not recognized her as a happily married matron and implied propositions

never suggested to a S'danzo seeress.

She ate the creamy cheese without tasting it. The fire of her shame burned inwardly now, illuminating the misunderstanding with which the world treated her. It wasn't as if she asked for so much, Illyra reminded herself. It was pure selfishness and stubbornness that kept those who claimed to love her from understanding that her world—her promise of happiness—had ended when Lillis died. If they really loved her they would commiserate with her and cease their meaningless efforts to jolly her out of mourning.

Her life was a tragedy: a slow dirge relentlessly playing between Lillis's death and her own. She'd become a martyr—and was comfortable with that identity.

"You should not scowl so."

Illyra sent the basket flying and stared into the sun, unable to recognize the man who spoke so familiarly to her.

"And you should be more careful where and how you make your personal storms."

Not about to be scolded by a stranger—or anyone else, for that matter—Illyra was tempted to break her private vows and launch a full-fledged S'danzo curse in his direction. But something she did not understand

restrained her. She clambered down from her perch and gathered her scattered meal instead.

From this angle, away from the sun, he was easier to see but no more recognizable. Not that there weren't a dozen incomprehensible languages spoken these days along the walls—but this one wasn't a stoneworker. Even Tempus, silhouetted by a bloody setting sun, was not so timeless and out of place as this man seemed to be. Moreover, she could not see him or his shadow which boded ill when Sanctuary itself was remarkably free of magic.

"I'm a free woman,"* she said petulantly, climbing onto a different stone where the light was better and she could look straight into his eyes.

"Not here you're not."

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He was calm, not threatening; speaking simple facts as if there were something obvious she had overlooked. But what could be overlooked sitting on forgotten rubble with her back to the main path?

"Look down," he suggested in a bemused and paternal manner.

Down. The dirt was red where years of storms had had their way with

the sandstone. Nothing grew there. Nothing was buried there. She couldn't see anything.

"Where you're sitting. Where you've been sitting this past hour."

Well, that. It was rubble, after all. These stones had been dressed and shaped into a building once, a long time ago. Not as if these were the only rocks around with little chips and bumps of some forgotten language on their sides. Lords and frogs, it could be Rankene for all she would know, wind-blasted as it was and illiterate as she was.

She took a mean-tempered bite out of her fruit and jawed it pointedly.

"So?"

"Are you blind, child?"

This stranger with his beaten, bronze-colored armor and his probing, dark eyes deserved nothing less than a S'danzo curse; Illyra decided. His stare was worse than a Beysib's and his high-and-mighty attitude worse than that. He'd be less arrogant when the S'danzo were through with him. She wrapped her thoughts in the ancient forms, then dug deep in her memory to find the ritual words that would merge her desire with the Sight.

He sprang at her, though she prepared her curse in silence, and wrestled her from the stone with his hand locked firmly over her mouth.

"You fool," he exclaimed, dropping her to the ground. "You blind, hopeless fool. How many times has Sanctuary been damned by petty curses uttered in ignorance by petty fools who don't recognize sanctity when they see it?"

Illyra swept the dust from her skirt as she stood. He was too sincere in his protests, too secure to challenge directly. "Who are you to scold me?" she muttered, watching the ground- "Who made you the guardian of Sanctuary? You're just another stranger come to work on the walls. It's my home and I'll send it to hell and back if I want to."

"You're more the fool than I thought, Illyra the Seeress."

"All right, I don't want to damn it to hell. I'd love to see a Sanctuary where flowers bloomed along the streets and honest people didn't have to hide after sundown. I'd love to see a Sanctuary where men loved their wives, wives loved their children, and children had a chance to grow up with food in their bellies.

"Who wouldn't want Sanctuary like that? But Sanctuary's Sanctuary and it never changes."

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She raised her eyes to glower at him and to make him think better of whatever he had meant to say next

"If you could bring yourself to take care of it, it might change into something better Maybe even something you could love "

"That'd be the day Who are you, anyway?"

"Call me a shepherd "

Illyra cocked her head at him Whatever he was, the only sheep he saw were dead, cooked, and served to him on a platter Some errant warrior, more likely She noticed he'd left a horse drop-tied back on the path, and noticed that no one was coming or going on the path, either It was not really a good idea to argue with one whose saddle and weapon belt bristled with a dozen modes of death

"All right, I give Sanctuary my blessing—"

"From the rock "

She seated herself on the first stone and made a show of clearing her throat "I give Sanctuary my blessing," she repeated A gust of wind carried dust into her eyes, that, and the back-lighting sun made it impossible to see him clearly "Let its people live in peace Let its governors rule wisely Let its walls be strong and its stewpots full.

"There, is that more like it?" she demanded, squinting into the sun

"You forgot love "

"Right, husbands love wives, wives love children, children . . . oh,
children love whoever they want "

"It's a start," the unlikely shepherd confirmed "Mighty trees and the
like. Are you thirsty?"

He unslung a wineskin and offered it to her. Thinking he meant to
embarrass her, Illyra took it. Not that many townswomen could aim the
bladder and catch the stream without covering themselves with wine. She
could. She'd learned to drink from a skin—and not from a borrowed
vision, either. It was one of the very few things her father had taught her.
The wine wasn't half bad—a bit tame, perhaps, but not local. She caught
a last drop and handed the skin back to him, smiling like a well-fed cat.

"Thank you," she said and noted with some satisfaction that she'd
surprised him with her skill.

He tipped the wineskin up and maneuvered himself beneath it so his
back was almost touching her and he, too, faced the sun. Illyra couldn't
imagine why he twisted around that way, when it was apt to make him

miss his aim Wine spurted past his ear, landing on the red stone

"Watch what you're doing," she snapped, hastily lifting her skirt out of the way as she spoke

But he squeezed the skin again and left a goodly stain across the worn inscription before adjusting his arms and getting a decent mouthful of

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wine Odd that a warrior, or a shepherd for that matter, would be so clumsy with the wine Hard, even, to believe it had been an accident—especially when she caught him looking back at her and grinning

"Out of practice," he said, and she did not believe him at all

"I'd best be leaving It's getting late I live

Illyra hesitated and thought better of telling him where she lived, not that her heart believed it would help her if this stranger took it into his head to pay her and Dubro a visit. She slid carefully from the stone, avoiding him as much as the wine, and put the substantial remains of her lunch in the shawl-sling It seemed prudent to back away from the stone. He was still gnmng when her heel touched the path, then he laughed and she shot through the gate.

In truth it wasn't that late, barely past midafternoon, and she hadn't intended to return to the Bazaar before sundown. The day was still pleasantly warm, and there wouldn't be many more like this until the next spring. She might still wander along the General's Road and headed that way—back through the forecourt and along the Governor's Walk.

Haakon the vendor was prowling his afternoon route, singing a song of nutmeats and pastry. Despite the food she'd eaten and the food she earned, they made her mouth water.

"Copper bit," the vendor said when she started to approach him, then, when he finally recognized her, added in a much softer voice, "for two "

Ulyra smiled and gave him the battered coin she'd received in the morning. Because she'd bought two, he wrapped the second one in a scrap of translucent parchment and tucked it into the folds of her shawl.

"Delicious," she confirmed, biting into the sweet and savory confection.

"Best to share "

He meant to share with Dubro but the face that came into her mind was Suyan. She wondered if the wet nurse had ever even tasted one of these uptown luxuries. Not likely. Suyan claimed she had grown up

Downwind, though Waleggn had found her in a Shambles house Illyra imagined the look on Suyan's face when she bit through the still-warm pastry shell to the nutmeats within She changed direction and hurried along the street to the Bazaar

The forge was empty but before Illyra could become concerned she heard Trevya crying and ran the last little way

"I brought you a pastry," she announced as she pushed through the curtain

Suyan smiled but it was almost lost amid her unsuccessful efforts to quiet the infant

"Here, I'll hold her They really taste best when they're warm "

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She picked the child up and found, not surprisingly, that she fit snugly into the crook of her arm and that she remembered how to rock her arms a bit and wiggle a finger or two as a distraction. And as Illyra's fingers were shiny with butter and nutmeats, Trevya found them fascinating. She pulled them into her mouth and sucked contentedly. Illyra felt the sharp ridge of the tooth that had caused this latest round of wailing.

"She's getting her milk teeth."

Suyan gulped a mouthful of pastry. "Not milk teeth, I'll warrant?"

Another of her lilting questions, but this one came with a furtive smile,

"Not milk teeth then. She'll soon be ready for gruel and a bit of porridge in the morning, I used to like to make porridge—especially in

winter."

The happiness in Suyan's face wavered. Illyra could almost see her

thinking of where she'd been before they'd brought her to the forge.

"We'll still need someone to take care of her. I'm S'danzo, not . . ."*

Illyra hesitated, wondering why she'd been about to say she wasn't

Trevya's mother. Neither was Suyan, for that matter. And other S'danzo

women had children underfoot all the time. "Well, Trevya should have

someone watching her all the time," she decided after a puzzling mo-

ment. "It's dangerous here, with the forge. Not like some other places

where the worst that could happen is a bumped knee."

The tension left Suyan in a great sigh. She ate the rest other pastry but

left the baby in Illyra's arms- They talked then, in the afternoon light, as

they had never talked before, though not about anything of importance.

They talked about the foods Dubro liked, and the ones he didn't; and the bolts of brightly colored cloth that had just arrived in a caravan from Croy; and whether the journeyman had a wife in his future.

Illyra stole a look at the future, then shook her head. "I can't See a thing," she murmured and remembered what she had said out on the rock. For a heartbeat her blood went cold. He had tricked her. That strange man who was not a shepherd had tricked her into casting an unprecedented curse over Sanctuary: a S'danzo blessing. Not that there was such a thing as a S'danzo blessing. "Everyone's a child, one way or another—"

"I didn't hear you?"

Suyan leaned closer but Illyra did not repeat herself. She was, after all, only one S'danzo and Sanctuary was Sanctuary and not likely to change very much no matter what she did. But she would have to, if she ever saw him again, thank the shepherd for setting her free, at least.

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Andrew Offutt

Someone is always awake in Sanctuary

especially when others are sleeping.

—Universal absolute

When she saw that he had wakened, she returned to the bed, mostly dressed but not quite. She bent down, exotically pale hair streaming long, to brush the top of his nose with her lips.

"We fell asleep," she told him. "I've got to go! It's terribly late."

Lazily, muzzily, he lifted a hand to try to capture a dangling lobe of her chest as she bent. She straightened swiftly with a little chuckle and finished closing her latch-front tunic.

"Awww . . ." he began, lazy-muzzy, and the sound slid off into a yawn.

She started for the door. He saw her pause, lift a hand to her temple, up under the newly silvered hair she had combed partially free of the tangles the two of them had put in it. She turned back. Moonlight admitted by the open window let him see that she was frowning.

"My earrings," she murmured, hurrying back to the little table beside the bed.

A moment later: "Darling? Didn't I put my earrings right here?"

They're—they're gone!"

"Muss've dropped 'em on th' floor," he said without concern, and yawned again.

Watching her, smiling a little, remembering. Watching her go to her

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knees beside the bed in her search was fun, and he entertained a little fantasy about that.

"They're not here, Cusher! Please get up and help me. Could you light the lamp? Those are good eardrops!"

Eight or nine minutes later the bedclothes were on the floor and they had even searched his abandoned clothing, lest her missing dangles of gold and jade and topaz had somehow gotten entangled in the attire he had hurriedly dropped to the floor, hours ago. By then she was sobbing and babbling about how the baubles had been gifts from her grandmother, years and years ago.

At last Imaya—the lady Imaya Rennsdaughter, if truth must be told—gave it up and left. By now fully as awake as she, Cusharlain latched the door after her.

A better man would escort her home, he mused. Down to the street, at least. Absently scratching his thigh, he realized that he was still naked. He regarded his clothes, forlornly strewing the floor. Then, one eyebrow up, he looked at the window. Of course it was open, but after all! It wasn't as if this room was on the first floor!

Naked, he padded to the window and looked out. He saw nothing;

only other buildings and the dark alleys and streets among them; only Sanctuary, tired and snoozing in the moonlight. He looked down, then, down three flights, leaning out a bit with his hands on the sill, and then up. A little shiver ran over him and he ignored it. He twisted his head to cast thoughtful glances to either side.

Cusharlain straightened, sighing. "Damn," he muttered aloud.

This room was inaccessible save by the locked door, and it had still been locked when she'd thought to check it while he shook the bedsheet for the third time. He remembered the same as she did. After one of those pretty earrings had pricked his arm during their horizontal embrace, she had removed them both. He had watched because he liked the way her bare breasts moved when she lifted her arms to her ears. He had seen her; she had laid them on the little table right there, just beside her side of the bed.

And we made love, and drifted off, he mused, staring at the open window. And while we were sleeping someone came in that window and took those earrings, not to mention what I chose not to tell her: the money pouch sewn into my leggings! Except that no one in Sanctuary could possibly do such a thing. No one's good enough.

One man was able; one man had both the climbing skill and the stealth to have accomplished this impossibility. He could have done it. but he's

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gone; left quite a while back. Over a year? Yes, by all the gods; well over a year ago.

Nevertheless someone came in that window and took her earrings and my purse, while we were right here sleeping!

Damn! The little bastard's back in town!

"I'm a carpenter, Spellmaster. Was." The man with the hound-dog face held up his hand to display its severely restricted use, especially to a carpenter.

Strick showed the fellow a compassionate expression. All his recent weight loss accounted for the droopy aspect of his face; long-stretched

skin still hung in the memory of former jowls and "plump" cheeks.

"Wints told me before you came in that you are a better than good carpenter, Aboherr, and that you've recently lost fifty or so pounds. He did not say that you had also lost your thumb."

"Want to hear how I lost it?"

"No," Strick said, regarding the still upraised hand and its thumbless state. He knew of the occupational hazards of carpenters and woodcutters, and was not interested in particulars doubtless both gory and overlong in the telling. "That is, telling me would be of no value to either of us. And I have to tell you at once that I can't do a thing about that thumb, Aboherr."

Aboherr heaved a big sigh. He nodded. "Figured that. The—the point is, Spellmaster ... I don't want to carpenter no more. Tired of it. I mean I was even afore this happent to m'thumb, I swear by Anen's beard I was. I know you have a lot of contacts and a real name for helping people, and so . . ."

The formerly fat Maze-dweller waved that maimed hand while he looked sadly yet hopefully at the very big man behind the desk draped in rich blue. The man who had already made such a change in Sanctuary and its troubled, surely damned people. A foreigner with an odd accent,

come here from up north somewhere!

"My abilities don't extend to—to . . . hmm. I'm not sure what it is you want of me, Aboherr." Strick's pronunciation of "want" rhymed with "font" or his extreme shortening of the o in "lost."

His visitor rose swiftly. Even standing, he maintained his deferential aspect, so that he didn't seem to be looking down upon the seated man in his plain blue tunic.

"I'd do anything for you, Spellmaster. I'll pay you for yer time, too, 'f I'm wasting it. Just—well, just let me know if you hear of anything; a job I might fill. I'm big, and strong, and a damned good worker, Spellmaster. I'm used to a lot of work. You've got a lot of contacts and everybody's

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talkin' about all the people you've helped, Spellmaster- If you hear of anything . . . well, Wints—yer helper Wintsenay, I mean—knows where to find me."

Strick nodded. "Wintsenay suggested that you come?"

"I don't want to get him in no trouble ner nothing, Spellmaster. We was talking, an' he sort of did, just sort of."

"Um." The spellwright's expression did not change, which took effort.

"Uh, well, anyhow, uh—what do I owe you, Spellmaster?"

Strick showed his visitor a very small smile and a small shake of the big head that was covered to midforehead, midcheek on each side, and the base of his nape by the snug cap of leather dyed dark blue. No one had seen this man's bare head, or a sign of hair. They saw the cap, and the strangeness of deep blue tunic over matching leggings. Strange, and dull. The medallion, a plugged gold piece he always wore, did little to alleviate the severity of his attire. Oddly, the medallion nearly matched

his large and droopy mustache.

"I've done nothing for you, Abohorr. You owe me nothing. You're sure that you don't want to fight back and cope—to be the best one-thumbed carpenter Sanctuary ever saw or heard of? That I can help you with!"

"I just don't want to go back to carpenterin', Spellmaster," the poor fellow said, and with several expressions of thanks and apologies, he left the office of the man from Firaqa.

Strick waited a minute or so to allow him time to get down the steps and to the door of what he referred to as "my shop" before shouting,

"Wints!"

The man formerly described as "an overage street urchin" was much less than a minute in making an appearance. Wintsenay was a changed man, now, with good steady employment and the blue livery of Strick tiFiraqa.

"Sir!"

"You suggested to your friend Abohorr that he come see me," Strick said grimly, fixing the other man with a stem face and a pointing finger bigger than any of those of the carpenter or ex-carpenter who had just departed. "You know bloody well I can't do anything about a lost thumb, Wints! I wish you'd never learned my curse—that I have to help or try; can't not help to try, especially when I'm asked."

Wintsenay started to expostulate, to deny. He broke that off and looked down at the nice carpet someone of wealth had recently presented his master. Like the medallion, it was another expression of gratitude for another of the white wizard's services.

"I'm sorry, master. He's a good man, Ab is. Used to be so fat and strong and jolly all the time, you know. Now he looks like somebody's

huntin* dog that's been run hard for a solid week of nights. He sure needs and deserves somebody's help."

"You play tricks with me, sirrah Wintsenay, and so will you need somebody's help. Now get your treacherous butt out of here and take the rest of that ugly corpus with it."

Wints understood the first part well enough, and acted on it. He was setting his slow brain to the working out of the rest of his master's meaning as he departed, touting at speed.

Strick sighed, shook his head, and slapped an inordinately big hand down on the fine cloth covering his desk: a large piece of deep blue velvet that trailed gold tassels on the side facing the visitors' chair. After a moment he spoke, loudly but not shouting as before.

"Avneh?"

A girl in her teens bustled in, also in the distinctive blue of Croy:

Strick's color. Former streetgirl, former hangerout at the low dive called Sly's Place, former alcoholic, former aspiring whore. Now she was receptionist and devoted servant of the man who had rescued her. Servant, as in acolyte of a god. He called her niece and enforced her calling him

"uncle" in self-defense: the grateful teenager had wanted to give herself to him in every way. She had also just outgrown one tunic of Croyite blue and had to have a new one to accommodate her steadily plumpening body.

"What can I get you. Uncle StriceEEEE!"

She was staring past him when she broke off to emit that loud, prolonged e sound- Her seated "uncle" astonished her by the speed with which he rose, pounced three feet sidewise, and whirled. An obscenely long knife had appeared in his hand. He and Avenestra stared at the intruder while the latter stared at the big man and the ready blade nearly as long as a sword.

He was dark, lean and rangy at medium height. Jet black of hair and the eyebrows that almost met above a falcate nose. His eyes were nearly as black as his hair. He wore a plain green tunic, nicely tanned leather leggings, short buskins, and several knives. They included one that was a mate to Strick's outsized blade. Lifting his gaze to Strick's blue eyes, he elevated his arms a bit as well.

"Mother Shipri have mercy. Hansel" Avenestra said. "Only you could have gotten in here 'thout being seen by Frax 'n' Wints 'n' me! But when did you get back in town? I thought maybe you was dead!"

" 'Were' dead, Avenestra, damn it," Strick said without turning or

looking at all away from the intruder, "and get out of here. Tell Frax and Wintsenay to be still, and hold visitors for a few minutes."

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"That's really Avenestra?" the intruder said a few seconds later. "She sure looks better'n she used to. Even working on getting fat' Yours?"

"My 'niece,' assistant, and sometime cook, and that's all. I told Ahdio what you said: that you hadn't taken the red cat, but that it followed you, even out on the desert."

"You've got a good memory, Strick of Firaqa."

"Umm- Come on around to the proper side of the desk. Yes, I remembered to pass on to Ahdio the message you gave me when we met on the road to Firaqa, and I recognized you too—once Avenestra called you by name. I've heard it rather more than once since I came to Sanctuary. You aren't exactly unknown in this town."

Wiry and youthful, walking almost catlike on the balls of his feet

rather than the heels, the dark, youthful-looking man rounded the desk and stood beside the chair set there for clients; supplicants.

"Neither are you, Strick. Didn't take you long to gain a reputation in my town. And that day in the forest I thought you were a weapon-man on the run! You came to help my town—so're you going to get rid of

those fish-eyed snake-turds from oversea?"

"Afraid not, Hanse. The Beys are here to stay."

"Heard that. Sure going to take some getting used to. Is it true about you?"

"How would I know?"

Hanse came very close to smiling. "That you deal in white magic only—"

"Yes."

"That's a switch, in Sanctuary! And is it true that every blessing from you also comes with some sort of curse?"

"Of sorts. The Price, in addition to the payment in coin or goods. Avenestra, for instance, no longer needs or wants to get drunk every night—but developed a rather grievous craving for sweets."

"Which explains her new, uh, plumpness," Hanse said, nodding.

"And you, Hanse. We met only briefly, long ago. Have you come here on business?"

"No. Just wanted to say hello. I mean, we did meet, however briefly that day months and months ago, and gave each other a little information about Firaqa and Sanctuary—carefully." Hanse chuckled-

"I remember that each of us was very wary indeed of the other, yes, that day on the road up in Maidenhead Wood. You had a young woman with you, I remember—and of course the singularly large cat. Red."

Hanse nodded. "Aye. Name's Notable. First cat I ever hked. First cat I ever didn't dislike! As soon as I came here—"

"From Firaqa?"

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"Uh, well, aye, along with a, uh, stopover along the way. As soon as I got here I went to Sly's. I left Notable with goodole Ahdio, who told me about you. Hearing a lot more about you from other people was easy.

You responsible for this ridiculous silver hair so many people have broken out in?"

"I suppose."

"Not the bare-jiggles fashion though, hmm? That came from the snake-eyed fish-faces."

"Urn. You might try to stop calling them names, Hanse. Fact is fact, and the fact of their continuing presence in Sanctuary has to be accepted."

"I'll work on it," Hanse said without enthusiasm. "Lots of other changes since I left. Lots of construction work—reconstruction work. Noticed repairs to this building and the new paint job outside, too; really like blue, don't you! You were wearing mostly dust last time I saw you—first and last time. And liveried guards, too. Even Avenestra in matching blue. Pretty place, your 'shop.' Handsome cover on that table; handsome carpet, too."

Strick continued to gaze at him from those large blue eyes above the droopy, yellowish-russet mustache. He shrugged.

"I'm also hearing about mysterious disappearances in town, and rumors of slavers, operating right here in Sanctuary?"

"A lot of people are trying to learn more about that, Hanse. It appears to be fact, aye. Be careful, should you chance to be out after dark."

Hanse laughed aloud. After a few moments Strick's big mustache twitched in his small smile.

"I'm sure I'd be interested in your impressions of Firaqa, Hanse, and how you fared there. But I do have some visitors waiting, downstairs."

"You'll be interested in hearing a few things, all right." Hanse assured him. "Do these names mean much to you; Thuvarandis, and Corstic, and Arcala?"

Strick blinked. Slowly, he sat. He gazed expectantly across his desk at the younger man. The names of those three men meant plenty to him, as Hanse had assumed.

Briefly, he outlined his activities and adventures in Firaqa. He ended the abbreviated narrative with the ghastly happenings in the wizard's manse, and the outcome.

Strick sat staring. "He is dead?"

"Very."

Strick slapped the blue-draped desk he called his worktable. "Dead! About time! You've rendered Firaqa a great service then, Hanse. That was a genuinely wicked man."

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"That," Hanse said in a voice dry as the desert, "I know."

After a silent moment he said, "And you've rendered good service in Sanctuary, too. Just a pair of do-gooders to each other's towns, aren't we!"

"Urn." Strick made muttering noises about having to go back and forth from his fancy villa every day, ending with "I'm a man of the people who'd rather live in town."

"Why, I can help you with that," Hanse assured him, all wide-eyed.

"Be happy to accept the villa as a gift, Strick."

With a wry smile, Strick asked who owned the Vulgar Unicorn.

At last Hanse let his wiry form slide down into the chair across the desk from the master of white spells. "Old Earrings' You've asked me something I know. Unless the place has changed hands since I left, the owner's the physician Nadeesh, on the Street of Goldsmiths. Can't miss him. He wears moonstones." Hanse held up two fingers. "Two. Earrings.

Stones black as a tax collector's heart."

"Nadeesh the physician," the big man repeated. "Thanks, Hanse. Oh—where are you staying?"

Hanse's expression became bland and blank, the business face of the thief called Shadowspawn. "I ... get around, Strick. If you should want me for anything, just leave word at the Vulgar U or at Sly's."

Strick nodded. "Oh, and your young woman—I gave her my amulet . . ."

"Which served her, me, and Firaqa mighty well," Hanse assured him.

"Let's, uh, talk about that some other time, all right? I have a young woman with me. Odd that you mentioned Old Earrings, or asked about him—I picked up a nice pair of earrings just last night, as a present for her. Silky. Well, actually her name is Vivispor, but who cares—just a girl I, uh, picked up in Suma."

"You . . . 'picked ... up' ... a pair of earrings."

"Right," Hanse said equably, and was hasty to cut off further comment or queries with "And I'm fresh out of a cat. You know, I really got accustomed to havin' that damned cat with me. I hate to admit it, but I already miss—oh, No!"

For the second time within a half hour or so, Strick sat gazing at a person on the other side of his worktable who was staring past him in surprise unto shock. Since Hanse did not shriek or reach for one or more of his several weapons, however, Strick refrained from giving another demonstration of his swiftness and the fact that he was armed.

Besides, this visitor soon announced its presence in its own voice; a very low and sweet voice at that:

"mew."

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"Damn it. Notable, you sneaked out of Sly's and followed me again! Up the side of the building next door, even!"

So that's how he accomplished his not-so-impossible surprise entry!

"I'm sorry, Strick. C'mere, you dam' cat. He always makes that sickeningly sweet li'l kitten sound when he hears aggravation in my voice and he thinks he deserves a tongue-lashing. Come . . . Here, Note . . . able!"

"mew?"

Strick sat very still while the red cat—unduly, unequivocally, and al-

most unconscionably large—trotted tippy-toe past him and, an instant after Hanse said "No, Notable!" and started to duck, precipitately appeared on the lap of the seated young man's tunic. Hanse grunted and gave the spellwright an unusually, unconditionally, and decidedly unwontedly subdued and guilty look.

"I'm, uh, sorry, Strick."

"It looks very much as if Notable has decided he is your cat, Hanse, not Ahdio's."

"Aye, I know," Hanse said. His voice was sad, though .his face was not.

"Once a cat makes up its mind . . ."

"Alleged mind. Aye, I know. It's just that Ahdio's so damned big . . ."

"Urn. Let's hope he's big about understanding, too. Hanse . . . listen, I need a favor. Two."

"Uh."

"Take Frax and Wints out and show them how you got in here. Tell them I want them to make any changes necessary to make sure no one

can do it again."

"Strick, I swear: no one else could."

Strick sat staring at him in silence until Hanse had to exert his strength to keep from looking down. The expression of wide-eyed innocence that had long served him well with others didn't work with this man. This maker of spells was different. Strick was like . . . like no one.

At last Hanse asked, "What's the second favor?"

"Don't ever come in that way again."

"Strick, I swear I won't."

"Good. Thanks. Otherwise, Hanse, good to see you and thanks for the information about this Nadeesh. We must get together and talk again.

After hours, and normally."

"Uh." After a time Hanse said, "Damn! You just dismissed me, didn't you?"

"I work days, Hanse. People are waiting."

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Hanse gazed at him, his mouth slowly widening. "Strick, you're really something! Let's go, Notable, you dam' cat."

On the way out he saw that Strick hadn't exaggerated: two others sat in the downstairs waiting room. One had the look of a Rankan of substance. Strick sure is doing well by doing good here, Hanse mused, and winked at the icily staring blue-uniformed man with the sword and dagger. Ex-palace guard, Hanse was sure. He recognized Wints, too, but pretended not to notice. A shaking sight, Wints decently dressed, shaved, and looking as if he knew who he was!

A few steps down the street called Straight, Notable pacing at his side, he saw still another woman with silver hair. Strick had started this craze? Damn, why? A man never knows whether a woman's dyed, prematurely gray or extraordinarily well preserved!

Avenestra ushered in a well-dressed Rankan noble.

Strick swiftly learned that Noble Abadas was new in Sanctuary; he was cousin to Theron, the new emperor-by-his-own-hand. Noble Abadas was of medium height, perhaps ten pounds overweight, with receding light brown hair and reddish mustache, big ears, and stubby fingers. Superb eyes the color of doeskin met Strick's directly, which was impressive. Abadas was just arrived from Ranke with his daughter and, unusually, a single servant. He wanted a good place to live, he said, and planned to

staff with Ilsigi; locals-

Odd Rankan, Strick thought. Seems to be a liberal who wants to show what a good fellow a Rankan can be; particularly the . . . agent?—spy?—of the new emperor!

"I have deposited funds with a local banker. You know Renn."

Strick nodded. Renn was one of the two men he banked with, both Ilsigi.

"He showed me around a bit," Abadas said. "I have to say that I saw two places I love, Spellmaster. One, a villa, turns out to be yours!"

"Ah."

By the time Noble Abadas departed Strick's place of business, the two foreigners to Sanctuary had made a business arrangement. Strick was happy to have leased the villa he bought from Izamel (since old Izamel and other wealthy, old-money Ilsigi kindly loaned him the money) to Abadas for an amount that was a shade more than Strick's loan payments and taxes. The current inflation helped; Strick had recently bought the place at what were now called "old rates"; prereconstruction rates! Their deal made both men happy.

Strick called in his man-of-all-tasks.

"Wints, go to Cusharlain. Tell him I am looking for a large place in town, preferably a house I can also use as a shop. All right?"

"Yes sir. Oh, are you—"

"Good. Then go to Gilla Lalo'swife. Ask that good woman whether any of her children or relatives would like good employment with a decent Rankan noble. All right?"

"Yes sir. Sir, I—"

"Aye, I am sure that you know of some prospective servants for the household of the lord Abadas, Wints. Just go on about my business my way, for now."

Wintsenay went.

In the next hour Strick saw four people. He refused to do anything at all for the one who wanted vengeance on a landlord, used a minor spell and an unnecessary foul-tasting concoction to get rid of the really ugly warts on another's face, told a third sadly that he could do nothing about the long-twisted leg but secretly made a spell to make the poor woman

more accepting, at least, and told a sufferer of persistently upset stomach that he needed to go to a physician, at once. It wasn't as if anyone was going to cure the rampant malignant growth Strick saw in the too-young man's upper intestine, but at least he could go through his final weeks of life in a drugged state. For all this the spellwright took in three pieces of silver and a nice bolt of cloth of a color he did not desire. Well, he could trade it, or use it as gift goods.

Avenestra came in, chewing.

"No one else is waiting, L'ncie. I hung out the 'closed' sign as you said."

"Good!" He rose and stretched.

"Ooooh! What a beautiful bolt of cloth!"

"You like that, Avneh?"

"It's just beautiful. Uncle! I love paisley!"

"Hmm. We may not be able to do anything about your craving for sweets, poor baby. But show me that you can come in here without chewing on something and we'll see what we can have made for you from this."

"Oh I'm sorry, Uncle. Mother Shipri make me strong!"

Strick patted her shoulder, turning a little sidewise to avoid being hugged (with hands one of which he saw was sticky from some pastry), and hurried downstairs to collect Fulcris. Leaving Avenestra "in charge" and Frax on guard, Strick and his other aide headed for the Street of Goldsmiths.

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Nadeesh the leech had heard of the foreign spellwright who had come here to be of such value to Sanctuary, both physically and psychologically. His sad-looking servant ushered the visitors in to his master.

Nadeesh the leech was a cadaverously thin man with hair that began at about the midpoint atop his skull and dangled stringily in long ugly strands of corpse-gray. He looked to be seventy or more. He also, Strick and Fulcris discovered, wore only one earring. Attired in a paradoxically bright tunic that appeared to be draped over mere bone, he sat weakly in a chamber made dim by drawn drapes. Strick saw at once that he was in bad shape, and not just from the healed wound that showed his left earring had been torn from him. The fellow looked far too old for his age, which he said was "about fifty."

"What do you think is wrong with you, sir?"

"Can't find a cause, sir. Just last night a friend—a fellow physician—suggested that it might be ... a spell,"

Strick saw the little shiver that went through this too-thin man as he spoke those words. Showing confidence and making sure to project it, Strick suggested that he look. Nadeesh agreed, nervously.

"What—what do you need to do?"

"I need for you to give me something of value, and then just lie back and try hard not to think of anything at all. I will have my hands on your shoulders, that's all."

The physician snorted. "Only the gods know how many patients I've said that to—and all of us knowing all the while that it's completely impossible!"

With a little smile, Strick accepted the proffered coin and set his hands on shoulders that might have been mere bone covered by the other man's yellow tunic- The Firaqi wizard was quite able to stare at nothing.

It took him only seconds to discover the cause of Nadeesh's malaise.

"Your friend was right, leech. Someone has set a dark spell on you."

Nadeesh moaned.

"Hmm. And left a barrier. Perhaps you would think of an opening gate, opening doors, a cave with a wide open mouth ... no no, please be still but not stiff . . . hmm."

A little work discovered the impossible: the spell came from a dead man. One Marype, the son of a mage named Mizraith and long apprenticed to a shadowy mage name Markmor. The problem was that everyone knew Marype was dead! Except that this spell is not that old. Marype is vehemently alive! Furthermore he's past the apprentice stage—past journeyman, by the Flame! Strick concentrated, began to sweat . . . and soon realized that the severity of Nadeesh's affliction was because Marype had gained possession of something belonging to the physician.

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"Ah, the earring, and thus a bit of blood!"

"Wh-what?" The wizened physician's voice quavered.

Strick released those frighteningly bony shoulders and sat beside the man who looked far too old for the age he claimed. The spellmaker would have bet that before this malignant spell the physician had looked fifteen years younger.

"How did you lose your earring?"

"Late one night about two months ago I was set upon by footpads and —by the gods! This began about then! I have lost very much weight in these past two months, Strick, and of course strength as well."

"Urn. Those were not footpads, Nadeesh, but men hired for a definite assignment. A dark mage who hates you used them to gain possession not only of your earring but, since it was torn from your ear, a bit of your blood as well. It has enabled him to make a powerful spell! indeed.'*

"How do you know this?"

"Do you answer your patients when they ask you such a question?"

"No. And usually I cannot answer this one; What is to happen to me?"

"You already know. You are wasting away; no one would know that it's the result of an inimical spell. I'd say this sorcerer intends your death."

Nadeesh surprised his visitor with a string of words concerning the unnamed mage, his sexual activities, and his mother. Then:

"Who is it? Who has done this, Spellmaster?"

"That I cannot say," Strick said, as perfectly capable of lying when he deemed it wise as any physician. "What mage hates you so much?"

"None! I mean—I've no idea."

"You've never treated a sorcerer?"

"Not knowingly."

"Urn. In that case, have you refused treatment to a sorcerer?"

"Not knowingly," Nadeesh repeated. After a few seconds he added,

"But now one is going to murder me."

"Is murdering you," Strick said, staring at nothing. "Unless we can do something about it."

Nadeesh lurch up, gasping with effort. "You think you can?"

"One can always try. In this case, one must."

"I don't understand."

"Never mind. You are too good a man to be murdered this way without my trying to stop it."

A long sigh escaped the pitifully wizened man, and Strick heard the rattle in his scrawny throat.

"Bearing in mind that I am a spellwright, not a physician, let us discuss the bill in advance."

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Nadeesh's smile was hideous, but genuine. "You certainly have me, sir. Name the price and I shall agree. Understand that if the patient dies, however, he cannot pay."

Despite the gravity of the complaint of his "patient," Strick laughed aloud.

They discussed his bill.

Hanse noted more construction/reconstruction on his way to pay a visit to Mignureal's widowed father. It was not something Hanse wanted to do. He had loved Moonflower, Mignue's gross diviner of a mother; he was able to admit that to himself, now. Ahdio and a couple of others at Sly's Place last night had already observed that the dark, youthful man called Shadowspawn was "different." They were right. Events on the desert and up in Maidenhead Wood had changed him a bit; the Mignureal experience had enforced responsibility and changed him ac-

cordingly; the constant dark shadow of sorcery and ghastly events in Firaqa had changed and matured him; and so had more recent experiences in Suma.

The presence of the outsized red cat strolling along at his side, tail high, attracted plenty of looks. Hanse's eyes and the presence of so many sharp blades worn openly here and there about his person persuaded people to keep their comments to themselves or low-voiced. Once he did hear a scornful laugh and knew it for a deliberate attempt at provocation. He didn't even turn. Shadowspawn was "different," yes.

At the shop where Mignureal's father Teretaff sold this and that . . . item, he was admitted by one of Mignureal's dark-haired and dark-eyed younger sisters. Since their number was several and Hanse had never been interested in children, he wasn't sure of this one's name. Odd, how she had bloomed in so short a time. Girls had a way of doing that, and the S'danzo did seem to bloom earlier than others.

He entered into warmth made heavy by a fragrant mix of odors, aromas, smells, scents of foods and leather and spices and perfumes and other herbal . . . things. The shop had always been cluttered. It was more so now, with Moonflower dead.

"Does your father have a, uh, woman friend?" he asked, feeling sneaky, and was not displeased by the shaking of a large-eyed head. What

was this girl, about thirteen? That meant that the next one—the boy Cormentaff—was fourteen. Another member of the family was pushing sixteen too, as he recalled. The one with red hair, or almost red. What was her name, anyhow?

This one made girlish noises over Notable, who eluded her attempts to pet him. The cat disappeared behind a counter.

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"He, uh, he's a one-man cat," Hanse explained. "Notable, if you knock anything over or get into anything it will go hard with you!"

"Mraow."

Hanse was not happy to discover that Teretaff already had a visitor. The aged S'danzo "chief" with the implacable eyes and straight mouth and the usual multicolored, modestly cut garb barely acknowledged Hanse's presence. Hanse was determinedly respectful. The Termagant was not visiting Teretaff, he realized; she was interested in the almost-sixteen-year-old. Now both stared at Hanse, Jileel from huge round eyes the color of walnut wood flanked by a great deal of hair the color of a roan horse. Her blouse was striped yellow and green and was unaccountably stuffed; under a multiprint apron, her skirts showed six or nine other colors and hues.

"You left here with my daughter," Teretaff said, but it was a question rather than an accusation.

"Precipitately," the Termagant said, straight-mouthed and flat-eyed.

Suddenly Hanse has to tell them, no matter the consequences: "Yes.

When I found Moonflower I went wild. I started running, ran into a fish—a, un, Beysib, and killed it. Her. I think it was the one who ki—
who . . ."

"Oh, I do hope it was!" the almost-sixteen-year-old said ferociously, in a rather throaty voice.

"Jileel!" the Termagant snapped, inadvertently helping Hanse by providing the girl's name.

Teretaff glanced at her, and back to Hanse. "I hope so too, Hanse. She did like you, my wife."

Hanse was surprised to hear himself say, "I loved her, Teretaff."

All three of the others blinked. At last the old woman said, "You have changed, young man."

Hanse nodded. "We endured much. We even accomplished much, up

in Firaqa."

"Firaqa?"

"A city far north. Strange people with a strange religion. Ruled by a sort of council of sorcerers. The chief was also the most evil and I suppose the most powerful. He's dead, now. Teretaff, Termagant . . .

Mignureal's powers soared, in Firaqa. She was glad to find a small colony of S'danzo. They were unwelcome in Firaqa; S'danzo, I mean. That's no longer true. She . . . Mignureal has remained there, Teretaff. She's an accomplished Seer, now, an amoushem. Did I say that right?"

"Yes!" the Termagant said, astonishing Hanse by the sudden happy light in her eyes. "So! She flowered, then, and is respected, with the Ability."

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"Yes. She Sees, Termagant, Teretaff; Mignue Sees beyond anyone else

in Firaqa."

"She will do well there, then," Teretaff said, with some happiness and pride mingled with sadness. Tears had appeared in the walnut eyes of the girl beside the old woman, to hear that her sister was not coming back.

"But—you are here and she there?"

Hanse nodded. "It was not easy. Oh, we had our troubles—probably mainly because we were under the shadow of sorcery all the time. But I think we will always love each other. It's just that I had to come back, and she felt she had to remain there. She is happy there. Established."

"I am glad for her," Jileel said but her voice quavered and she sniffed.

"I am delighted!" the Termagant said, and again she astonished Hanse, by proving that grim mouth could smile.

Hanse wondered whether Teretaff might have been less equable about this news had the Termagant not been present, and so enthusiastic. Almost he wished that Jileel were not present. She kept staring at him, staring with those huge dark brown eyes. She always had, he remembered, when he had come to see Moonflower and then Mignureal, but now it seemed different. She was older, with the cusp of womanhood newly sealed upon her. And . . . could that be she in there, rather than the family laundry or a couple of smuggled melons, making her blouse stand out and strain so? Mignureal had not been constructed so! Of course her mother had been, but Moonflower had been huge everywhere, a truly obese woman whose size had made walking difficult for her. (She also remained the most beautiful woman Hanse had ever known. It was she who taught him, just by being, that beauty was not something a person wore, like clothing or skin, but was inside; it was something a

person was.)

He produced the bag and handed it to a surprised Teretaff. It jingled.

"From Mignureal," Hanse told him.

"From Mignureal?" Now it was Teretaff's eyes that glistened wetly.

Hanse pretended not to notice. He nodded. "She insisted. She is doing well. That is for you and her sisters and brother, she said. It is, uh, considerable Firaqi gold, Teretaff. Gold because that way I had fewer coins to carry. Be sure to go to a decent bank to get a fair exchange on those flame-marked coins, now."

Teretaff smiled, then laughed, and embarrassed himself when laughter became sobs. In manner womanly, his daughter Jileel went to embrace him- Uncomfortable, Hanse began backing.

"I have to go now." He swallowed. "Got an appointment, you know."

"Young man."

Hanse swallowed again. "Name's Hanse, ma'am."

"Hanse, then. And I am called the Termagant. You know that I am the senior amoushem; first among the S'danzo with the Ability. Moonflower liked you. I know, and Mignureal . . . well. I admit that I never had much—I never had any use for you. That has changed. You may consider me friend. Hanse.

Still again Hanse swallowed. It was his way not to act honored, but he could not escape the feeling that this was like being acknowledged friend by the Prince-Governor, as he had been. Suddenly his stance changed, and his grin was the old cocky one.

"My occupation hasn't changed. Termagant."

She blinked. "I do not hear you. A friend entrusted a bag of money to you for her father, and you brought it this long way."

Damn! "Uh . . . well, that's different. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"What?"

Hanse shrugged. "I've got my reputation to think of."

"But young ma— Hanse, it is a bad reputation!"

Hanse nodded. "It's mine, Termagant."

Between the old woman and her father, with her arm around him,
Jileel giggled.

The Termagant shook her head. "I, however, have spoken. You are to consider me friend, Hanse."

"I'll remember. I have to go now."

As he left, he heard the Termagant's voice: "Very well now, Jileel, let's test you again to see if that really was the Sight . . ."

Hanse hurried on, clucking to Notable, thinking of the considerable amount of money he had secretly left with that banker in Firaqa for Mignue, dear Mignue ...

He found a decent place to live, in Red Court in the Maze, and delighted the proprietor by laying down a few coins in advance. Silky the ever supple and ever ready was for testing the bed; this soon after leaving Mignureal's family, Hanse just couldn't. He also couldn't admit that. He pointed out the need to find her employment, and they wandered. Sometime that afternoon he realized that he had no intention of living with the tan-haired girl he and his loneliness had acquired up in Suma. All right, he could handle that; he was not stuck with her and besides she was

obviously not charmed with the Maze, Hanse's natural habitat.

He did succumb to Silky's importunings to buy a melon. As he cut it, he noticed that the wooden handle of his favorite knife was loose.

"Damn!"

Next he noticed that she was talking animatedly with another of the

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pedlar's customers, a Rankan. Good, he thought, and without any compunctions at all he walked away. Silky was just Silky, a passing fancy, but a defective knife was serious business. Using this cut-through and that, he was soon on the Street of Tanners. Three blocks down from Sly's Place was Zandulas's Tannery; one had only to follow one's nose to find it and the busy establishment of Zandulas's next door neighbor, Cholly. Cholly the Gluemaker was the man to see. Oh, his real name was Chollander, but only his wife called him that. Cholly performed a number of important services for Sanctuary, including the making of glue. In a town where bodies tended to appear with the morning sun and tended never to be claimed by anyone, a man who had use for them and thus rendered a free corpse-collection service was valuable. Come to think, "rendered"

was the right word for the main part of Cholly's activities.

The bear-sized man with the barrel belly greeted Hanse heartily and with surprise. "Why haven't I seen you for so long, Hanse? Must be a year or more."

Cholly was alone in his smelly, cluttered place of business, meaning that his two assistants were out on this errand or that. Taking orders for delivering glue, probably, or the ancillary products of Cholly's trade. Selling jewelry, perhaps, or slightly used clothing. A bone or two, maybe. Or nice long hair, perhaps, to make nice wigs.

Briefly and without much patience, Hanse told Cholly where he had been.

"I had no idea, Hanse' Oh—I guess you left before that sexy Rankan gladiator came to town, didn't you?"

"How can a gladiator be s— oh. You mean Chenaya Nutcracker? We, uh, met, Cholly."

"Oh? Surprised you don't grin when you say that, Shadowspawn. Surely Milady Swagger either insulted you, tried to kill you, or bedded you. Or all three."

Hanse showed him a couple, knowing this lover of knives would consider both of them exotic because they were of foreign manufacture. "The really fancy one was a gift from the head mage up in Firaqa, a man named Arcala."

"Hmp! Never knew you to stay around a mage long enough to receive a gift! Hard to imagine, from a fellow who hates sorcery worse than anybody!" Cholly said, admiring it and the other knife Hanse handed him, a normal enough sticker. He examined both with the respect and care of a man who knew knives. "Nice," he said, laying them down.

"Here, look at this pretty thing while I finish the job on your old knife." He placed in Hanse's hand a dagger whose blade was inlaid with silver.

Sensing trade negotiations, Hanse naturally found it necessary to demean the seeming treasure. "Uh. Pretty," he said casually. "I'll bet this fancy inlay weakens the blade, though."

Sensing an impending trade, Cholly snorted and made a chuckling noise to show Hanse how silly that was. It was also subject-changing time:

"Ah yes, this is good now, Hanse- Dry-tack's a really good bonder. I'm proud of it. It won't stick to slippery surfaces, see, like wax or grease. Or soap. On the other hand it's easy to peel it off smooth, polished surfaces."

"In that case how can it be strong enough for a knife I need to trust?"

"I said 'peel' it off, Hanse. Pulling it off, breaking the bond—that's another matter. Believe me, I could glue a handle onto a horse's back and lift him by it. If I could lift a horse, I mean. It's strong."

That triggered a thought, but Hanse was careful to sound casual when he asked how one got the stuff off.

Cholly gestured. "Oh, I have a remover for it! Had to come up with that!"

"Uh. I guess," Hanse said, and decided it was time to swing back to the potential trade: "How strong d'you think this silvered blade is?"

"It's a dagger, Hanse. I mean, it isn't as if you're going to try throwing it or chopping trees, is it?"

The ritual of leading up to a transaction had begun. The dickering had to come first, of course, and the deliberate dropping of the subject for friendly converse before returning to another offer or "suggestion" of offer. This time the process took only fifteen or eighteen minutes. When

Hanse left, Cholly had both Firaqi knives in exchange for the inlaid dagger and a pot of the dry-tack Hanse called "Cholly's Dry Stickum." The gluemaker threw in the remover as a courtesy. Their deal made both men happy-

Hanse returned to the area where he had left Silky. The melon pedlar had gone on, and apparently so had Silky. A little asking around apprised him that the tan-haired Sumese girl had departed, with that blond Rankan. While Hanse's pride was wounded a bit, he was not unhappy. He did seem to be stuck with the big red cat. By that evening he had left Notable with Ahdio twice. The moment a door was opened. Notable hastened to use it and seek out Hanse.

"All right, you damn' cat, let's go home and drop off my new pot of glue! You'll need to sniff out the place anyhow."

Notable swerved sharply to bang his flank into Hanse's leg. "Maowr!"

"No."

"mew?"

"No, damn it. Notable, we will not stop and get you a beer now!"

Strick's rule was that people came to him; he went to no one. For this interview he had long wanted, however, he would have gone to the pal-

ace. Prince-Governor Kadakithis would not hear of it. Instead, secretly, in disguise and terribly early on a Fourday morning as agreed for his convenience and security, he arrived in Strick's "shop." In this absolute privacy and confidence, the handsome young Rankan of about Hanse's age and size astonished Strick; he admitted that he was less than he wished to be and had decided that it was because he was too indecisive; fearful of what the Ilsigi would think of him.

"The young half-brother of the emperor," he said quietly, tapping his chest while studiously not-looking at the spellwright, "always had to be careful not to offend or even be very visible, you see. Abakithis—the emperor—was that sort of man. In time, though, he decided that I wasn't invisible enough. He shipped me out here. The goal was not to do anything for Sanctuary or for me, but to get me out of Ranke!" Kadakithis sighed. "So, I felt the need to prove something, to do well. Trying too terribly hard, I was overzealous in trying to clean up this town. In taxing the Red Lantern Houses and . . . other things."

Strick sat very still. He said absolutely nothing and more, he made no sound.

Embarrassedly looking at the wall to his right, Kadakithis went on in that sadly quiet voice: "This morning Lord Abadas, the new emperor's

cousin, visited to present himself formally. I disgusted me. I was positively ingratiating."

After a time he turned his head to look at Strick from pale blue eyes.

"Your efforts and actions were understandable," Strick said just as quietly. "And with Lord Abadas as well. The man is surely here to keep an eye on you for his cousin, isn't he. After all, you're half-brother to . . . Emperor Theron's predecessor in the imperial chair."

Kadakithis shook his head. "No, Strick; I have come to like this town, both from sympathy and feeling a part of it. If I'm to amount to anything—if I'm to help these people in anything approaching the way you have, I'll need . . ." The Prince-Governor broke off in embarrassment.

Strick didn't need to hear the words. "I like Sanctuary and its sorely stressed people, too, lord Prince, and . . . I must help, I have no choice."

"I have heard that mysteriousness before, Spellmaster, but I will not pry. I believe you. If it is pain, then I am sorry. Both of us know pain."

"And so am I sorry, lord Prince, so am I. Now I must warn my lord Prince about the Price."

Kadakithis nodded. "Naturally I have heard about that, too- I want that help you've given so many others, Strick."

"The Price is the Price, Prince Kadakithis. It is beyond my control. Sometimes it is severe and sometimes it is readily bearable. I have no control over it."

"I know these things, Strick. I said I want that help you've given so many others. While I am called Kittycat, you are being called Hero of the People. Is a prince of the people not a person? Shall a prince be treated as less? Shall a prince be fearful of the Price? I know about it, Strick. Must a prince cajole?"

Strick rose and bowed. "Noble Lord Prince! I have desired this meeting for months- These people deserve more of their gods and their rulers. Now you embarrass me; I have wanted to be of aid to you, as you know. The warning, believe me, is something I give to everyone who comes here. I must."

Kadakithis nodded. And sat looking expectant. Waiting.

Strick called Avenestra, but met her at the door. She knew that she was not to enter as usual and not even to see this visitor, and was able not to try. He let the prince hear him bid her prepare "Saksaraboonmga."

She already had the drink's revolting but harmless ingredients ready, except for a bit more stirring to mix the vegetable colors of purple and green. She hurried to do so. Strick waited at the door; Kadakithis sat very still, staring at nothing past the Firaqi's empty chair. Avenestra reappeared from the other room to hand her savior a silver goblet. Strick

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paced over to set it on his worktable before his visitor. Kadakithis stiffened, bent forward to peer into the cup, stiffened the more, and tensed his face. Then, as if accepting a mandated cup of poison, he bravely reached for it.

"A moment, my lord Prince. Give me something of value."

First Kadakithis gave him a look. "I suppose the ritual bans the use of the word 'please'?"

Strick stood gazing at him. He said nothing. True, this was a prince royal of Ranke and governor of this city—co-governor, at least, with his alien companion. Torezalan Strick tiFiraqa, however, was Tbrezalan Strick tiFiraqa, Spellmaster and Hero of the People.

From within his pillow-stuffed brown tunic the disguised prince slid a tiny, beautifully carved box. He set it on the desk and opened it to reveal a single pearl. As if ritually, Strick only touched it. And looked expect-

tant.

With obvious misgivings and distaste for the concoction Strick had been at pains to make unpleasant in appearance, odor, and flavor, Prince Kadakithis drank it down. All of it, without lowering the cup. The man did know, Strick mused, how to take medicine!

Lowering the drained goblet, Kadakithis shook his head. "And people think it's easy being a royal! By all gods, Strick, what's in that stuff!"

"Nothing to harm you, lord Prince. A secret formula I have of a Zimmanabuniga wizard far to the west."

With hands on the lean blond's shoulders, Strick told him that he was decisive, charismatic, and had no need to lack confidence, "for charisma and more importantly your intelligence will carry you through, to the benefit of Sanctuary. You must think much on this, particularly before sleep and before rising."

The Rankan Prince-Governor of Sanctuary stood and gripped the far bigger man's hand. Strick noted that the young man stood more erect than when he had entered. For a few moments they stood gazing into each other's eyes. Then Kadakithis swung, drew his hooded cloak again about himself and his padded tunic, and left. With, Strick noted, a firmer and more confident tread than when he had entered.

Strick sighed. Charlatan, he grumbled at himself, hardly for the first time. That handsome young man was already charismatic and decisive! It's just that now he Believes!

Then the spellwright sent Wintsenay to pass the word; Strick needed to see Hanse.

Kadakithis paid the Price. That same Fourday afternoon he received word that Taya had fled the palace.

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Shupansea was amused: "Well after all, she came here as your concubine, my love. And, however pampered, she's had nothing to do for a long, long while now!" Then: "On the other hand, I would recommend—"

"Never mind," Kadakithis said with cool decisiveness. "I have already decided to take no action whatsoever. This cannot reflect badly on me, but will serve as further proof of how truly you and I love each other."

Shu-sea blinked. "Well. How very clever—no, how very intelligent of you, my love!"

Yes, he thought. And the point is, this is obviously the Price I must pay

for Strick's help. even if it costs me face.

An hour later a bank messenger arrived to tell Strick that someone had just deposited sixty unshaved golden Imperials to his account, each coin bearing the face of the previous emperor. Strick smiled and nodded. He knew who it was from, and wondered what other Price Kadakithis was paying.

A short time later, Hanse responded to Strick's request to visit. He met the young Lady Esaria on her way out. Neither recognized the other because neither knew the other.

Somewhere, the goddess Eshi smiled.

"Hanse," Strick said without any preamble at all, "a man needs your help. A client needs a service only you can perform."

Hanse put on his face of sweet innocence. "I can't imagine what you mean."

Strick's smile was cursory; dutiful, "A wall or two needs to be scaled. A house and a room or two need to be entered. An item needs to be fetched."

"Ah! I've heard of just the roach you need. He's called Shadowspawn,

I believe."

"Do you think he will perform this service?"

"Probably. He usually works for himself. But, if the price is right . . ." Hanse gestured eloquently. "Tell me about this . . . mission."

"The price is right," Strick said, and told him about the mission.

"Oh, no! Not a sorcerer!"

"Hanse! After your experiences with the real thing up in Firaqa, this boy will pose you no problem. True, he was apprentice to Markmor the Archmage, but Markmor was found dead even before I came here. A lot of mages have come and gone, Hanse."

Hanse nodded. "I remember that big one with the blue star on his forehead . . ."

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"Lythande," Strick said.

"Lythande! Odd name for a man!"

"That one will not be back, Hanse. Lythande does not like this town at all, and will never be back."

"You know a lot, Strick. for a newcomer who's been here only a few months."

Strick nodded. "Yes. I make it my business to learn things. Sanctuary is my business, now. And I, believe me, am here to stay. And we were discussing a certain venture concerning a roach and one Marype."

"Oh but Father Us, how I hate sorcery!"

Strick stared. "Perhaps you will refer me to a brave professional, then."

"Bastard!" The professional thief made a show of his sigh. "What does he have that you want . . . acquired?"

Strick held out his hand. An earring gleamed brightly in his palm: a glowing black stone caged in good gold. "The mate to this. It was torn from its wearer's ear and now that swinish mage is using it to harm him."

"Nadeesh," Hanse murmured, and sighed. He nodded, gestured.

Strick told him a bit more. Reluctantly, Hanse named a price. Disconcertingly, Strick did not even bother to dicker. He rose, placed the ear-

ring in Hanse's hand, bade him grip it and try to visualize its mate, and laid hands on the best cat-thief in Sanctuary.

"Now. You will be able to find it, once you're in its proximity. If it is in a container, bring it that way. This is important."

Once more Hanse sighed. "A sorcerer! Gods, how I hate sorcery!"

Strick merely gazed at him.

The younger man rose. "It will be done, Strick," Shadowspawn said casually, on his way out.

Strick surprised him with the standard benison on a thief: "May the night-dark cloak cover you and your actions this night," Meanwhile the spellwright was thinking: How interesting. He keeps company with an ensorceled cat and wears a dagger that's the product of sorcery. Hates it, hmm?

Hanse wandered his town, thinking and working to relax as he preferred to do before an important reaching venture. He noted reconstruction, a purse-cutting, the painting of various buildings, the large number of foreigners imported to handle the work. Occasionally he returned—or ignored—a startled greeting. He saw Beysib mingling with Ilsigi and Rankans. Near the marketplace he was surprised to see large dark eyes peeping at him; the girl he had thought of only as Mignue's little sister.

He pretended not to notice. Beard of Us' Jileel! All grown up and seemingly smuggling watermelons—and still staring!

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Noise at a wall's reconstruction site attracted him. He ambled that way, seeing that it was a real uprising. While disgruntled Ilsigi laborers mutter-muttered, refusing to work, a big fellow harangued them. He was ranting loudly about the way these walls were wrecked, among other destruction and deaths, and how the gods were angry at Sanctuary, and why should "we fix and put back a wall for those damned oversea Beys occupying our palace!" Imported workers meanwhile stood away. Uninvolved, they performed that act known as honoring the strike, meaning they stood or sat around enjoying the break.

Some of the bully's words made sense to Hanse Things were bad here when I left, and obviously got a lot worse. I hate these loudmouthed rabble-rousers, but . . .

Suddenly a lean, blond young man appeared, wearing a leather apron over his well-made blue tunic. He commenced working. Stone dust flew. Brave fellow, Hanse thought. Brave fool! Then he frowned, seeing the ranter pick up a jagged chunk of stone and take aim at the sole worker . . .

Almost out of sight, the three Beys sent by Shupansea to watch over her beloved drew bowstrings to slay the rabble-rouser in defense of Kada—

And Hanse threw. His flat lozenge of knife rushed to slice across the back of the big fellow's hand so that he dropped the stone with a scream. Another scream followed: he had dropped it on his own foot. Laughter rose as he danced, simultaneously squealing and cursing.

The Beysibs lowered their bows and went back to looking invisible while everyone watched the dark, wiry young man who came running into the work area, wearing a good green tunic and nice doeskin leggings. The daring young worker in the leather apron, having retrieved the thrown knife, stared while the newcomer faced the loudmouth.

"Go away, Tarkle," Hanse shouted. "All that babble you've been giving out is just that—everybody knows you just don't like to work."

The big rabble-rouser with the bloody hand, once again discovering that bullying was becoming a more and more hazardous pastime, glowered and made surly noises. He also noticed the deadly eyes and several other knives on the person of a known expert he had thought was long gone from Sanctuary. Tarkle backed off—limping. Suddenly Hanse and leather-apron were exchanging stares of recognition:

"Prince!"

"Hanse!"

Excited noises went through the assemblage along with the usual rumble-rumble as they watched the Prince-Governor himself pounce onto a high spot and extend a hand to Hanse.

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"See who works on the walls of Sanctuary?" Kadakithis called, in a loud clear voice. "A Rankan! See who saves him from a murderous bully who knows not what he's doing?—an Ilsig ... my friend."

Hanse's eyes rolled. Oh blast! There goes my credibility!

Kadakithis spoke on, startling all of them with his confidence and charismatic eloquence. They cheered! His people went back to work— with Kadakithis.

Damn, Hanse thought cheerlessly, stooping to grasp a big cut slab of stone. I'm stuck! I can't just walk off and leave the Prince-Gov working like a Downwinder! But . . . damn! Work! Me!

Since Markmor's death, Hanse learned the following Eshday afternoon from one of the fixture/characters of the Maze, the street cleaner and

trash picker called Old Thumpfoot, the quite young Marype had secretly set himself up in Lastel's villa, whether legally or otherwise.

"How nice," Shadowspawn murmured, meandering along the Serpentine. He knew that well-appointed villa, and the late Lastel/One-Thumb's secret. All he had to do was use the tunnel connecting the house with a House; the brothel called Lily Garden. True, he had an idea about Cholly's dry-tack, but he'd try that another time. Cheered by that prospect, he dropped in to the Vulgar Unicorn for a piece of cheese and an apple. He'd eat a proper meal afterward, if his stomach agreed. He tarried, more than civil and almost loquacious to the surprise of a couple of old acquaintances. He left their company at sunset, taking a small pail of beer home to his new second-floor room. Notable was happy to see him and more than happy with the beer. He lapped with gusto while Hanse stretched out to rest and think.

No question about it, entry will be like slicing pie. Now what am I likely to need? he thought, and his smile faded. Blast. Here previously, and up in Firaqa, he had grown accustomed to Mignue's warnings and directions!

Suppose I'm in and it turns out that I should have brought a brown crossed pot, or a copper kettle, or . . .

"Gulp," he said aloud, trying to shame himself out of unwonted nervousness that was as uncharacteristic as his affability to the Vulg.

Notable looked up from his whisker-grooming. " 'rraow?'"

"I said cats aren't supposed to belch, you beer-guzzling greedbag."

Hanse directed his thoughts to Nadeesh, and from that unfortunate man to Strick. That man's going to make a Difference, he reflected. Already has! Twice he shocked Notable by lurching up into a sitting position and snapping a throw. He had not told his landlord why he had grunted up here to his room with the old wooden wheel. It was inordi-

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nately thick and joined by pegs rather than nails. Braced against the wall farthest from the bed with the iron rim removed, it made a nice target. The throwing star he sent straight into the hub; the slender wafer of a knife from its sheath on his right upper arm missed by an inch.

"Must be getting old," he muttered, swinging off the bed to retrieve both missiles. Pacing back to the bed, he whirled and threw. The flat, hiltless and guardless knife appeared in the hub. Tired of the violent nonsense, Notable said "rrawwr!" and pounced.

"Ouch! How'd you like to become my favorite target, Notable you

dam' cat?"

A couple of hours later he rose again and stripped, to change into his blacks; his work clothes. Notable seemed already to understand this ritual, whether or not cats saw colors: the big red animal pounced up onto the shelf under the window and looked from it to his human.

"You're right," Shadowspawn said, double checking the lock on his door. "That's the way we go out tonight, m'friend."

They did.

An hour later, both of them had easily gained silent-entry to the large house formerly occupied by one Lastel/One-Thumb and now the lair of a young mage many thought dead. Hanse was sure they were wrong, although by now he had heard tales of the legions of walking and indeed wandering dead who had plagued Sanctuary's streets during his absence. No. Marype was alive. A look in the kitchen provided evidence of occupancy and recent cooking. A bed on the second floor had been used recently. In fact that bed looked as if Marype had lately entertained company. The tall cabinet-like press contained clothing. Not that of the departed Lastel, surely; expert eyes found membranous black gloves and noted that the thumbs of both were expanded by wear. On the point of keeping those nice thin gloves, the silent intruder decided against it. He'd steal nothing from the lair of a sorcerer; only that property of another which he was here to retrieve. He departed the bedroom without search-

ing further, remembering the spellwright's words that he would know when he was nigh Nadeesh's earring.

Soft-soled buskins as silent on good carpet as Notable's pads, a living shadow roamed dim corridors and stepped briefly into well-furnished chambers. Some had been long closed, he saw; he passed them without opening their doors. Man and cat saw no one and heard no sound. Notable gave no indication that he scented any. Once he paused, head and one foot uplifted, and his companion went to the corridor wall like a shadow. A dark knife had materialized in his hand even as he squatted. Notable ambled over. Shadowspawn didn't touch the animal, waiting for any

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further indication of danger. Notable gave none. After several silent moments his human tapped his back with the knife.

"Dumbhead," Shadowspawn whispered, and Notable immediately commenced purring. "Shhh!" He rose and ghosted on, purring cat pacing close by.

At last they came to a room containing a worktable and things that

made the hair twitch on Shadowspawn's nape and writhe under his working blacks. Notable's purring stopped as if sliced. O gods, how I hate sorcery—

Abruptly he knew that the earring was in that nice little mahogany casket. Nice work, Strick. On the point of opening the box, he paused, cocked his head, and stepped to one side. From there he flipped up the lid with the point of one of his knives. He heard the concealed trigger and watched the slender dart fling itself straight up into the ceiling with a tiny thunk of impact. Notable went into a low crouch while Shadowspawn nodded at sight of the little box's contents. Bloodstains, too. Still using the knife, he tipped the lid and waited alertly. Nothing happened save that the lid dropped almost noiselessly back into place. On the point of snatching it and departing this silent chamber whose contents made him horripilate, he spotted several strands of hair on the table. He popped them into the box, wrapped it in a nice strip of scarlet cloth off the table, and slipped it into his black upper garment. With rather unseemly haste, he vacated the chamber of Marype's sorceries.

Easy as slicing pie, he reflected as he hurried down to the concealed entry to the old tunnel. Just as good as ever, without any help from

Mignureal or anyone else!

In that musty old tunnel he heard a rat and saw another and then he saw ghastly eeriness. Ghost images seemed frozen, locked in eternal combat. It looked like—could that be old One-Thumb? Surely not, he thought, and that was when the rat pounced.

It was big, a rat the size of a normal cat, which Notable was not. Shadowspawn was only just able to duck, flailing. The cat had already pounced at the rat with a long ugly "Rrrawwww," and Hanse smiled in anticipation of a swift squeaky massacre. A flurry of action wiped away his smile and brought a grunt from his throat; a big red shape went hurtling backward to flop loosely on hardpacked earth.

"Notable!"

Shadowspawn slammed a throwing knife into the rat, then another. His eyes went wide and he felt his nape hairs stir again at sight of both blades passing through the creature, bloodlessly. Shock immobilized him long enough for the rat to leap upon him and sink its fangs into his arm. Hanse groaned and bit his lip while he clamped the unnaturally heavy

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beast with his right hand. The rat felt just as strong as he. Its fangs were like thick needles and the pain was awful when he tried to pull the huge

rodent away. Sweat coated him in seconds. Despite the fact that the other knives had accomplished nothing against what was obviously sorcery, he could not give it up. Even as the rat-thing gnawed him and his brain began to stagger in a red haze of pain, a terrified Shadowspawn drew Cholly's dagger and stabbed, slashed.

With a shriek and a horrid jolt that made him cry out, the sorcerous thing vanished. So did the pain in Hanse's arm and the mark there. Yet his glance showed him a satisfying smear of blood on the dagger's silver-inlaid blade. Pouncing to take up the unconscious Notable, Shadowspawn ran.

I didn 't name Strick a high enough price/

Emerging like the shadow of a ghost into the Lily Garden, he ducked an amorously entwined couple who never saw him. A downward glance showed him that the big heavy cat in his arms had one eye slitted open. It gazed greenly up at him.

"Oh, Notable, you omery faker! See who gets the beer after this night's work!"

Notable made a distinctly unpleasant remark. Hanse tarried to be cute with the Lily Garden's proprietor, Amoli, but not for long.

A few minutes after his departure, Amoli was bustling along the tunnel

to tell Marype a few things . . .

Early Aneday morning Strick himself arrived at the home of Nadeesh the leech. Using the earring with its brown-stained post, Strick easily "cured" the physician- Nadeesh upheld his bargain: he agreed to sell the Vulgar Unicorn (which he wanted to get rid of anyhow!) to Strick tiFiraqa. Strick kept the sorcerer's box and the few strands of human hair. Marype's hair.

"There, Snapper Jo. Do you have any further doubts that I have power over you?"

The cowering demon shook its hideous head.

"Good," the new owner of the Vulgar Unicorn said. "You've just been replaced. Go find other employment."

By the following night a native Ilsigi had been installed as night barman at the Vulg; seeing that former carpenter Abohorr had lost a digit, everyone immediately delighted in calling him One-Thumb. Later that evening those same patrons were astonished and proud to see in their favorite haunt here in the very heart of the Maze: the white spellmaster Strick and Lady Esaria (with two bodyguards, of course). They seemed

to have a nice time. Even drunks were sensible enough to say nothing untoward to the spellmaster's lady.

No one knew that Strick owned the place. As a matter of fact hardly anyone knew that Nadeesh had owned it. Most patrons did like the new serving girl. Silky, with her odd accent.

That same Moondy night Hanse ambled along, richer by quite a bit and actually trying not to swagger. As he passed an alley he was hit by a stagger spell, grabbed by three large toughs, punched, drugged, bound, gagged, and popped into a big cloth bag. Callous men hurried him to the waterfront. Their bagged burden thought of the stories he'd heard of slavers, right here in Sanctuary. Groggily he recognized one voice among the three: Tarkle. In the rope-bound sack, Hanse was boosted onto the ship *Asienta* and tumbled into the hold with a mild splash. He listened to the hatch being screwed down tightly. Groggily he heard that the ship sailed tomorrow for the far *Bandaran Islands*.

UNEASY ALLIANCES

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Dramatis Personae

The Townspeople

AHDIOVIZUN; AHDIOMER viz; AHDIO—Proprietor of Sly's Place, a legendary dive within the Maze.

THRODE—An employee at Sly's Place.

CLEYA; JODEERA—The woman Ahdio loves, and who works for him at Sly's Place. Since she is far too beautiful to travel safely through the Maze, Ahdio has arranged for her to be protected by a disguise of ugliness.

i LALO THE LIMNER—Street artist gifted with magic he does not fully understand.

!: GILLA—His indomitable wife.

i

t GANNER—Their middle son, slain during the False Plague Riots of

the previous winter which signaled the end of severe civil unrest

in Sanctuary.

VANDA—Their daughter, employed as nursemaid to the Beysib at

the palace.

WEDEMIR—Their eldest child and son. A member of Walegrin's

guard patrol.

LATILLA—Their youngest daughter.

ALFI—Their infant son.

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HAKIEM—Storyteller and confidant extraordinaire.

HORT—Son of a fisherman and Hakiem's apprentice.

JUBAL—Prematurely aged former gladiator. Once he openly ran Sanctuary's most visible criminal organization, the Hawkmarks, now he works behind the scenes.

SALIMAN—His aide and only friend.

MORIA—Once one of Jubal's Hawkmarks, then a servant of Ischade. She was physically transformed into a Rankan noblewoman before the magic died, and the transformation endures. She is in hiding with Stilcho.

MYRTIS—Madam of the Aphrodisia House.

SNAPPER JO—A fiend who survived the destruction of magic in Sanctuary. Once employed as a bartender in the Vulgar Unicorn.

STILCHO—Once one of Ischade's resurrected minions. He was "cured" of

death when magic was purged from Sanctuary.

zip—Sitter young terrorist. Leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Sanctuary (PELS). Now he and his remaining fighters have been designated as officials responsible for peace in the city.

The S'danzo

ILLYRA—Half-blood S'danzo seeress with True Sight. Wounded by PELS

in the False Plague Riots.

DUBRO—Bazaar blacksmith and husband to Illyra.

THE TERMAGANT—Oldest of the S'danzo women practicing her craft in Sanctuary.

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The Magicians

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ILSIGI MAGES:

MARKMOR—A powerful, ambitious, youthful wizard.

MARYPE—His arrogant, yet blundering, apprentice.

MIZRAITH—Marype's father, slain by Markmor shortly after

the Prince arrived in Sanctuary.

RANKAN HAZARDS DWELLING AT THE MAGEGUILD;

RANDAL; WITCHY-EARS—The only mage ever admitted into the Sacred Band of Stepsons or trusted by them. Now a teacher at the Mageguild.

Those who adhere to no hierarchy or discipline but their own:

ENAS YORL—Quasi-immortal mage cursed with eternal life and a constantly changing physical form.

ISCHADE—Necromancer and thief. Her curse is passed to her lovers who die from it. Since the diminution of magic in Sanctuary, she has been in isolation at her house on the White Foal River.

STRICK;TORAZELAN STRICK TIFIRAQA—White Mage who has made Sanctuary his home. He will help anyone who comes to him, but there is always a Price, sometimes trivial and sometimes not, for his aid.

Visitors in Sanctuary

THE SHEPHERD—A figure of considerable mystery. By his panoply he

might be an Ilsigi warrior—but all such men have been dead for years.

The Rankans Living in Sanctuary

CHENAYA; DAUGHTER OF THE SW—A beautiful and powerful young woman, the Prince's cousin, who is fated never to lose a fight. In her

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arrogance and innocence she made more enemies in Sanctuary than even fate could handle and has left town until her reputation repairs itself.

DAYRNE—Her companion and trainer.

LEYN, QUIJEN, DISMAS AND GESTUS—Her friends and gladiators at her father's school.

DAPHNE—Rankan noblewoman and first wife of Prince Kadakithis. Ostensibly sent to safety before the arrival of the Beysib, she was actually kidnapped and sold into slavery on Scavenger's Island where Chenaya rescued her. She is estranged from her husband.

PRINCE KADAKITHIS—Charismatic but somewhat naive half-brother of the assassinated Emperor, Abakithis.

LOWAN VIGELES—Half-brother of Molin Torchholder, father of Chenaya.

A wealthy aristocrat self-exiled to Sanctuary and hoping to return to the Rankan capital in triumph someday. He operates a gladiator school at his Land's End estate and has built a small, temporary arena there.

MOLIN TORCHHOLDER; TORCH—Archpriest of Sanctuary's wargod (whichever deity that is at the moment). Architect for the rebuilt walls of Sanctuary, Supreme bureaucratic administrator of the city.

RASHAN; THE EYE OF SAVANKALA—Priest and Judge of Savankala. Highest ranking Rankan in Sanctuary prior to the arrival of the Prince, now allied with Chenaya's disaffected Rankans at Land's End.

STEPSONS; SACRED BANDERS—members of a mercenary unit loyal to Tempus. Their years in Sanctuary were among the worst in their history and all but a few of them have gratefully left town.

CRITIAS; CRIT—Longtime mercenary in the company. Tempus left him in charge of peace-keeping in Sanctuary when everyone else left. Also the partner of Straton, though that pairing has been in disarray for some time now.

STRATON; STRAT; ACE—Partner of Critias. Injured by the PELS at the start of the False Plague Riots. He has been Ischade's lover

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

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and though her curse has not killed him, most of his former associates count him among Sanctuary's damned.

WALEGRIN—Rankan army officer assigned to the Sanctuary garrison where his father had been slain by the S'danzo many years before. He is now one of three officers responsible for the peace in Sanctuary. He is also Illyra 's half-brother.

The Beysib

SHUPANSEA; sw-SEA—Head of the Beysib exiles in Sanctuary; mortal avatar of the Beysib mother goddess. Lover of Prince Kadakithis whom she wishes to marry.

INTRODUCTION

Lynn Abbey

"No! No more blood! Make it stop!"

Shupansea awoke at the sound of her own scream. The nightmare had propelled her out of bed and to the window of her bedchamber. With a

trembling hand she pulled the casement shut- This wasn't the first time she'd found herself before an open window; wasn't the first time she shed a cold sweat wondering what would happen if some night she did not scream herself awake.

"O Beysa, forgive my intrusion. I—I heard you scream . . ."

Shupansea turned to the lamplight and faced the frightened eyes of Kammesin, the woman who had cared for her since infancy. "It was nothing—a noise in the dark. Nothing at all."

Kammesin did not relax. The old woman's eyes remained wide, round and steadily unblinking. Mother Bey! Had she been exiled so long among the fluttering Rankans that her own people looked strange and unnerving? Was her soul forgetting that the fixed stare was a gesture of honesty and transparency as much as it was a measure of uncontrolled anxiety? And had she, herself, blinked even once since waking from the nightmare?

"Yes, Kam-sin," she admitted, forcing the membrane to withdraw and her eyelids to descend. "It was the nightmare, again. But I'm all right now. Just light my lamp, then you go back to sleep."

The woman gave a shrug that every servant knew. It meant the same to both Rankans and Beysibs; disbelief and resignation. "As you wish, O

Beysa." She lit the lamp beside the bed as she left.

A flush of shame burned across the Beysa's face as she heard the door

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close. Those folk who believed aristocrats were unaware of their servants had no understanding of the matter at all. Shupansea felt her old nurse's censure as a sad, painful twinge in her heart. All her life she had confided in Kammesin, but now, when she was overflowing with despair, she could speak to no one.

In point of fact, the Beysa wished to speak to the goddess Bey. She wanted to know why, after these seasons in Sanctuary, her sleep was haunted by memories of the final, bloody days of her brief, unsanctified reign over the Beysin Empire. But it had been more than a year since the Mother's voice had resounded within her head. Mother Bey, like everything else magical or divine in Sanctuary, had been reduced to shadow strength.

The town which had been god-ridden was now virtually god-less.

Mother Bey was the merest whisper of empathy in Her avatar's mind. A calming whisper nonetheless, and it seemed to say that the goddess was content with exile and did not plan to return home soon.

That's not enough, the Beysa thought loudly enough, she hoped, for

the goddess to hear. / can't stay here and remember the past, too.

The flicker of empathy shifted, resonating love and the smiling face of Prince Kadakithis. Shupansea grit her teeth and shook the feeling away. Mother Bey had strengthened every cynic's hand when She tumbled into a divine infatuation with the wargod, Stormbringer. Half the people in Sanctuary—if not the known world—had shared hot frustration in their dreams as the would-be lovers contended with a mismatch of immortal anatomy.

Such divine emissions had ceased when the magical nouma of Sanctuary was burned away, but Shupansea knew the pair chased each other still and she was more than slightly embarrassed by her progenitor's lusty behavior.

Though Shupansea purged the goddess from her thoughts and feeling, the prince was not so easily removed. Surely it was no coincidence that the nightmares had started right after they'd announced their intended, but still unscheduled, marriage. Right after she'd decided to abide by Rankan standards of acceptable behavior and moved her personal entourage out of Kadakithis's suite.

Love had never been part of Shupansea's emotional vocabulary. Indeed, no Beysa had ever dared to love—not when her blood was venom and all her male offspring were condemned to death in her womb. At

home they sacrificed the royal consort, and the Beysa insured her line with casual, guilt-free affairs.

Could she doubt for one heartbeat that the nightmares—the cold fear

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that lived in her belly—were the underside of her love for an unlucky Rankan prince?

Shupansea shivered from the fear, and the everpresent dampness that permeated the palace. She shrugged her gown over her shoulders and looked beside the bed for her slippers. It was no wonder that Rankan women swaddled themselves in layer upon layer of cloth. Sanctuary was always damp; it was hot and damp in the summer, then chilly and damp the rest of the time. Either way you wrapped yourself in soft, absorbent cloth for comfort.

She opened the door quietly, half expecting to find Kammesin crouched beside the latch-hole. The corridor was empty, but her lamp-light caught the final sway of a nearby drapery. Despite her age, Kam-sin had retreated to her alcove and, after another moment, began snoring gently.

A faint smile crossed the Beysa's lips as she headed for the sunrise wing. Twice a year everyone who was anyone changed residence from

one side of the palace to the other—adjusting the social hierarchy in the process. The best people had sunrise suites in the warmer months and sunset suites in the dreary winter.

At first Shupansea and her comrades-in-exile had taken all the good rooms for themselves—winning themselves no friends among the Rankans. Moving days had been tense, bristly affairs with frequent brawls between the servants and the occasional duel between the incoming and outgoing residents.

The palace, like the city, had mellowed in the last year. Some of the Beysibs had moved to renovated estates beyond the walls; some of the Rankans had as well. Those who remained got along better—as well as any court in either empire—and Beysibs began mixing with Rankans on both sides of fortune's wheel.

The man whom Shupansea sought could have had an apartment on the sunset side, but he chose, for reasons of his own, to live in counterpoint to both the Beysa and his prince.

"Ambitious people have stronger stories," Hakiem always insisted when moving day found him marshalling his possessions against the tide. "And unhappy people have tragic ones."

The Beysa never argued with the storyteller, who was her closest

friend among the natives. Privately she thought he was wrong, at least about tragedy. She knew her own story, and that of Prince Kadakithis, and she'd gladly have changed with a sunrise resident whose life was both comfortable and dull.

Trusted servants slept in alcoves and on pallets beside their masters' doors. The more alert and reliable managed to be wide-awake as Shupan-

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sea walked by with her lamp. Most of the Beysibs kowtowed to her shadow, some of the Rankans glowered with scant respect—but not as many as once had done. The Beysa ignored them, which was what they all expected anyway.

Hakiem's knotted latchstring was drawn to the inside of his door, and Shupansea was suddenly aware of the late hour. The storyteller said he was always ready to be her ears—any day, any night—but he wasn't a young man. Men and women offered themselves to a Beysa or a Prince in the sublime confidence that their gift would never be called.

Twice Shupansea pulled her knuckles soundlessly back from the door. The third time she touched the wood, but still there was no sound as the door swung open on well-oiled hinges.

"Hakiem? Friend?"

The room was empty; the storyteller's pallet was rolled up into a day-cushion. Shupansea felt awkward and foolish. Hakiem was old enough to be her father, but that didn't quite make him old. Certainly he was charming, witty, and—now that he was better groomed and bathed regularly—cut a handsome figure among the court ladies who commonly complained that men talked only of war and politics. Surely he had offers—no doubt his assignments were more easily arranged from this side of the palace.

She resolved to make no mention of her untimely visit and was about to leave when the lamplight fell on a pile of drawings. She saw her prince with a bloody sword, and herself with bloody hands—and curiosity got the better of her good sense.

Lighting Hakiem's lamp from her own, Shupansea settled down to examine the colored sketches more closely.

Not all of Sanctuary ran on palace time. The Street of Red Lanterns was ablaze well past midnight. The Maze didn't start to get interesting until respectable people pulled their shutters in. And a dive like the Vulgar Unicorn hit its stride a good deal later than that.

Through all Sanctuary's vicissitudes, the Vulgar Unicorn had been a touchstone of a sort of stability. Its bartenders—human and otherwise—

were uniformly ugly; its wenches were invariably on the downside of careers that had never looked promising. Its food was uncompromisingly vile, and the swill they tapped from their kegs . . . The beer at the Vulgar Unicorn was generally regarded to be the worst of mixing sludge from the harbor and goat urine; the wine—well, the beer was better than the wine.

Irony of ironies: Hakiem the Storyteller, who had spent the better part of his adult life in a drunken stupor, begging coppers to squander on the

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vulgar wine, now had enough money to buy the tavern's entire cellar, and he could no longer drink the bilge. The taste was the same in his mouth, and it brought back bittersweet memories of a vanished Sanctuary, but he dared not swallow. Fortunately no one noticed when he hawked the bloody liquid at the floor.

He was in disguise—that is, he wore the old clothes he'd sworn to incinerate years ago. Most people knew he'd come up in the world; most people didn't recognize him when he looked liked his old self. A few even worried about him and warned him away from the Unicorn now that he had a few coins in his pouch and access to the palace. Those few were probably right, but he could no more live without the Vulgar Unicorn than he could . . . Than he could live in the palace day after day.

Late at night, long after his respectable patrons had shut down their respectable soirees, Hakiem eased back to the Sanctuary they could not imagine and harvested another crop of tales. He had an apprentice of sorts, the fisherman's lad, Hort, who did the first winnowing and pruning, but nothing could replace his own senses. And nothing could replace the parade of life in the Vulgar Unicorn.

He let his eyes go out of focus—an easy task since his hair had begun turning white as well as gray—and was struck by a wild insight that shook him in his shoes: His beloved Unicorn and the palace weren't so very different after all. He gulped his mug of wine and blamed his seeping eyes on it.

But, no, the comparison was in his mind and the similarities would not go away. The Vulgar Unicorn and the palace were both places where style was generally more important than substance. They were both places where you belonged, or you didn't belong—and where you had to always prove that you still belonged. Both had reputations which exceeded reality, and—might as well admit it—both were parasites in the city's lifeblood.

Dark Shalpa knew how many honest men it took to support a thief—even one who lied as all thieves lie. Hakiem guessed it took about as many as it took to support an aristocrat.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Hort said cheerfully as he took the chair opposite his mentor.

Hakiem raised his head to see twins smiling at him. Puttering Nether-gods! What did these people put in their wine? Old habits, however, died hard and stood him in good stead as he reestablished conscious control over his body with slow, deliberate gestures. Old habits, and the fact that he had drunk no more than half a mug of sour wine.

"You've forgotten everything I've taught you," he said, using drawling sarcasm to mask the stiffness in his tongue.

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"What sort of introduction is that? Make a point, Hort. Get your audience's attention. Add color. What manner of ghost; what sort of look—"

They had played this game before. Hort puffed up his chest and spread his arms wide. "Ye gods, old sot, your eyes are as red as the gutters in Shambles Cross; you're as pale as a man who's seen his mother's ghost dancing naked with Vashanka's tent peg!"

Hakiem swallowed hard, and not because of the wine. The boy had talent; had learned everything he'd been taught. He didn't need a mentor any longer.

"Better, lad. Much better. You do yourself, and myself, proud. Now, tell me, what have your pointed little ears heard this week?!"*

"Tales of vengeance: brothers for brothers, fathers for sons. Ordinary folk are confident that the worst is over and are stepping out to settle their own scores."

Hakiem nodded. He'd sensed as much himself. The Nisibisi-funded PFLS anarchy was over and there was a sense that the future would not be like the past. But debts had to be evened before the future was embraced.

"What else?"

"A whole new society growing in Shambles where the rousters who moved Torchholder's stones make their homes. They think the streets of Sanctuary are paved with gold—or at least the walls are—and, dammit, if they don't seem to be right. Everybody's swinging a mallet or smoothing mortar, even our Prince, and the common folk think the world's getting better each day."

"Are there any clouds on our cheerful horizon?"

The young man shed his expansiveness. His eyes grew intense and he

leaned across the table. Still good storytelling, but Hakiem sensed there was something more in Hort's eagerness.

"Men are vanishing, maybe five or six a week. And they're not turning up in any of the usual places. Some say it's the Mageguild trying to get power back, but I've found a blind alley there. Best guess points toward the harbor."

"You've checked that out?"

Hort drew back a hand's breadth. He was the son of the best fisherman in town, and, while he had no taste for salt water himself, he had the confidence of those who did.

"We're taking more trade up and down the coast: stone for the walls and pretties for Beysib gold. Most goes where it should, but some sails west and hooks about the Hag Banks—and you know what that means."

It galled a bit, but Hakiem had to shrug and shake his head. He'd

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heard of the banks, where the Beysib fisherfolk had taught Hort's people to set their nets for deep water fish, but he knew nothing more.

Hort's smile deepened. "Catch the current there," he whispered, lean-

ing further across the table. "And you bring up in the lee of Scavenger Island with a harbor as deep as ours, twice as wide—and no law at all to interfere with your gold."

The master storyteller twirled a grey tuft of his beard. He knew the history of Sanctuary better than any other man. These days the Rankans were the tyrants and the townsfolk pointed with underdog pride to their Ilsigi ancestry; it hadn't always been that way. Not far beyond the reach of living memory the Ilsig kings had been the enemy, and Scavenger's Island had been the sanctuary toward which the oppressed fled.

Scavenger's Island—pirate haven. A place which made Sanctuary at its worst seem serene and orderly by comparison. Scourge of the seas, Harrier of the coast, and, also, a place which had generally regarded Sanctuary as a poor relation and left it alone. But Sanctuary wasn't poor any longer.

"How does this tie to the missing men?" Hakiem asked, completely sober now.

Hort shrugged. "Some go willingly as recruits, the rest as galley slaves."

"And no one else suspects that we're being harvested by pirates?"

"Did you?"

Again Hakiem had to shake his head. Sanctuary had always been downtrodden—a home to thieves, not the target of pirates. Old habits died hard, indeed.

"The Old Man," Hort continued, speaking of his father, "says you can always trust kings and princes to build their walls in the wrong place."

/ suppose you can, Hakiem agreed in silence.

"You'll tell them, won't you?" Hort asked, no longer a storyteller but simply a young man who was afraid for his home and his life.

Hakiem nodded. He would, of course; nevertheless, a tale like this was wood-ripe for burning and required special care. There were people in Sanctuary who could confirm the substance of Hort's suspicions, and few of them owed an old storyteller a favor. He'd get started tomorrow, but without Hort. There were some tricks to his trade Hakiem hoped the younger man would never need to know.

"Anything else, my boy? Scandals, magic, two-headed calves?"

Hort relaxed and began one of many tales, about a love charm gone remarkably awry.

It was nearly dawn when Hakiem made his way out of the Maze to West Gate Street. He'd stayed out later than planned, drunk more than he should, and could practically feel his plump bed beneath his cheeks. A group of tired guards hailed him as he came through the gate, then looked the other way as he took a candle from the rack and slipped into the backways.

The backways were always the fastest, most discreet ways through the palace. A warren of hidden stairways, corridors and cul-de-sacs had been built in order to be officially forgotten at the end of each burst of palatial expansion. Like the Maze and the sewers, they were runwred to be more mysterious than they actually were. Beneath the Hall of Justice, Hakiem passed not one but three courtiers scurrying back to their proper beds; he didn't even try to count the servants.

There was only one protocol along these backways: silence. One might look, but never see; hear but never speak. Hakiem remembered what he saw, but unless he saw the same event in a public area it stayed locked forever within him.

As the storyteller rounded the dusty comer where the backways merged with the public ways, he was minded again of the similarities between palace life and criminal survival. There were seeds of an epic tale

sprouting in his mind and no room for other thoughts.

Later on Hakiem would say of those next few moments that he was neither a kowtowing Beysib nor a stiff-backed Rankan courtier and so he looked the Beysa straight in the eye as a proud Ilsigi. Truth was, though, that the sight of Shupansea—with her dark gold hair night-braided, her soft wool gown and slippers, and her deadly emerald beynit draped across her shoulder—sitting on his cushions completely unnerved him.

"0—0—0 Bey—" Words failed him as they had never failed before.

The Beysa reacted with more aplomb. She tittered like an apprentice handmaid and scattered a pile of drawings clear across the floor. Only the slender serpent retained its dignity; it yawned, showing its ivory fangs and crimson maw, then wove itself deep into her hair.

Shupansea grabbed the nearest of the drawings. She got to her feet and held it out as a peace offering. "I'm sorry. Storyteller . . ." Her lamp was guttering. A swathe of pale light came through the narrow window. She realized she'd spent the night in his room—with him or without him.

"Oh, I'm really sorry."

Hakiem bent down to pick up another drawing, and to look at something besides her face. A successful drunk learns that death is not the likely consequence of embarrassment. He had mastered that lesson years ago, but the Beysa, obviously, had not. She was redder than her serpent's

mouth.

"Had I known it was you, 0 Beysa," he tried to keep the absurd amusement from his voice and reached for another drawing. "Had I but known, I would have come home much sooner."

Time froze for a moment, then thawed as Shupansea exhaled in a long, trembling sigh. "I—I had nightmares. I thought you might be able to help . . . If I could think of an ending for the dreams, perhaps they'd go away. You always seem to know how things should end."

Hakiem shook his head sadly. "That's because stories may end while the hero—or heroine—is still alive. Life is different, 0 Beysa. But I would be glad to listen."

"No, I guess I understand that they're my dreams, and I must conquer them." She crouched down and gathered more of the colorful parchment scraps. Her fingers paused above a portrait of Prince Kadakithis standing uneasily beside a corpse. "I think maybe I learned something just looking at your pictures. It's strange—I've never thought of Ki-this using his sword. I mean, he's not weak, but I love him because he's gentle. He's strong and gentle—and someday maybe his people will realize that. But looking at this—well, I could see it happening. I knew. this man was a

traitor, and that Ki-this had to kill him. He was proud and disgusted both at the same time—and he grew up that night.

"I'll have to do the same thing—well, maybe not with a sword, but I've got to grow up if I'm to help him turn Sanctuary into one city for everyone, You should draw more pictures and put them where everyone can see them."

Hakiem made a sour grimace and took the scraps from her hand.

*That, I fear, is the general idea. I tell stories while an artist sketches, and then the Torch—excuse me. Lord Torchholder—intends to have them painted on his new walls."

Shupansea straightened as if the priest had entered the room. She had a half-dozen contradictory opinions about the omnipresent bureaucrat. Not that anyone claimed to understand Molin Torchholder. He was a black-haired Rankan, a dedicated priest of a vanquished god and the driving force behind the resurrection of a city he openly loathed.

"It's a good idea. He hasn't mentioned it yet, but he will, and both Ki-this and I will tell him so. He'll grumble something about doing what's necessary and walk away under a dark cloud. It must be hard, I think, to work as hard as Lord Torchholder does, and get so little satisfaction."

"They say hate is as satisfactory a mistress as love."

"I prefer love."

"Lord Torchholder does not."

The last drawing had slipped beneath the cushions. They both saw it at the same time and Hakiem, who recognized the subject from the visible

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corner, dove to retrieve it first. He would have had it, but his sudden lunge aroused Shupansea's serpent. Discretion was always the better part of valor, still a lump hardened in his throat as she pulled the sketch out.

Torchholder's orders had been precise: illustrations from Hakiem's stories of the events that had shaped Sanctuary since the Prince had arrived as governor. There had been few occasions more momentous than the afternoon when Kadakithis had handed the Savankh to the Beysa and her court-in-exile for "safe-keeping." Hakiem liked Shupansea now—the Prince wanted to make her his wife—but they'd hated her that afternoon and it showed clearly in Lalo's sketch.

Draped in jewels and cloth-of-gold, hard-eyed, her face and naked breasts painted an iridescent green, Shupansea had been the archetype of arrogance. The storyteller seldom connected the young woman he'd come to know and the alien creature he remembered, but he could not

deny that the Beysib, with their abundant gold and equally abundant contempt for all non-Beysib things, had been the prime cause of Sanctuary's horrors. The Rankan campaign against the Nisibisi in the north would scarcely have touched the city—much less divided it—if the Beysib hadn't riled it first.

"Does he intend to have them all painted?" Shupansea asked in carefully measured tones, her gaze never rising from the picture.

"With the Prince's approval, and yours—of course."

The parchment fluttered in her hand. Her eyes went wide and glassy, the beynit rose from her hair, and Hakiem began to doubt that she had, in fact, truly changed during the years he'd been advising her. She had returned the Savankh to the prince's keeping, but not the power behind it.

"We looked like that, didn't we?" Shupansea whispered as she put the parchment on top of the pile. "And nothing I ever do will erase that picture, will it?"

Hakiem caught her hand and squeezed it gently. "I don't tell stories about the future, you know, but it's my guess that Lord Molin means to leave the largest space—the space above the main gate—for a commemoration of your wedding with Prince Kadakithis—"

Shupansea sighed and pulled her hand away. "If we marry. Maybe hate is stronger than love." She stood in the doorway, looking over her shoulder, waiting for Hakiem to deny what she did not believe could be denied.

"Hope is the strongest of all," he assured, and watched her walk slowly down the corridor.

SLAVE TRADE

Robert Lynn Asprin

Saliman did not have to stretch his acting talents-to maintain an air of disdain as he carefully picked his way through the rows of chained slaves. He had performed this task hundreds of times before, so though unpleasant, the odor of so many close-packed, unwashed bodies was not new to him. The fact that he was on board a ship only added a new batch of musty smells to the proceedings. Pulling his cloak high to keep it from the filth on the floor would do no good. The air itself would invade the fabric until it would either have to be thoroughly cleaned or discarded altogether. One didn't wear one's best clothes to shop for slaves.

No, it was not the distasteful nature of the job that had Saliman in such a vile mood, but rather the hour. The fact that he had been roused from a warm bed shared by an even warmer bed partner to carry out this

mission in the pre-dawn hours virtually guaranteed that he would be less than generous in his negotiations with the slavers.

"I shouldn't be doing this," the man holding the lantern grumbled loudly. "I got better things to do, what with the ship to get underway and all."

This was, of course, the reason for this sudden assignment. The ship was due to sail on the morning tide, and it was important to carry out this mission before it left Sanctuary's waters. Still, it gave Saliman a focus for his irritation.

"Do you want me to tell that to Jubal?" he said, his expression bland.

"I'm sure if I alert him to your inconvenience, he'll be careful to only bother you with important matters in the future."

The thinly veiled threat was not lost on the slaver.

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"No! I ... that won't be necessary."

The slavers had paid well to be sure that Sanctuary's crime lord did not interfere with their operation, and did not wish to raise that price by denying his request. Particularly not when Jubal's prices were known to occasionally include blood as well as money.

"If you could simply speed your selection?" The man was pleading now. "This is the third time we've been through the rows, and if I don't set sail soon, I'll miss the morning tide and lose a full day's travel."

Saliman ignored him, not deigning to dignify the whine with a response as he peered around the darkness of the ship's hold. Sailing ships were not noted for their punctuality, not when winds and storms could affect their schedules by weeks, not just days.

Still, he was secretly in agreement with the slaver. This was taking much longer than was necessary. Of course, the search was slowed by his reluctance to admit that he was searching for two particular men rather than two slaves in general. If he were to impart that piece of information, the process would be speeded, but the price would doubtless increase with the implied importance of the individuals in question,

Surprisingly enough, it was the man Saliman only had a description of who had been the easiest to find. While his features and hair had been obvious enough, that slave had been rocking back and forth, hugging his knees and moaning his own name as if trying to cling to his pre-slave identity. It was the other man, the one Saliman knew on sight, who had thus far eluded his search.

A movement in the dark caught his eye, and he grasped the slaver's

arm, redirecting the light of the hooded lantern.

"What's that?" he demanded, gesturing toward a large sack, its mouth secured by ropes.

"That? Oh, that's a special deal we made. A fellow and a couple of his friends brought that one by ... said they were getting rid of his wife's lover. They made me promise not to let him out of the bag until we were at sea."

"You bought a slave without even looking at him?"

"They weren't asking much for him," the slaver shrugged. "If he's alive, we'll show a profit, and from the way the bag's been jumpin' around it's pretty safe to say he's alive."

"Well, open the bag and let me see him."

"But I just told you—"

"Yes, yes. You promised. But if you're about to sail, who's to know whether you opened it early or not?"

The slaver drew a breath to argue, then shrugged and gestured to the two burly sailors who had been standing by to insure that none of the

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slaves attempted either attack or escape while the hold was open. Those stalwarts seized the bag, kicking aside any slave who happened to be in their path, and began fumbling with the ropes that secured its mouth. There were a few underbreath grumbles about landsmen who didn't know proper knots, then the bag was opened and its contents jerked upright for display.

The slave was a slim youth, still clothed—which confirmed the slaver's claim that he had been untouched since being brought aboard. His wrists were bound and his mouth gagged, and he blinked painfully in the sudden light of the lantern's glare.

Saliman knew him instantly, though he was careful not to let any sign of recognition show on his face. Shadowspawn. One of Sanctuary's homegrown thieves who had stolen and fought his way to the top of his profession.

The thief gave no sign of recognizing Saliman, though whether this was from any cunning on his part or from simple lantern-blindness and drug-confusion, was hard to tell. Whichever it was, he decided to act before the scene had a chance to change.

"Well, he's not much . . . but he's the closest I've seen. I'll take him."

He made a point of turning away before the slaver could even begin the anticipated protest.

"But ... I can't do that!" came the expected sputter. "I told you, we weren't even supposed to open the sack until we were at sea! If the ones who sold him to us see him walking around town—"

". . . You won't care one whit because you'll already be at sea with your profits," Saliman finished loftily. "Spare me your efforts to wheedle a higher price. Remember, I'm not some landowner who only buys one slave a year. I'm too familiar with the trade to be convinced of the worth of a slaver's word."

"But—"

"I'll give you fifty in gold for him. If that isn't sufficient I'll just have to review the rest of your stock again. I was trying to be considerate of your schedule, but if you prefer to spend time haggling I have nothing else to do before midday."

Faced with logic, an ebbing tide, and a more than generous offer, the slaver surrendered ... as Saliman had known he would. Still, by the

time the money had changed hands and the slaves hauled out of the hold and offloaded onto the wharf, the sun had already begun its slow climb into the heavens.

A wagon was waiting there, and the slaves were put in the load and covered with a tarp, the thief still secured in his sack. Saliman had a

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healthy respect for the youth's talents, and did not wish to return to Jubal with one slave and a tale of escape. The one called Shadowspawn would have to wait until they were in more secure quarters before his bonds were loosened . . . quarters safe not only from escape, but from prying eyes as well.

Despite his offhand manner with the slaver, Saliman kept a careful watch until his cargo was covered from sight. The fishermen had already left for their day's task so the wharf was deserted, but that could only serve to focus attention on his own activities. Though he had had no specific instructions for secrecy, he could see no advantage to letting it be known that the two slaves were still in Sanctuary, and countless disadvantages.

The driver clucked to his team and departed without a wave or a backward glance, leaving Saliman to find his way to the rendezvous on his own. Again, this was as planned. While it would have been easier to ride in the wagon, there were too many in town who recognized him on sight and knew him for Jubal's lieutenant. Shopping and hauling were not among his normal duties, and his presence on the wagon would have drawn unwanted attention to the cargo and its destination.

He was not normally awake, much less about at such an early hour, and as he trudged through the streets Saliman peered about him curiously as the shops and stalls of Sanctuary came to life, preparing for the day's business. There seemed to be more people in town now, a lot of strange faces what with the work being done on the walls. Work meant money in the pockets of the laborers, money which was quickly transferred to the coffers of shopkeepers, tavern owners and whores. The old hopelessness of Sanctuary and the more recent fears during the street wars and magic upheavals seemed to have disappeared in the light of the new prosperity. There was even a light, mischievous tone to the street haggling over prices which had never been there during the old days of desperation.

As he walked and listened. Saliman allowed himself a rare, leisurely moment of envy. It seemed so simple to earn your living that way . . . stock and customers, straightforward transactions where the biggest worry was price-setting and the rent.

How many years had he worked for Jubal now? Did any of these people appreciate or even suspect the amount of work necessary to maintain the crime lord's illusion of omnipresence?

Take this morning's exercise for example. His instructions had been simple enough: Two slaves of a given description, or rather one of a given description and the other a specific, known individual, were to be purchased from a ship where they were being held before that ship set sail.

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There had been no explanation as to how Jubal knew of their captivity or reason given for their rescue, just the instruction to effect their release and to deliver them to Jubal with a minimum of disruption or attention.

It would have been a simple enough matter, if it weren't for the short deadline for his work. First, there had been a matter of arranging for operating capital at an hour when no goldsmith or moneylender was functioning. Then someone had to be sent to fetch a wagon and driver to meet him at the ship while he prepared for the visit by learning all he could about the slaver he was to deal with. Though in this case it had proved unnecessary, the information that the slaver had a favorite mistress in town could have proved invaluable if he had proved to be difficult to negotiate with. A timely kidnapping would have given Saliman all the leverage he would need to effect the rescue . . . and of course, that

contingency had had to be arranged as well. The men standing by near the mistress's dwelling would have to be paid for their time as well as their skills, even though the latter had not been called on.

Fortunately Saliman's records on the night shift of the city guard were up to date, though the recent reorganization had thrown everything into a cocked hat for a while. He knew who was on duty, what their patrol patterns were, who was lax and who was bribable, so the return journey from the wharf could be routed to best avoid interference or questions. It might seem a minor thing, but the recent rash of slaver kidnappings had set the watch on edge, and Saliman had no desire to purchase the two men only to be accused of kidnapping them himself.

Yes, it would be nice to be able to do business openly and simply. Boring perhaps, but nice. Saliman smiled at the thought, then dismissed it. The truth was, he enjoyed his work. If anything, his administrative duties had doubled when Jubal moved his organization underground, and the challenge and excitement generated by the simplest of tasks, like the release of two slaves, was payment in itself. . . , though his actual salary was nothing to be ashamed of. Being close to the crime lord meant not only having an overview of everything that happened in town, but actually having a hand in shaping events as well. It was a fascinating job. One Saliman wouldn't give up for the world.

His thoughts amused and occupied him all the way to his destination ... the delivery entrance of The House of Whips and Chains. This

brothel was perhaps the most dubious member of Sanctuary's Street of Red Lanterns, catering to the most bizarre and jaded tastes of a notoriously tasteless town. Even so, it would be strange to have an open wagon pull up to the front door, and as such the use of the delivery door was a must. Even here, or, perhaps, especially here, the streets had eyes and it did not pay to relax one's vigilance.

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The thief had been released from his sack and was being held, still bound and gagged, between two retainers. Saliman noticed that the youth's eyes were alert and wary, and assumed that whether it was drugs or seasickness which had caused the earlier dullness, it had since worn off. There was no sign of the brothel's women; caution or the hour confined them to their rooms. Also, there was no sign of the second slave, which he assumed meant that Jubal was currently occupied with the interview. This last assumption, however, turned out to be incorrect.

"He wants you upstairs, third door," one of the retainers greeted him flatly. "You're to take this one with you."

So Jubal had finished with the other slave already and was waiting . . . impatiently from the sounds of it.

Saliman fought back the urge to grimace and simply nodded as he

motioned for the thief to precede him up the stairs. Any indication of difficulty or disunity within Jubal's forces had to be hidden from outsiders. He had worked too hard teaching new recruits the necessity of maintaining that illusion to shatter it himself.

His charge paused in front of the indicated door, and he reached past to rap sharply on the door with a knuckle. The particular rhythm he used signaled that he wasn't alone, but when several moments passed without a call to wait, he opened the door and ushered the thief inside.

The room was dark, one of the windowless, possibly soundproof chambers of the house. The only light came from a small brazier filled with glowing embers from which protruded the handle of a branding iron. There were shackles on the wall, and a low sofa where one could recline comfortably while watching the branding process.

"Close the door."

JubaT's voice came from one of the corners the light didn't reach.

Saliman obeyed, smiling at his employer's invariable flair for the dramatic.

"Remove his bonds."*

Again Saliman moved to comply, this time twirling a blade from its hiding place in his sleeve. He made the move deliberately showy. The

thief had a reputation for knives. It wouldn't hurt him to know there were others in Sanctuary who prided themselves on their blade-handling ability. As he reached for the gag, however, the youth beat him to it, ungagging himself with hands that were somehow free from the ropes that had secured them.

Though Saliman showed no reaction, he knew the thief had won this particular round of showing off. So did Shadowspawn, who shot him a mocking glance as he tossed the gag and ropes aside. It seemed doubtful the two would become fast friends.

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"Hanse . . . sometimes called Shadowspawn," Jubal said, moving into the light of the brazier. "Do you know who I am, thief?"

The youth folded his arms across his chest, his stance arrogant and rebellious.

"We've never met, but it's easy to figure who you are. You're Jubal, right? You're older than I thought."

Saliman winced at the thief's brazen mockery of Jubal's spell-aged body, but the crime lord seemed to take no offense.

"True, we've never met. In fact, you're one of the few of the local talent who never approached me for work, or at least to sell information. I was always curious as to why."

"I work alone," Hanse shrugged. "Besides, I'm choosy about my friends."

"Not too choosy, if your friends include the likes of Tempus Thales," Jubal retorted, his voice hardening. "And as for being your own man . . ."

He lifted the iron from the brazier.

"... I fear that came to a halt when the slavers took you. You're mine now. Bought and paid for."

Saliman expected Hanse to flinch, but the thief was uncowed. Though his eyes followed the iron, his voice was firm and confident.

"You aren't going to brand me," he said, more as a statement than a defiant challenge.

"I'm not?"

"You don't have to untie me to brand me," Hanse pointed out. "If anything, the process would be easier if I were still tied. That means you

want to talk. All right. Quit waving that iron around and let's talk. What is it you want?"

Jubal stared at the thief for long moments before returning the iron to the brazier. Saliman could understand why. There was nothing in their record to indicate Hanse possessed the intelligence he was now displaying. He wondered if this would mean a change in Jubal's plans.

"You've changed, thief," the crime lord said at last. "What happened while you were gone to change you?"

For the first time since removing his bonds, Shadowspawn seemed to falter.

"I ... I'd rather not talk about it."

"Very well," Jubal nodded. "Shall we get down to business?"

Interesting, Saliman thought. The thief doesn't fear the branding iron, but his recent past makes him uncomfortable. Though Jubal did not look his way or give any other indication, he knew he was expected to make

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note of Shadowspawn's apparent vulnerability and investigate it as soon

as possible.

"How did you know where I was?" Hanse said suddenly.

"I have many sources of information." Jubal waved deprecatingly.

"That particular piece of news came to me from the S'danzo."

"The S'danzo?" the thief frowned. "I didn't know you had any friends among the S'danzo."

"I don't," the crime lord acknowledged without rancor. "But now at least a few of them owe me a favor for arranging your freedom. No, the information came from one of your friends."

"My friends?"

"Two of them, actually," Jubal added, apparently relishing the thief's surprise. "One of them, the older, sensed your danger and went to the younger, the blacksmith's wife, to divine your specific location. Hers was the added price of freeing the other slave as well . . . a favor to another client, I believe. Anyway, realizing time was short, they passed word to me, asking for my intervention in your behalf."

Saliman was listening attentively. This was the first he knew of the source of this morning's exercise. Learning it now, he realized why Jubal had been so eager to have this mission completed, and completed effi-

ciently. He knew a moment's pride that the crime lord had turned to him as his first choice for crucial work, then returned to his analysis.

The S'danzo were tight-knit and mutually supportive. Jubal had been trying for years to find a chink in their armor, and now their desperation over the welfare of a thief had delivered opportunity into his hands.

Saliman wondered briefly of the price exacted for his work. Had Juba! demanded guarantees and assurances, or had he risked it all on performing this favor gratis, preferring to leave the repayment unspecified and therefore open. Probably the latter. Jubal had gained much of his power from Just such favors owed in return for his help at key moments.

"Then I'm free to go?" Hanse said uncertainly, glancing again at Saliman.

"I didn't say that." Jubal smiled.

"But you said the S'danzo paid for you to have me freed."

"What I said was, they asked me to free you from the slavers. That's been done. However nothing was said about freeing you from me ... and I happen to have need of your services myself."

"Since when did you need help to steal something," Shadowspawn sneered, his old arrogance back.

"I don't, thief. At least, not from the likes of you," Jubal replied coldly. "There is, however, a task you can perform for me in return for your complete freedom . . . one involving someone who trusts you."

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"I'm a thief, not an assassin," the youth snapped proudly.

The crime lord raised his eyebrows in exaggerated surprise.

"Reluctant to kill, are you? Strange, I don't recall your showing any reluctance the night you helped Tempus kill four of my men."

Even in the brazier's glow Saliman could see the thief blanch.

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"You do remember, don't you? That night outside the Lily Garden? Or perhaps you thought I didn't know about it."

"They attacked us. It was self-defense,"

Shadowspawn seemed suddenly aware of the hot iron again.

"They were trying to punish Tempus for murdering their comrades . . . and stop him from continuing his sport of hunting Hawkmarks, of course," Jubal intoned. "I know you had no choice, however. Otherwise I wouldn't have left your killings without response."

He paused to study the thief.

"Now, if I thought you had a hand in freeing Tempus from Kurd's, I might not be so generous in my treatment of you."

Saliman kept a blank expression as he watched the thief try to hide his discomfort. It was clear that Hanse was unsure if Jubal was truly ignorant of his part in Tempus's escape, or if he was simply being toyed with. His fear of the crime lord was great enough, however, that he wouldn't risk Jubal's possible wrath by openly admitting his guilt. Saliman knew, however, that now that fear was foremost in the thief's mind, they could get down to business.

"That's all behind us now. Rest assured I don't need you to kill anyone," Jubal said smoothly, as if reading Saliman's thoughts. "Actually, all you have to do to win your freedom is to arrange a meeting for me."

"A meeting?"

"Yes. With Prince Kadakithis. I believe he's a friend of yours?"

The thief was clearly off balance now.

"How did you know that?"

Jubal smiled.

"I've been aware of it for some time. I would suggest, however, if you want it kept secret, that you try to keep the Prince from shouting about it in public . . . like, from the top of brick piles?"

Hanse flinched at the memory, but gathered himself to rally back.

"Why do you want to meet with him? I'd have to tell him something."

"Probably not. I believe my name is not exactly unknown to him. Still, if it will ease things, tell him I have a business proposition for him."

"What kind of a proposition?"

Jubal turned back to the brazier and poked at the coals with the iron as he answered

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"There's a civil war coming, thief. Not a local upheaval like we've just survived, an Empire-wide struggle. Even you should be able to see that. This town's only hope of success is to rally behind one leader . . . and right now Kadakithis would seem to be that leader. I plan to offer him my services . . . mine and my organization's. I believe we can aid him

as an intelligence network, providing information and, if need be, stilling dissenting voices. I think even Vashanka's priest would admit our value in that capacity."

The crime lord turned to face the thief.

"All you have to do is arrange the meeting. Unfortunately, my position makes it difficult, if not impossible, to approach him through normal channels. Arrange it, and you may go free."

"What if I agree and just keep going?"

"I'll find you," Jubal said calmly. "More important, until you've discharged your obligation to me, you'll be my slave. Legally, bought and paid for. I don't have to brand you."

The crime lord tossed the iron back into the brazier to illustrate his point. "You'll know it, and I'll know it. I think that knowing you're not your own man, that you belong to me, will mark you more than I could ever do with a branding iron."

Saliman was not so sure, but he had learned to trust Jubal's judgment when it came to people- Watching the thief ponder the proposal, he began to believe anew.

"What if the Prince doesn't agree? He's changed since I've been gone. There's no guarantee I can convince him if he isn't interested in your offer."

"All I ask is that you try." Jubal grimaced. "If he refuses, then I'll let you buy your freedom ... for five hundred in gold."

Shadowspawn's head came up.

"Five hundred? That's not enough!"

Jubatlaughed.

"I should think you'd be more likely to argue the price was too high, especially considering what we paid for you. Still, if it will make you feel better, I could name a higher figure."

Shadowspawn shook his head. "You could double it ... triple it even and it would be too low."

"I know," Jubal said solemnly. "The price always sounds low to a slave. It's because he thinks of his worth as a man, while the buyer and seller see him only as merchandise."

Saliman could see the crime lord's thoughts turning to his own beginnings in the gladiator pens, but then Jubal seemed to shake off the memo-

ries as he continued.

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"The price stands at five hundred," he stated, eyeing the thief.

"Frankly, I'd rather you concentrated on arranging the meeting. That is priceless to me."

"I'll see what I can do. Can I go now?"

"One more thing. While you belong to me, I feel a certain responsibility for your safety. Here."

The crime lord produced an oilskin-wrapped package from within his tunic and tossed it to Shadowspawn. Opening it, the thief found a familiar assortment of knives and throwing stars.

"I wouldn't ask you to walk the streets of Sanctuary unarmed. You'll probably feel more comfortable with your weapons. In case you're wondering, a man named Tarkle was selling them."

"I know," the thief growled, settling the glittering bits of death in their customary places. "I recognized his voice when they loaded me on the ship."

Saliman had to hide his smile. Obviously Jubal had planned this surprise as the climax to the interview ... a final demonstration of his access to secret information. The thief had already known the secret, but luckily Shadowspawn was so preoccupied with his knives that he didn't realize how anti-climactic the announcement was.

"Well, whatever you're thinking will have to wait until after you've seen the Prince," Jubal ordered irritably. "I didn't go to all this trouble to lose you in an alley brawl. Remember, for the time being at least, you're not your own man- You're mine."

"Oh, I'll remember. Believe me, I'll remember."

Saliman felt a sudden chill as Shadowspawn met the crime lord's look with a gaze that was not at all subservient.

THE BEST OF FRIENDS

C. J. Cherryh

Morning on the streets of Sanctuary, a cold, knife's edge wind that rattles at shutters prudently closed in the thief-plagued maze, and drizzle comes on that wind, to slick the stones and darken the aged wood and make muck out of the filth that lies in every crack and crevice of the cobbles.

Citizens stir out, nonetheless. A body has to, who wants to eat. Everyone goes cloaked and muffled, from the beggars in their grime-colored rags, to the well-to-do factor on his way to the wharfside warehouses.

Thus Amhan Nas-yeni, an ordinary sort of man, a man with a nobody face and a nobody shock of dark hair beneath the hood, neither tall nor short, stout nor thin. Nas-yeni goes at a moderate pace in these streets, cloaked and muffled, and quite unremarkable among the average Ilsigis of better than average means, merchants, shopkeepers, traders and smiths.

In fact he is a tradesman and still solvent, despite the recent chaos that saw blood, not rainwater, running in the gutters of the town—some might say, because of that chaos, which needed supply of weapons and other such illicit things, as well as licit ones, to people who could pay not always with coin, but sometimes in protection, sometimes in elimination of threats, sometimes in liberated goods that had the stamp of Rankene military on them, but there was always a market. There was always a market, that was what Nas-yeni would say. He walked a careful line, did Amhan Nas-yeni, and walked it with, in his own estimation, scrupulous integrity: a man of honor. A man of principles.

A man who loved his son, and who had warned him; at the same time he understood young idealists, and was proud of him.

"Be sensible," he had told his son. "Trade is the way to power."

And his son Beruth: "Trade! When the Rankene pigs tax us to the bone and confiscate our shipments!"

"Did I say, compliance?" he had said. "Did I say, stupidity?" Tapping the side of his head. "Brains, young hothead. Trade is an art of the mind. Trade is an art of compromise—"

"Compromise! With Rankan pigs?"

"—In which you contrive each time to make a profit. In which you use your head, young man."

"When they use the sword. No, papa. Not when they can just take everything. Not when they don't have to play the game. Not with the sword only in their hands. You fight your way. I'll fight mine- We're both right."

With that light in his eye and that half-smile that haunted a father's sleep. Like the way he had found him two days later, where the Rankans had thrown the body, out on the rubbish heap where birds, in those dark days, gathered in black, carrion-hunting clouds. Beruth had had no eyes,

then. And what else they had done to him before the birds got to him . . .

Nas-yeni had fought his war of trade then. Had stripped himself to the bone, not selling, at the last, but giving away everything that he had to the rebels, paying out coin and weapons and supply to hire men who would find Rankans to question, to find out one thing, only one thing:

who.

Who, because the why of it did not matter. He was Ilsigi. He was an honorable man, the way Ilsigis had been, before Ilsigis tried to trade with Rankan lords who had a sword, when they did not. He was of a very old family. He remembered, as many Ilsigis no longer did, the entire tale of his ancestors and the worth of them.

He remembered, as even he had forgotten for a while, until his son reminded him, that blood is worth everything in the world; and that once that debt is made, only blood can pay it.

Their names, he had asked of his informants. Give me their names.

And the answer came back, finally: The Stepsons Critias and Straton.

He began then, to learn everything that he could learn about these two

names. He learned their partnership in the Sacred Band. He learned what this meant. He learned their wamames and their histories, as much as his informers could extract from gossip and the talk of Rankan soldiers in bars and whorehouses.

He wanted more than their deaths. He wanted revenge. He wanted

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their ruin, their slow, suffering ruin, of a sort that would erode the soul, such a soul as such butchers might have; and he wanted them to fear, at the last, the way their victims had feared them, with a sickening, hopeless fear.

Therefore he had held his hand from Straton, when his informants told him Straton's soul was already in pawn—to a witch. Therefore he had sweated in agony, seeing the Stepsons ride north and Critias ride with them: therefore he had prayed nightly to the darkest of gods for the saving of one Stepson from war and from the chances of war—and for the weaving of spells about the other, spells that should damn him to hell and bring Critias—the stiff-necked, hard-handed Critias, straight from war and arriving bloody-minded in a town rife with ensorcelments, a town Straton commanded—bring Critias back with a vengeance, oh, yes, the man of war to the man bespelled, his partner, his—lover, doubtless, in the way of Sacred Band partners: Nas-yeni knew every detail he could glean of the Sacred Band, studied them, obsessively, the way he had once

studied his rivals in business, and studied, most particularly, this Pair, their reputations, their manner, the time of their sleeping and eating and the look on their faces . . . even that, because he had been near them, oh, often, that he had stood so close to one or the other of them, had brushed against them in crowds, had looked once in Straton's very eyes as they collided, unexpected—

—eyes that looked into my son's eyes. eyes that had no pity, eyes looking out of Hell now, is it, murderer? I could take you. I could slip a knife into you and watch those eyes go, oh, so shocked and frightened. . . .

But far too quick, far, far too quick. Good day to you, Rankan. Good day and gods protect you, Rankan, against any chance of the streets.

He had smiled at Straton, friendly as could be. And the Rankan, with whatever burdened his conscience, whatever hate, whatever distrust of Ilsigis who smiled at him, had looked confused and angry that an Ilsigi had touched him.

Perhaps . . . expecting that knife in the gut.

Often, on the street, once Straton settled into pattern, in those dark days, when only a fool would observe patterns—but Straton went befuddled in those days, befuddled and more and more hell-ridden—Nas-yeni would smile at him, that same, secret smile that had everything of obse-

quiousness in it—Hail, our conqueror. How brave of you, to ride among us, morning and evening, mazy-eyed and bewitched.

Do you know me yet? His mother always said Beruth had my eyes, my mouth.

But he would not have smiled at you.

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His mother died, do you know. in the winter. Took to her bed. Never smiled again. Just died. She took all the drugs I bought, one dose.

I owe you so much. Stepson. Truly I do.

They say the Stepsons are coming back to Sanctuary.

Critias . . . is coming home. What will you say to him, my friend?

What will you tell him about this town you rule?

Who will you sleep with. then?

And how will the Riddler deal with you?

Every morning, every evening. One of the crowd.

Part of the crowd when Critias rode in, grim and hard—hard and soldierly, where Straton had grown fey, and strange.

Where Straton served Her who was whispered about only rarely and in the lowest of tones among the few Ilsigis who knew they had a Patron, of sorts-

It confused even Nas-yeni.

But the torment, the absolute hell in Straton's look nowadays—that satisfied him. So did the rumors of estrangement.

And to help it along, he took to the skills of his youth—set up an archery butt in the warehouse now largely depleted of goods, but enough for a man to live on, who did not plan to live forever.

He had been a damned fine shot, in his youth, in the time that he had spent in the city guard. The hand and the eye remembered. Hate might make the one tremble. Grief might blur the eye. But purpose—that was clear and cold. Critias was back. Straton was in ruin already: one of the Pair was broken, and too difficult to predict.

Eliminate him.

From a rooftop.

In a way that an assassin could escape, and lay guilt upon the other Partner, and fear on all their company. It was what Beruth would have done, it was his kind of vengeance; it had sharp, keen savor, the drawing of that arrow—blue-fletched, Jubal's colors, not because Nas-yeni had any particular grudge against the ex-slaver, but because it might make the maximum of trouble-

And the wind being what it was, and Straton's damned horse in the way—

But it had hit, all the same, and created havoc beyond Nas-yeni's own imagining—delivered Straton wounded, into the hands of enemies who had not handled him gently, by all accounts; and crippled him; while Tempus, displeased with a city block in ruins and with the rise of witchly influences in his ranks, one supposed, demoted him.

And departed, leaving, the gods be thanked, Critias in command of a city Straton had lusted after, Straton crippled and drinking himself stu-

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porous night after night in the Vulgar Unicorn, Straton with so much witch-sign about him that he was notorious, and even footpads refrained from cutting his throat on his drunken wanderings to and from the barracks or the bars. They refrained because the word was out in the underworld of Sanctuary that this man was protected, and that throats would

be cut if this man's was.

Things were altogether as Nas-yeni would have them: one enemy in a living hell, banished even from the witch's bed, living because no one was friend enough to kill him; and the other—the other—

There was no more to be done to Straton.

There was Critias . . . safe as yet, newly set into an office that Tempus had given him, perhaps with a sense that here was the only place that Straton might stay alive and Critias the only man who might have a chance to heal him: that much understanding Nas-yeni had of his enemies as he had had of his rivals in trade, canny trader that he had been, and smuggler, and judge of men. It was a fool who failed to see his enemy as man like any man, needing the things a man needed, like companionship, like solace, like—the illusions of these things, where the substance failed. By such things a trader lived and prospered; by such things, the likes of Straton and Critias worked on their victims, breaking their confidence as they broke the body.

By such things a man could unravel another.

A hunter had to be his own prey. They were locked together in this hunt, which had achieved a certain intimacy. Nas-yeni who had no family, had two men whose every thought he surmised, whose every move he

could now predict; they kept him from loneliness, they kept his heart beating and the blood moving in his veins; they gave him something to think about and to look forward to, something which made him very glad his shots had gone amiss.

First Straton. Now Critias. Critias—who already suffered. He might simply live and watch Critias, watch the slow embitterment of a man left to a town which hated him. But he knew this man like a son. He knew that such embitterment would leach the feeling out of a man like Critias;

knew that some morning Straton would simply turn up dead of drink or some mischance no bribe could save him from, and Critias would be sorry and relieved, and the boil would be lanced, that was all, the pain stopped.

That would never do.

A change in fortunes for Critias, the man facing all directions; and absolute hell for Straton, the man who had lost his way. The very plan was an indulgence approaching the sensual for a man who had restrained

himself so long, so very long, and nightly prayed for his enemies, that they go on living.

And it was so easy, for a man so like every other man in Sanctuary, to the eyes of the invaders.

Wind and rain spatter at the eaves, rattle the shutters and bring cold into the room where Moria dresses, hastily, in the stink and the squalor of the tenement she shares with Stilcho, late of Ischade's service. A gray, dim light reaches the bed where Stilcho rests, drugged with what she can buy him—sleep, peace which she can buy him, who has so little peace nowadays.

He is so handsome, so very beautiful to her whose beauty a mage gave her, whose beauty, Rankene-fair, Haught bespelled with stolen magic;

Stilcho's, she had never seen—had been terrified of him, whom Ischade had raised from the dead; she had dreaded the sight of him, shrunk from the chance touch of his hand, which in those days had been chill, had seen only his scars, which the beggar-king had given him, a Stepson, in the long, long night that he had been the beggar-king's prisoner, and they had taken out his right eye, and were about to take the other when Ischade had intervened.

Ischade had claimed him then, since the Stepsons would not have him,

a walking dead; and Ischade, whose curse took the life of her lovers, (except Strat, gods only knew why but Moria made guesses) had taken Stilcho in Straton's stead on those terrible nights when the black mood was on her, and she evaded Straton and drove all her servants from her presence—except Stilcho, on whom the curse fell with all its force, who could die, and die, and die, because she had strings on his soul, and could pull it up again from hell—

Moria had seen him on such mornings, had seen his face and shuddered at that look, that bleak terror, that awful intensity with which he would sit and feel of things, the table, the texture of the cloth, the flesh of his arm—as if it were precious and all too fragile.

She had heard him scream—had heard him, as no woman should hear a man, break down in tears and plead with Ischade, not again, not again, no more—

She had shuddered at the mere sight of him in those days.

But those arms, however chill, had been there to hold her when her own world came tumbling down. And his goodness, his loyalty, had touched even Ischade's sense of justice: she had brought him all the way back. She had set him free—free as a man could be, who had suffered what he had, and who still waked screaming of nights, seeing hell, and demons.

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Krrf gave him peace. Krrf let him lie safe from his devils—so, so good to see, his quiet sleep, his face that was always so pale, at rest, the patched eye and the fall of dark hair, all that was dark about him: the rest was light, white-washed in the light that, like the chill wind, came through the shutter slats.

She tied a ragged brown scarf about her blonde hair. And from its place in the corner, disguised with clay, she took a lump that was heavier than any rock ought to be, a lump that weighed like sin—or pure gold.

She put it in the ratty basket she had, along with some rags of laundry, She was very careful going out the door, and left the latchstring inside, so only he could open it.

He would know, she feared, when he woke. The first thing he would check would be that corner where they hid the lump she had salvaged from the Peres house. Last night she had begged him to let her take it to old Gorthis, who would give her, she argued, fair price for it. He had fenced for the gangs, back before the war. She knew Gorthis, that he was an honest fence, at least, he gave the fairest rates in Sanctuary. He need not suspect that it was Ischade's gold.

No, Stilcho had said, absolute and angry. No!

What do you want? she had cried, too loudly, in this damned tenement where every sound found other ears. Us to starve?

Better that than some things, he had said, his hands hard on her shoulders, his voice the lowest of whispers. Moria, Moria, it's too dangerous, the damned thing's too big! It's too much! Your fence can't afford a lump like that, he can't pay you, he'll cheat you or he'll rob you, one or the other, damn it all, Moria, you can't take that thing through the streets'

He was close to panic. His grip hurt her shoulders and the fear in him frightened her, who knew what his panics were like, how bad they were, how unreasoning and how difficult for her to bear, old nightmares, old memories (not so many months ago) of Stilcho's voice shrieking terror through the river house, haunting all their nights. A woman could not take that, in the man she loved. She did not want to remember that. She did not want him to break, who was at once so strong and so fragile.

We'll melt it down, he said.

When? she cried at him, and sucked in her breath and bit her lip. They had been over that territory. It was what he always promised whenever

she talked about selling it- It took a fire bigger than they could raise in their apartment to melt a lump like that. They could not heat it and hammer it. The walls would carry every sound. The smell would go through the cracks and the gaps. There would be outcries: fire was the eternal terror in the tenements, and neighbors would come hammering

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on the door demanding answers, threatening them with violence, because they already knew that her man was . . . peculiar, and likely a fugitive mage: that was the whisper about him that she had heard, a dangerous kind of whisper, because mages were trouble, and a block of Sanctuary in ashes had proved it to the town at large.

And so, so easily in a place like this, a rumor could get started that would damn them both, and have their apartment broken into.

Or their throats cut.

She would go to Gorthis. He would take the tump and set up an account for her, and there would be no money, except what it took to get a better place to live, and then the things they needed, and the lease of a shop—a little shop, that was what she wanted with that gold. A liveli-

hood for herself and her man where he could find the quiet he needed to forget, and shutters and a stout door she could bar against the dark, where She walked, and hunted.

Down the stairs, out onto the streets, a woman with a basket of rags, a woman with a scarf over her head and a heavy shawl and long skirts to disguise her youth and her looks.

Uptown, like some cleaning woman going to work, for some middling-well-to-do family not rich enough for servants. She was legion, in the midtown of Sanctuary: cook or maid, respectable enough and not soliciting, and not a mugger in the town would waste time on her, when there was richer prey abroad.

Straton slid from the saddle and caught himself, hanging from the bay's stirrup-leather, a little short of impaling himself on the iron spikes that thrust up through Ischade's hedge. The bay whickered, swung its head around and nosed at him with the roughness a big horse could use—warm, warm, not like Crit said, a dead thing, nor hell-spawned. /;

loved him. He took it for omen. He clung to that omen, that Ischade who had withdrawn every sign of gentleness toward him, did not take the horse back, but left it with him, left him one gift of hers, at least, which had no hidden thorn.

He wept against the bay's neck, standing there in the rain, both of

them wet and chilled. He was very drunk. And he knew that he ought to get back on the horse and ride, quickly-

But he did not. He pushed himself away from the warmth of the horse and staggered a step to the gate. The cold of the iron burned his hand. A rose thorn pricked his thumb and he carried his hand unconsciously to his mouth and sucked at the blood that welled up.

The gate swung inward and the way lay open through the yard, the

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maze of hip-high and scraggly weeds, the thornbushes and black, skeletal trees that all but obscured the little house, the gray stone porch.

He went, staggering a little and desperately trying to balance himself between the drunkenness it needed to come this far and the sobriety he had to muster to deal with her.

The thumb still bled, when he looked at it, and he wiped it on his breeches and looked up again at the door just in front of him, hearing the give of the hinges.

The sight of her hit him in the gut—so beautiful, all dark and light, her black dress blowing in the gusts, her square-cut hair flying like smoke about her face, about dark eyes that seized on his soul and threatened to uproot it.

"Ischade—" His jaw refused to work without his teeth chattering. He was cold through. The wind bit like a knife, here so much in the open, on the high shore of the White Foal. And there was no promise of yielding in the look she gave him. "Ischade, I hurt, I hurt so damned bad—" He held his arm, and the pain was there, even through the alcohol, worse, in the rain and the cold; aching so he could not sleep. "You healed the damn horse, can't you help me?"

"There are physicians."

"For Vashanka's sake, Ischade—"

"Vashanka didn't help Tempus. I doubt he has power here."

"Damn you!"

"Better men have tried. Leave, Strat. Now."

He stood there, shivering, his teeth chattering and the pain in his

shoulder a dull, bone-deep ache, the way it had been for days and nights of this weather, the way the pain got into bone and brain, and he wished he had the courage to kill himself, but he kept holding out some idiot hope that someone, somewhere made this pain worthwhile. He had had her. He had had Crit. Neither one was acting sane. Neither one had acted sane for months. A man who had been loved once and twice in his life—went on expecting more of it, and believing things could be right again; a man who had seen the two people he most respected—yes, dammit, respected, for all she was a damn woman—in the whole universe . . . lose their minds and act like lunatics—kept expecting that they would wake up one morning with their wits about them and come to him and tell him they were sorry.

A man couldn't kill himself, whose world was that badly skewed. A man could not go—wherever he had damned himself to go—with his whole universe gone crazy and right and wrong all tangled; most of all with the faith (still) that if he could just hold on, if he could just beat reason into one of them, that everything would somehow sort itself out.

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"Ischade, dammit, I didn't mean what I did! I didn't understand! Ischade. dammit, it's enough, it's parking enough, open the damn door!"

That was his voice, cracking and breaking like a teenaged boy's. That

was himself, on his hands and knees in the wet weeds, because the world had suddenly spun around to the left, and gone black a moment, and he had landed there, and hurt his shoulder in the process. He nerved himself to push, and got the arm up against him and one foot and then the other under him, and turned and walked back to the gate, thinking that was about as far as he could walk before he fell down and lay there and froze to death in the rain.

But he did not. He made it to the bay horse, and hung there against its warmth a while till he could get his breath back-

"Take him, why don't you?" he muttered to the hedge, the unnatural roses, the witch who had his soul in pawn. "You've taken everything else, Take him and be damned to you."

If she heard him, in her sorcerous ways of being aware of everything near the wards, she gave no sign. The bay horse stood rock-steady for him to mount, and bore him away, where it chose; he did not care whether it was a shelter or over the cliffs: let it choose. The White Foal, beyond the trees, was roiled and muddy, and looked friendlier than the town did.

Ischade sat down, at the table in the house that was somehow larger inside than outside, and which had more rooms and windows than appeared from outside. She sat in her cluttered living room, where the cloaks of former lovers, like torn moths' wings, gave riotous color to the floor, the couch, the chairs, the bed, cloaks and bright cloth and here and

there a trinket which a careless foot might tread upon and break ... of no interest to her these days, these gray and deadly days-

She rested her elbows on the table and her face within her hands, and went into that nowhere place which she had learned to find within herself, as the Stepson Niko had had it, that inner landscape which in her case was a maze of many doors, each one with a key and a lock.

The hallway was safe. It had turnings and there were dark places, and there were doors that rattled ominously and clamored with lost voices, doors which weakened if she thought of the thing behind them-
So she did not.

But somewhere, somewhere down the hall, there was a door still open. She knew that there was. She sensed it. And it was in that darkness far down the hall, where she did not willingly go. She might go up to that door and try to slip up on it and slam it quickly and lock it. But she was paralyzed with dread of it, that what was inside would remain tranquil

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for years if she did not attempt it. There would be time. There would be time to gather strength—

There was a room within which was treasure. A blue fragment spun within that room, power, secret power, filched from the ruin of magic in

Sanctuary. She had hid it within herself, in that place where no other mage could go without killing her, and she, by the very curse that created her, could not die.

There was that place far away in the dark, where something waited—almost she could see it, red-eyed and smiling at her within that room at the end of the hall.

And there were the doors behind which she had shut away everyone who trusted her. She held those keys. She kept them in the room with the fragment of the Globe of Power.

It was her virtue, her sole virtue, that she listened to their rattling and their clamor at her sanity, when everything in her ached to let them out, to have them with her, vulnerable to that thing that waited down there, in the dark.

Especially Straton-

You healed the damn horse, couldn't you help me?

She hurt inside.

Heal him—yes. And prove to him by that, that she had not forsaken him, that there was hope for him and her.

And after that, after that—

She saw him lying still as all her other lovers, by morning light. It was

the very fact that he loved her, that would damn him. He could not, now, take his healing as a kindness. No, to him, it would be an absolution. It would bring him to her as he had been—but more insistent, more himself, more violent and more desperate to prove his manhood after what he had suffered—

—and that was the very thing that would kill him. That was the nature of her curse.

The thing in the dark snickered filthily. // knew. It was amused by her helplessness, when she was one who held what it wanted.

Go to Randal, she thought. Seek help in the Mageguild.

But that would precipitate things for which she was not yet ready. She knew that she was not ready and would not be ready perhaps for years.

She was far too unbalanced now. The tides of need and satiation which ruled her with the changing moon—were running too high, too violent.

She prowled the Maze and the Downwind and sometimes the high streets near the palace, and dead happened, happened with more frequency than made her feel safe with anything she valued.

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She needed, that was the unpalatable truth, needed sex the way Strat needed drink, to deal with the dark and the pain.

And she wanted him—so damnably much.

The thing—was there again. Stilcho saw it, the red eyes glowing in the murk, the smile like a smug face lit from inside, leaking red light at nostrils and mouth and blazing behind the eyes like hell itself.

It grinned, and the terror of that waked him with a yell that was still dying in his ears as he sat up, sweat-drenched and ashamed and expecting Moria's arms to hold him, Moria's voice to bid him hush, hush, and rest, Moria's lips to kiss him and whisper that he was safe.

"Shut up!" came the yell from somewhere else in the building. "Shut it up, dammit!"

He propped himself against the wall, blinked and shivered in the draft against his bare skin, still krrf-fogged and searching dazedly for Moria.

Not there.

She must have gone out to market.

But they were out of money. Flat broke, except— •

Except—

"Ogods."

He scrambled out of bed. He went to the corner and looked amid the junk and the clutter.

Not there. The gold was gone- So was Moria.

And he knew where.

Gorthis's shop was still shuttered at this hour, but he was stirring about inside by now, Moria knew his habits. The shop was on the lower floor of his apartment, in the building that he owned, and Gorthis, being more than prudent, never left his jewelry downstairs in the shop at night. He packed everything up and brought it upstairs, where a pair of vicious dogs guarded the upstairs halls.

In spite of the fact that no thief in Sanctuary tended to prey on a fence, whose good will was important as sunrise—such precautions were necessary because there was always the disgruntled customer.

Or the rival.

Moria seized the bellpull, of the doorbell in the shape of a smiling Shipri—better, she thought in the hysterical humor that came of having gotten this far unmolested with her cargo, that it should be Shalpa, god of thieves. The bell chimed inside, and she waited, her laundry basket on the doorstep, herself within the shelter of the alcove, out of the rain.

The little peephole opened. She stood on tiptoe, and back a little.

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And suddenly remembered—O fool!—that she no longer was dark-haired Moria the thief, Mona the Ilsigi.

It was a beautiful stranger stood on Gorthis's step, her blonde curls wrapped in rags, but her brows still pale, her eyes blue, and her complexion whiter and fairer than any Ilsigi's could be.

"Gorthis," she said, "let me in."

The peephole stayed opened a damned long while longer than its once-upon-a-time wont. She sensed the consternation on the other side of the door-

"Who? What do you want?"

"Gorthis, it's Moria. Moria. You remember me. I bribed this mage—"

It was not the truth, but it was close enough to the truth, and simple enough to explain through a peephole.

The peephole shut. The door opened, on a fat, huge man who looked

more apt to be a blacksmith than a goldsmith. Not a hair on his head except a tuft above either ear that stuck out like some brindled monkey's ruff. He utterly filled the door. His eyes, Ilsigi-dark, were wide and worried.

"Moria?"

"Makeup," she said, clutching her laundry basket, which had gotten heavier and heavier from block to block. "Corn' on. Gorthis, f'gawds'-sake—it's me. Moria. Mor-am's sister."

He hesitated a moment longer, then backed out of the doorway and held it open for her and her basket, admitting her to the dim interior of counters and barred doors and barred sections: a goldsmith even in this section of town and in these days, had to worry, and Gorthis believed in defense. He always had.

"Shalpa's ass," Moria breathed, setting down the basket and looking open-mouthed at the maze of bars, "whole Rankan army couldn't make its way through here."

"Whole Rankan army ner Piffles ner any other damn pack of looters, girl, ain't nobody going to break into my place! I been respectable, I been respectable ever since the Troubles started. I ain't doing no more, so you can take yourself and whatever you got there—"

"This ain't no problem, Gorthis, I swear to you it ain't." She bent and dived after the lump in the middle of the laundry, held it up in both her hands, because that was what it took. "This here's gold. Gorthis. You don't got to fence it, you don't got to tell anybody, you just use it and gimme an account here—look, look—" She set down the clay-covered lump and stripped off her headscarf, shaking out blonde curls the sort that Moria of the streets never had had. "It's still Moria," she said in purest Rankene accents, "But I've come up in the world, Gorthis, I pass,

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and I need the money. Do me this favor and I won't forget it when I'm back in society."

"Magery," Gorthis breathed, wide-eyed. "You been witched."

"Expensive magery. And it lasts." She picked up the lump and held it toward him. "Lift it. It's a lot of gold. A lot of gold, Gorthis. No plated rock, you can test it. You'll have it. Like I said, all you have to do is pay me out a little at a time, in silver I can spend without answering questions."

"Shalpa and Shipri." Gorthis drew out a handkerchief and mopped his face. "They said it was you uptown. They said it was you, Mor-am come in here—trying to pawn this knife, fie said you'd gone uptown."

"Where is my brother?" She did not want to know, she truly did not want to know. He was still Ischade's creature. He must always be, or suffer in terrible pain. But not to know whether he was living or dead—that uncertainty she could not bear.

"Ain't seen him since. I got no idea. Lemme see that thing."

She handed it to him. He hefted it.

"Damn—" he said.

"Told you, that's no rock inside."

He took it over to a work counter, through a barred gateway to a table where a barred shutter gave a little light. She followed, anxious, biting her lip as he brought the lump down hard on the table and shattered the clay around it.

Yellow gold shone in the light, veined with lines of soot.

"This's melted stuff," he said.

"It's not stolen." That was half a lie. She clenched her hands together.

"It came from friends. They died in the riots. But I haven't got a place to melt it down. I know you're honest, Gorthis, you always were. You take your old cut, same as you always did, and you pay me out little at a time, isn't that fair?"

"Wait here. I got to get something." Gorthis hurried back past her to the cage door and through it.

He slammed it shut, and Moria stared at him open-mouthed in shock. But Gorthis was a little crazy about security. He always had been. She was willing to think it was that.

Until he turned the key and took it.

"It's my damned gold, Gorthis, I'm not going to steal it!"

"You ain't going nowhere," Gorthis said, and went and pulled on the cord that rang a bell somewhere way up on the roof, a thief-bell, that called the watch.

"What are you doing?" she yelled at him. She shook the bars of the

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gate, hopeless, because Gorthis's locks were always sound. "Gorthis, have you lost your mind?"

"I'm respectable," Gorthis said. "I been respectable ever since the Troubles started. I ain't getting into it any more, I got too many uptown clients." Another series of tugs at the bell rope. "Sorry, girl. Truly I am."

"I'll tell them! I'll tell them who you are!"

"Who are they going to believe, huh, girl, when I turn over you an' that great lump of gold to the watch? No, missy, this is going to be better fer me than fer you. I prove to 'em I changed my ways, that's what this'll do."

"I have friends uptown."

"No, you don't. I know what yow friends are, girl, the neighbors done talked, the neighbors what got burned out around Peres, uptown. They got a warrant out fer you, hiring mages and all, arson and murder—you know the law doesn't come down on mages, ain't no way the watch is going to arrest them. now, is they? But them as hires 'em, now, they're

responsible, ain't they? You go burning the whole town down, come in here with a lump of witched gold—"

"It ain't witched!"

"It come from the burnin'! Ever'thing up there's witched! And I ain't makin' no jewelry out of it and sellin' it to my clients' You're goin' to the watch, girl, an' you can explain to your neighbors 'fore the magistrate what you done up there on the hill, / ain't!"

"Let me out of here! Damn you, damn you, I got friends, Gorthis, I got friends'H fry your insides, you damned snitch! I got wizard friends!"

"No way," Gorthis said, pale-faced and sweating, and still ringing the bell for all he was worth. "No way you got friends like that, missy, or they'd melt that there gold for you and not need no furnace- I ain't no fool! And you're going to hang, that's what's going to happen to you—"

An alarm was ringing in midtown, and Crit stopped the gray to listen. Not particularly his business: the watch and the guard responded to that sort of thing, and his own mind was on personal problems—a partner who had had a run-in with the watch last night, and who had been let go because the watch did not know what to do with him—and a Prince-Governor whose orders were getting more and more arbitrary—now the damned be-curl'd and perfumed prig wanted a barrel tax and wanted all the taverns in town to pay a head tax ... per customer. And he was

supposed to break the news to Walegrin, whose men were supposed to

make the thing work.

An alarm was not the kind of thing the city commander took for a personal responsibility. But he was in a mood to crack heads. He debated

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it a moment, then, set the horse off at a good clip—no run, counting the slick cobbles, just a businesslike jog that cornered well enough in the twisting streets, with their ghostly drift of cloaked, hooded figures themselves heading toward the trouble—daytime reflexes, the more so that the watch was surely on the way and folk figured there was some kind of entertainment to be had, watching the guard putter about after a thief who had probably run like hell when the bell went, and listening with delicious smugness to the shopkeeper tearing his hair and wailing ... a morning's worth of gossip, at least- And more of them would come, when they saw the city commander involved in it.

Damned busybodies.

He had an idea where the bell-ringing was coming from when he found

the right street, about the time the bell went silent and he had an idea the watch had gotten there ahead of him. There was a jeweler hereabouts notorious for his eccentricity—and a shady past; and he saw the crowd and the waiting horses that said that matters were tolerably well under control.

He almost turned the gray about to go back about his business, back to his troubles with Strat and with the Prince-Governor, figuring there was nothing here that needed intervention.

But the crowd ohhhed and aaaahed to a great deal of shouting, and pressed close upon the door, where there was evidently something going on. A guardsman was trying to keep spectators out.

Maybe, he thought, someone had cut the jeweler's throat.

But the place was supposed to be a real obstacle course. So the rumor ran. Real crazy man.

Curiosity drew him, since the morning's business was not that attractive. He nosed the gray on through the crowd, figuring the guard could use a little help—might well be a few neighbors there hoping for free samples, if there had been some fracas inside and some stuff scattered.

"Get out of here!" the beleaguered guard was yelling, shoving with his sheathed sword at a clutch of women who wanted to get their noses in

the door. The crowd booed that, and guffawed when a fat man appeared behind the guard and screamed at them to get out of his door.

"What's going on here?" Crit asked the guardsman, forcing the gray into service as a living barrier, and its teeth and the stamp of its feet made a little room.

"Dunno, sir," the guardsman said. "We got a woman and a laundry basket and a damned great lump of gold old Gorthis says is witched and stolen and he locked 'er up and called the watch." The guardsman looked doubtful a second, then: "Woman looks Rankan, sir, and old Gorthis says she's a thief named Moria who lived in the Peres house, and we got a

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warrant out on her. The corporal don't know. We got a lot of warrants.

But she talks uptown."

"Moria. Out of Peres." Crit drew in a deep breath, all at once awake in this slow and nuisanceful morning. He slid down and threw the gray's reins at the guardsman as he ducked under the horse's neck and put his

head into the jeweler's shop.

The damn place looked like the city jail, it had so many bars. And in the clutches of a trio of guardsmen was a blonde and distraught young woman, answering questions, shaking her head furiously, no, no, and no.

"Hey," he yelled, interrupting it all. The woman looked at him, and gods, it was for certain Moria, who had hosted the whole Sacred Band at the truce-feast in the Peres house.

Before it ended up a pile of blackened sticks and tumbled stone.

"Moria?" he asked. And listened to the whole thing over again, from the jeweler Gorthis shouting in one ear, the guard corporal shouting at Gorthis to shut up, the woman sobbing and shouting that she was innocent, that Gorthis was a crook who wanted her gold, which was hers, and Gorthis her enemy who had lured her here with promises of help.

"Gold might be hers," Crit said slowly. "Ease up a little. Let's just all be calm, can we? Ma'am, I think you and the gold and Gorthis here better plan to spend the morning uptown and get this straightened out. They say there's a warrant out on you- I don't know about that. I know I've got a few questions. Where are you staying?"

The woman's face might have been a waxen mask. An honest woman might have answered. There would not have been that desperate dart of

the eyes, like something trapped. Crit had had a lot of experience, judging reactions like that. He pulled out his kit and rolled himself a smoke, giving her time to answer, if she would. Then, finally, lighting the smoke from the lamp by the door.

"Well, sergeant, I think you might as well take the whole damn mess uptown. You can have Gorthis. Woman goes to my office. Gold goes to your captain and it damn well better stay accounted for. Hear?"

"Yessir," the sergeant said, and Crit nodded, puffed on his smoke to calm his nerves and walked as far as the door. He had a rare impulse to chivalry, and turned back to the sergeant.

"Don't take her through the streets like that. Put a wrap on her and don't bruise her up any, all right?"

"Yessir."

He walked out, collected his horse and climbed up, riding out through the crowd, paying no attention to the shouted questions and the ohhhs and ahhhs and the rumors flying thick and fast. Up the street, then,

where the last few shyer onlookers stood gawking, and around the corner.

A man fled his path. There was one with reason to avoid him. He was halfway moved to find out why, but the streets were slick and there was enough commotion hereabouts. The chance of overtaking the man was nil, without risk to the gray, and he was not about to take the chance. Dawn, and there were still some of the night-skulkers out, pickpockets, for sure, who worked their best in circumstances like the press and commotion back there.

Not his business, that. Not a soldier's business at all.

He rode on his way, down the mostly deserted street, at a walk, already back to the problem of the head tax.

And was halfway startled when a cloaked man came out of the alley and looked up at him and ran over to him. "Officer—officer—my son, f'godssakes, my son, they stabbed my son—"

"Who?" He reined in the gray, which was as like to take a piece out of the man as not. "How many of them?" The whole, damn district watch was tied down back around the corner, and a purse-cutting that went to murder was the way of things in this damn town.

"Come on!" the man cried, running back for the alley—merchant, to

look at him. And distraught.

"Hell!" Crit threw down his smoke, gathered up his crossbow from the saddle-ties and turned the gray down the alley after him. He had wanted a head or two to crack. He was still in the market.

The iron gate flared blue as Stilcho brought up against it and pushed, sweating and gasping and desperate. Witchfire stung his hands and ached in his bones, but the gate gave to his push, and he waited for no other invitation from the river house. He ran as far as the gray stone steps before slick stone and his exhaustion betrayed him: he sprawled painfully against the edge of the steps and lost his wind, fighting even so to pick himself up.

"Stilcho," Her voice said, and he looked up, heart hammering, at the face that figured in so many of his bad dreams.

"Stilcho?"

He gathered himself up to his knees and to his feet, hanging onto the post which supported the roof. He was taller than She was, if he were not standing beside the porch and She, on it- But Her presence was overwhelming, so that all the warmth of running leached out of him, and all the months of hiding seemed useless. He was back. He had never been free. He had never owned his soul, from the night Ischade drew it back

into him.

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"The w-watch has M-Moria," he stammered, while the pain in his ribs bent him against the post that was the only thing keeping him on his feet.

"They've arrested her—"

"For what?" Ischade asked, a soft voice, precise, and cold.

"Th-the—" O gods, there was no lying to Her. There could not be. He tried for breath and knew what bargain he had come to strike, a bargain for what She already owned. "The gold from P-Peres house. They say she stole it."

"She did," Ischade said, that same quiet precision. "From me."

He had no answer for that. It was truth. Claiming it was himself, claiming anything but what was—might end everything. "You can help her," he said. "P-Please h-help her."

"She left my employ. She stole from me. Why should I intervene?"

"I'll come b-back." His lips stumbled around the words. His sou! was cold to the roots, and he met that stare of hers with a vertiginous feeling that it was already sliding away from him. "I*11 come back to you."

There was long silence. Then:

"You and Moria," Ischade said. "Love does make fools of us, doesn't it?"

"Please. Get her away from them."

"I thought that Moria would come, long since, wanting her fine things and her soft bed. I least of all expected you, Stilcho. And for her sake. How touching."

"My lady—"

"I confess I have missed you, in more ways and for more reasons than you know." She extended her hand and touched his cheek with the backs of her fingers, a touch which—he could not help it—made him shuddei;

and She could not but tell that. "A good man. And hers. Why, Stilcho? Debt of honor? Or do you love her?"

"I 1-1-love her."

"Poor man." She came close and folded her arms about his head, drew it against her breast. Her breath stirred his hair and he felt her gentle

kiss, felt the unlikely warmth She gave despite the chill of her hands as She lifted his face. "I will help her. I will take you back. I will keep her with all the fine things she loves. You as well. And I shall be kinder. You know that there are times I cannot be."

"I know that—"

"She will be safe enough. I will send a message uptown. We'll do everything by town law. As the aggrieved party, I give her the gold. See? Solved. Come inside and I'll give you the paper with my seal on it. You take it to the Palace and tell them if they have any questions about it, come to me. Come. I shan't bite. You know better than that."

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They had brought the gray horse in from the streets—no one had dared steal it, nor any of its gear; it had wreaked havoc on a storefront and kicked a man in the gut before the watch got a couple of riders to herd it up the street and one of them was horseman enough to talk it calm and get the reins without having his fingers taken off or his horse kicked.

Of Crit there was no sign at all, and Straton found himself coldly, terribly sober, interviewing everyone in the affair, no one of whom knew a damned thing, except the horse might have come from a dozen streets, all of which they were searching door to door; and as many alleys, more

likely, all of which they were searching, down to the rubbish heaps and the refuse, looking for the body. Crit's bow was missing, not with the horse and not in any place he would have left it. He must have had it with him. Must have had reason to have it in hand when trouble came on him. So he had not been taken utterly off his guard. And they had still got him. Whoever it was.

There had been some kind of fracas involving a goldsmith and a lot of crowd in that area. Crit had been there. Had found the woman Moria in the middle of it and she was in custody, along with the jeweler and a lump of gold. That, Strat reckoned, had nothing to do with it. Crit had ridden out of there, the guard swore to that, ridden out of there and down the street and vanished somewhere within that district, to judge by where they had first reported the loose horse.

He began to build a scenario in his mind—the crowds, the likelihood of cutpurses and pickpockets, and Crit maybe spotting something—

—running into trouble and ending up just a corpse someone had to get rid of, down some sewer, into some basement, under some rubbish heap:

gods, Crit, to end like that, in some damned alley, in a damned police action, in something that was not his job. because Crit, being Crit, tended to be all over what he was managing—

—or maybe Crit had seen someone; or someone had seen him, who had a grudge. Gods knew there were people with grudges. He had a vision of blood in the streets again, some new set of crazies with an agenda, murdering any symbol of Authority they could get their sights on. Sanctuary had seen blood and blood and blood, and it had been quiet a while, but the same damned lunatics were still in town, those some other lunatic had not killed.

He felt sick at his stomach, that was what he felt, sick and helpless and scared, because he had shot his mouth off with Crit and done everything wrong he could do—

—he had been stinking drunk this morning when Crit had been riding

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the streets alone, because he had no partner he could rely on any more. And he hated himself. He despised himself. He could not figure out how he had become what he had become. As good as if he had run and left his partner to face his killers alone. That was what he had done. And if men shied off from him this morning and if he could not meet their eyes, there was reason for it.

Oh damn, he wanted his hands on someone.

He wanted Crit alive, he wanted Crit to come walking in that gate all

right and madder than hell; and he would listen to everything Crit had to say and swear that it was right, and go back to him and make it right if Crit would have him, that was what he would do. Crit needed him, needed him in the worst way; and Ischade had thrown him out and battered his pride for the last time, he swore she had. It was over. Finished. He had no more intention to go crawling to her a second time.

Gods, if he'd come walking in here—lost his horse, that's all; we'd give him a hard time, he'd curse us to hell, I'd stand there and maybe he'd know without my saying a thing, know what hell I've been through—we could talk, then. Let him swear me to hell and gone, no matter, get him talking and maybe I could talk to him, the way we used to—way we used to be—

A man came up on him, a guard sergeant, to report they had a man in hand, from the gate—"—asking after the woman, the one they arrested, says he can prove whose the gold is—"

He had told them he wanted to know everything about everyone involved. He had sent a man he trusted to ask Moria if there was anything she could tell him, though he doubted it. This man was at hand.

Was Stilcho. He saw Ischade's former lover, conspicuous in his shabby cloak and in the black patch which covered his missing eye. City guards hastened him along with a firm grip on his arms; and Strat's mind raced

wildly, trying to make connections with facts which did not, no matter how he pushed and pulled them, fit any pattern he could understand.

And damn it all, Ischade and her household were not what he wanted to deal with now.

Except Stilcho was no longer Ischade's. Nor was Moria. And somehow, for some terrible reason, they were here, under this wan gray sky, with Crit missing, himself and Stilcho who had met often enough in Ischade's house; and Moria under arrest: that was at least some vestige of connection in events, but it was on the wrong problem, surely it was the wrong problem.

"Stilcho," he said, and did not tell the guards to let him go. One of them handed him the paper.

Ischade's spidery, elaborate hand. Her signet. To Critias, under the

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authority of His Imperial Highness Theron, and His Grace Kadakithis. Commander of the City: You have arrested one of my servants for possession of property I gave her, to which she has legal title. The lady Moria is therefore innocent of wrongdoing. I ask for her immediate release and will thank you for your prompt and earnest attention to this matter. Under my personal seal: Ischade, herself.

Straton read it through twice. To Critias.

Critias.

"Let him go," he said sharply, and when the guards did not take their cue: "Leave him!" And waited until the city guard was out of earshot, the paper trembling in his hand. "What's this have to do with Critias?"

"To do with—"

"My partner's missing, dammit, missing while the city guard hauled Moria and that gold out of a jeweler's shop, the last damn place they saw him! Where is he?"

"I don't know," Stilcho said, bewildered-looking, and was not lying. Straton's heart sank. The little that that chance Jiad raised it. "I don't know. Moria got picked up—that's all. Critias was there. I saw him. Corner of Regent Land and High Street. He was on a gray horse. I didn't want to get picked up too; I ran and he didn't follow. That's the truth, Strat. I was one of you. My oath—it's the truth, it's all I know."

"Moria know anything?"

Stilcho shook his head. "I don't think so. I was there because she

sneaked out with the gold, I knew she was going to get in trouble—" It was too much truth now. Stilcho let his voice trail off, with that desperate look in his eyes, the look of a man who had committed himself too far to a man no longer in the same game. "It's in the letter. Her seal."

"Her seal. Dammit to hell, is this her game?"

"No! Gods—no, I don't think so."

She wrote to Critias. She didn't know.

But by the gods, she can find out.

"Sergeant!"

"Sir!"

"Tablet. Fast." He grabbed Stilcho by the arm, pulled him close. "I thought you'd left her house. Alive."

"I'm g-going b-back." Stilcho pulled to free the arm, desisted when he did not make it easily. The single eye was desperate, distraught. "N-not easy b-being on the streets."

"I can slip you into the guard. Call it a favor. You could have come to me. I owe you one."

"Too Mate." There was all hell in that look. "Too late."

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"She's got you." Dead again? In the chill of the wind, there was no way to tell.

"She's got me. And M-Moria. No help for us. Strat, for godssakes, get Moria out of there—if you owe me anything, get her out of that hole—"

The sergeant came up with the tablet and a stylus. Straton took it and wrote: Walegrin—and a long scratch that stood for all the damned protocols. Send the woman Moria to the palace guardstation with this messenger and your order to hold her there until I sign the release. Straton, for Critias— Another long line, for all Crit's authorizations. He slammed his ring into the soft wax of the tablet and shut it. "No damn time for an overseal. Get this to Walegrin at his headquarters and hurry about it."

The sergeant left at a run.

"I'll go with him," Stilcho said, and Strat caught him a second time.

"She's not free."

"Not—"

"If Ischade wants her out, Ischade can find Critias. Come on, man.

We're going to go tell her that."

Stilcho said nothing, only came as fast as he could, exhausted as he was.

"Horses," Straton yelled, and the horses were waiting at the gate.

Crit moved, tried to pull himself up from the upside-down position in which he had waked, in which he had already suffered hell, coming to soaking wet and staring upside down into the face of a lunatic with a knife.

He had lost consciousness several times, and vomited his gut out along with a good amount of the water he had swallowed when the Ilsigi who avowed he wanted to kill him slowly had lowered him upside down into a rain barrel and waited till he choked. Again. And again. And again. And in between times had let him down, trussed hand and foot, to lie heaving and puking on the floor of the basement.

He had screamed before his voice went. He was not proud. He had hoped to hell a dozen of his men would be searching by then, would hear the ruckus and come break the door down. But this place, wherever he was, was down deep, lantern-lit, and with some sort of padded baffle all

round, so that there was precious little sound going to get up to the streets, if that was even where they were any longer.

This fine, this upstanding citizen with the kid in trouble—had got behind him and hit him with something that stung like hell in the back of his neck and then weakened his knees and dropped him helpless as a baby to the alley cobbles, whereupon this fine citizen had kicked him in

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the groin, in the gut and in the head, and the light had gone out for he had no idea how long, or through what.

Right now he wanted only to get air past the bubbling of whatever was in his nose and his throat, and upside down, he could not do that, the blood was hammering in his neck and his head and his gut hurt too much to let him get that breath.

The rope paid out suddenly and dropped him onto his arms, his shoulders and the back of his head, driving the breath out of him.

He could not get it in again. He went out,

And came to propped up against something lumpy and solid, and with the self-same lunatic squatting there with a knife in his hands.

"I'm not going to kill you," the man said. "You'd like to know my name, but I'm not going to kill you, not going to give you a thing to give your friends, either. All us Ilsgis look alike—don't we, pig?"

He thought: // remember you, Wriggly. But he was not about to argue. Never argue with a lunatic with a knife.

"What'll you describe? Medium build. Black hair? Do you a lot of good, pig. I got your partner. Now I have you. Witch has your partner. Maybe the witch can bring back your eyes. Can she? What would your partner pay for that? It might be worth it to me, pig—just knowing that."

0 gods. 0 gods. We've got trouble, haven't we?

Hell-bent through the streets, too fast, for the weather, but the bay horse made it without slipping and the borrowed sorrel made it, somehow. Strat did not stop to see, reckoning Stilcho would follow as he could.

And this time he pulled up in front of the river house and slid down to drop the bay's reins in front of the hedge, he was cold sober and in a deadly hurry. He shoved at the gate and got a shock, kicked at it then.

"Ischade, dammit! You want that damn girl, you get out here, fast!"

Stilcho rode in behind and slid down, ran up to the gate and got it open

—him, it did not shock.

For him, Ischade's door opened, and Ischade came out and stood on her porch, waiting.

"Come on," Stilcho said nervously, and grabbed Strat by the arm.

He needed no pull. He all but beat Stilcho to the porch steps; and held Stilcho's distance from her, who stood cloaked and dark and ominously frowning.

"Somebody waylaid my partner," Strat said. "Ischade, I'm asking you

—personal favor, if I've got any credit left. Tell me who and where."

"Where is Moria?"

"Guard custody. She's safe. She'll be fine. I'll let her go when I've got

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Crit, hear me? You want a favor out of us, we want one out of you. Fair trade."

Prolonged silence.

"Fair trade," he yelled at her. "Damn-lit!"

"A remarkable day," she said. "So many people want favors of me.

And magic comes so dear nowadays. You don't want me. You want a fortune-teller. A finder of lost objects. Surely you can find one down at the bazaar with the jugglers and the mimes."

"Don't put me off, woman, I'm not in the mood for your jokes!"

"You mistake me. Do you want my help?"

"Yes." Breath came short. "Dammit, I have to have it."

She turned her shoulder and the door opened wide. "Come in."

He mounted the steps, Stilcho treading behind him. Not like old times in this familiar room that was somehow the same and somehow more chaotic in its disorder and the litter. He was where he would have given a great deal to have been this morning. And now there was ice in his gut, because there was suddenly his partner's life on his hands, and Ischade's temper to deal with, that he had provoked, he, when it was Crit's life in the balance.

If Crit was still alive at all.

Ischade took the back of a chair and flung it, shoved the table back, rumpling a litter of cloaks, and simply sat down cross-legged on the floor, hands before her. Her eyes rolled back. Her lips parted.

And a light grew between her hands, spinning and spinning in a way he had seen once and more than once.

Like a small Globe of Power, whirling and staining her hands and her face and all the room with its cold glow.

He hunkered down with his hands clasped against his lips and waited, waited, because what she was doing was not the magic he knew in her, pyromancy and necromancy. This was another thing, a thing that was not supposed to exist.

"I don't find him on the surface," she murmured—no mummery, either; Ischade could talk and wield power at the same time, carry on a running dialogue while doing what would raise a sweat on many a talent in the Mageguild. "There's a far-seer over across town. I'll see. She's erratic. Sometimes she's right."

"For godssake, find him!"

"What—" Her eyes snapped shut and open again, present and shocked, as she clapped her hands together and smothered the light.

"Aaah!" Stilcho cried, and held his hands over his eyes.

Straton and Ischade exchanged a look then which understood something Stilcho did not.

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"What is it, dammit?"

Ischade bit her lips and drew in her breath. "Nothing. Nothing need concern you." She gathered her skirts to rise. "I will find him. There's nothing I can do from here. We'll have to search out the trail. Stilcho." She gave him her hand, and he helped her to her feet.

"What is it?" Strat asked again.

But Ischade did not answer him. She flung her cloak about her and walked out the door, which had a disconcerting way of opening just when it had to.

He was last out, and it shut behind them with a thump, as the gate swung open. Stilcho's horse shied and pulled at its tether.

The bay simply stood. And when he got there, Ischade was holding the reins.

"I'll ride behind," she said.

Old habits came back. He had his mouth open, and shut it. Useless, with Ischade. One did things her way, or one did not, and they might go to hell for all she cared; he wanted her help in the worst way, with a life at stake.

He rose to the saddle and cleared the stirrup for her. She rose lightly up behind and put her arms about him, too damn familiarly.

"Hyyyyaaa!" he yelled at the bay, and it wheeled about and might have unseated her and him; but not him, and damned well not the likes of Ischade, no such luck.

No chance of falling on the road, slick as the stone was. He laid his heels to the bay, and such was the uncertainty of the misty air and the echo off the buildings, sometimes it seemed like it was only Stilcho's horse striking the cobbles.

"My son," Nas-yeni said. It was safe to tell him that much. There were a lot of sons. There had to have been. "You killed my son. Threw him out like garbage." He sat cross-legged, close to his victim in the lantern light.

"You, I'd like to take to the same place when I'm done with you. Maybe I will."

The Stepson never had said much, just took in his breath when Nas-yeni got to work on him, and screamed sometimes, in what voice he had left, but the vomiting had left him with very little voice for screaming. He could still see. Nas-yeni had saved the eyes for last. And the tongue, that last of all. Right now it was the fingernails; and Nas-yeni pulled the needle, heated, from the little cooking brazier he had full of coals.

"Come here, Critias. Let's try another one."

Critias spat at him and tried to kick him, but there was panic in his

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face now, and that kind of hard-breathing sob a man got before he fell apart. Nas-yeni knew. He had practiced, before this.

There was panic in the attempt to scream, too. It was in the pace of things. Nas-yeni had studied these matters. Had done this service for certain of the gangs, who wanted something from one of their own.

Rankans he had never touched. He had never risked himself. His mission was too holy, his revenge too important, to risk Rankan trouble. Just

internal matters.

Never too hasty. Take one's time. Never let the victim get his defenses together either, or forget there was worse to come.

"He was seventeen, pig."

Slowly, through the afternoon streets, still in drizzling rain, the shops' business slow, the citizens who did find reason to be out on the streets moving about all muffled up in cloaks.

But no few stared at the sight of a Stepson with a black-cloaked woman riding pillion behind him, slowly and deliberately through street and street and street; and a one-eyed man beside them, where Stepsons had searched frantically all day, and roused citizens and searched warehouses.

Perhaps it was the fey, dire feeling about them, that coursed through Strafs bones and set his teeth on edge.

"Wrong," Stilcho said softly, above the soft clip and clop of hooves on cobbles. "Wrong—"

"Is it me you see?" Ischade whispered. "Or else?"

"I don't know," Stilcho said hollowly, in a voice which itself could raise the hair's at a man's nape.

"Hereabouts," Ischade whispered. "Hereabouts. Steady, Straton. Don't flinch."

He felt something at his back—felt it, like fire and ice, burning through his armor, into his bones. And suddenly the horse whickered and gave a thrust of its hindquarters, skittering forward and taking an undirected turn into an alley, into a maze of balconies and rubbish and discarded barrels. It was crazed. It headed them up a nook and stopped, facing a dead end.

"Here," Ischade said.

"Where?" Blank walls surrounded them, windowless, doorless. Strat looked about them in desperation, and twisted about as Ischade slid down.

"The horse knows. It has the scent."

He dismounted and dropped the reins, drawing his sword, looking above them, for some window, any aperture.

The horse pawed the cobbles, put down its head and nosed the rubbish.

Above a hinged iron plate set in the cobbles.

"Damn," Strat said. "Damn."

And dropped to his knees and pulled at it with his fingers. It would not move.

"Bolted," he said. "Dammitall!" Desperation welled up in him.

Blue fire ran around the opening, down the hinges, dim in daylight.

Metal grated.

"Now," Ischade said.

He pulled and it lifted.

And the sound, the half-human sound that came from somewhere in the depths, ran right through his nerves.

He did not stop. He saw the steps and he went, writhed his way through a hole too small for a man to take easily, down into the echoing dark.

"Stilcho!" he heard Ischade whisper urgently. He heard the slither of someone behind him, but another such moan wrenched at his gut. He felt his way down and down, one hand for the sword, one for the wall, his eyes straining at dark absolute except the little gray light that got through from the open trap above, and that fitful, with his partners leaning over it.

He heard laughter echoing through the vault, soft and awful, coming from everywhere.

And caught himself with his heart in his throat as his foot missed a step and he saved himself at an unexpected landing. There was a chain there. He grasped it and felt it to find the steps, descending again, till he heard the sound in front of him-

He felt ahead of him with his sword, probing the dark till it suddenly touched stone. He felt either side and found nothing, and, with his bare hand, in front of him, and felt a wooden door. He put his ear against it.

And pulled it open, carefully, carefully as dim lamplight spilled against his eye.

". . . friend," he heard.

And a sound hardly human at all.

He saw a light, old columns, watermarked, a pair of figures low to the ground against a mound of dirt. He eased his way in, flexing his hand on his sword-hilt, hardly daring to breathe.

The damned hinge creaked. The man looked around.

"Hiiiiii!" Strat yelled, for what shock could do, and was halfway across the room before the man jerked Crit up by the hair and brought the point of a dagger right up under Crit's left eye.

"You want him blinded? Drop it! Drop the sword!"

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Cnt tried to say something Fool, probably And arched his back and struggled as the knife jabbed

"Drop it"

Strat dropped it, and saw the man drop the knife and snatch two-handed at something in the straw beside him, but he was already moving, launched with all his strength and speed across that intervening space—

Crossbow Cut's Firing The bolt tore into him He spun with it,

staggered and kept moving, clawing his way up again, tearing the dagger from his belt, hurling himself and the weapon missilelike against the man with the spent bow

He hit the man in the gut, he felt that, felt the rush of blood over his hand, the tumble of threshing limbs tangled with his as he went down with the bolt shocked by the fall and the dark closing around him

"I couldn't stop it," Stilcho said "I couldn't reach him—"

Ischade held up her hand, dismissal, absolution—whatever Stilcho would accept—and looked down at the carnage that spread blood through the straw

"Witch—" Cnt said, or tried to say, looking at her through the one eye that still would work It came out a raven's croak And after so much else, he spat at her

"Gratitude Of course." Straton washer concern She tucked her robes away from the blood that was everywhere and felt of his back and his neck, where a pulse still beat The bolt had hit high The bad shoulder Again.

"Damn you," Cnt whispered, "damn you to hell, let him be."

She touched Strat's face when Stilcho had turned him over He was

bloody everywhere. He was half-conscious, and he tried to say something, but she touched his lips and his brow and put him to sleep She did other things too, and bent and kissed him on the brow and on the lips, bloody as he was

"Let him be, you damned ghoul"

Somewhere Cntias had found that much voice, and struggled to an elbow, to try to throw his body into her, if only that

She whirled and stopped him, her hand on his throat, and flung him back down, spat at again

But she restrained herself "He came after you He came to me for you But you will not remember that " She held him with her eyes only now, cut him free with the knife she drew from the dead man, then put her joined hands to Cnt's face, and let the mage-fire flow, mending the eye, the hands, everything that might cripple a man "Sleep, Cntias "

It was part of her curse and her talent, that mesmeric talent that could

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erase her very passage from a mind, make seeing eyes blind, create elaborate memories that had never been

Such, largely, had been her affair with Strat until she began to take risks, with Stilcho to die his deaths, assuage her needs, fulfill the curse

"Come," she said to Stilcho, taking him by the hand "We have Mona to see to Cnt will take care of things "

And drew Stilcho with her, hesitating at the last, bewildered, surely But she turned his face to her with a touch of her finger, and erased his memory of this place, before she led him up to the light

It was luck, surely, that a searcher spotted Strat's bay horse in an alley searchers had been down a dozen times that day, spotted the trap left up, and investigated, all on a hunch that had come on the man even to go down that often-searched alley Cnt had run out of strength, dragging Strat's half-conscious weight toward the stairs, collapsing there in the dark with Strat damned near bleeding to death and the stairs yet to go.

After that it was horse litters to get them as far as the guard-barracks infirmary, Cnt more exhausted and bruised and with cracked ribs that bandages could help, Strat the worse off of the two of them.

Strat, who had come through for him and done what he had done, before the damned IIsigi lunatic had had time to carve him up Strat, who had distracted the killer and taken the bolt, knowing he was going to take

it, because that was the only way to get across that distance and knife the bastard that was going to cut Cnt's throat.

Strat had had enough strength left in him to cut Cnt loose And then fainted

Cnt ought to have been in his own bed He was not He sat by Strat's, just holding onto his arm, thinking, damn, he would go to the witch by riverside, he would go down there and he would beg if that was what it took The sight of Strat deliberately distracting that bastard, deliberately taking the shot and still having it in him to aim true and hard—would haunt him, like the thing Strat had said when he managed, in his pain, to cut him loose—

"—damn mess, Cnt, damn awful mess How'd you get into this^"

It was Strat the way he had been Strat before the witch had got him.

Strat his partner

And Strat did much the same thing when finally he came to and found him sitting there, with the candle all but a stub on the bedside table

"What the hell," he said "I must've made it all night, didn't P"

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Jon DeCles

"I am afraid, my dear, that we are going to get into some trouble over this play," said Glisselrand, picking up another ball of brightly colored yarn and adding its lurid yellow to the dark fuschia with which she had been working all morning. Her knitting was the one evidence of her past that she had not dropped along the way, the closest thing to a regret that she had ever shown in all the years since she had run away from home to become an actress with the travelling players.

"And why should that be, my sweeting?" asked Feltheryn, going over the lines of the play before him, intermittently sipping at the tisane in his cup.

"Well, you may have been too busy to listen to gossip, but the thing most discussed in this dreadful town is the possible marriage of Prince Kittycat to the Beysa," Glisselrand replied, her voice just a little more reedy this morning than Feltheryn liked. "Has it not occurred to you that this particular play which Molin Torchholder has commissioned us to perform might be taken as a political statement?"

"How so?" asked Feltheryn, devoting only a part of his mind to the conversation.

"It depicts an unsuccessful marriage of state, for one thing," said Glis-

selrand. "For another, there is that very powerful scene in which the High Priest forces the King to his will. One assumes the words were written originally at a time when the King of some country was overstepping his bounds, and when the magician who wrote it felt it appropriate to bend the will of the monarch to the wisdom of the temple."

"Well, yes," said Feltheryn, looking up at last from the old parchment

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text of the play. His blue eyes focused on Giisselrand and he was struck, as always, by how beautiful she remained, even at - . . .—Certainly more summers than was polite for a man to consider. (At least past fifty.) "But what has that to do with thee and me?"

"Feltheryn, my darling," Glisselrand said patiently, "you know how the plays affect people's minds. Has it not occurred to you that Molin might be attempting to use us to get control of the prince?"

"My darling," said Feltheryn, "the plays are magical, there is no doubt about that. But their magic is unpredictable. Surely Molin, as a priest, knows that he cannot depend on a performance of one of our plays to give him any precise results. The changes that occur in people upon seeing our plays are subtle, and like as not they will even go unnoticed. Molin saw the plays in Ranke. He knows they cannot be used, I am sure.

. . . You must think more kindly of this fine man who has been good enough to arrange a theater for us, hire that charming painter, Lalo, to paint our scenery, and, most important, see that we are all fed until we are established in Sanctuary."

"Perhaps," said Glisselrand after a moment. "But-I do wonder at you, even after this many years. You are still such an innoceff! I wonder how you maintain it."

This comment left Feltheryn bewildered so he returned to his memorizing of the text; a very normal reaction, as much of what his beloved leading lady said to him was beyond his understanding. In a moment he was absorbed again in the terrible scene in which the king discovers that his new young wife is in love with his son by a previous marriage.

Feltheryn moved his hand to his brow and ran his fingers through his bushy white hair in rehearsal of a gesture of anguish. He did not notice Glisselrand's tender smile as she watched him.

The company had lost many of its treasured articles of production in its final days in Ranke, and as *The Power of Kings* was a play replete with royalty, it behooved Feltheryn to replace certain crowns, sceptres, and other paraphernalia of rulership. To this end he headed for the bazaar of Sanctuary, accompanied by Snegelringe, who would play his son Karel in the play (Feltheryn always reserved the parts of kings for himself and left the younger, more romantic parts for his junior) and Lempchin, the boy who acted as factotum to the troupe. They were looking for a blacksmith,

but one who had a certain flair and style about his work; for crowns and sceptres were a far cry, artistically, from horseshoes and barrel hoops.

It was perhaps inevitable that they catch the attention of those who frequented the bazaar by day but who made their homes in either the Downwind or the Maze; for after so many years of being a king upon the stage Feltheryn moved with the authority of one, if not the wisdom.

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Certainly no true king would have been foolish enough to head for the bazaar with only one guard and a clumsy boy for company.

It was luck, and very good luck, that the first to make an attempt upon the old actor's person was not one of Sanctuary's better thieves: otherwise the purse which Molin Torchholder had provided might have been lost. As it was; the apprentice pickpockets crashed into Feltheryn, the "master" of the gang (who had attained at least eighteen years despite his stupidity) rushed in with a knife—and learned quickly that actors must be as good with their swords in reality as upon the stage.

Snegelringe's blade flew from its overly ornamented scabbard, moved in an overly flamboyant arc, and the attacking knife flew from a hand

that spurted blood.

The apprentices drew back, their eyes round with surprise as their master clutched his hand and staggered away with a yowl- They had clearly not expected Snegelringe, a paunchy man with a receding hair-line, to have any speed of arms.

"Death to all who ride against the King!" proclaimed Lempchin, in a voice that was strong enough but not yet deep enough for the stage. Then the boy spoiled his moment by giggling.

Fortunately the apprentice pickpockets were not versed in the finer points of stage delivery, and they took Lempchin's statement seriously. They ran, scattering as thoroughly as the narrow street would allow.

"Well played, my hearty!" said Feltheryn to Snegelringe. "But you, boy, you must learn never to break character until the curtain is down! Suppose they had not run? Suppose they had taken our defense as a joke?"

"Why then," said Lempchin, "Master Snegelringe would have skewered them all!"

"A pretty move, no doubt," said Feltheryn, and he lowered his deep voice an octave to where it sounded like the dead oracle from Nodrade.

"But then should we have found ourselves with enemies, and be the target of every friend those fiends ever had. And one dark night when you must walk alone, the sharp blade would cut across your throat!"

The boy gulped.

"And we should have to find another boy to take your place emptying the chamber pots!" added Snegelringe.

Lempchin's discomfort faded and he blushed. He did not really like Snegelringe, Feltheryn knew, but he respected the actor: in fact, he wanted to take his place some day, if he could just learn the lines and arrange an accident.

"Come," said Feltheryn, rumpling the chubby boy's hair. "I see the place Lalo recommended, across the square ahead. While I talk to the

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blacksmith perhaps you can persuade his wife to read your palm. They say these S'danzo women read the future well, and she may see you upon the boards yet!"

The interview with Dubro, the blacksmith, went well enough, though he apologized for his lack of expertise in fashioning crowns. The huge man was not pleased with the way Snegelringe lavished attention on his wife Illyra, but neither did he move to stop it. Feltheryn supposed the fellow would have felt foolish exhibiting jealousy over a pudgy actor with a receding hairline; and he did not feel it appropriate to disabuse the man of his illusions at just this point. Snegelringe's reputation as a ladies* man would spread through Sanctuary soon enough, causing the company problems aplenty. Let that happen later, after people were accustomed to coming to the plays. Then the troupe would be able to weather the criticism of their morals that even a town as corrupt as Sanctuary felt qualified to heap upon mere actors.

As for the wife, Hlyra: Feltheryn wondered why it was she dressed as she did, making up her face in such a way that she appeared, to the untrained eye, like a crone. Was it because of the respect accorded to old age? (He knew well that such respect was more often an illusion of the young than a reality- His own years had earned him rather a grudging tolerance than respect. People did not defer to him, they waited for him to die so that they could take his place!) Or did she have some secret distress? She was not responding to Snegelringe's attentions as a woman might usually. The professional mask of a seeress was set well in place, but to Feltheryn's equally professional assessment she seemed mildly puzzled by it all; as if she could not understand why Snegelringe was flirting with her. Was it possible she did not know that actors used makeup as skillfully as S'danzo, and for much the same purpose? Was it

possible she did not realize that Snegelringe could see beneath her mask to the lovely young woman?

Feltheryn let the puzzle go, another observation of the human condition for his catalogue of character, and finished his business with Dubro.

Lempchin had not found the seeress in a soft enough mood to give him a reading of the cards for free, so the boy begged for a pastry instead, and that led to Snegelringe boxing his ears as they left the bazaar to return to the theater.

The theater itself was still under construction in the shell of a building that had burned during the plague riots. It was located between West Side Street and Processional, near enough to the palace that the prince could come at his convenience yet far enough away for the Rankan lords to retain their feelings of respectability. Molin had at first proposed housing the actors at some distance from the actual playhouse, perhaps in

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Westside where there was new construction: but Glisselrand had made clear, with her wannest affectations, that a woman would feel unsafe going such a great distance alone, and that providing her with a dependable escort would cost Molin much more than was reasonable. She had phrased it in such a way that there was no room, short of acute rudeness,

for the priest to suggest she provide her own escort, or do without. Thus the theater included an attached residence which, though small, was better than anything they might find among the workmen's quarters at Shambles Cross.

The Architect of Vashanka had even taken a personal interest in the construction, as if the finishing of the walls on which he had so long labored was somehow not enough to occupy his creativity. He offered plans for a very lavish performing space and was not in the least offended when Feltheryn pointed out to him, with grave discretion, the need for a stage house at the top and dressing rooms below and behind the actual stage; not to mention space in the wings for the storage of properties to be brought on.

The rebuilding had gone on apace and now the structure was beginning to look much the way Ranke's theaters looked. There was a proscenium, a thing never seen outside the capital, boxes for important people who wanted to be seen as much as they wanted to see, and a royal box for those nights when the prince wished to attend a performance. The theater was, after all, a political tool of some import for those, like the late Emperor, who knew how to use it.

It was therefore not as great a surprise as it might have been when Feltheryn entered and found the Beysa Shupansea having tisane with Glisselrand in the foyer, surrounded by several ladies-in-waiting whose raiment was so splendid that it paled only before the Beysa herself.

For a moment Feltheryn was awestruck. The cloth in the Beysa's dress alone could have footed the bill for the whole of the theater. She wore such riches as Ranke never saw, and she wore them well, her breasts thrust out voluptuously and yet with dignity, her head held with a pride that was neither unnatural nor condescending. The gorgeous snake coiling about her throat like a necklace was a priceless piece of theater!

The only woman he had ever seen so queenly was Glisselrand herself, perhaps in the role of Adriana in Templesmoke: but of course he would not declare that to the Beysa.

"Does not the day confound the night?" he quoted from *The Archmage* by way of greeting, for he had not yet learned her proper title of address. "Are not the stars but fragments of the light?"

The Beysa smiled and the membranes on her eyes nictitated. She knew

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flattery, instantly understood why he chose to use it at this moment, and decided to accept it graciously.

"I have come to see your theater," Shupansea said. "And perhaps to make my own small contribution to its success, if that would be appropri-

ate and acceptable."

Feltheryn decided he liked her.

"But of course!" he said. "Has my lady shown it to you, or have you waited for my return?"

"Your lady has shown it," said the Beysa, "and we have discussed my gift. She asked only that I accept a few sweets, and this lovely hot tisane she makes, while we awaited your approval."

"If my lady approves it, then so do I," said Feltheryn. "But what is it that you so kindly offer, if I may ask?"

"The Beysa," said Glisselrand (and her voice held the full rich lustre that it always did on stage) "has offered to have the royal box flocked with velvet. Not just the rails but the whole thing, inside and out. I think that is most kind of her, don't you?"

"Not only kind, but generous," said Feltheryn. "May I assume from this that . . ." (There was nothing for it, he had to use some title!) ". . . Your Highness plans to attend our humble offerings?"

"It will be a great treat to see such plays as those the Rankans saw," said the Beysa. "Especially after so long here in Sanctuary. In my homeland there were many spectacles provided to amuse us, and I confess to

missing them. I shall be most pleased indeed to come the very night you first perform."

The irony of her using the past tense when referring to the plays performed in Ranke was not lost on Feltheryn, but he noted it only in passing. An occupied Royal Box inevitably meant a full house!

Later, that night, Feltheryn had second thoughts about presenting *The Power of Kings*. In addition to the King, his son, and the leading lady, the play required a second young male, the son's best friend. It was the most sympathetic part in the play, for the friend, Rorem, died by an assassin's arrow in the last act, even in the midst of swearing his love for the prince, Karel. It was one of the great and moving scenes of the play, and one of the most mystical, for it was never explained. Like the events of real life, nobody ever discovered who killed Rorem, or why.

The problem was that Rounsnouf, the company's comic, was the only person available to play the part; and Rounsnouf had discovered the *Vulgar Unicom*.

To be sure, every town had its share of low dives; but the *Vulgar Unicom* (Rounsnouf explained as best he could after much too much to drink) was special!

"Master Feltheryn, I have never seen so many great character studies! The place is a treasure house' I could live there, absorbing the little moves they make, taking in the peculiar touches of their accents! There is a dark-haired boy who is all bluster and covered with knives, yet who possesses a wonderful vulnerability; I would not trust him with a gravestone, yet he appeals to my heart, . . . - There was a young woman, clearly of the noblest birth, and yet trained as a gladiator! Can you imagine that? I dared to speak with her, and she told me that she chose to learn to fight! So fascinating! Oh, how I wish you would join me there!"

It was not the wine, nor the ale, that thus gave Feltheryn misgivings: it was the seductive quality of observation the tavern offered. While all actors spent much time observing the details of character in their fellow humans, there was something about Rounsnouf that was like a hunger, and that fed off other people. He used every observation he made in his brilliant work in the plays, but when one encountered him backstage, or away from the theater, it was always disquieting. Glisselrand said she hated to leave him alone with Lempchm, not because she thought the comic would bugger the boy but because she wondered if she might come home and find him in the stewpot.

"How are you coming with your part?" Feltheryn asked, not valuing the answer of a drunk but trusting to wine to bring out the truth.

"I'll have it by opening," said Rounsnouf. "Never fear! It is only a

small part, after all."

"Yes," said Feltheryn, "but it is an important part, and it is not a comedy, it is a tragedy. You have played it before with less than glorious results, I might point out. I would appreciate it if you left off your observations until we have opened, and concentrated on the work at hand. The Vulgar Unicorn will not close nearly as soon as our play will."

Rounsnouf sat down on the floor and folded his short, thick fingers intertwined. He shut his eyes, set too close together, and yawned. Then he scratched his butterball stomach under his motley tunic.

"I suppose you are right," he said, entirely too agreeably. "I would like to be able to deliver Rorem's death speech without laughing. Oh thou whose blood runs in my veins, more closer yet than any brother. Thou, whose blood I chose against the call of nature ..."

He fell back laughing and his legs stretched out so that his feet, too small for his body, wiggled in the air-

"It sounds as if he has to use the outhouse!"

Feltheryn held back his own laugh. Taken out of context, the little comic was right.

"Come, Rounsnouf," Feltheryn said, offering his hand and helping the little man up. "I think that we had best to bed, else wake the house."

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"Let me see . . ." the comic said as he gained his feet and shook himself. "The boy walked thus . . ."

And without any help he mounted the stairs, his body gliding sleekly in imitation of the shadow-spawned grace of one of the town's most notable thieves.

Feltheryn sat down and considered: Rounsnouf had twice before become so engrossed in his studies that he had completely missed performances. He could not be allowed to do so again, at least not this early in the game. One could not bind him to the theater, nor yet threaten him. He only sulked and gave a bad reading if you did that.

What then?

Feltheryn looked in the purse of gold that Molin had given him and contemplated the best and most necessary uses the money could be put to. Of these, assuring the performance actually occurred was certainly one of the best, and so he decided upon visiting the Vulgar Unicorn himself.

But early the next morning he entertained a visitor who delayed his visit, a visitor who, of all those denizens of the empire he had entertained, was surely the most entertaining.

He awoke with the feeling that the room was burning. He started to cry out where he lay but immediately stopped. He knew too well that people died from leaping up and breathing in the burning air that accumulated at the top of the room, sometimes not more than a hand's breadth above the sleeping face. He threw one hand out to anchor Glisselrand where she lay next to him, then thrust the other up to see at what level death hovered.

Two surprises greeted his hands. The first was that Glisselrand was not there. The bed was empty but for him. The second was that the air above him was not burning, only warm.

He focused his eyes more clearly, remembering as he always did in the morning that his eyes were not what they once were.

He was not in his room after all, not in his own comfortable bed. He was lying, rather, on a chaise lounge of red-brown satin with a damask coverlet thrown over him. He was still in his long woolen nightshirt, and the lounge was large enough to accommodate two, but that was the only resemblance to the situation in which he had fallen asleep.

He was in a low chamber with a black and white checked marble floor. Thick small carpets were scattered here and there and a huge fireplace blazed brightly not far away, the source of the heat that had made him think of fire. The walls of the room were paneled below the wainscoting with dark wood, but above they were covered with damascene silk of a dusky rose color. There were framed pictures on the walls, but Feltheryn

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found he could not look at them directly and see anything. They simply blurred.

A blind servant stood next to the hearth, and across from the lounge on which he lay was an ornate chair, a throne really, in which sat someone heavily robed and hooded, a someone whose eyes could be seen glowing redly out of the darkness of the hood.

"Master Feltheryn," a voice said amiably from under the hood. It was a young voice, but he could not tell (and that bothered him!) whether the voice belonged to a man or woman. "You are not really here. I trust you realize that?"

Feltheryn had not, but he nodded in assent since he seemed to be expected to not only realize it but understand it.

"Very good," the voice said. "I thought an actor would understand such an illusion. Such a way of communicating. I am Enas Yorl, a resident of this town who does not get out much for reasons which I may later choose to explain. I have chosen to come to you in this manner to request your help in alleviating my boredom at being so cooped up within my house."

Now this Feltheryn understood. The way the man shadowed his countenance with his hood, the discretion he showed in conducting the interview, were symptomatic of many who suffered some deformity.

"You wish me to make some special arrangement at the theater," Feltheryn said. "Something in the nature of a draped box, where you may see without being seen; is that it?"

"Do you then know of me so quickly?" Enas Yorl asked, and his voice began to change, not as to tone but as to timbre. This fascinated Feltheryn greatly, for it did not seem to be a deliberate alteration such as he, himself, would have made.

"No, good sir, only of others who have asked a similar boon. The effects of a pox upon a beautiful lady, the loss of looks that comes from war ... It is not such an unusual request. In Ranke we reserved a box with curtains specifically for such a need. I think perhaps we might make one here as well, though I had not expected its requirement so soon."

A laugh came from the hood, but even as it bubbled forth the laughing changed, and when next Enas Yorl spoke it was with a rough and guttural tone like that of an experienced soldier. Feltheryn instantly envied the man his remarkable ability!

"You do not know of me, that much is plain! And I think that I shall leave it so, for you have made me laugh by your innocence. Soon enough shall you learn. But then again, your assessment of my situation is not incorrect. Return to your rest, Feltheryn Thespian, and consider that you

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have the best of the bargains a man can make: for you change form at will, and can take off the masks you assume. Now sleep!"

Feltheryn wanted desperately to pursue the conversation and stay in the presence of Enas Yorl, for at that moment he observed that his interviewer was not only seeming to change his form somewhat under the robes, but to change his mass as well; and that was a trick he would dearly love to learn. Playing Roget the Hunchback was one of the greatest accomplishments of the stage, not because of the powerful emotion of the role but because of the difficulty of acting while strapped into the elaborate harness that simulated the deformity. He was about to plead his case for study with Enas Yorl when darkness intervened and he was awaking in his own bed, his arm thrown protectively over his lady and the morn-

ing sun pouring through the casement.

He moved his hand gently back, so as not to disturb her beauty rest, then climbed out of bed and dressed quietly.

He was in the small kitchen heating water for tisane when he heard the door of the theater open and close. That would be Lalo the Limner, come to paint the next set of flats and the periactois for the auto-da-fe in Act Three-

There was certainly nothing more impressive in all the world than the illusion of fire on stage, and nothing harder to accomplish- Feltheryn had chosen this time to bring about the miracle through the use of periactois—three-sided columns with different paintings on each side—which could be revolved. There would also be ragged strips of cloth dyed like flames which Lempchin could waggle furiously by means of strings descending from the flies. The strings would not be visible, and in the flickering light of the onstage torches the effect would be terrifying.

The vision so captured Feltheryn's early morning imagination that he quite forgot the kettle of boiling water and went to get his script and notebook, adding several details which he thought would improve the stage picture. He barely noticed when Glisselrand put the pot of tisane and a clean cup at his elbow, and with it a plate of freshly scrambled eggs, cheese, sliced bread from the previous day, and a pot of rare red jelly made from the legendary oranges of Enlibar; of which they had a

dozen left in trade for seating when (hey had played *The Steel Skeleton*, a play which many assumed to have been written by an Enlibrite wizard, and which the Enlibrites would travel fantastic distances to see.

He was roused from his deep reverie and study of the text when an unfamiliar voice echoed in the theater, followed by Glisselrand's most opulent tones.

"I only came to bring Lalo his midday meal," a woman's voice said.

"But I confess I did hope to see if it was you. It's been many years, but

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how could I forget? While Lalo was working on the painting that won my hand there was nothing for me to do, so I came to see the play. I had seen you do a piece before the tent, so I knew it would be good."

"Why yes," said Glisselrand, and her voice held all the charm and delight that only an actor can know when remembered after twenty years. "What play was it that we did?"

"The Master Poet," said the woman, whom Feltheryn now took to be Gilla, Lalo's wife. "It was so personal, at that time, for your situation

was much like my own. When I came away I felt as if my whole outlook on life had changed. People looked so different! I felt so differently!"

Feltheryn smiled to himself. Yes, the plays worked their magic in strange and subtle ways. And that play was a comedy of love, a comedy of love between the generations. But even then he had chosen to play the older man, the lovable shoemaker who could have the young girl, but who chose wisely to let her love the younger man, the man of her own generation.

"I am so pleased that you remember my performance," said Glisselrand, and Feltheryn knew that it was true. He tried to hark back in his mind to that distant day, to remember some trace that would lead him down the path to a sensual recall of time and place, but it was hopeless. He had done *The Master Poet* so many times that one performance blended into another. The sunlight falling on flowers that his mental search prompted could have been in any of a hundred small towns. The play was too universal to attach itself to time and place. Only the first time he had done it was clear in his memory, and then he had not played the older man, but Dainis, the apprentice who danced and fought . . .

The King recalled him to the page and Glisselrand and Lalo and Gilla faded into the paint of the periactois like soft music played behind the potted palms in the Emperor's palace. His hand shot out into the air,

retreated, his lips moved, and anyone watching might have thought him in the grip of some seizure as he moved in slight indications of the broad gestures he would use upon the stage.

It was much later when he came to the realization that he was eating his supper, not his breakfast, and that he had been absorbed for the whole of the day. He carefully set the script aside, finished the boiled turnip with butter that was the last of the food on his plate, and washed it down with the watered wine that Glisselrand had provided. He was not up to the full strength stuff anymore. Then he stood and stretched his very tall frame, forcing air back into the stagnant blood. It was,, he considered, time to visit the Vulgar Unicorn.

Snegelringe and Rounsnouf were already there, drinking at a table in the company of a handsome young man with shoulder-length glossy

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black hair, a man dressed far too fine for the likes of this low dive, Feltheryn observed as he entered unobtrusively and looked over the place.

And yet, low though the dive was, it was not without merit. He thought of the many taverns he had entered over the years and the gen-

eral lack of lustre they displayed, and he decided that perhaps Rounsnouf was right, the place was a treasure house. There was a certain dark color that crackled with hidden decisions, a subdued excitement that spoke of desperation. He spied out the barkeep and headed across the room, then dodged deftly as a scrawny, heavy-lidded man who feigned sleep at one of the tables tried to trip him without seeming to.

"It would seem that Hakiem does not like you," the big man behind the bar said.

Feltheryn had assumed his dodge deft enough that nobody would notice the interchange, but that was clearly not the case. The eyes of thieves, he reminded himself, were trained in much the same techniques as those of actors, to see and learn what was not always apparent.

"Now why should that be?" he asked, drawing out a small coin and putting it down.

"He views you as competition, King of Players," said the barkeep. "He is a storyteller in the streets. What will you drink?"

"Half water, half wine," said Feltheryn. "That is foolish of him, for he will be able to tell a thousand tales to each play I perform. And the stories we offer are different."

"Half water?" the barkeep asked, and his look was of the greatest contempt.

Feltheryn drew himself up tall, taller than the barkeep though not so broad or strong: taller than anyone in the room, though probably thinner than anyone as well.

"I am an old man, in case you have not noticed," he said with dignity.

"My body does not move as quickly as it once did, nor do my guts digest as well. I will pay you as if the whole cup were wine."

That settled the matter and the barkeep gave him what he wanted.

"I will pay for something else as well," he said after he had taken a drink. "Something within your proper duties but which might be distasteful without the gold."

"And what is that?" asked the barkeep suspiciously.

"By now you know Rounsnouf, my comedian," Feltheryn said, gesturing toward the table where his actors were so engrossed that they had not noted his entry. "I fear that he knows this place better now than he ought, at least for the welfare of my plays. I will pay you a fit sum if on

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certain nights, when we are to perform, you will forbid him entry until the play is done."

"And what's to stop him drinking elsewhere?"

"It is not the drink he values in this place, it's the people. I do not think he will find such a ripe assortment elsewhere in Sanctuary, and if he knows that he can come here but for play nights, I do not think he will feel abused."

The barkeep named a price, Feltheryn dickered it down (though it was within reason) and the bargain was struck.

"But you must tell him what you've done," the barkeep concluded.

"Just so," said Feltheryn, finishing his drink and gesturing for another.

His cup refilled, he made his way across the room, avoiding the table of Hakiem, and joined the party. Rounsnouf and Snegelringe introduced him to their new friend, Hort. then they all swapped stories and poems for a while. Feltheryn did not tell Rounsnouf what he had done until the next morning, when the little comedian took it in stride.

"Would that the gods," he said in acceptance, "were so steady of will as a director!"

The final piece of planning involved extra bodies, for *The Power of Kings* was a spectacle play and the effect of spectacle was achieved largely through filling the stage with elegantly clothed people. Feltheryn had taught many a young actor the importance of a walk-on role by citing the case of the handmaiden in *The Murder of Queen Ranceta*, a part which gave the young woman playing it but a moment on stage but without which the play could not exist. (It was the handmaiden who delivered the tray with the fatal flagon of poisoned wine, and without the poisoning there was no play!) Now the question was where to hire attractive young women to don the robes of court ladies, and where to hire young men to wear the garb of court gentlemen.

Feltheryn asked Lalo, who certainly should be able to ferret out beauty if anyone could, and Lalo asked his wife Gilla, for he was not confident in the enterprise. Gilla suggested that Feltheryn talk to Myrtis, the proprietrix of the Aphrodisia House, with the admonition that the women who worked there were above average in looks for their trade; and a vote of confidence in their honesty to their employer. Feltheryn did as Gilla bid and was delighted to find that Myrtis could not only supply him with lovely ladies but knew where to hire young men just as pretty and reliable to wear the beautiful clothes he promised.

It was not long before the theater neared completion, before the sets were painted and dried, before Glisselrand had brought in seamstresses to help her finish the arduous task of building the last of the costumes.

Actual rehearsals got under way, the piecemeal chunks of the drama were glued together into scenes, then acts, then the ladies and gentlemen of the evening were called in (by day, so that they could continue to work nights until the opening) and the grand sweep of the drama was stitched in its final glorious pattern.

Feltheryn ceased to sleep much for even after so many years an opening night excited him. He ran lines in his mind constantly, missed, re-ran them. He worried over the success of his new theater, he worried over the nuance of each line in the play, he worried over things that a week before would have flowed by him like mist in the night. He took to dressing in a shabby cloak and wandering the streets, hunched over so that his height would not mark him, and listening to the crowds.

Were they talking about the theater? About the play?

If not, something must be done.

He longed for the days when the mere fact that he and Glisselrand slept together without benefit of marriage was sufficient to titillate the masses. In those days there had been no difficulty in drawing a crowd. The pride of the youthful Rankan Empire had filled the streets of Ranke

with pleasure seekers, and the craving of a young empire for respectability had made scandal easy,

Scandal in Sanctuary would be hard work, he thought.

The theater was decorated within with banners and garlands of flowers made of gayly colored silk, and the night before opening they decorated the outside as well. It must be a festive occasion, and it was to be such a novelty in Sanctuary that all kinds of people offered help. Molin came by and asked that they move virtually everything movable, to make sure it would work. Myrtis stopped in—at an hour unknown to a woman other profession—and assured Glisselrand that she and her ladies would be bringing trays of sweetmeats for opening night. A wagon pulled up and unloaded several barrels of excellent wine, courtesy of the as yet unseen prince. It seemed as if nothing could go wrong.

Feltheryn retired that night with only the slightest anxiety, and sank immediately into a sleep filled with naming vistas, tragic emotions, and thunderous applause.

The actors slept late the morning of the opening, as was usual. Days of rehearsal had now to be traded for nights of performance, and the energy required for such was enormous, particularly of people who had reached the ages Feltheryn and Glisselrand had. Lempchin brought them breakfast in bed, a tradition which they indulged despite the cleaning which the kitchen would require after the boy's attempt at cooking.

Snegelringe came in and Feltheryn complimented him on his perfor-

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mance at the dress rehearsal: "I think you have the role at last," he said.

"The way you walked was perfect! Just the right balance of nobility and indolence for Karel."

"I was pleased with that myself," said Snegelringe. "Actually, I owe it totally to Rounsnouf and his fascination with that tavern. I was casting about for a model and one of his friends, a dark young woman who fights as a gladiator, told me she could show me a man very much like Karel if I would attend her. I did, and we rode to a brief hunt. Out on the hills she pointed out some noble dandy and his guards, and even from the distance I could see that he was what I wanted for the part."

"Who was he?" Feltheryn asked, sipping at the tea which Lempchin had made too strong. He much preferred tisane.

"I've no idea," said Snegelringe. "I asked her, but she laughed and said it were better I did not know, for he was not the kind of man I would enjoy knowing."

Feltheryn furrowed his brow. It was not likely to be a source of diffi-

culty, but he preferred to know from what hand all the cards in the game had been dealt.

"Will she be coming to the play?"

"She says she would not miss it for the world; especially once I had told her Prince Kadakithis and the Beysa would be there in the newly flocked box. She said she would be bringing several other ladies as well."

"Ah, good," said Feltheryn. "The more nobility the merrier!"

"The house will glitter like Midwinter Festival in Ranke," said Glisselrand nostalgically, and Feltheryn detected just the slightest regret in her voice. It had been good in Ranke with the Emperor's support.

She threw the covers back dramatically and sat up in the bed.

"And /." she announced, "must glitter twice as bright! Lempchin! Go out to the herbalist and get me a box of henna, my hair is beginning to show grey!"

That buzzing, casual time before the opening passed, the afternoon when there was nothing to do but a thousand tiny things that had to wait, then had to be done. The blue hour came, the stars began to prick the sky, and Lempchin lit oil lamps on the front of the theater. The inner doors were closed and the outer doors were opened, and Lempchin pre-

pared to sell admittance.

Feltheryn headed for his dressing room, stage left, and prepared to put on his makeup. He did not need as much as he once had. Now the job was to make him seem young enough for the part of the king. Once it had been a task to make him seem old enough.

He was part way through when he heard the voice of Hort outside his door, and with it that of Rounsnouf.

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"But you could wait," Hort said. "He will still be there later!"

"I could, but I won't!" said Rounsnouf, and the voices moved past the door to Feltheryn's dressing room, toward the back entrance of the theater.

Feltheryn felt a moment of panic, dropped the sponge with which he had been applying rouge, and leaped to his feet. He hurried out into the passage, but it was too late. The door was closing and Rounsnouf and the storyteller were gone!

"Shipri's Dugs!" Feltheryn swore, and his voice carried like Vashanka's thunder. The door to the dressing room next to his own opened and

Snegelringe looked out, his face looking oddly pale with only the base applied, and no eye or lip color.

"Hold the house!" Feltheryn instructed. "Rounsnouf has fled, and I must chase him!"

"To the Vulgar Unicorn?" Snegelringe inquired.

"If so, I'll have the hide of the barkeep. I paid him to be sure the curtain was on time!"

He went back into his dressing room, wiped the makeup from his face with a wet towel, then pulled on a tunic. Just to be sure he would be taken seriously he added the belt with the King's sword. He threw a short cloak over the tunic against the chill, then he left the theater. No matter that the sword was cheap iron, a hand on the hilt was all it usually took!

He glanced up the alley from the stage door as he went and noted that people were already arriving. He would have Rounsnouf's skin for this escapade, and possibly a bit from Hort as well!

He rushed through the gathering darkness, still running lines in his mind for the second scene of the first act. In a matter of minutes he was at the Maze, then within it. He was so angry that he barely noticed the pattering of feet that fell in behind him, forced them in fact from his atten-

tion until they speeded up: until it was apparent that they were running after him, close and with intent.

The skill most necessary to an actor upon the stage is the ability to adjust rapidly to changing circumstances. If a door sticks one must be ready to make it appear a part of the play. If a sword sticks in its scabbard one must be ready to dodge a choreographed blow and keep the action flowing while one gets it free. It was not so much self-preservation as stagecraft that made Feltheryn whirl upon his assailants at the last moment and slide his sword free, raising it over his shoulder in the menacing stance of a broadswordsmen ready for the downstroke.

The shadows before him skidded to a halt. There were five of them (poor odds) and he recognized them at once as the pickpockets who had

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tried for his purse that first day in the bazaar. Wicked sharp steel glinted in the scant starlight, definitely better weapons than the fake sword he wielded.

The tallest one, the boy whom Snegelringe had wounded, gave a laugh.

"King indeed!" came the young voice. "Nothing but an old player!

One with too much gold on his person at that! And this time with no pudgy sidekick to defend him!"

The youth was right, Feltheryn observed, but his words showed inaccurate judgment.

"The gold is all spent," he said, keeping his voice carefully level and below the middle force. "As to the rest: I am old, but not without skills."

"Skills to be tried!" snarled the boy, and they all came at him.

"Die then!" Feltheryn cried, and this time he let forth the full power of his voice, a voice trained to reach at least the third balcony of the largest theater in Ranke. And as he spoke (for he did not have to shout to be heard from one end of the Maze to the other) he brought the iron sword down with his full strength and speed, straight at his opponent's head.

One knife caught in his cloak as he swirled it with his left hand.

Another thrust between his ribs, under his descending right arm; but its force was not sufficient to go all the way in, so startled were the thieves by the force of his voice. Two of the boys jumped back, terrified. The leader, primed on his pride, managed to avoid the iron blade descending toward his head, but not quite enough. The edge was not terribly sharp but it was moving fast enough to break his collarbone where it struck, even as his blade sliced across Feltheryn's belly, drawing blood but not

managing to gut him.

It was not unlike the fight in Rakesblade, and Feltheryn, barely feeling the wounds in the excitement of a performance, delivered his lines with force enough to rattle their teeth:

"Is this your best, you unborn whoreson snakes?

Is magick then your honorless defense?

See too my holy blade I can enchaunt.

So that its light your rude entrapment breaks!"

The fact that they were not using magic against him quite escaped their attention at that moment, for the sword in Feltheryn's hand began to glow a bluish white, spilling its weird light into the shadows and illuminating the scene dramatically. They had no idea that the light from the blade was all there was to the magic of the spell contained in the play. They only knew that their leader was once more screaming in agony and that the man before them was much taller than he had seemed a moment before: that he seemed unharmed by their attack, and that they were not winning.

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"Gralis, forget him!" cried one of the boys to their leader, and then they all bolted, leaving the wounded Gratis to fend for himself.

Feltheryn stepped forward, brandishing the glowing sword at his agonized enemy.

"Go thou into darkness!" he commanded, from later in the same play.

"Take demons now for playmates if you will, and leave forever, these the lands of light"

Through the pain in his ruined shoulder the boy heard these words and, harking back to the terrors that had so recently reigned in Sanctuary, he lost control of his bladder even as he turned and staggered away, doing his best to run.

Feltheryn stood triumphant, the light blazing from the sword in an unnaturally quiet and empty street. He watched the horrified and incompetent thief disappear into the shadows, then he realized that something was wrong.

There was no applause!

The light of the sword fizzled out as if it had been doused with a bucket of winter cold water, and the pain hit Feltheryn where the two blades had cut him. He shook himself, took a deep breath, then thrust the stage sword back into its stage scabbard. He felt the wound across his belly and determined that it was not going to be fatal, then checked the piercing between his ribs. That was more serious, and would require a surgeon: after the performance.

He turned and headed for the Vulgar Unicorn, his anger returning full force.

—But he was not prepared for what awaited him when he slammed open the door and raked the brown darkness with his steel-blue gaze.

Rounsnouf and Hort were two of three sitting at a table engaged in animated conversation while the barkeep—a barkeep different from the one Feltheryn had bribed—poured dark beer in their mugs.

The barkeep registered a look not much different from that of any other man faced with trouble, but it was the third patron at Rounsnouf's table who captured and held Feltheryn's attention. A daemon! They were drinking with a gray-skinned, wart-faced, wall-eyed daemon!

"Oh dear," said Rounsnouf. "I believe I've upset my director."

"Lady of Stars!" exclaimed the young storyteller. "You're wounded!"

"Not so much in the flesh as in my heart!" Feltheryn proclaimed, a quote from the play he should now be ready to begin.

*I would not have come just now . . ." Rounsnouf said lamely, and he gestured to the daemon.

"Snapper Jo's fault?" the daemon queried. "Just a little drink with friends. Very human thing to do!"

"To the Theater!" Feltheryn proclaimed. And if the habitues of the Vulgar Unicorn had been familiar with the whole corpus of the sacred plays they would have seen in the fire of his eyes the conjuration of most ancient deities from the most ancient dramas.

They were not, but nobody argued.

Still, the night's difficulties were unended.

Bandages, ointments to kill the pain, makeup, costume, light calisthenics to fill his blood with air to support his voice; all these were accomplished, and the curtain went up. From the wings Feltheryn listened to the love scene in the garden between Snegelringe and Glisselrand, running his lines and clearing his mind of all the nonsense that had slowed him. It was past, after all, and only the play now existed.

The scene drew to a close and the curtain was drawn, then he and Rounsnouf and Lempchin, with the aid of the roaring boys provided by Myrtis, pulled the ropes, moved the panels, and in general changed the scene to that of the King's study. He took his place on the stage, seated at the King's great desk, and the curtain went up.

Feltheryn came alive.

There was an audience and he could feel it, feel every living being as a presence, their eyes upon him, their breathing slowed, their minds involved—their emotions guided as they submitted themselves, for the duration, to the magic of the show. He began the monologue in which the King voiced his doubts, then Glisselrand entered and he began the part of the play that was his personal favorite, for it said, better than any words of his own could ever hope to say, what he felt about her:

"How shall I call you then?

Like some great bird, that though she be my slave can yet take wing?

Like some famed horse, that though I hold the reins can race the wind?

I call you love, and hold you in my arms, and yet you overpower me.

I call you wife, and you must call me lord; and yet I worship at your shrine!"

He ceased to exist as a separate person and became the tragic king, a man doomed by circumstance to destroy all that he loved in life, rescued from the ultimate humiliation only by the intervention of supernatural forces at the end: forces beyond his comprehension.

The scene changed again and the pain hit him, then he launched back into his performance and it was gone. Only when the first act was complete did he really understand that he was seriously wounded. Instead of going out to the little secret passage behind the lobby (Molin had included it without question) to listen to the public reaction to the play, Feltheryn stayed in his dressing room, resting for the forceful and terrible

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interview with the High Priest, preparing for the cold and terrible act of burning his enemies at the stake, the auto-da-fe that was the play's most stunning spectacle.

By the end, however, as the story ground to its inevitable conclusion with the ghostly figure of the King's dead father dragging his grandson Karel into the tomb, the pain was pushing past all Feltheryn's defenses. And there was something else, something that had tugged at him increasingly throughout. As the curtain fell and he dropped the character from him like a discarded robe, he placed it.

There was no applause.

No more applause than there had been in the alley earlier. Instead there was a curious buzz, something between anger and amusement, partaking of both; as if the audience didn't know what to do.

He had felt it, had known with the back of his mind that something was wrong, but he had been too much at odds with the pain to pay attention. Now his mind focused on it with a clarity like sunlight on springwater.

He started to go through the curtains for a bow, .if not to receive applause then to gauge the danger, but Glisselrand took his arm and stopped him.

"I think not," she said, and he saw that there were lines in her face that age had not put there.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't quite know," she replied, "but I think we shall find out. The Prince and the Beysa have sent word that they are coming backstage. Let's get to the green room."

They had taken the precaution of providing their own greens for the opening, so by the time Prince Kadakithis and the Beysa Shupansea swept in, Feltheryn and Glisselrand were seated behind a desk amidst baskets of flowers and fruit with potted palms to either side. It had not been easy to find potted palms in Sanctuary, but they had grown used to them in Ranke and they felt it would identify them positively with the capital in its days of glory.

The effort was apparently wasted.

"How dare you!" accused the prince, and Feltheryn instantly knew what it was that he had dared, though just how and why he did not know.

Prince Kadakithis was clearly the young nobleman on whom Snegelringe had modeled his walk and manner! It must have appeared that the whole play was directly aimed at him, a warning or an insult or ...

"Oh look!" said Snegelringe, entering on the arm of a beautiful young

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woman and accompanied by several more. "Here's the young man you pointed out to me! Kind Sir, you cannot know how grateful—"

Snegelringe stopped.

The whole world seemed to stop for a moment as one of the ladies in the pudgy actor's retinue stepped forward.

"Daphne!" Prince Kadakithis exclaimed.

"My husband!" said Princess Daphne, and the look she gave him could

have frozen the oceans all the way to the Beysa's homeland. "I heard that you had made a gracious contribution to the evening, so how could I do less?"

She stepped past him and drew out a small velvet bag which she dropped on the table in front of Glisselrand with just enough force to indicate that it contained metal; from the sound of it, gold. Then she looked back at the prince.

"I hope that you enjoyed the evening as much as I did. For now you must excuse me. I have an appointment with Master Rounsnouf, the estimable actor. Then Masters Snegelringe and Rounsnouf and I will be going to the Vulgar Unicorn. It is amazing how much of Sanctuary I never used to see!"

She swept from the room, followed by the other women who had come in with her.

Snegelringe, perceiving that he had been duped, stood motionless while the full import of his actions crashed down on him. "I . . ." he started, but then he stopped, clearly unable to formulate an appropriate apology.

The Beysa laughed.

"Master Snegelringe," she said, "your imitation of the prince was most

enlightening. Only less so than the reason for it which we have just had revealed. But perhaps you might choose another model for the performance you will give tomorrow night."

"Unless," said Feltheryn, the plot of the play before him coming clear, "Your Highness would consent to see it in another light!"

The Prince and the Beysa turned to him and Glisselrand clutched his hand.

"While it is true," he continued, "that the role of Karel is tragic, it is also noble. Karel, like His Highness, spends much of his time in a backward land; so much so that he comes to love its people, even to the point of standing up for them against his father, the King."

A different tension now came into the room, for the relationship between Prince Kadakithis and his half-brother the late emperor, was well known.

"If it were spoken in the palace that the Prince was pleased with our seeing him in such an heroic light, tonight's performance could not be

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taken as an insult by anyone, no matter how it was instigated. In fact, I doubt anyone would believe that it was anything but the best compliment

we poor players could offer. More, it is known that Your Highness has supported our efforts, so it might seem that it was with Your Highness' compliance that we performed the play thus."

He did not dare say further. The seeds of the idea were planted, it would be up to them to keep them watered. The magic in the plays was subtle, but it might be sufficient to transform the image of the Prince from that of a "kittycat" into that of a tiger.

The Prince and the Beysa looked at one another. The Beysa's snake slid out of hiding in her sleeve.

Molin Torchholder stalked into the room, his face full of the lightning of the god he worshipped, but before he could speak the Beysa turned to Glisselrand.

"Turn out the pouch the Princess Daphne gave you," she instructed.

"Daphne?" echoed Molin, clearly outraged.

Glisselrand did as she was bid and dumped the sizable pile of gold coins onto the table.

The Beysa eyed the coins, then reached down to her dress and plucked off several large jewels. Smiling, she placed them on the table next to the

gold.

"I believe your next play should be *The Queen of Tarts*," she said with consummate modesty, considering that the play was accounted too lascivious to play in many towns. "In case you do not remember, it is the one about the noblewoman who sells herself in the marketplace. I have never seen it, but here, far away from home, I believe I can risk it. These jewels should serve in earnest of the costs."

"Oh, Your Highness," said Glisselrand, looking at the jewels. "We could not possibly accept such a gracious donation . . ."

—Now what was she saying? Feltheryn wondered; for at that moment the pain between his ribs began to blot out his thoughts and he was sure that he must immediately slip from consciousness. The Prince and the Beysa might be nobility, but opening night was over and he needed a physician—

"Not unless," Glisselrand continued, "Your Highness would accept a small token of our thanks."

Feltheryn understood and plunged back to consciousness, but he was not quick enough. Before he could intervene Glisselrand had pulled out the object she had been knitting, a multicolored tea cozy that would have put the S'danzo to shame for its garishness, and she was proffering it proudly to the Beysa.

RED LIGHT, LOVE LIGHT

Chris Morris

Sunset gilded Sanctuary's domes and spires as Shawme, the new girl at Myrtis's Aphrodisia House, sat upright in her backroom bed. Fists clenched, she took deep breaths, shaking off her bad dream.

Her blue eyes wide, she stared hungrily out the window, at the sunset to which she woke, at the window frame itself, at the whitewashed walls of her little room. The room was plain by Aphrodisia House standards, but not by Shawme's. The room had a real window with glass panes; it had a feather bed and clean sheets; it had a writing desk cum dressing table on which were such luxuries as pots of body paint and makeup, kohl and powdered cowrie shell, even a hair brush made from boar bristles, and a bone comb; it had a closet with clothes in it—clean clothes, free from holes, dresses of fine sheer silk and even a coat to keep out the spring chill.

It was a room of unimaginable luxury, high above the street, not like the room in the dream from which Shawme had awakened to flee. In the dream, she'd been back in her old Ratfall burrow, shared with five other orphans, fighting over the raw and bony thigh of a dead cat they'd found in the street. In that dream, the other kids had teased her that all of this

was a dream. They'd been sure there was no room for her in the Aphrodisia House, no job among the perfumed women of the evening, no marvelous future unrolling day by day.

In the dream, Shawme had been back in Ratfall where no one had a future and no one had a past, not a chance or a hope. Except Zip. And Zip didn't pay any mind to the youngsters. You couldn't matter to Zip

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until you weren't a kid anymore . . . until the PFLS found a use for you.

Shawme unballled her clenched fists and rubbed her eyes with her hands. As the dream's terror fled, joy filled her and crested into exultation. She was really here! She'd made it out of Ratfall!

So all of this was true and real—the down coverlet she pulled up against her naked shoulders, the lavender-scented oil lamp ready to light by her bed as night came on, the beautiful sunset—because even in Sanctuary, the night could be beautiful when you were safe inside the walls of a fine house instead of lurking cold and vulnerable on the streets.

And it was all real because of Zip. Zip had noticed her, all right, when she'd come to him with the treasures she'd found on the Downwind beach. Zip had looked at her with focused eyes for the first time and

Shawme's heart skipped a beat. You couldn't do any better than Zip. Zip was the fantasy lover of all the young girls in Ratfall and half of Downwind. Zip's power could shield you, Zip's connections could get you anything, even out.

In front of Zip, Shawme had bitten her lip and pretended she wasn't about to swoon. She had to be grown up and impress the PFLS leader for her plan to work. The PFLS—Popular Front for the Liberation of Sanctuary—was working with uptowners now. Zip's connections were legend in the shanty towns. She'd smiled bravely and said, "I found something—things you'd want. I'll give them, for a price."

And he'd let her show him, let her tell him, what she'd found—a bronze rod that turned noble metal to dross, an amulet of uncertain value, a rusted knife whose edge could be coaxed to life. There'd been one other thing she hadn't shown him, but that was her secret, still.

And the PFLS leader had seemed to be impressed, and said, "What's your name, girl, and what do you want for these?"

She'd replied, as cool as if she dealt with handsome rebel leaders every day, "I want out of Ratfall. I want a room in the Aphrodisia House. I want to be one of Lady Myrtis's girls and meet a noble lord and marry well." Her chin was high, to show she knew the ways of the world and the implications of what she was saying. As she spoke, she ran spread

hands down her bodice and over her hips as she'd seen a whore do once, when she was uptown in the Maze where men could afford to buy a woman's favors and women sold themselves for money rather than having to give themselves for survival.

Zip's eyes had narrowed, his mouth had twitched. He'd stroked his stubbled chin and gazed ruminatively at the treasures she'd found. Then finally he looked up from under his black sweatband and said, "That's what you want, I'll see what I can do. But leave these with me, or

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somebody might take them from you and you'll have nothing to trade but what you started with."

She'd been suddenly uncomfortable under his stare, a different look than he'd had on him before- It seemed to go right through her clothes and she thought, terrified for an instant so that she'd begun to shake, he was going to ask her to demonstrate her expertise, such charms as could qualify a girl for Myrtis's, the finest house in all of Sanctuary's red-light district.

If he had asked, all chance of Shawme's escape to luxury and bright tomorrows would have been dashed on the spot, for Shawme had no idea what a man like Zip would want from a woman, let alone a professional woman.

In point of fact, Shawme had no idea what to do with a man, except run from them and throw whatever you could at them if they got too close. If you didn't do that and they grabbed you, the next thing you knew you were battered, bleeding and pregnant.

But it wasn't that way for the uptown women of the Aphrodisia House, and ever since she'd found that out, Shawme had wanted to go there.

So when Zip's voice deepened, she was terrified. If he found out she knew nothing about the job she'd demanded in exchange for the treasures she had, he'd never help her. And if she ever was to let Zip do what men did to women, she'd have to know what she was doing. Or else he'd laugh.

Men always laughed at virgins.

Shawme's virginity was still a problem now, after a week at Myrtis's.

She'd meant to tell Myrtis, when the time was right. But the time had never been right. Zip had gotten her the interview, and sent her uptown with an escort. She hadn't returned to Ratfall again, not for the whole two weeks since then.

She'd been taught to bathe herself, to deal with her moon flow, to make herself soft and beautiful, to keep from getting pregnant. But she'd been taught nothing of how to rid herself of the awful curse of virginity.

Or of how to please a man.

All the other girls—older girls, poised girls, wise girls with gold rings in their ears and gemstones in their noses—assumed she knew her trade. They were arch and competitive, and their gossip had teeth. If they found out, she'd be driven from here, back down to Ratfall. Like in her dream.

But no one had found out, and Shawme was going to go downstairs this evening, for the first time. Tonight, she would be among those in the great salon, posturing and fanning themselves, luring men upstairs.

Tonight, Shawme would become the woman she was pretending to be.

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She'd lied about her age, said she was eighteen, when she was years younger. But no one had noticed. All the other girls were too busy counting conquests. Who came to see you mattered most here. Who came more than once, who became your regular, who your regular knew and what kind of gifts he brought you. It was a different world.

And she was on its threshold. Her heart calmed, she stretched in her bed, watching the sunset slink into dusk, the colors no more beautiful than the garments the girls downstairs wore. Myrtis had given her the smallest room, the plainest clothes, the lowest percentage, but only because Shawme was the new girl.

"Except for Zip, you wouldn't have this bed at all," Myrtis had told her, not unkindly. "We've got a waiting list down to the White Foal Bridge. You'll have to make your way here, make friends, develop regulars. Then you'll have your own money, and we'll settle up what I've advanced you against a piece of your gross."

Shawme hadn't even known what a "piece of your gross" was, until she'd gotten up yesterday early and snuck out of the house to meet Merricat at Promise Park.

Merricat was Shawme's only uptown friend, a girl apprenticing at the Mageguild because of her shadowy, powerful aunt up north. The two girls had met on the beach one day, and been fast friends ever since.

When they'd met, Merricat had been crying as she beachcombed, and Shawme had drawn her knife, ready to protect the other girl if she could. Merricat's tears, it turned out, were tears of unrequited love for Randal, the powerful mage who served the Stepsons.

So they'd had something in common, both girls unnoticed by the men of their dreams. Merricat had confided all about Randal, and Shawme had told of her hopeless love for Zip.

Then together they'd concocted this scheme, that was supposed to make Zip notice Shawme, come to the Aphrodisia House some day and sweep her off her feet. "After," Merricat had said wisely, with a nod of her prim little chin, "you have mastered the womanly arts better than anyone else. To make Randal love me, I must become a wondrous adept."

Merricat had given Shawme a spell to hide her virginity yesterday, given it with a frown: "I'm not very good at this—yet," she'd cautioned. "So be careful."

Merricat was shorter, rounder, and fairer than Shawme, with a plump face and button eyes and all the softness of good breeding. Yesterday when they met, Merricat had had her peregrine, Dika, with her, the gift her aunt had sent to qualify Merricat for Mageguild apprenticeship in the first place.

"I trust you!" Shawme had replied, rubbing her tanned arms because suddenly she didn't.

"Trust Dika, it's his doing. Lightning and thunder, I hope it works."

Merricat was suddenly solemn. She leaned forward on the park bench:

"And you'll tell me, promise. What it's like. Who it is ... everything.

Or I'll curse you. You wouldn't want that."

As long as Dika didn't curse her too, it probably wouldn't hurt worse than growing up in Ratfall, Shawme thought. Out loud she said, "Of course, as soon as ... it ... happens, I'll put the lantern in my window. But won't you know, by magical means?"

Merricat lived in constant fear of being found wanting, of failing in her apprenticeship. "I should know," she said, her full lower lip beginning to tremble, "but I probably won't. I'm not good enough, Shawme," she said, a whine edging her tone. "I'll never—"

"Shush, bitch," said Shawme sharply, and then regretted the gutter talk up here where words meant different things. Shawme took Merricat's fine, soft hand and squeezed it hard before letting go. "You're better

than you think. Dika knows it. He's not flying away."

Merricat reached up, onto her shoulder to stroke the peregrine who perched there. The bird cocked its head at Shawme and opened and closed its beak once as if in agreement.

"He's right, Merricat. Got to go before I miss breakfast."

"And I miss bedcheck. Good luck with Zip."

"Good luck with Randal."

So the two friends had parted, Shawme armed with a root of dried mandrake on a thong that was supposed to keep her secret safe from discovery.

Keep it safe, tonight. Tonight she would lie abed with her first man.

She rubbed her tawny arms, stroking the fine sun-paled hair on them. She hoped he would be beautiful, bold and not too old. She wanted him to be just like Zip, with a full head of hair and a lithe young body, with high cheekbones and the fire of revolution in his eyes . . .

But he could as easily be a fat, greasy-lipped merchant from the Street of Weavers, or a drover from Caravan Square. There were no gods left alive in the part of Ratfall that had spawned Shawme from the chance meeting of an Ilsig matron and a soldier who, from Shawme's blue eyes,

was probably Rankan.

No gods to pray to, but prayers aplenty. Shawme closed her eyes and chanted. "Red light, love light, first light I see tonight. Wish I may, wish I might, have the boy I love tonight."

Quick as a spooked cat, she opened her eyes and there, out the window, she saw the first lights flare along the town's skyline. Against the

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torpid blue of early evening, they seemed like an omen. Zip would come, she was sure of it. Come to make sure that Shawme had a customer on her first night at Myrtis's. Come to make a woman of her.

Sliding out from under her coverlet, she clutched the mandrake root around her neck on its thong. Thanks be to Merricat's magic, everything would be all right . . . //she could just decide whether to wear her blue dress, or her red one.

For a girl who'd never before owned even one dress, but only cast-off shirts and trousers, beggar's rags, choosing between two new and filmy dresses with low cut bodices and gilded laces was no small challenge.

When she'd donned the blue one and was padding down the Aphrodisia House's stairs, male laughter was already rising over the raucous strains

of music from the downstairs saloon.

And tucked beneath that dress, tightly bound with a scarf to her thigh, was the other thing she'd found on the beach that night, the weapon she hadn't shown to Zip, the weird artifact from the sea that Merricat had squinted at, frowned over, and told Shawme that she'd better keep.

The guard was changing in Sanctuary, and nowhere were the winds of chaos more keenly felt than in the Mageguild.

Even Merricat, who hadn't been an apprentice very long before pillars of fire uptown had signalled the coming of the New Era, knew that. She could see it in the faces of the adepts, in the hunched shoulders of the handsome, mysterious and nameless First Hazard.

She could feel it in her classroom sessions when a real mage was teaching, as Randal was this evening. Usually, when Randal taught the gathered apprentices, Merricat found herself daydreaming. She'd watch Randal's freckled face and envision it gazing fondly on her in some secluded bower to which he'd whisked her for private lessons. She'd stare at his prodigious ears and taste what it would be like to nibble them. She'd meditate on the strong arms of the warrior-mage in his adept's robes and wonder what it would be like to feel them around her.

But not tonight. Tonight even Randal—who always made Merricat feel calm and safe and less afraid of being exposed as an untalented

imposter among the students—even Randal seemed tense and wan.

The lesson was in progress, though, and Merricat tried hard to concentrate.

" . . . go to your trances, and then we'll start adventuring up among the planes. On each plane we visit, you'll have time to look around, meet denizens. When you meet a denizen, be sure to remember its name. The eventual object of this lesson," Randal said in a sharp voice that forced Merricat's attention away from daydreams, away from schemes to get

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Randal alone on pretext of discussing Shawme's plight, away from everything . . .

" . . . the object is, eventually, to reach the twelfth plane, where you will encounter a spirit guide, a connection to help you negotiate among netherworld powers. This is magic of the most potent sort, magic of the kind that will stay with you lifelong and determine even your afterlife. It has nothing to do with mundane spells failing, with irate harridans complaining about inefficacious love potions—"

The score of students tittered.

Randal continued. "This is profound business. Some of you will make this journey slowly, in stages. Some will only partly complete it during this term. But to be truly an adept, you must in your lifetime journey to the twelfth plane, conquer all that stands in your way to do so, and there meet your guide face to face. Your guide is your representative where feet cannot tread. It is privy to knowledge you otherwise cannot tap, to power you'll never wield on your own."

A hush fell over the students. Randal's voice had deepened even further. In his fighter's tunic and dark pants, he was the picture of a field mage, so much more suited to this lesson than some soft adept in a festooned robe of power. When Randal leaned forward, his neck out-thrust, his eyes raking their ranks, no one even shifted in surprise at the words he spoke next.

"Class," Randal said in a suddenly softened voice that signalled his most intense concern for their welfare. "This is a lesson not without its dangers. Afterwards, there will be no teasing among you, no bravado from those who proceed faster toward those who go slowly. All of you are about to risk your sanity and mortal persons among the planes. Go cautiously, go with determination, and go with my blessing." He straightened up.

A murmur ran through the students.

When it subsided, Randal said, "And now, if you'll all put your feet

flat on the floor, hands flat on your thighs, I'm going to guide your trances."

As Randal ran through the relaxation litany, Merricat let his voice be her beacon. When he instructed her right hand to rise, of its own accord, from her lap and hover before her face, it seemed that her hand was indeed weightless. And when he told her to open her eyes and behold the manna of her person, she was unsurprised to see a green nimbus surrounding her fingers, to see the bones beneath the skin, and to see blue lightning spurting from her fingertips.

When she was instructed to close her eyes again, they closed without her volition. When she was told that her hand would now fall to her

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thigh and when it did, she would open her eyes and see the first plane around her, she was not afraid.

Until her hand hit her thigh. Then Merricat was plunged into vertigo and if she could, she would have grabbed onto her chair. But she could not. Her body was under RandaF's control, not her own. When the snap of his fingers caused her eyes to open, she beheld a landscape wind-whipped and strange, stretching forever in all directions, where hills had crests like frozen waves and trees were perfect spheres. Beneath those

trees were others and she knew (without knowing how she knew) that some of those others were her fellow students.

She knew because she was under one such tree and beside her were creatures part human, part not. One creature came toward her in wide strides, staring at her through one burning round eye, cocking the head of a falcon and saying through the beak of a bird: "Welcome, Merricat, to the first plane. What is it you seek here?"

"Knowledge," said Merricat as she'd been coached in RandaF's lesson.

"Friends. Power of mind."*

The beak of the bird grew large and from it came the words, "There are no friends for you on the first plane, as there are no friends for you at Aphrodisia House. You must seek higher. Here, as there, you will find only tools."

"Give me one, then," she heard her own voice say, and was appalled at her temerity,

The bird head nodded and the bird beak came close.

She wanted to shy away from the sharp beak but she could not. Her palm extended and the beak neared the soft offering of her flesh. And into her palm it dropped an insect, like a wasp. The insect tickled her palm and on her flesh, with many legs, it danced. And as it danced, a wasp's

nest came into being and into it, the wasp soon crawled.

Then Merricat's hand became very heavy and the next thing she knew, it had fallen to her lap, for Randal's voice was saying, "•• . . at the count of three, your spirit will return to your body and your eyes will open and you will be in your seat beside your fellow students."

It was as if the adept spoke only to her. She listened only to his voice as again dizziness overcame her. She was flying through clouds of many colors, among ancient seas, and farther.

When she found her body, she felt absolutely sucked into it and her spirit came to rest in its prison with a thud that was her hand hitting her thigh.

Her eyes opened. She blinked. The students around her were all pale-faced, white-lipped, and silent. No one looked at anyone else. But Merricat looked at her hand on her thigh.

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In the palm of her hand was a red blotch about the size of the small wasp's nest. The hair rose all over her body. Surely this must mean something, or else she'd done it all wrong . . . , What connection could the first plane have to Shawme's plight and the thing she'd told her friend

to keep secret?

She was shaking, trembling all over. Her skin was blotchy, red and fishy white.

She didn't hear the rest of the lesson, she just heard Randal's voice, the only comfort in her universe which now was no comfort at all.

She had to tell the adept what she'd done, how she'd failed, and find out what the omen meant. She had to.

When the class filed out, her throat constricted: what if Randal left before the last of the students were gone? She couldn't chase him down the halls, or sortie to his private chamber where real magic was always under way. She just couldn't.

But Randal was surrounded by other questioners, excited voices asking about what they'd seen on the first plane. Merricat waited until all but two of them were gone and then walked slowly up the row toward the front of the study hall.

As she did, she felt the mage's eyes on her. And met them to see concern there, and recognition.

For what she was sure was the first time, Randal had noticed her—not just because she was giving a dinner menu to the First Hazard and he

happened to be in the room, either. But noticed her with his whole attention.

If she hadn't been so frightened, she'd have blushed red as a beet. As it was, her gait stiffened and her steps slowed.

Then Merricat stopped. She held back, watching, miserable. She didn't have the courage to walk brassily up to the mage, who was pestered with unending questions from other students. No matter the meaning of the omen, she'd go to Shawme by herself. They'd figure it out together. She couldn't, just couldn't, bother Randal with her insignificant problems, not when the whole Mageguild was reeling from the magical recession taking place in Sanctuary; not while teaching a new generation must seem so futile . . .

Randal winked at her. Her hand flew to her mouth. She must have imagined it. Two students were much closer than she, prattling away. She clutched her tablet, on which she'd taken not a single note tonight, to her bosom.

He winked again, and she heard him say to the two fawning apprentices, "You two compare experiences, it will do you both good. Right now, I have an appointment with this young lady, whom I can't keep

waiting any longer. Go practice first plane access. Tomorrow we do the second plane. Go on, now."

Both students looked over their shoulders at her with resentful, jealous eyes that changed visibly when they saw what "young lady" Randal meant. She glimpsed surprise and a new respect and something nastier in their backward glances as they left, whispering together.

With their passing, she and Randal were alone. She drew back a step. He didn't follow but stood unmoving, hands hooked in his fighter's belt, a slow smile on his freckled face.

He was so bold, so handsome, so brave. He was the Stepsons' chosen mage, a fighting magician who'd battled in the Wizard Wars. He was the most romantic single figure in the beleaguered Sanctuary Mageguild and Merricat wished miserably that she could disappear, sink through the floorboards, and be gone.

What did he care of her troubles, her doubts, her questions? She wished Dika was here, a comforting weight on her shoulder. Sometimes Dika seemed to speak for her, lend her courage. But not tonight. Falcons weren't welcome in Mageguild study halls.

Neither was she. It was obvious that the keen eyes of Randal were reading her soul. She trembled, went up on tiptoes, and eyed the doors

through which the others had gone. Still time to run.

"Well, Merricat, how was your trip to the first plane?" said Randal gently as at last he came toward her.

He knew her name! She could hardly believe it. She said hastily, "Well, it's fine, there was a blird who spook weirds to me, and round trees."

Damned and tongue-tied, she wanted to die. She closed her eyes-

And heard a voice so close she nearly fainted, "I saw something or other of that, I must admit. Would you like to talk about it over a drink?" and felt the mage touch her arm lightly, oh so lightly.

Saw something? What a mage he was! Talk about it over a drink? She took deep breaths and opened her eyes and said fervently, "Oh yes you, bless!" And, mortified, put her hand to her mouth again. If she could just calm down, her words wouldn't get scrambled. Blird who spooked weirds. She cringed inwardly.

The mage's fingers covered hers and drew her hand away from her lips. Then he was examining her palm, where the wasp nest's mark still could be seen.

When he looked up, his brow was furrowed. "What's here means more to me than you'd understand. It would be a favor if you'd share your

experience with me, and anything else that might be relevant that's happened to you lately. Wasps and I have a ... special understanding."

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The hand that wasn't holding Merricat's went to his waist, where a wavy sword, short and foreign-looking, hung in a tooled scabbard.

Miserably, afraid to trust her traitorous voice, Merricat nodded. How to tell him about it all? About the wasp on the first plane, and the weapon her friend Shawme had found, that silver tube that shot tiny wasplike pieces of metal when you blew through it—the weapon Merricat was certain that Dika had wanted Shawme to keep?

In fact, how to tell Randal anything at all, with her tongue tied in knots and her heart pounding? How indeed, while she was sure to the very depths of her soul that she'd done something wrong in helping Shawme, and in coming to the Mageguild, and in falling hopelessly in love with the famed and fearsome mage Randal in the first place?

Shawme was trembling uncontrollably and afraid someone would notice her, making herself small in a comer among the other girls in Myrtis's saloon.

And someone had. One of the musicians, a percussionist who pounded drums and shook bells and crashed cymbals, kept watching her as he

played.

The attention of the musician made things worse. As did every man who came ducking in through Myrtis's beaded curtains, who stalked around the room, drink and smoke in hand, and touched this girl or that before making up his mind and escorting his chosen up the back stairs to the girl's room.

Worse, because none of them so much as ogled Shawme. She might as well have stayed upstairs. Worse too, because if a man did approach her, she was sure she'd break and run- Unless, of course, that man was Zip.

After a while she closed her eyes, secure in her corner with stout red-frescoed walls against her back, certain she'd get through this whole night unnoticed. As much trouble as that might cause with Myrtis, she knew she could handle that. Other girls must have failed to make conquests on their first night here. Most of those who'd gone upstairs already, went with men they obviously knew quite well, men who took them boldly in strong arms and crushed silken bodies against armored chests with no preamble.

Shawme didn't know anyone like those soldiers, any more than she knew the sort of brocaded nobles who came in groups of twos and threes, smelling of perfume like the women, and gathered up giggling ladies by the armload.

The only man who noticed her was the musician, a youngster with barely a beard and naked, sweaty arms. Her son. From undistinguished beginnings Eking out a living among his betters and here to please. The

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more he watched her, the more Shawme felt a kinship. She began wondering if, when his music was done, the youth would come toward her.

But it didn't work out that way.

She was studying the frescoes in the saloon through a growing fog of smoke, finally realizing how instructive they were to an ignorant girl. On them men were portrayed doing what she'd seen dogs do in the street. And women knelt before them, doing mysterious things that involved kissing. Shawme was trying to guess at what that would be like, feeling her mouth grow dry and her heart pound as each successive man took someone else and the crowd of women thinned while she tried not to notice and prayed that Myrtis wouldn't come down tonight to find Shawme the only unclaimed girl, the only one who hadn't made a copper's worth of profit for the house . . .

So she didn't notice the newcomers until the beaded curtain rattled, and then she quickly lowered her eyes.

Three men had come in together, laughing, arm in arm, with a fourth behind them, taciturn. The three were military men, highly ranked since they'd been allowed to wear their weapons in here. The fourth was armed as well, and unsmiling. His glance caught hers before she looked away.

In front of Shawme's corner was a couch on which three older girls reclined, each showing thigh or bare perfumed shoulder or a hint of rosy breast. The three jolly soldiers, unmistakably a little drunk, came their way. The tallest one was blond with braids in his hair and a goblet in his hand.

He stared directly at Shawme for three heartbeats, and on the fourth her heart threatened to stop entirely. That look was a look of recognition, but she couldn't remember ever meeting such a soldier. She was sure he was coming for her.

She shrank back in the corner, trying to push her way through the frescoed walls; trying to get breath into her lungs, enough breath for flight if he held out a hand to her as she'd seen men do here.

She would run right past him, duck under his arm and fly out through the curtained doorway, into the street, back to Ratfall. She'd run and run until her heart burst.

But the blond man looked away then, at the girls on the couch between

Shawme and his soldier friends, and held out a hand to one of them, who squealed, "Oh, Walegrin, you're looking fit tonight," and giggled.

In relief, Shawme squeezed her eyes shut. In that solitary darkness, her relief was eaten up by chagrin. Then came embarrassment and mortification, shame and despair. No man was going to choose her. She was going to fail. All the other girls would laugh at her.

She thought to herself, Perhaps it's the mandrake. Perhaps it's ugly.

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Perhaps it's working too well and keeping the men away So she reached up behind her neck, eyes still shut, and undid the thong that held it there

When the thong came undone, she opened her eyes and surreptitiously pulled the mandrake from between her breasts, hiding it behind her, under the cushions of the bench against the wall

When she straightened up, a shadow fell on her She looked up And up Standing directly in front of her was the fourth man, the one who'd come in alone.

She thought wildly. He's not here for me, he's going to ask one of the girls on the couch. But all of them were gone While she'd had her eyes shut, they'd left with the blond soldier and his friends

There was no one else in this corner, darkened by the big man's shadow, but Shawme. She craned her neck, unable to rise as a girl should, her knees like water.

He seemed gigantic, all dark cloth and leather. She looked up past his weapons belt at eye level, and could hardly see his face, just the dark shadow of new beard and a hand that came suddenly toward her.

"Young lady," his deep voice said, "what's your name?"

"Sh-Shawme," she quavered and hated herself. His hand was waiting. Somehow, she lifted hers. Then, with his help, she was standing.

"Your room, if you please," said the voice and still she had no clear impression of his face. Her gaze was level with his broad chest, and his eyes beat down on her with such fire in them—as only those of Dika the peregrine had ever done before.

Too late to run, the deed all but done, she remembered her training. "A drink, kind sir, or something stronger?" Drugs were purveyed at Myrtis's—drugs to embolden, drugs to give stamina, drugs to make up for whatever needed making up for, so Myrtis had told her.

"I'm known as Shepherd, little lamb," he said and she knew from that.

he wanted no drink or anything at all but her

At the last minute, while his hand inexorably drew her from the corner toward the stairs, she remembered the charm that Mercat had given her, her mandrake root, without which this man was soon going to know she was a virgin.

Anguished, she halted, their arms stretched out between them, without the strength to pull away His big head turned questioningly and she saw his profile for the first time a grown man's profile, hard and seasoned, a bold nose and lips trying hard not to laugh above a stubbled chin This was a stark man, a man from whom you ran on the streets because such men took what they wanted There was no fooling such a man as he

"I—I forgot something, left something on the bench "

"You don't need that, not with me," he said with such authority that

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Shawme could do nothing but obey the pressure of his tug, which pulled her in and under the circle of his arm

Up the stairs they went the big man's right arm crooked around her neck, her right hand pressed against her collarbone by his grip, his fingers against her throat She hadn't remembered the stairs being so many, or

the trek to her backroom bed so long His breath in her hair was hot and
the things he said were a matter of tone, not words

The tone said. You're mine, I'm in control Relax and you'll be fine.

The words said whatever Shepherd thought she should hear, but she
heard only an end to her childhood in them

It didn't matter what the words were, it didn't matter that she took
moisture from his lips to wet her own It didn't matter that he wasn't
Zip, even It only mattered that she not fail, that he not be angry when
her virgin blood was spilled, when her lack of expertise was on display

When they got to her room, Shepherd wanted no help with his leathers
or his weapons Help with his boots was something any fool could give
And then he helped her, wordless and with a strange look on a face that
seemed unaccustomed to humor or kindness but displayed both in red-
brown, fiery eyes, eyes so much like Dika's

When it became clear to him that she was unworthy of the job she
held, ignorant and ill-prepared, an imposter, she was sure he'd leave her,
go straight to Myrtis and complain. But he did none of those

He treated her like fragile glass, like the musicians below in the saloon
treated their instruments And soon enough she was learning, under his
hands, why the other girls went to work smiling each evening.

She learned enough so that, when the moment came for her skirts to come off, she was forgetful of everything what he must soon find out, how disappointment and disgust would oversweep him, even of what form his wrath might take.

And then it happened Shepherd sat back on her bed, his diaphragm with its line of dark hair quivering, and said, "Take that off" His voice was very harsh "Put it on the table Now"

"It?" She was breathless, her voice a fear-constricted squeak How could she take off her virginity? How could he even see it? He'd just this moment glimpsed her unclothed form

Then she followed the big man's pointing finger, and relief flooded her The silver tube was what he meant The sea-gift, the one Memcat had advised her to keep "This?" she said with fake aplomb. "I always wear it"

"Not with me, you don't." He rose up, off the bed, and she saw his body start to change Chest heaving, she blurted, "Please, don't go I'll take it off"

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Hands on hips, he waited until she had. Then he took her in his arms

and, his lips against her breast, said, "The rest of it, I can handle. Just

trust me, lamb."

And somehow, she whispered to him, "But I don't know . . . I've never ... I don't have anything to offer you, no tricks, no skill—"

"You have something none of those others could offer, lamb," he replied in a rumble that made her legs weak. "Something only you can give. And for it, I'm going to give you a lesson in love as has never been taught in Sanctuary."

And then she knew that Shepherd knew, somehow, and that he wasn't going to be angry no matter if she bled all night. What she didn't know, until he tapped her on the mouth with a reddened finger, was that it didn't have to hurt to become a woman.

Anymore than she'd known anything about the joys of womanhood that lay beyond her body's barrier, all of which the man called Shepherd showed her before, while she dozed, he slipped away, leaving a piece of gold upon her pillow.

"Wake up, wake up!" said Merricat, shaking Shawme's shoulder. Behind Merricat, Randal hovered in the doorway, with Myrtis beside her. And Myrtis was wringing her veiny hands, saying, ", . . this is highly

irregular, mage, and the least you can do for me, since I allowed it, is make our weather-control spell your first priority."

"Later, Madame," said Randal. "Now leave us, if you please."

Shawme was rubbing her eyes and stretching widely, still unaware that there was a man in the open doorway behind Merricat.

"Merri!" Shawme smiled with delight. "What are you doing here? Never mind, I've got so much to tell—" Shawme saw Randal and stopped speaking. She pulled her coverlet up around her neck and hunched in her bed.

"Shawme, this is important," Merricat said quickly in a low voice. "That's Randal the mage. He wants to talk to you. About thai." Merricat pointed to the silver tube on the table beside Shawme's bed.

"That?" Puzzlement crossed Shawme's face. "It doesn't matter. Thank you for the mandrake, Merricat. Thank Dika. I had the most wonderful—"

Randal crossed the room in quick strides. "Pardon the intrusion, miss, but did you—?" Randal stopped and looked at Merricat imploringly.

"Shawme," Merricat demanded, leaning over the other girl stiff-armed and reaching for something glinting gold on the pillow with her other

hand. "Does this mean what I think?" She fingered the gold soldat.

"Oh, yes, and it was wonderful! I can't tell you how wond—"

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Merricat's face fell; she blinked back tears. If it hadn't happened yet, Randal had promised that he'd sponsor Shawme for Mageguild apprenticeship, to get her out of Aphrodisia House. Now . . . Merricat turned an imploring face to Randal. "Too late," she whispered.

"I thought it might be," said Randal, and Merricat saw Shawme's eyes dart from face to face as the others spoke. "Shawme, if you will cede this instrument," he ignored the coin that Merricat held, and tapped the table on which the silver tube rested, "to the Mageguild, you'll have my undying gratitude, enough money to move out of here into your own house, and favors to be claimed from Merricat and myself whenever you need them- Such favors as a mage can grant."

"What? Why? I—"

Merricat sat back, beaming now, looking fondly upon her friend, who was saved after all by the fine auspices of Randal, the most wonderful

mage who ever lived.

Randal replied, "It's too long to explain. I have an affinity for wasps, let's say. So does Merricat. This washed up on the beach, I was told?"

The mage stood over her, beginning to voice his questions.

Shawme nodded and answered every one, while Merricat held her friend's hand, until Randal asked, "And will you tell me who you went with tonight? Who came up here with you, and what happened then?"

Shawme's jaw set. Her eyes seemed to go cold. She said, "You want the pea-shooter, take it. My client didn't like it anyway."

"And your client . . . ?" Randal blushed and Merricat thrilled with love. "Did he, ah, was there blood spilled here tonight?" Randal pressed.

"What is this?" Shawme demanded, bolt upright now. "You told him, Merricat! How could you? It was our secret. Get out of—"

"Shawme, I had to; it's important. Did it happen, the spilling of blood?" Merricat's grip tightened on Shawme as the other girl tried to shake it off.

"Of course it did, and it was wonderful!" Shawme's anger blazed.

"Now get out of here, Merricat. I'm never going to forgive you for this. My business, bitch, is with this here mage, not the lies of you."

Merricat stood up uncertainly, head hanging. Randal put a comforting hand on her arm, a reassuring touch that told Merricat she'd done the right thing, no matter what Shawme thought.

Randal stepped forward then, saying to both girls, "Shawme, Merricat, friends are too few to fall out over something like this. Shawme, Merricat was brave and tireless in your behalf- Merricat, your friend needs your understanding. Blood shed in this way, right now in Sanctuary, is important. All of what I've promised you, Shawme, is still yours—money, favors for the asking—even if you won't answer me. But as a favor to me,

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we need to know if the man who gave you this coin is anyone we know, whether he's friendly or inimical to us."

Shawme blinked like a startled alleycat. Merricat was afraid her friend would ask Randal just who the mage meant by "we," but Shawme didn't.

She didn't say anything at all. She threw back the coverlet hiding her nakedness and vaulted from the bed. There, on the linen, was proof of the act, and of Shawme's boldness.

Merricat's friend reached languorously for her robe, head high, a

proud look on her face. And Merricat was beginning to think it must have been Zip who'd come to Shawme and made her a woman when the Ratfall girl said, "He calls himself the Shepherd, or something like that," and, shrugging into her robe, snatched the gold coin from Merricat's fingers. "He gave me this, and more." Her eyes burned.

Merricat got up from the bed and backed right into Randal, her own body feeling wooden and numb. Peering into the mage's face desperately, Merricat strove for comfort and found none.

Randal shook his head infinitesimally as Shawme flounced by, announcing her intention of "going back downstairs, where there's food and drink for celebration."

Left alone in the courtesan's room. Randal said only, "Shepherd, by the Writ." He sighed deeply. "The only good in this came from you, Merricat. And will have to come from you, henceforth. You must help your friend, even if she doesn't understand anything about why you're doing it. And you'll need all your powers, as well as my help. Are you up to it?"

Powers. Merricat had no powers, but Randal did. And Shawme needed her. The blood spilled tonight was spilled in sacrifice, an Ilsigi rite that Shawme hadn't understood, but was now inextricably bound up in. And in a way, it was all Merricat's fault.

She saw Randal pick up the silver tube and fondle it, then look back at her and offer his arm.

She'd done something right. "Of course I'll help Shawme. Even if I didn't want to, an apprentice always obeys the Adept who is her instructor. Have no fear, dear Mage. I shall do whatever you say."

And she took Randal's offered arm and let him escort her out of the Aphrodisia House and back to the Mageguild, where she belonged.

A STICKY BUSINESS

C S. Williams

The Serpentine is a partially cobbled street that zigzags its way like a snake through the Maze. At one end stands the sleaziest, skungiest, most disreputable dive in all of Sanctuary: Sly's Place. Since Sly's death several years ago no one knows who owns the place, but it is run by a huge man in a mailed vest. His name is Ahdio. His origin is questionable, but in this neighborhood so is everyone else's,

To the right of Sly's Place is a dark, narrow, dirty, uninviting lane known as Odd Dirt's Dodge. Nobody lives there, or will admit they do. The wider street to the left of Sly's is the Street of Tanners. The stench there on a hot day can make even a Downwinder nauseous.

Three blocks down Tanners is the location of Zandulas's Tannery.

Zandulas is a friendly enough fellow, if he would ever bathe.

Zandulas's supplies Chollandar's Glue Shop next door. The proprietor, called Cholly by his friends, makes the finest glues and pastes in town. He uses only the best ingredients: tree sap, inedible fish, hooves and unusable hides, flour, acids and other compounds from the chemists, and people.

Each night in Thieves' World people meet violent ends. Some die by accident, others by "accident," others by design. Most are left where they lie or dropped in some dark alley. Many of them have led useless lives and belong to a social class deemed worthless. No matter what his life had been, in death no man is worthless to the gluemaker. Under license from the Governor he and an apprentice go out with a wagon every morning and pick up the remains from the previous night's mayhem as a social service. Cholly will not, however, pick up a corpse that has apparently died of disease. Those he leaves for the Charnel House wagon.

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For a substantial fee he also makes house calls.

The bodies are stripped and dismembered and the goods sorted. Scalps go to a wigmaker, clothes and leather goods and weapons to used goods dealers in those items, gold teeth and jewelry to jewelers. The rendered

tallow is ladled off and sold to a soapmaker. The bones are dried and used to help fuel the fires under the great iron pots. Yet all these are bonuses, for the primary product is glue. Nothing is ever wasted at Chol-landar's.

Cholly awoke from an elbow nudged into his amply padded ribs. He grumbled and rolled over, snuggling deeper beneath the woolen blanket. The elbow returned with greater force.

"Get up. It's time you left for work."

"Yes, Pet," he groaned.

A small tortoise-shell calico named Crumpet was sitting on his hip, purring loudly. She was a smearing of orange and black with a white chin, feet, and belly. The gluemaker often called her—lovingly—the ugliest cat in Sanctuary. He picked her up and gently placed her at the foot of the bed before crawling out from beneath the covers. He pulled on a faded black tunic and belted it with his weapons belt. On the belt were a dagger, an Ilbari knife, and the axe he used for dismembering corpses and chopping firewood. Onto bare legs he drew soft-soled knee boots. A knife was sheathed in the top of the right one. Finally he wriggled into his vest, heavy leather covered with iron rings, and slid his wax-boiled vambraces onto his forearms. He did all of this in the dark so Ineedra could go back to sleep. He kissed her and went

downstairs to the kitchen.

"Oh, all right, nuisance," he gently chided the cat nibbling against his leg and purring. "You know, most cats have to find their own food!"*

He fed the puss some chopped meat and fixed himself a thick slice of hard sausage and a wedge of cheese between two pieces of black bread. He washed it down with watered wine. Crumpet finished eating before he did and began preening herself, ignoring him with that aloofness only felines are capable of.

It was a miserable morning. Usually Cholly took his time to walk to the shop, but not in this downpour. The cobblestones were slippery and unpaved streets were slimy bogs. Twice he had to backtrack and take a different street. At least his greased boots and oilcloth cloak kept him relatively dry.

He opened the big brass lock and replaced the key in his pouch. The front portion of the shop consisted of row upon row of shelves full of clay jars, each jar marked with a symbol that told him what compound the

pot contained. At the rear, in front of a curtained doorway, stood a large wooden counter.

He slapped his hand onto the counter and was answered by a yelp.

"Aram, get up. It's time to get started. Go wake up Sambar."

A tall, lanky youth of perhaps sixteen years crawled sleepily out from beneath the counter, yawning widely. He stood and stretched, scratched, and ran one hand through a shaggy mop of blond curls.

"Morning, master," he yawned.

Aram went through the curtained doorway and crossed the brick floor of the rendering room with its four huge iron pots, firewood and dry bones in the rack, and shelves and bins of ingredients. On one side was a butcher's beam and a water pump. A second curtained door, wider than the first, opened onto the stable.

Enkidu and Eshi, two grays with hooves the size of dinner plates, were in their stalls. In one corner of Enkidu's stall a pudgy boy with olive skin snored beneath a coarse wool blanket-

"Get up, Lazybones. Old Baldpate's here. Rise and shine," Aram announced, giving the fourteen-year-old a kick.

"Already?" Sambar stood and shook the straw from his blanket, folded it, and hung it across the stall divider. Satisfied, he brushed the straw from his tunic and began picking pieces from his blue-black straight hair.

By the time the boys had had a bite of bread and cheese and gotten the horses harnessed, the rising sun had barely lightened the tenebrous clouds to putrescent gray. Thunder rumbled like an empty barrel rolling down a cobbled street. Instead of forked streaks, lightning flashed in weak patches scattered randomly on the face of the thunderhead. The White Foal would overflow again and uncover the trench graves of the unnamed flood and fire victims.

Rain cascaded off their oilskins in icy torrents. Enkidu was prancing, ignoring the weather and enjoying his work. Eshi sulked, wanting to return to her nice warm dry stable. Aram was walking ahead because visibility was so poor. They had just turned onto Odd Birt's Dodge.

"I see one, back of Sly's."

Gray water splashed at every step of Aram's greased buskins.

"Father Us' beard! He's still bleeding!"

"Can we help him? Is he still alive?"

"No, Cholly. His head's nearly cut off."

"Do you see anybody? The killer may still be around close."

Aram drew his dagger. Cholly climbed down from the driver's seat and unsheathed the Ilbarisi long knife. There was no one to be found. The door to Sly's Place was securely barred and a search of the area revealed no one hiding. No one had gone past them-

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"I don't understand. It would take a magician to get out of here without us seeing him," Aram said.

"Anything is possible," Cholly replied.

Aram jumped down and ran to open the stable doors, jumping over the bigger puddles. The double doors swung open easily. Cholly backed the wagon inside. Aram unhitched the team, wiped them down, covered them with dry blankets, and gave them food and water. Only then did he stop to remove his rain gear. He replaced his wet leather gloves and apron with dry ones.

Cholly was smoking a pipe while he inspected the pots Sambar had been left to clean and fill. It was a minor vice, but one to which his wife objected, ". . . because it stinks up the entire house. Even my hair smells like smoke,"

There was nothing in Sanctuary that he feared, that he was not mar-

ried to. Neither wizard nor demon, man nor god, living or dead. When the night was filled with the undead of Ischade and Roxane, he had dispatched several of the poor wights, beheading them so they might return to the hell they had been called back from.

Not all of them were eager to go. One, a former Stepson, had argued for over an hour that it was not dead. It even had the gall to draw a shortsword and threaten the gluemaker. Fortunately the expression "the quick and the dead" was inappropriate. Cholly hacked the zombie to pieces with his axe to prove his point. Sure enough, the Stepson was dead.

Over a dozen bodies were stacked in the wagon. Five had come from Red Lanterns or nearby, indicating it had been a busy night. Three bodies were female. One had even been pretty, in a cheap way.

"You see," Sambar chided while he and Aram began unloading the wagon, "this is what happens to people who spend all their money at the Slippery Lily."

"I hope they had at least finished their business and were leaving. It would be a shame to die without gettin' what they came there for," Aram chuckled.

"One of these Moonday mornings you may come in with the load as a client, not a passenger."

"I can take care of myself."

"The least you'll get is Eshi's measles."

"I haven't had a dose yet. Besides, it isn't fattening like your candy. In another year your taste will run to sweets of another sort. Mark my words."

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"Idiot!" Markmor shrieked- "Fool of a fool!"

The young man with flowing silver hair trembled at the tirade, staring at the floor lest the most powerful mage in Sanctuary look him in the eye. Until a few years ago the apprentice wizard's father, Mizraith, had been the chief of those mages not bound by the Rankan Mageguild's hazardous rites. Markmor had been a brash upstart, scarcely more than a child by sorcerous or any other standards. Yet he had slain Mizraith fairly in a wizard's duel and thereby proved himself supreme among those who held to the magical traditions of Ilsig. He'd had to lie low a while—feigning death, abandoning his skein of spells lest he be drawn into the mage-killing and god-killing that had beset Sanctuary these last few years. But he'd survived, and returned, and meant to recapture everything he'd lost,

with interest.

"Th-there wasn't time, Master," Marype stammered. "I was just slitting the messenger's throat when I heard horses. I vanished for just a moment, hoping whoever it was would pass by. When I returned the body was gone."

"All you had to do was take the amulet and run. You didn't even have to kill him. A blow on the head would have done the job-' How could it be so difficult?"

Markmor's robes of shiny vermilion silk brushed the polished marble floor as he paced angrily. His short hair and pointed beard were as black as his soul. Beneath a single shaggy brow his amethyst eyes were blazing with rage.

Several moments of threatening silence passed before he continued, "Do you have any idea how valuable that bauble is? Not only to me, but to all of us who stand outside the Guild? Much less what could happen if it ever reaches the first Hazard as it was supposed to? Do you see the danger your bungling has placed us in? Do you? Do you?"

"I think so, Master." Marype cringed.

"No, that's your trouble, Marype. You don't think. If you had you wouldn't have left the amulet behind. There are times when I wonder

why I took you into my service. I really do.

"Now tell me again—from the beginning—exactly what happened. If the person who has the amulet has not yet discovered its powers we may not be too late."

"I had been following him from bar to bar. By Argash's bloody nails that man could drink! Eventually he wandered down the Serpentine to Sly's Place, but it was closed. Despite all I had seen him drink he wasn't staggering, so I hung back at a short distance to await an opportunity. As luck would have it ... AAAHCHOOO!—Sorry, I may have caught a cold in the rain last night—he stopped to relieve himself. I transported

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myself to a spot right behind him. Even as I slashed his throat I heard the clatter of hoofbeats and at least two men talking. They sounded very close, and coming closer. I knew that the amulet would have made escape impossible, so I gambled that the amulet would look too cheap to be worth stealing. I vanished for just a moment. When I returned the entire body was gone."

"Did you see anyone about? Anyone at all?"

"It was pouring. Even the beggars were hiding somewhere. He was

gone without a trace. I searched and searched. AACHOO!"

"Marype, you surprise me. You really do. You left the amulet on him in the hopes it would look too worthless to steal. Correct? Every child knows that Mazers and Downwinders steal anything that is not nailed down too securely to pry up. If you didn't have your father's talent in your blood I wouldn't put up with you. Such talent deserves training, but you severely try my patience,

"Still, all is not lost. Perhaps we can scry its location."

The day's first customer was small, with delicate bones and a slender figure. Her face was veiled and a scarf almost hid her mane of chestnut hair. Although she dressed as a lady's maid, her bearing was more suited to giving orders than taking them. She looked around nervously, making sure no other customer was about. At last: "You are Chollandar?"

He nodded. "How may this humble gluemaker serve you. Milady?"

"I was told you will pick up ... uh-uh-uh . . ."

"Raw materials, Ma'am. Raw materials. For a fee we will pick up that which you no longer desire, and turn it into a variety of useful products. We do stipulate, however, that the goods must be ready to use without further treatment. Do you understand?"

"Yes. You mentioned a fee. You will do it, then?"

"Certainly, Beautiful Lady. For ten soldats we will remove your raw materials from any address you name—which we promptly forget. For this reason we ask for advance payment. Otherwise we might remember and send a bill. Does this pose some problem?"

To his surprise she did not haggle.

/ should've asked for more, he thought.

She gave him the address and turned to leave.

"A moment. Milady."

Cholly held out a clay jar. She looked at him in puzzlement, then took the jar.

"This is a glue shop. If you leave with one of my Jars anyone who sees you will see why you have come and notice nothing else."

Her veiled face whitened. "I hadn't thought of that."

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"By the way, this variety is made especially for porcelain and ceramics. It does wonders on broken dishes."

After she had hurried away, the clay jar held where it could be seen, Sambar came through the curtained doorway. "Master, why do you always insist that the pickup be dead? Wouldn't they pay more if you did it for them?"

"They would, but I will not take blood money. See, I deal in death every day without adding to it. If people want to kill each other, I can't stop 'em. But I'll be damned if I'll do it for 'em."

With the work on the city walls and the repairs from the aftermath of the witches' fire and flood, business was brisk. Kadakithis's workmen had bought an entire wagonload of mixed varieties. The new tax was at least being spent for the purpose it was collected for, rather than lining the Prince-Governor's purse.

Privately Cholly had no use for magicians, but that did not prevent him from doing business with them. One came in seeking a human skull. Another, a lanky fellow with graying hair and beard and an unusually dynamic voice, came seeking fingerbones. These gentlemen never knew that their treasures came from his fuel pile of dried leftover bones.

A third aspiring thaumaturge sought a hand of glory. Cholly went back into the rendering room once more. There was a chunking sound. A moment later he returned with a severed human left hand.

One last minor magician—the truly powerful ones needed no such props—requested an entire human skin. He was sent next door. Zandulas would pay him a referral fee later.

When business slowed down enough for him to check on the boys, Cholly saw that they had been busy indeed. The bodies had all been stripped and the belongings sorted into neat piles, according to type. The smallest pile by far was money. They were honest enough lads, but he knew they kept a few coppers, even as he had done when he was apprenticed to old Shi Han Two-Fingers.

He sent Sambar to the front counter while he and Aram scalped, bled, and dismembered the remaining corpses. Once the bodies and the proper additives were mixed into the scalding water to his satisfaction he told Aram, "When you get time, take those barrels of tallow across the alley to Reh Shing the Soapmaker. It's time I started my rounds."

Chollandar scratched the back of his neck. For a moment it itched like someone was staring at him.

He always began his trading at Shamara's Wig Shop. In her youth

Shamara had been striking. Her present beauty was of a different sort, a warmth that radiated from her sweet soul. They dickered for a bit,

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Shamara fingering the scalps for quality and texture. At last they settled upon three silver bits, eight coppers, and a kiss.

"The things I do for business," Shamara laughed before pressing her lips beneath his moustache. There was no lustful passion there, but there was something undefinable. "Enough. You make me feel like a girl, and I've survived that nonsense already."

He whistled a happy tune all the way to Marc's Weapons Shop. Most of Marc's goods were shoddy, but so were the weapons Cholly sold him. The really good stuff he sold separately. Some special blades he kept for himself. Even so, he sometimes ran across an interesting piece in Marc's stock.

Cholly regularly had lunch with Furtwan Coinpinch while Hazen, Furtwan's nephew, watched the shop and kept an eye on the gluemaker's wagon. Today they decided on beef, so they found themselves a quiet

table at the Man in Motley, where a joint was always skewered to the carving board.

"Anything interesting happen last night?" Furtwan asked between

swallows of True Brew.

Cholly did not answer right away. He felt the feeling return that he was being watched. By whom and for what reason he had no idea. He scratched his neck again.

No one seemed to be looking in his direction, but he knew damned well someone was spying on him. The itch was stronger. He slid his right hand under the table, pretending to scratch his bare calf. He assured himself the extra knife was in place in his boot. Good.

The two men gossiped spiritedly for an hour. When Cholly left the shop the itch returned. If anything, it was stronger. The most unsettling part was that he could spot no sign of anyone following him, yet he knew they were there. But who? And why?

He missed the friendly greetings he used to get from Ganner, Lalo's son who was slain by the mobs in the False Plague riots. He had enjoyed

the brief chats they used to have. Instead of Ganner it was Herwick himself who met him at the door. The jeweler still wore the symbolic torn collar and black armband of mourning.

"Good to see you, Cholly. Are you here to buy or sell? I believe Ineedra has a birthday coming up. Next week maybe?"

"Next Eshday. The trouble is she still hasn't given me a hint what she wants like she usually does, or else for once she's been so subtle I missed it."

"You can't go wrong with good jewelry. I've got some nice new pieces.

Take a look. I could make you such a deal . . . -"

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"Not today, I've got a few days yet in case she drops a hint. In the meantime I did bring you a few trinkets to examine."

He fished a folded square of cloth from his tunic. Unfolding it upon the counter, he displayed a jumble of glittering ornaments. Most were cheap junk, worth a copper or two apiece. A few were good quality paste and worth a bit more. Two pins were set in real gold and sparkling gemstones. Finally there was a solid gold pendant covered with strange markings.

"Where did you get this? I've never seen this type of workmanship before. Most unusual. And raw gold! I can't read it; it isn't Rankan or Ilsigi. It isn't Beysib—I've had too many Fisheyes in here not to recognize it when I see it. If it was older I might guess it might be Enlibaran."

"Now that I've had a good look at it, I think I'll keep it for the time being. It's sort of interesting. Can you think of anybody who might be able to tell me what it says?"

"Try Synab. If anyone can tell you, he can."

His next stop was Synab's artifact and curio shop just down the street. The daub of blue paint smeared on the door meant the pwner was paying protection to someone. Cholly himself had never paid anyone for "protection" and he vowed he never would. A bell jingled when he entered.

The white-haired man in green linen said, "I haven't seen you lately. I trust you have something of interest for me?"

"Maybe. I found this medallion in this morning's goods. Can you decipher the writing?"

The little man's bushy eyebrows raised. His sallow face turned ashen. His gnarled hands trembled, dropping the bauble onto the counter as if it had suddenly become hot.

After a moment he said, "Do me a favor, Cholly. Go. Get that thing out of here. Please."

"Why? Mother Bey's balls, man, at least tell me what's wrong."

"I guess I owe you that much. I can't read it, but I've seen enough relics to recognize it. There is one word here I do know: the name Theba."

"Isn't she some sort of death goddess?"

"Yes. Anything connected with her has to mean trouble. If I were you, I'd get rid of it as quickly as I could."

Cholly thanked him and left.

His unseen stalker was still there. The tingle was so strong it was becoming painful. Hopefully whoever it was would not make his move

until after Cholly reached Renn, his banker.

Renn was one of the few men in Sanctuary he completely trusted. Due to the armed men at the door and some less obvious defenses, no one had

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ever robbed Renn's bank and lived to reach the door. Thieves had gotten the message and stayed away.

The gluemaker deposited most of his cash and got a receipt, keeping out enough to pay the boys, take Ineedra out to a nice dinner, and enough left over to go to the games at Land's End and have a few coppers to bet. Compared to what he had been carrying it was spare change. Unfortunately his tracker didn't seem interested in money.

Upon his return to the Street of Money the feeling intensified. Damn! He wished whoever it was would make his move. This cat-and-mouse ploy was making him angry. Maybe he could shake them up a bit.

He turned Enkidu and Eshi onto Olive Branch, sped down to Saddlers and turned left, leaping off the wagon as soon as he thought his pursuer could not see him for a moment. He stepped through the doorway of a tack shop and waited.

Two thugs came running around the corner. One was of average size;

the other was short and round, like a beer keg with legs. They were trotting to keep the wagon in sight.

For a middle-aged fat man in a ring-mailed vest, he moved quietly.

And quickly. Any sound made by his soft-soled knee boots was masked by the din of street noises: beggars asking alms, shopkeepers and customers haggling, the clomp of horseshoes on cobblestones, children shouting and playing.

The shorter man was lagging a few steps behind his partner, panting.

He never heard anything suspicious.

The taller man glanced over his shoulder in time to see the barrel-man topple from the flat of Cholly's axe. Before he could break away a large hand extending from a wax-boiled vambrace had grabbed a handful of his tunic and slammed him against a brick wall, driving the air from his lungs. His head bounced against the bricks, painfully but not far. He became acutely aware of the axe haft pressed against his throat when he struggled to inhale. A melon-sized knee pressing into his stones also caught his attention-

Cholly's normally merry hazel eyes were narrow slits of cold green.

His voice was calm, even, almost a whisper.

"Why are you following me?"

"I wasn't. (Cough)"

Cholly towered his knee slightly, then snapped it upward. "Don't lie to me or you'll sing soprano. Let's start again. You were about to tell me why you followed me."

Tears filled the tall man's eyes. "I swear I wasn't following you."

He would've screamed when the knee drove into his crotch if it weren't for the wooden haft flattening his gullet.

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"Let's try again, shall we? I ask you a question, you answer it. Honestly. For the last time, why were you tailing me?"

"All right," he whimpered. "We was paid a silver bit apiece to rob you." Tears rolled down his dirty unshaven cheeks.

"Fool. If it was money you wanted you would have jumped me before I reached my banker. You didn't make your move, although you've been chasing me all afternoon. So what are you after that is worth dying for?"

"The medallion."

"What makes it so valuable?" Cholly demanded.

"Don't know. He didn't tell us. He just paid us to get it."

"Who paid you?"

"He didn't give us a name. He was dressed in magician's robes."

"What did he look like?"

"Silver hair—"

The knife just missed Cholly's ear before burying itself in the tall man's eye. Blood and clear liquid gushed out of the wound. The dying man jerked once and went limp. Cholly released his hold. The body slid down the wall, the stubby knife handle still protruding from the eye socket.

The barrel-man was just vanishing into an alley.

"I should've hit him harder," the gluemaker muttered.

He gave a shrill whistle and Enkidu and Eshi backed up. Business was business. He loaded the dead man into his wagon and covered him with canvas. No one thought it unusual for him to be picking up somebody

this early. There were accident victims all the time. It was common practice to mind one's own business.

Babbo shifted his weight from foot to foot while wringing his unwashed hands. His gaze never left the floor. The room was cool, but the hireling's stained homespun tunic was damp with sweat.

"What in the Shadowed One's name are you saying? How could he get away? There were two of you! Both armed! Do you mean to tell me two of the best muggers in the Maze were bested by a bald old shopkeeper?" Marype raged.

"He was good," Babbo said defensively. "Dorien was one of the best men I knew in a brawl. When I came to—I never heard him coming before he busted my head—he had poor Dorien pinned against the wall with an axe handle and a knee pushing Dor's balls up to his belly button. Believe me, the man is good. How do you think he got that old? Only way I could shut Dor up was to spike 'im."

"Why didn't you knife the gluemaker instead?"

"Look, I didn't have a lot of time, you know? I wasn't in no shape to tangle with the man. Maybe I just threw amongst 'em and ran. Be-

sides, you're the magician; why didn't you do something? Turn fatso into something?"

"As long as he has the amulet, magic doesn't work on him. Why else would I hire you two bunglers?"

"Big hotshot magician," Babbo retorted. "You can't do the job with your spells, so you hire us. Then you got the balls to come down on me 'cause I didn't get him neither. Far as I'm concerned you can go diddle yourself. See ya around. Cotton-top," he snorted, his fear replaced by contempt.

It was crowded in the stands Lowan Vigeles had built at his Land's End estate and the stone benches were uncomfortable. The spectators had already swilled down enough Red Gold to be rowdy. Zandulas and Cholly were hooting and hollering with the rest. The early rounds had been condemned criminals pitted against each other. Not much skill there; mostly brute strength. Chollandar preferred the chariot races.

He was picking them well. The fourth race had just ended, and for the third time he was collecting his winnings. Zandulas, who was zero for four, got to his feet with a sour grin.

"I'm getting a brew before the final heat. Want one?"

"No thanks, Zan. Want me to place any bets for you?"

"Neh. Oh all right. If I'm not back in time, just put two coppers on whoever you pick."

Cholly's favorite driver was Borak. Behind his three chestnut geldings Borak's long oily whip moved like a living creature, while he used the bladed wheel hubs better than most men wield a sword.

The other drivers in today's final race were Magyar driving whites, Atticus with dappled grays, and Crispen with a second team of whites. No second-raters there.

Everywhere were shouts of "Six coppers on Atticus," "Two on Magyar," "Four on Atticus," "Eight on Crispen,"

Caught up in the betting, Cholly shouted, "Two silver on Borak!"

"Take 'em all. I'll cover the balance," Zandulas whispered, returning.

"I'd have taken Atticus, but then I haven't been right all afternoon and you're on a hot streak. I just hope it holds."

The big money bets were in the box seats, stacks of golden soldats. The difference was that those in the boxes could usually afford to lose. The simple townfolk in the cheap seats were hard pressed if they lost a

handful of coppers.

The tingle was back. Someone was watching him again.

Four teams entered the track, having drawn lots for position. Cholly frowned. Borak was on the outside. Next to Borak came Crispen, then

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Magyar, and finally Atticus at the advantageous inside spot. The games master dipped the flag and they were off. Horses crowded each other. Sharpened steel zinged each time the wheels whirred close together. Crispen forced Borak into the wall, but the wily veteran kept control. Dust flew as his blades gouged the masonry. To even the score he flicked his whip, welting the closest white racer's hindquarters. The horse broke stride. It took only a moment to get back in sync, but that was enough.

Cholly looked around. Was that a flash of silver hair in the crowd behind him? Maybe it was a woman who had joined in the fad. Maybe not. His left hand rested upon the hilt of the Ilbari knife.

A white stallion screamed when it was hit by a blade, chewing his rear leg off at the gaskin. The crowd roared. The animal's fall yanked the singletree to one side, causing the rest of the team to wheel, overturning the chariot. Magyar's hand was caught in the reins and he was dragged along beneath.

The silver hair was out of sight, but not gone. Cholly could feel it.

Zandulas was shouting, "Did you see that?"

By the last lap Borak was ahead of Atticus by half a length. Crispen had gotten tangled in Magyar's wreck and lost too much time to make it up.

"Collect my winnings," he told Zandulas.

"Why? Where're you going?"

"Must be the Red Gold. I'm not feeling so good," Cholly lied.

He could hear the crowd shouting Borak's name as he hurried down the steps. A knife darted at him but was deflected by the iron and leather vest he wore. He was lucky, and knew it.

Once out of the estate, Cholly ran as fast as his thick legs could carry him through the construction gangs working on the walls, through a gap in the emerging wall itself, then darted down twisting alleys and taking random turns. Few others knew the streets as well as this man who traveled them each morning. Soon he would reach the docks. He saw no sign of pursuit, but the feeling remained.

The Winebarrel catered to fishermen. Most of the clientele knew Cholly. They bought glue from him to use on their boats. He, in turn, or his apprentices, bought unsold or inedible fish from them. He was made welcome.

Of all the folk in Sanctuary, only the fishers had truly accepted the Beysib—at least the Setmur clan of Beysib—because the newcomers were hard workers, honest and good sailors. Inside the net-hung walls of the Winebarrel, all seamen were brothers, comrades-in-arms in the endless battle to eke a living from the merciless sea.

It was not surprising then that the one-armed Ilsigi should be sharing

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his table with a small, quiet fish-eyed man. Cholly walked over and joined them- For a moment the tingle was gone, or else so weak he did not notice it.

Omat, the Ilsigi fisherman, gestured with his glass. "You're getting thinner on top and thicker in the middle. And you look like you could use a drink. Pull up a stool and let me buy you one. You know Monkel Setmur, don't you? Monkel, Cholly here makes the best damned glue you can buy—"

"—Or get in trade. What fisherman doesn't know Cholly?" the small man said, smiling sincerely and extending his hand. "What brings you to the Winebarrel?"

"I'm in a real fix. Somebody's trying to kill me. I found this medallion in the stuff I took in this morning. Ever since then, someone's been on my tail. Two gutter rats tried to waylay me, but I caught 'em off guard. I conked one on the head and put the other up against the wall. That's how I found out the connection with the medallion I'd found, and that they'd been hired by a wizard-type with silver hair. But, I hadn't hit the first one hard enough, and he knifed his partner through the eye before I got any more.

"Just a little while ago I was out at Land's End. I saw someone with silver hair in the crowd near me, so I decided to get out of there. He followed me long enough to throw a knife, only he didn't take this vest into account."

"Can we do anything to help, Cholly?" Omat asked.

"Run me around to White Foal Bridge by water. That should get him off me for a while."

"I could use a bit of fresh air. Coming with us, Monkel?"

The little fellow nodded.

The dying sun was streaking the western sky with its blood when Cholly parted the thirty-one cords with their thirty-one knots.

"You're early today," Ahdio commented. "Anything wrong? You look upset."

"You might say that. I need a brew—the good stuff. Say, what happened to Cleya? I see the pretty one is back. Jodeera? Isn't that her name?"

Ahdio looked down into the other man's eyes—not too far down, for he was only an inch or so taller—and paled slightly.

"What did you say? That's Cleya right there."

"Quit kidding. I'm looking right at her."

Ahdio stood silent for a moment then said, "Would you mind stepping into the back with me a moment where we can talk?"

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The two men walked back to the stockroom. Ahdio closed the door and turned to face Cholly. He looked worried.

"How did you know?"

"Know what?"

"That Cleya and Jodeera are the same."

"Oh, come on. Cleya is a sweet girl, but she is skinny and sort of homely, like a stray cat. Not that I don't like her, but she isn't even in the same league with that lovely creature."

"They are the same. I'm going to trust you because I like you. See, when Jodeera first came to work here there was trouble. Remember?"

The gluemaker nodded, paying close attention.

"It wasn't her fault she was so pretty, but it did make the boys rowdy, trying to outdo each other. I didn't want to send her away. I love her. What could I do? I had a spell put on her to hide her beauty from all eyes but mine. How'd you see through it?"

"Maybe this had something to do with it." He fished the gold medalion from inside his tunic.

"Take it off. I'll hold it. You go back and look. Tell me if you see Cleya

or Jodeera."

He returned a moment later. "Cleya. It was the medallion."

"Where did you get it?"

Cholly told his story again. Ahdio stroked his chin glaring from his friend, to the medallion then at the door to the taproom. "You got trouble here," he said, returning the medallion. "Bad cess. Look, I have this old war buddy named Strick. He's a magician. Hold on, he's not like the ones you've seen. He's strictly a white mage . . . literally can't use his powers for evil. Take my word, he's one of the good guys. Tell him I sent you."

"Where do I find him?"

"You mean to tell me you lost him again?!" Markmor screamed, his face almost as livid as his robes.

"I almost got him at Land's End. How was I to know the knife would bounce off his vest?" Marype cowered.

"Then what happened?"

"I followed him to the docks. It wasn't easy. He must know every twist and turn of every alley in town. He went into a place called the Winebar-

rel, and when he came out he was with two other men. One was a fish-face, and the other had one arm. They got into a boat and rowed away. I had to be careful. People tend to notice when you appear and disappear in public. Besides, as long as he has the amulet not even you can trace him by magic."

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"You insolent pup, you brainless piece of dung, do you dare to question my powers?" the would-be greatest magician in Sanctuary roared.

Marype cringed even more. "I don't doubt your power, Master, but did not you yourself tell me that the gods themselves have no power over the one who wields the talisman?"

"Precisely, imbecile. That is how we shall find him."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't think you would- By Argash, if I want something done right, I'd best do it myself. Pay attention and you may learn something. First we cast the Net of All-Seeing over the city in the name of Father Us."

"What good will that do, Master? We still can't see him."

"Sometimes I wonder why I even bother with you. Tell me, do you ever use your head for something besides growing hair? Think! With this spell we can see the entire city at once except for one blind spot. Wherever that blind spot is, there we shall find the one who has the medallion."

He was bigger than Ahdio, but only slightly so. He moved like a swordsman, keeping his weight evenly distributed and his gaze unfixed, looking at nothing yet seeing everything. It seemed odd that he wore no weapon, not even a dagger. He was dressed all in blue from boots to skull cap.

"My niece says that you would not tell her your problem. You would tell her only that Ahdio sent you. You confuse me. I see a spell about you that is not a spell, something that is not magic yet very powerful. Is this the problem you wish to consult me about?"

Cholly removed the chain from his neck and handed the medallion to Strick.

"I am a simple gluemaker- Each morning my apprentice and I take a wagon through town to pick up the bodies left from the night before. I make glue from them. It's all legal; I have a charter giving me the right to pick them up and dispose of them for the city. This medallion was on one of the ones we took in this morning. Since then I have had two attempts on my life, I have been followed every step I take, and I have discovered

that when I wear it I can see through a magic spell. What I want to know is: just what is it, really?"

Strick handed back the medallion. "Do you know of the goddess Theba? According to legend she declared that nothing, not even gods, should be immortal. Gods, you see, live on many planes at once. If they die they still live on all the other planes. That's what happened to Vashanka—gone from here, but not dead. Now it seems Theba was ambitious and didn't want to pursue her rivals through the infinite planes, so one night she called down a star from the sky. It fell like a blazing comet,

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and in its heart was a lump of unearthly gold. Theba took the white hot nugget in her bare hands, she shaped the medallion, then inscribed it with her fingernail, and quenched it in the blood of a virgin."

"Sounds like a real sweetheart."

"That, says legend, is how the Spell of No Spells was cast, a spell that cancels all magic. Perhaps antimagic is the proper term. Its power nullifies all spells and powers. It is the supreme defense against magic. There is one catch. It also cancels any magic the wearer possesses. Spells, bless-

ings, curses; all are useless."

"Let me see if I can take it from there. Immortality is a supernatural gift, right? So, if a god had the medallion, he's no longer a god; he's mortal, and can die like anybody else. Right?"

"Yes, but even Theba was appalled when She felt her rival die the one, true death. She threw Her tnnket away, and 't fell into mortal hands. Most mages—including myself—want nothing to do with it: Its risks outweigh any possible rewards. But there are always a few like Theba, caught in the blind throes of ambition, greed or jealousy.

"Be careful, Cholly. At least one mage, maybe more, wants Theba's medallion and knows you have it. Because of what it is, because of what he is to want it in the first place, and because as long as you wear it no one can tell for certain if you're a powerful wizard or an ordinary gluemaker—because of these, you're a marked man, my friend."

"Thanks for the information. How much do I owe you?"

"Nothing. I could not help you with your problem, and I charge only for services rendered."

"Well, I feel I owe you something for telling me about the talisman. I'll tell you what: the next time you need to mend anything, send word to me what you are working on, and I'll send over the right compound for the

job with my compliments. How about that?"

"You are a fair man, gluemaker. I have enjoyed meeting you, and I hope you solve your problem."

Cholly stopped by the shop and paid the boys their weekly bit of copper. Sambar would spend all his at the bakery and sweets shop. Give him another year or two and he'd be paying for sweets of the same sort as Aram. Father Us but that lad was randy! It was only blind luck the boy hadn't yet contracted a dose- Ah, youth!

Before he left in his best clothes Aram said, "Some fellow was in here looking for you. The first time was the middle of the afternoon, then he came back a little while ago. He didn't say what he wanted, just that he wanted to speak to you. Special pickup, I guess."

"Did he leave a name? What did he look like?"

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"No name, but he's easy to recognize. He's got all this silvery hair and he dresses like a magician. Know him?"

"In a way. I think I've seen him. How would you like a bit of extra pocket money?"

Aram's eyes lit up.

"Go run ahead to Ahdio, at Sly's Place, and tell him I'm going to need his backroom for a while. And tell him to ask his friend Strick to join us- Do that and I'll give you an extra week's pay."

Aram was gone like an arrow. Cholly walked down the rows and picked out jars of glue and solvent. From beneath the counter he took a satchel of several brushes.

He hoped this wouldn't take long. He was already late, and Ineedra would have his head on a salver. He'd better take her to Hari's or the Golden Oasis to unruffle her feathers once this business was over with.

Ahdio didn't recognize any of the trio who strutted into the crowded tavern, and he usually remembered faces. One of them, the youngest, did have a flowing silver mane, so these must be the ones he was watching for.

The squat, broad red-faced one asked Throde, "Hey, Gimp' You seen Cholly da Gluemaker in here? We was s'posed to meet up wit' 'im."

"Not that I recall, but we've been pretty busy. Ask Ahdio," Throde replied, nodding at the mountainous man in the mail vest. He smiled and

hobbled away to deliver his tray of beers, giving Ahdio a wink in passing.

Again it was the toadish one who spoke. "You Ahdio?"

Ahdio smiled. "What will you have, gentlemen?"

"You seen Cholly da Gluemaker? We'll make it worth ya while. We got bidness wit' 'im, see?" said the red-faced man, bouncing a coin on his palm.

Ahdio held out his hand. "Maybe."

The man tossed the coin onto Ahdio's broad palm. Ahdio neither spoke nor moved his hand until several copper coins were stacked there.

"He's in the back room. Follow me."

Cholly was watching the door. He noticed the argent hair at once, then he stared at the others. The dark one in red damask silk was the obvious leader, a man accustomed to power as his due.

"What the hell is that?" he wondered, seeing the last of the trio enter through the doorway.

It was shaped sort of like one of the rendering pots in the shop, squat

and rotund with thick stubby legs ending in homed, splayed, webbed three-toed feet. It had ears like a donkey, little beady rat's eyes, and a

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wide froggish mouth full of long yellow-green teeth. Its thick muscular arms hung down so low its knobby knuckles dragged the ground. Its matted, scraggly feathers were the color of iron rust. Topping it all off was something resembling a coxcomb. It had no head or neck per se.

It was ugly.

He gestured for the two men to sit opposite him in the booth. He asked Ahdio to bring a chair and three large beers for his guests.

"Nothing personal, you understand. I'd just rather not sit where I'm hemmed in. We haven't been introduced. My name is Chollandar. And you?" He spoke to the black-bearded man.

"No offense taken. I am called Markmor. This young fool is my apprentice, Marype."

"Does the demon have a name?"

"I'd forgotten you can see his true form. I'm afraid I can't tell you his real name. He does answer, however, to 'Rubigo.'"

"Rubigo it is then." He took a sip of his Baladach wine.

"How much will you take for it?" Marype asked,.

Markmor glared at him. Rubigo snickered at such a breach of manners. Even he knew better.

"I never discuss business until after a sociable drink. I wouldn't think of doing business with a man who won't have a friendly drink with me first. You seem to have some breeding, Markmor. Surely you understand. Perhaps in time your impatient apprentice will learn. If he's like my two, it may take a while."

After what seemed an eternity with the demon standing sullenly by the door, Ahdio returned with a chair. Throde followed with a serving tray. Upon the tray were three pitcher-sized tankards holding perhaps a half gallon of Red Gold each, possibly more. Rubigo plopped down and hoisted a pewter tankard, chugging it into his mouth with hedonistic glee. Throde set the tray down and left.

Cholly sipped his wine and asked, "Is beer all right? It's the best brand he carries. I forgot to ask."

"This is fine," Markmor answered, taking a tankard in both hands.

Marype did likewise.

Rubigo drained his in one long, gurgling, slurping pull. When he went to set the tankard down he made a startling discovery—the tankard was stuck to his lips and hands. He squealed in anger. When he tried to rise he found his feathers glued to the chair.

Markmor and Marype realized the trap too late. They too were stuck. Their mouths and hands stuck to the tankards and their robes stuck to the booth. Even their shoes were stuck to the floor. The master wizard's

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eyes seemed twin flames of amethyst. A growl of rage rumbled in his throat.

There was a puff of sulfurous smoke and Rubigo's tankard clattered onto the wooden floor. An instant later the smoke cleared, revealing the demon standing in the center of the room.

"Nice try, Fat Man. Too bad you didn't know us demons could jump planes just by thinkin' 'bout it. Haw-haw! Didn't nobody never tell ya not to go messin' wit' us? Now you gonna die, boy."

"Are you sure? It seems to me that as long as I have the Theban Talisman you can't touch me. Suppose I used this axe of mine on you.

How do you know it wouldn't kill you?"

Rubigo paused a moment. Cholly eased out of his chair and slid his dismembering axe from its iron ring on his belt. He drew the Ilbarsi knife with his left hand. He waited, smiling.

"One way to find out," Rubigo growled, swinging a long arm around to slash at Cholly with green adamantine claws. The hand had three webbed fingers plus a thumb. Cholly ducked easily. The demon was slow. Cholly hacked with the axe.

Rubigo's hand fell to the floor. For a moment it lay wriggling. It vanished. The demon's wrist stopped oozing brackish fluid from the severed stump because the hand was back. He had an ugly laugh. Uh-oh, Chollander thought.

Chortling and drooling, Rubigo circled, intending to play with Cholly for a while before killing him. He lashed out with either hand, his claws raking the air around Cholly but not making contact. The gluemaker stayed calm, ducking and blocking, chopping and slashing at every opening. Once he darted in and managed to plant the axe deeply into Rubigo's chest, only to see the wound heal as soon as he removed the weapon.

Markmor and Marype watched every move of man and monster over the tankard rims.

The hellspawn was wearing the gluemaker down. He was untouched, but he was getting tired and winded. Sweat trickled into his eyes and the salt stung. He slid the Ilbarsi knife into its sheath and shifted the axe to a two-handed grip. He blinked and continued to block and counter and attack. He knew he would have to change tactics before exhaustion caused him to err.

Damn, he thought. I've given him enough blows to kill a squad of men. but his fiendish magic heals him every time. If he was mortal I could take him apart.

Cholly smiled.

Changing back to a one-hand grip on the axe, he used his free hand to reach for the talisman. Yanking the chain over his head he said, "That's

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enough. This is what you're after. Take it. I can't fight any more. Just take the damned thing and leave me alone. I know when I'm beat."

"That's more like it, Fatso. Youse is good, butcha ain't no match for da ol' demon. Now gimme."

He caught the medallion in the palm of his webbed hand. Now he was going to kill the fat bald man, since there was nothing to restrain him. He

looked over to the wizard and apprentice wizard, holding the bauble aloft and smiling. He looked back just in time to catch a sparkle of light reflecting from the gleaming blade descending. Realization flashed in his beady little eyes just before they rolled back into his head.

Cholly picked up the medallion from the lifeless fingers, returning it back around his neck. Next he placed a foot upon the fiend's face and worked his axe free from the skull. Slipping the haft through its ring, he sat back down at the table.

"That was thirsty work." He drew his long knife and placed it between himself and the magicians. He poured himself another goblet of wine and sipped it. He paused long enough to get out his pipe, fill it, and light it from the candle on the table.

He took his time, seemingly ignoring the two prisoners. He would take a puff or two, blow a few smoke rings, and sip at his wine. All the while he kept smiling, sometimes idly playing with the Ilbari blade.

"What am I going to do with you?" he said, breaking the tense silence.

"If I let you go we'll be right back where we started, except I'll know who you are. I've got better things to do than play hide-and-seek with your hired flunkies and conjurings. I have to work for my living.

"Have you ever seen glue being made? We start with a body. First we

strip it naked and inspect for obvious disease. Next we lop off the hands and cut the throat and hang the body head-down to drain the blood. Are you following this? Oh yes, if the client has a nice head of hair—yours would fetch a pretty price, Marype—we scalp it before we hang it up."

He paused to pour himself another serving of wine. Markmor looked nervous and Marype was quite pale.

"Then we hack off the arms and legs and dump 'em in a big kettle of scalding water and render them down. We sell the fat to make soap, and dry the bones for firewood."

Markmor looked nauseous and Marype's countenance was paler than his hair.

Cholly sipped at his wine, inwardly smiling at achieving the desired reaction. He continued, "Look at it from my point of view. The only way to be sure I'm safe is to get rid of you. My way you can not only remain dead, but serve a useful purpose. I guess you know I don't like magicians much.

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"On the other hand, I could spare your lives. The problem is: how do I know you won't attack me again? I suppose I could chop off your hands and cut out your tongues. Feet too, so you can't learn to use them for

hands like a beggar I once saw. The eyes, naturally would have to go. Can either of you wiggle your ears? No? I'll leave them, then."

Markmor stared at the man, unsure whether he was bluffing. If it were the other way around he knew what he would do.

A combination of beer and fear finally took its toll upon Marype's bladder. Markmor turned to glance at his apprentice with disgust.

Setting down his goblet, Cholly smiled. "Look on the bright side. You'll get to wear the Theban Talisman—for a few minutes at least. Isn't that what you wanted? Look at it from my point of view. Silverlocks here—acting on your behalf—has tried to kill me already. He did kill the fellow who had it before me. This chunk of gold is too powerful to give to the likes of you, and at the same time I have a living to make. I have to have some assurance you won't bother me again."

Cholly knocked the dottle from his pipe, refilled it, and took another light from the candle while Markmor reflected upon what he had said.

"Nature calls," he told his prisoners. "I'll be back in a minute. Don't go anywhere," he snickered, sliding out of the booth. He sheathed the Ilbarsi knife and stepped across Rubigo's carcass.

Cholly returned several minutes later. Behind him came the big bar-

tender, and behind him a bearded man even bigger, carrying a staff. The last man, largest of the three, was dressed in blue and seemed to radiate power.

The wizards were trying unsuccessfully to escape.

"Nicely done, Cholly. What are you going to do with them?" Strick asked, chuckling,

"I haven't figured that one out yet. I can't let them go, but I'd rather not kill them unless I have to. Any ideas?"

"There are a couple of things that could work. First, to a mage knowing someone's true name gives you power over him."

"That's why he wouldn't tell me the demon's name."

"Right. Second, there is only one oath he cannot break: one sworn on his powers. All you have to do is make him tell you his true name and make him swear by it and on his powers to leave you alone. If he breaks that vow, at the very least his powers shall be forfeit for eternity."

Markmor stared at the stranger. Only a magician could have spoken so certainly, yet this man was not known to him. He knew the few remaining Ilsigi mages, and the ones in the Mageguild, and the outsiders like Enas Yorl and Ischade. Whoever this upstart was, there would be a score

to settle later.

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Ahdio spoke up. "How do you know if he is telling the truth?

Wouldn't it be more likely he'd lie?"

"A good point, my friend. I can be of some assistance there. This staff I carry is not just a walking stick. It is a Staff of Truth. Whoever touches it may not lie and live."

Cholly puffed at his pipe, weighing the idea. Finally he asked, "What will it be, gentlemen? Will you take a vow to stop seeking the medallion and to leave me in peace?"

Strick touched the staff to Markmor's head. He nodded. When it touched Marype's head he too nodded. Markmor growled into his tankard.

"I'm going to free Markmor first. This will taste awful, and it will sting, but it will free your lips in a couple of minutes."

Cholly reached under the table and withdrew a leather satchel. From it

he removed a stoppered bottle and a brush. He kept brushing the liquid from the bottle onto the sorcerer's lips until they were freed from the tankard. The Staff of Truth rested upon his head.

"Faugh! What was that unholy liquid?" he sputtered.

"Trade secret. Just be glad it worked. Are you ready to give me your name?"

"Yes, damn you." Markmor gave his secret name.

"Now, do you swear, upon that name you have just spoken and by your powers, to never again seek the Theban Talisman and to leave me and mine forever in peace?"

"I so swear."

"Say it, all of it."

He said his name once more and swore on it and his powers.

Marype was more difficult, mainly because he had drained his tankard and was not entirely sober.

Finally Markmor growled, "Oh, for Anen's sake, take his bloody oath so we can get the hell out of here!"

Cholly freed the younger man and received his vow and name.

"May we leave now?" Markmor asked impatiently.

"In a minute. I just thought you ought to know that if your fair-haired boy there had simply come to me this morning and made me a reasonable cash offer before I found out what it could do, you could have bought the talisman outright. Too bad you didn't try straight dealing, because when somebody tries to push me around I have this tendency to push back.

You can go."

Markmor's face was almost as scarlet as his silks. "You mean you never made the man an offer?! You mindless dungheap, where was your brain? You were dealing with a businessman. What do you think he does?"

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He buys and sells things, that's what he does. At times like this I could almost justify destroying you, talented or not. Brain damaged is what you are. Brain damaged . . ."

He was still ranting as he and Marype faded from view, leaving their clothing still glued to the booth.

Tears were trickling down Ahdio's red cheeks and Strick was gasping for breath. Three big bellies jiggled with uncontrollable laughter.

Ahdio was able to speak first. "I haven't laughed so hard in ages. Did you see the look on his face when he found out he could've bought it for a few soldats?"

"Yes, and when he sobers up the silver-haired one is going to catch seventeen hells," Strick added.

"Couldn't happen to a nicer fellow," Cholly giggled.

"I have a special bottle of wine I've been saving for a special occasion. Share it with me. This calls for a celebration," Ahdio declared.

Strick asked Cholly, "If they hadn't agreed, would you have killed them?"

"No, but there was no way they could know that. I let them worry once I brought up the possibility. As soon as Markmor put himself in my place he was convinced I would kill them both. It's only human to think other people would act the same way you would in the same situation. Since Markmor would kill me without a second thought, of course he believed I would do it, just more reluctantly. After all, he had already seen me split his pet demon's skull."

"So it was all a bluff," Strick marvelled. "What if he called you on it?"

"I'd have waited him out. He wasn't going anywhere. Sooner or later he would have to give in. That's lot of beer in those mugs," Cholly chuckled.

"Remind me never to gamble with you."

Three large bellies began shaking with laughter.

Eventually the gluemaker asked, "Is that Staff of Truth for real, or was it a bluff too?"

"Does it matter? Markmor believed it was real."

"How am I going to clean up this mess?" Ahdio wondered aloud.

"There's several bottles of solvent in my satchel. We can toss the demon out the back door and I'll pick him up in the morning. I wonder how good a glue he'll make."

THE PROMISE OF HEAVEN

Robin Wayne Bailey

Tiana struck a brazen pose, turning her back to the small bust of the Rankan goddess Sabellia on its stone pedestal. The full moon shone overhead through a break in the trees, filling the small garden niche with a sublime light that revealed her full, pale breasts as they strained against the too-tight fabric of her green dress; a light bright enough, she also hoped, to lend luster to her deep green eyes so carefully kohled and her lovely red tresses.

She rumbled her hair with one hand and thrust her hip a bit further to the side, feeling the perfect vixen. She stretched, lifting her arms until the material of her bodice threatened to rip. She faked a yawn and dared another glance down the white-pebbled pathway that snaked through the Promise.

The man still stood there. She knew he'd seen her. What was wrong with him, anyway? Didn't he like women? Maybe he was one of those Stepsons, there were a few left in town; that would be just her luck.

She stepped back into the niche out of his sight and bit a fingernail. Perhaps she should have chosen a darker spot tonight. With the moon so full maybe he could see how faded her dress really was, how the rose in her cheeks was only rouge, how skinny and bone-rough she'd become, despite the size of her jiggles. Curse the fates that had brought her to this miserable town, and curse the lying, womanizing stonemason who had lured her here with his promises and sweet words, only to throw her into the streets the moment he found someone prettier.

She had no experience at this kind of work. She had to eat, though, and desperation emboldened her. This stranger down the path seemed to

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be the only man in the park tonight. He'd better have coins, though. Just last evening some wine-soaked fool had offered her a bundle of smelly hides for her service. What was she supposed to do with hides?

Tiana stepped onto the path again. The pebbles were smooth and cold under her bare feet. The air felt crisp; she would have to earn enough for shoes and a cloak, and soon. Food, too. She couldn't afford to let this man get away. Feigning an expression of boredom she rubbed her right breast, teasing the nipple. Then, she looked down the path.

Damn, damn, damn! He was gone! Into the bushes with some other woman? Her shoulders slumped, and tears welled in the corners of her eyes. She looked down at her toes, pushed a few of the milky stones around. Hadn't he liked her looks? Maybe she'd acted a little too whorish.

But gods, she was so hungry! How did the other women in the park do it? What was the knack she lacked? A whole week in this sad, silly place, and she had yet to break into the ranks of the professionals!

Tiana squeezed her stomach, trying to ease the emptiness as she leaned against Sabellia's pedestal and slowly sank down to sit on the grass at its base. Pressing her back to the fluted stone, she drew her knees close and hugged them.

She feared the night. The quiet solitude seemed like a menacing thing. The darkness engulfed her, swallowed her in a black maw, chewed and choked her down all in a preternatural silence. Even the gods whose busts and statues lined the walkways held their tongues in this unfortunate park.

She looked up into Sabellia's face. The moon itself seemed a weak and helpless emberglow in the vaster dark.

Tiana felt small and alone. She wanted to go home, but that, too, took money. She thought again of the stonemason lover who had lured her so far from Ranke. He had treated her kindly and promised her heaven.

Well, he'd given it to her. That was what the locals called this park where she now tried to ply her charms: the Promise of Heaven.

She rested her head back against the pedestal and at last let go the tears she'd held in check for so long. Each one seemed a precious thing to her, a fragment of her heart. She caught one on her finger and held it up to see. It gleamed like a tiny crystalline moon, a very piece of her god-

dess.

Even through her fear she felt the shadow fall over her. She sniffed once, then quickly wiped the moisture from her face, giving no thought to the rouge and kohl that turned to a smear. She scrambled to her feet as fast as her dress allowed and faked her best smile.

It was the same man. Same height and build, same dark garments. The

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moon touched his features. He was young, she thought. Only a little older than herself. Not bad looking, either, despite a peculiar edge, a hardness, in his gaze. She took a deep breath, swelling her favorite assets.

Then, suddenly she dropped her pose and brightened. "I know you," she said. "You came down with the workers* caravan—"

"I need you," he interrupted throatily.

She met his gaze. He had beautiful eyes full of warmth and charm. "Of course," she answered, remembering why she was there, why he was

there. Yet, there was more hope in her voice than seduction. She thought briefly of the meal she would buy come morning, and maybe an apartment. She hated sleeping in the alleys, constantly afraid. All she had to do was please him, and that shouldn't be hard to do.

He had such beautiful eyes'

"Come with me," he said softly, holding out a hand.

She took it. His touch warmed her; his hand felt soft and uncalloused. That puzzled her. If he was one of the workers sent to rebuild the wall around Sanctuary his hand should have been rough. Yet, it pleased her that it wasn't, and she pushed that concern aside. There was something else she was supposed to think about, something she should say. What was it?

"The cost . . ." she hesitated awkwardly, unsure of the usual charge.

"I mean. well, a sheboozh?" Oh, damn, she thought. That's far too much for a common street whore. A whole gold coin!

But he moved his other hand close to her face. She caught just the flash of the requested payment before he made a fist and the money disappeared,

Tiana couldn't believe her good fortune. Gold and beautiful eyes. The gods were with her this night after all. He really did have the most

incredible gaze, full of oceans and full of darkness, full of promises.

"Come with me," he said again. His voice was the high wind, and when he spoke no more she still heard his words. He was the sound of the night.

She looked into his eyes. Hand in hand, they stepped from Sabellia's garden niche and onto the pathway. Out of respect for the silence that shrouded the park the gravel refused to crunch beneath their tread.

Unable to help herself, Tiana smiled.

The moonlight continued to shine on the small bust in the Promise of Heaven.

Over the rest of Sanctuary, Darkness began to chew.

The full moon poured its radiance perfectly through the skylight above Sabellia's altar, lending an opalescent sheen to the graceful sculpture of

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the goddess. Her flawless marble features shimmered as the smoke of

incense swirled upward from a score of braziers set in the floor at the hem other skirts. It rose higher and higher like a wizards-weather mist, caressed her sensuous curves, curled toward the silver disc and out into the night.

Dayme looked up, seeking Sabellia's shadowed gaze. He knew she was with him, present in this first full moonlight of autumn as it illumined her altar. He felt her power, felt her touch upon his heart.

"Cheyne," he murmured as he knelt. "My Cheyne." He prayed no other words aloud. He didn't need to. Sabellia knew him well. The goddess had set her mark upon his soul.

He reached inside his tunic and extracted a small bundle of white silk. Carefully, he unrolled it. Several strands of fine blond hair gleamed in the moonlight. A silver thread bound them into a delicate lock. How long had he carried them in secret, those hairs stolen from her brush? Three years? Four?

He laid his small offering on Sabellia's altar. It was not a gift of great value, but it was very dear to him. The goddess asked no more. Dayrne bowed his head. But suddenly prayers would not come. Where had she gone, his Cheyne? Why hadn't she waited for him to

return with the One Hundred? He closed his eyes; it was easy to picture

her face when he closed his eyes. In the silent sanctity of the Rankan

temple he whispered her name.

Chenaya.

But in his heart he called her Cheyne, It was one of the names the gladiators had given her in the Rankan arenas. Hard as metal they had said of her. That wasn't true. She was tough, yes, but he had seen the softness buried deep in her soul, the piece of her she kept hidden from the world and from her father.

She was a child, sometimes. A spoiled child. Yet he loved her. Cheyne, he thought. My Chain. Chain that binds me beyond reason. He shook his head in a moment that was a mixture of pity and joy. Let me never be free. He looked up at Sabellia's face. She seemed almost to mock him as she peered down through the swirling incense, and he knew that was one prayer the goddess had already answered.

But where had Chenaya gone?

He thought again of that strange portrait hanging in her room. The

power of it was startling, but though he admired the artistry, each time he looked upon it a subtle fear tingled through his spine. Unmistakably, it was Lalo's work. But when had she posed for it? Lowan Vigeles said she had brought it home one night, shut herself in her room until dawn,

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and departed with the morning, saying nothing to anyone. Not even her father knew more.

Dayrne suspected, however, that Rashan did. The old priest had made a habit lately of going to Cheyne's room and staring at the portrait with that queer smile of his, peering through half-closed lids at Chenaya's face and the resplendent sun that framed her, seemed to caress her, an effect that went far beyond mere paint and craftsmanship. Her hair flew into fire and light; her eyes shone like tiny suns. Chenaya was beautiful beyond any woman he had ever known, but not even she was so glorious as Lalo had rendered her.

Strange as those things were, though, there was something else that stirred terror into his blood. The painting radiated a tangible warmth.

Could it be true what Rashan claimed? Was his Cheyne truly the Daughter of the Sun? Or was it all some trick?

He turned his gaze back to Sabellia, who governed matters of the heart. If Cheyne was a goddess or some avatar of Father Savankala, then what hope could there be for any love between them?

He touched the few strands of hair he had placed on the altar- They belonged to the goddess now. He bowed his head, uttered one last prayer, and slowly rose to his feet.

The Temple of the Rankan Gods was quiet and dark. He shook his head, feeling shame for his people. The construction of the temple had never quite been completed. The outer shrines with altars for Savankala, Sabellia, and Vashanka had been finished, but many of the inner ritual chambers and priests' quarters were still in various stages of completion. There should have been a festival in Sabellia's honor this night of nights. Rashan had elected, instead, to take his priests and hold the ceremonies at the smaller, private temple at Land's End which was not only completed, but sanctified. It didn't seem proper to Dayme, though. That temple was Savankala's hallowed ground. This hour should belong only to Sabellia.

Well, he was just a gladiator. What did he know of priestly affairs?

He walked through the temple, his sandals ringing softly on the smooth stone floor. Lonely, troubled, he made his way outside, down the

high steps, and into the avenue.

The street appeared empty. It would be foolish, though, to rely on appearances. Even with the street gangs smashed, there was still danger in the Sanctuary nights. There were too damn many alleys and shadows in this town. Sanctuary. He smirked, considering the name. As if a man was safe from anything at this end of the empire.

He wrapped a lightweight cloak about his shoulders and moved soundlessly down the street. Like the rest of Sanctuary's citizens he, too, knew

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how to turn invisible, to become a shade or wraith, as he wandered the darkness of Uptown. Cheyne would have mocked and teased him. She would have strode brazenly down the center of the road. Unlike his mistress, though, Dayme had no taste for confrontations.

He bit his lip and cursed her silently for leaving him behind. Where the hell are you, Chenaya, he wondered bitterly. Then, thinking of Lalo's painting. Who the hell are you?

Worry and confusion gnawed at his insides. Rashan, he thought, frowning his brow. He owed himself a long talk with that sunstruck priest.

Daphne worked the training machine with only the moon and a single

torch to see by. She leaped and dodged as four spinning wooden arms swung at her head and knees. Sweat gleamed on her body, ran in free rivulets down her throat and chest, down her arms into the hand that held an immense sword. Once, the sword had been too heavy for her. No longer.

For a time her mind was utterly free, devoid of thought or concern. The smooth working of muscle, the stretch of tendon, the pulse of her blood, the heat in her flesh—these were the only things that existed for her. She breathed the cool air of night, felt the crunch of sand beneath her sandals, listened to the rhythmic whoosh of the whirling machine. Nothing else mattered for her.

But when the arms began to slow she stepped clear and drew a deep, frustrated breath. Then, she leaned on her sword and looked around, strangely aware of the silence and her aloneness. She would not have called it loneliness.

A few lamps burned in the windows of the estate. In the opposite direction a few more lights showed distantly where the new barracks had been built at the easternmost wall of Land's End. Beyond the wall the sky glowed redly with the bonfires that Rashan and his priests had made, where they celebrated by Chenaya's temple on the shores of the Red Foal.

She was alone as usual, on the outside looking in again. But it didn't bother her. Practice was what mattered, and training and hard work. Dayme would be angry if he knew she was out here so late, but she didn't care. He was only her trainer, nothing more. He'd made that abundantly clear. Her hand clenched and unclenched on the hilt of her sword, though, when she thought of him.

She didn't care, she didn't care at all. But she raised her weapon suddenly and carved a great chunk out of one of the machine's arms. The breath hissed from her as she struck. Then, she stood for a moment and

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trembled. It was not Dayme, she told herself. It had nothing to do with him.

It was that damned husband of hers.

Kadakithis had summoned her to the palace again. Again, he had begged her for a divorce. Begged! A prince of Ranke! No matter that divorce was forbidden among the Royal Family. Hell, he'd practically crawled on his knees to convince her.

What had she ever seen in that man that had made her consent to marriage? It certainly hadn't been his thin, spindly body or his face with a chin that could stitch sailcloth, or that armor-piercing nose. It certainly

hadn't been the execrable poetry he once had written, or his mediocre talent on the harp.

It sure as the gods hadn't been his fidelity. Why, the bastard had stocked his larder with fresh meat almost before their wedding bed had cooled. And when the Raggah kidnapped and sold her into slavery, did Kadakithis come to rescue her? Hell and damnation, no! He'd curled up, instead, with his pet fish, and left that task to Chenaya.

She carved two more chunks from the training-machine, uttering a curse with each stroke. Damn it. Chenaya! (Thunk!) Why didn 't you lake me. (Thunk!) with you, damn it!

It didn't matter that Dayme loved Chenaya, it really didn't. She missed the blonde-haired little bitch. With all the new faces around Land's End, all the recruits for Lowan's new school, Daphne wished for someone to talk to. Chenaya was always best for that, though they usually only traded insults and catty comments. Still, there was a communion in that. Chenaya understood her, and as much as anyone could, she thought she understood Chenaya. Everyone else was too much in awe of Lowan's daughter. But not Daphne. Too often they'd looked each other straight in the eye and muttered, "slut," or some such.

That made her smile.

That business with Zip, though, that hadn't gone down well for Chenaya. She suspected that in the process of ridding Sanctuary of that verminous street gang (laughingly called the Popular Front for the Liberation of Sanctuary) Chenaya had lost part of her heart to the cutthroat little back-stabber who called himself its leader. Just like her, Daphne thought, to ignore a real man like Dayrne who cared for her and to fall for a piece of puke.

Still, it was a damn good thing Chenaya had left town so soon after the palace ambush. If she knew that Zip had been set free, or that her own husband, that splinter of manhood, had elevated him to a position of authority . . . Hell, even she burned when she thought about that.

How, she wondered, could Shupansea allow it? If she'd hated that

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carp-face before, Daphne had nothing but contempt remaining for the Beysa. Her own people had suffered worst of all at Zip's hands. Daphne remembered the massacre of so many Beysib near the Vulgar Unicorn. Why didn't Shupansea? Wasn't she the real ruler of this city? How could she allow Zip to live when Chenaya had practically poured his blood into a cup for her to drink?

Daphne leaned on the machine and stared toward the red haze that flickered against the vast eastern darkness. The noise of Rashan's celebration barely touched her ears.

Only days after that incident Chenaya had vanished. Reyk, her falcon, rattled listlessly in his cage. Her father, Lowan, rattled around the halls and corridors of Land's End, himself, like a caged bird, fretting in his own quiet way.

Fortunately, he had matters to occupy his mind: the arrival of one hundred of the empire's finest gladiators, the opening of his new school, the construction of suitable barracks on the estate's northeast section, with lumber transported all the way from Bhokar. And there were his plans for the upcoming Festival of Man. All that kept him from worrying too much about his daughter, and it gave him no time at all to visit the palace.

But Daphne had been to the palace on three occasions of late. It galled her to listen to Molin Torchholder and Tempus's crag-browed flunky—What was his name, anyway? Shit or Spit or something like that—muttering about Chenaya's treachery and Chenaya's scheming and Chenaya's this or that.

Not that the two had seen her. Woe to any woman raised in a royal

household that never learned to listen at a keyhole or from behind an arras, or that never learned to carry on one conversation while overhearing another. Daphne had learned a lot on her three visits, and she swore to learn more when she answered Kadakithis's latest summons.

Divorce was all he had on his mind these days.

Treachery. That's all Daphne had on hers. There was another traitor that everyone seemed to conveniently overlook, a man who'd befriended Chenaya, pretended to love her- He'd helped her shape the trap that had netted Zip that night, and he'd killed piffles right at her mistress's side.

Then, he'd let Zip go, freed the piece of offal that—more than any man in the world—he had reason to hate, cause to kill.

It made Daphne mad.

She reached out and gave the uppermost arm of the machine a push to set it spinning. Gears began to whir, moving the lower arms in a timed counter-rhythm. Daphne gripped her sword tightly, barely repressing a

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curse. She prepared to leap into her practice again, then stopped. As a perverse afterthought, she extinguished her torch in the sand.

She would try it without the light. She didn't need it anymore, she was sure. She was better than her trainer realized, and getting better still. She listened to the gears, to the whoosh of the arms. It was more of a challenge this way, but not much more. The moon was too full.

Leap and dodge, leap and dodge.

For a time, she abandoned thoughts of treachery and vengeance and found calmness in the smooth mindkssness of motion.

But only for a time.

Dayrne crept across the Governor's Walk and proceeded up the Avenue of Temples. Though a few lights burned in the windows of some of the greater edifices he walked the streets alone. Or, if he was not alone, then whoever else walked abroad moved as silently as he. In Sanctuary, he was willing to concede that possibility.

He had planned to go straight home to Land's End. There was so much to do these days with the One Hundred to organize and train. They were good men. He'd personally handpicked every one of them. Their first task upon arriving in Sanctuary had been to construct their own barracks with the lumber Dayrne had purchased in Bhokar. That done, he'd given them one day of rest in honor of Sabellia's celebration. Tomorrow morning would be their first full workouts. He would supervise the

session himself.

Tonight, however, he wanted a good sleep.

Nevertheless, he slowed when he approached the eastern entrance to the Promise of Heaven. Two stone pedestals high as his waist stood on either side of the wide white-pebbled pathway. He hesitated, then moved toward them and frowned. In Sabellia's blessed light he spied a flat black stone upon the left post. Such stones washed up only on the banks of the White Foal on the farther side of town.

It was a signal. He palmed the small bit of rock and walked stealthily down the graveled path. He had gone less than ten paces when the smell of a very cheap, but very potent, perfume brought him to a cautious halt.

A woman stepped out of the bushes that lined the pathway. She was much too old for her chosen trade; only here in the Promise of Heaven could she hope to make a living with what remained of her physical charms. Men didn't come here for porcelain beauty, but for a few quick grunts in the foliage. Still, she did the best with what she had.

Goldenwash made her hair too blond, and rouge made her cheeks far too rosy. More rouge colored her breasts, and kohl darkened her lids in a manner that was almost seductive.

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Her white dress floated about her as she moved forward. In the pale moonlight it was nearly impossible to discern just how threadbare and worn it really was. There was a certain sad beauty to it and to its wearer.

"Evening, Asphodel," Dayme said softly. "That perfume. I smelled you before I saw you."

She approached him, grinning, and suddenly she didn't look quite so old. The smile brightened her face, lent it youth. "Sarome's Night," she informed him. "It's in my price range, and it comes by the keg." She ran her fingertips lightly over the jerkin that covered his chest. "If it offends your nostrils, my young friend, then buy me something more expensive."

He caught her wrist, held it for a moment, then lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. She giggled like a little girl, then pulled away. She touched her own lips to the place where he had kissed, then turned her hand over, opened her palm and exposed the black stone he had pressed upon her.

"You wanted to see me," he reminded her gently.

Whore or not, Dayme liked the old woman. He'd liked her since the first time he'd caught her placing flowers against the main gate at Land's

End. Lots of the townsfolk had left flowers and small gifts there since Cheyne smashed the PFLS. Especially, Dayme suspected, the prostitutes whose trade that group had nearly ruined by their terrorizing of the streets.

Asphodel, however, had brought more than just flowers to show her gratitude. "Walegrin didn't take that bastard. Zip, to prison at all," she'd revealed in her best conspiratorial whisper. "He let him go." It was the first Dayme had heard of Walegrin's betrayal, but he'd only just returned to Sanctuary that same day with a hundred men and a missing Chenaya to occupy his time. He'd thanked her for the information, but had taken no other action.

A few nights later. Asphodel had sought him again outside the gate. "There's a plot brewing in the palace," she'd reported. "Nothing is set, yet, and the Prince isn't involved. But some high people want Rashan dead real quick. They don't like his talk about the Lady Chenaya being a goddess. Lots of folks are ready to believe it."

"Why are you telling me this?" Dayme had asked suspiciously. "How does a Promise Park whore come by such palace gossip?"

That was the first time he'd seen her smile. She'd leaned back against the gate and struck a pose that might have tempted him had she been twenty years younger.

"The ladies who work the park owe much to your Lady," Asphodel had answered. "While Zip and his bloody little boys ran this end of town our customers were afraid to venture out at night. But some of us have

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children and families to feed. Without the coins we earn in the park we couldn't afford food. Zip starved us as surely as if he stole the bread from our mouths."

She struck another pose. Dayme realized with a faint grin that she wasn't trying to seduce him at all. Her postures were, instead, matters of long habit, totally unconscious. Long ago, this woman must have been something very special, perhaps madam of her own house. Sadly, times changed for everyone.

"There've been other things she's done. too," Asphodel had continued.

"Little things. Many a time your Chenaya has cut through the Promise and scattered a few coins on the path. Oh, she always had a haughty air about her, but those coins sometimes made the difference between a good meal or none at all for someone's baby. We're a close-knit club, we women who work the Promise, and we don't forget favors. Even if people don't know they're doing us favors."

Dayme wished Chenaya could have heard those words, but she'd left town too soon. "Such information . . ." he'd started to ask.

Asphodel smiled again and rumbled her hair absentmindedly. "How does a common street whore come by such news?" She raised one finely penciled eyebrow. "Sir, it would surprise you the kind of men who seek us out. A fine, soft bed is, of course, a good thing." Her smile turned mischievous, "But a tumble in the bushes, in the open air with the stars overhead and the leaves rustling, a body with no discernible face, and the wind in the crack of your ass. That's more than mere sex, Sir. That's an adventure. And men both highborn and low sometimes find their lives turning a bit stodgy. That's when they seek us out."

"And they talk?" Dayrne suggested, gleaning her subtleties.

Her smile faded only a little, replaced by an expression of wisdom and the barest hint of regret. "Ever meet a man who didn't want the woman he topped to know how important he was?"

They'd continued to talk through the night. As the first clouds of morning caught fire in the east they'd parted, her with a full purse in her bodice. She'd tried to refuse it, but Dayrne had insisted. They'd made a pledge to help each other, and it came as no surprise to learn a few nights later that she'd distributed his coins among all the women of the Promise.

The leather purse, though, that she'd kept for herself. She wore it on a thong about her ample waist. As he watched, she opened it and deposited the small black stone that was her means of summoning him. That stone was the only clue Dayrne had as to where Asphodel spent her daylight hours, and he guessed she lived close to the White Foal, perhaps in Downwind.

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"Has Lady Chenaya returned home, yet?" Asphodel asked with genuine concern.

Dayrne shook his head. "No word from her, either."

The old whore bit her lip. The gesture touched Dayrne, drew him even closer to his new, unlikely friend.

He glanced up and down the walkway, making sure they were quite alone. Then, he pulled her gently into the bushes. To his surprise, she didn't make the expected suggestive remark. That told him something was wrong.

"There's trouble?" he whispered, his hand still upon her arm.

She stared at his hand, then away into the dark. "I'm not sure," she

said at last. "Maybe I shouldn't bother you with it."

He let go a sigh. If she didn't want to bother him, then it didn't concern Chenaya or Land's End. Still, he owed her. She had done enough for him and those he cared for.

"Bother me," he answered, another suggestive opening that she let pass. So it was big trouble.

Asphodel started to bite her nail, then pulled her finger away from her mouth and folded her hands together. "Some of the ladies have disappeared," she murmured almost too faintly to be heard. Then, her voice grew stronger. "One a night for over a week. And tonight . . ." she hesitated and started to bite the nail again. Again, she caught herself. "A new girl vanished. Sweet child, but a real novice. Her name was Tiana."

"Maybe she went home with a customer," Dayme suggested.

Asphodel shook her head. "Not likely. We're kind of a family here. We adopt newcomers like Tiana and try to keep an eye on them." Unconsciously, she raised a finger to her lips, inserted it, and bit the nail quite through. She frowned, shook the finger and let go a sigh. "One moment, she was working by the bust of Sabellia. The next, she was gone. Nobody saw her leave. In fact, the park has been nearly deserted all night." She pointed to the sky. "Full moon," she explained. "The brightness keeps the customers away."

Dayme rubbed his chin. "Are you sure they've disappeared? Maybe they've found . . ." he paused, choosing his words carefully, "better work. Or, maybe they're sick." He tried to think of other reasons a prostitute might take a night off.

"I told you we're close as family," she repeated. "I went to their homes, myself. Two of the ladies had children. Those little ones were all alone. One was a babe, a half-starved suckling. I had to find places for them all."

"Have you taken this matter to the garrison?"

She stared him right in the eye. It was a long, uncomfortable moment.

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"We're whores," she said at last. "This is the Promise." She didn't have to say more than that.

Raggahs, he thought. Could they be back in the slave trade? He remembered Daphne's experience at their hands, how those desert bandits had kidnapped and sold her into prostitution on Scavenger's Isle. The

Promise of Heaven would be easy pickings if those bastards had decided to resume business.

If it was the Raggahs, though, then he had a personal stake in this.

Daphne was his pupil. An affront visited upon her was visited upon him as well.

"Have any . . ." he searched for a delicate word, then shrugged helplessly, "bodies turned up?"

"No," she answered- "No traces at all. They simply vanished. Easy enough to do in Sanctuary, and if it was just one or two girls I wouldn't question. But one a night for more than a week?" She gazed around as if she could see through the shrubs and bushes into every corner of the park. Then, she raised the hem of her dress to reveal a small dagger thrust through a garter on her right thigh. "My ladie? are scared. I'm scared."

"I'll see what I can learn," he promised, unsure of what exactly to do. He pursed his lips, then drew a deep breath. "Anything else?"

She also took a breath and let it out slowly. "Just gossip. All those workers who've moved into Shambles' Cross are causing quite a stir. Trouble-making bunch of misfits, all seeking a quick fortune. They like to rough a lady up a bit, you know? They try it up here, and they'll be sorrier than hell." She patted her weapon through the thin dress.

"Doesn't that scare away your customers?" he wondered, amused.

"Easy enough to hide it in this darkness," she answered, grinning weakly. "But it's always within reach."

They stepped out of the foliage and onto the walkway. Once more, Dayme caught her hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed it. "I'll try to help," he promised again before he turned away. He glanced over his shoulder, but she didn't follow. When he turned a second time she was gone. Asphodel knew the park far better than he did.

Sanctuary, he thought. The Promise of Heaven. So many funny names for a town with no sense of humor.

Sunlight shimmered around Daphne as she stepped from her silk palanquin at the Processional Gate. She had prepared for this meeting, dressing in her favorite gown of exquisite blue. It split enticingly to her right hip and draped low, just covering her breasts, leaving both arms bare. She had spent much of the morning piling her hair upon her head,

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pinning it in place with pins of gold and polished oyster shell. Small silver sandals adorned her feet. A perfume of rare citrus floated about her.

She was not so stunning as Chenaya, but she was beautiful. And before she granted him any divorce, Kadakithis would acknowledge that. So would Shupansea, the woman who wanted her place at his side.

She turned to Leyn and Oujien who manned the front poles of her transport. "Thank you, brothers," she said formally to the two gladiators. They had helped often with her training, and she bore them great respect. It delighted her heart that they had volunteered to bear her today. The two at the rear poles were new men. She didn't know their names, but if Dayme had chosen them they also deserved her respect. She made a short bow. "Thank you for this honor you've done me."

"We'll wait here," Leyn said. Then, he put on a grin. "Give 'em a taste of hell."

He was a beautiful man, blessed by Savankala with the same golden hair as Chenaya, tall and strong with the classically sculpted body that only a gladiator's training seemed to give. She looked into his richly blue eyes and smiled half-sadly. Why was it not Leyn she loved?

"I'll try not to leave you long in this sun," she answered. "And a taste of hell? I'll serve them a gods-damned banquet." She made an ugly face that instantly transformed to an expression of innocence. "Of course, I'm just a sweet, boring little princess of Ranke." But as she said it, she drew a finger across her throat and turned thumbs down with the other hand.

They laughed together, startling passersby who moved along the Processional on their morning business. Then, Daphne passed alone through the gate, crossed Vashanka's Square, and entered the Hall of Justice.

The hall was empty. Kadakithis had given up any real pretense of governing the city, himself- He rarely held court at all- She paused at the bottom step of a high dais. At its top rested the throne from which the prince once had delivered his judgments.

For a moment her resolve faltered. She sank down on one knee, staring upward, recalling how she had first arrived in this gods-cursed city with her husband. Kadakithis had been so full of ideals then—almost bloated with plans and schemes to improve this filthy city his halfbrother, the emperor Abakithis, had given into his care. She had loved him at that time, even forgiven him for the harem he had brought along from Ranke. And she, too, had shared his ideals and dreams. Most of all, she had rejoiced at the changes that command had seemed to make in him.

But none of it had lasted. The ideals were shattered and scattered into dust. Kadakithis had so easily relinquished his command, first to Shupansea and her Beysibs, and then to Molin Torchholder and his cro-

nies. She grieved for the Kadakithis that had journeyed—an enthusiastic boy-man—to this city. She despised the Kadakithis he had become.

It was not his fault, of course. It was the city. Sanctuary corrupted from the inside out. First, it shattered your ideals, then it ground your face against the broken edges, held you down with its foot on your neck until you no longer felt the pain. Until you were just numb.

She was proof of that. A once-delicate princess who lived, ate, slept like a gladiator, who cursed like a street whore, who had killed and reveled in the flow of blood. Oh, Sanctuary had worked its brutal magic on her.

Daphne rose from the step, passed through the rearmost door meant only for the prince and his entourage, and into the palace proper. She did not see Lu-Broca, the major domo, anywhere, so she grabbed the arm of the first guard that crossed her path. "There are four good men outside the Processional Gate." She saw by the gleam in his eyes that even a mere palace guard knew who she was, and she smiled inwardly- Intimidation came so easily to her these days. "You, personally, will take them the best goblets and the finest vintage wine you can beg, borrow, or steal from the kitchens. Fail me in this—" She patted his shoulder and winked, "Well, don't fail me." She had his dagger from his belt sheath and under his chin before he could draw a breath. "Oops!" she said, passing it back by the point. "You nearly dropped this."

She walked serenely down the corridor, leaving him. Neither Rankan guard nor Beysib dared to bar her way. They knew her. Princess Daphne, who once had dared to call their Beysa a whore to her face and laughed about it before all the city's gathered nobility. They hated her, but they accorded her a measure of awe, perhaps because not even their fish-goddess, Mother Bey, had dared to strike her down.

Or, perhaps that was only her imagination. Sometimes her mind ran away with her. She couldn't really guess what they thought of her, Beysib or Rankan. Nor did she care. It was Chenaya she strove to please, and Dayme and Lowan Vigeles. And herself. Beyond that, she no longer gave a damn about Rankan or the Beysibs or Kadakithis.

Her loyalty was to Land's End. Chenaya had rescued her from Scavengers' Isle, and Lowan had offered her a home. Dayme and his gladiators had put strength in her arm, courage in her heart, and a sword in her hand. To them she owed loyalty and love. Anyone else was less than the dirt under her sandaled feet.

She found Kadakithis in his private quarters. It amused her that he thought such intimate surroundings could sway her decision. Well, let him keep his little vanities a while longer. A guard stood by his door,

opened it for her, and remained at her side until the Prince stepped through a curtained archway.

Kadakithis smiled his most reasonable smile.

Daphne stifled a sigh. He was still in so many ways the boy she had once loved. He had the same babyish face, the same hair, same thin and spotty beard that probably would never become a man's full mane. He was too scrawny, a mere stick beside Dayrne or Leyn. Yet, she had truly loved him.

No more, though. He had killed that love when the Raggah kidnapped her. Kadakithis hadn't even bothered to look for her or to wonder about her fate. And when she did return—thanks to Chenaya—she had found him with another woman. Hardly a woman at all, but a fish-eyed carp.

She didn't know if she hated him. But he had hurt her. She wanted to hurt him back.

"Daphne!" Kadakithis exclaimed. "You look positively radiant."

She folded her arms and waited for him to come to her. "Flatter me some more, Kitty-Kat," she encouraged him coldly. "Maybe it'll make me more pliant, and I'll give you what we both know you want."

He reached out to her, and she suffered his touch. His fingers brushed

over her bicep. "By the Golden Crown of Savankala," he whispered in his best chiding tone, "if your father knew you were working out with a bunch of gladiators!" He squeezed her muscle. "Why it's bigger than mine!"

"Yours was never very big, husband," she answered caustically. "But we both pretended." She changed the subject. "Is Shu-sea hiding behind that curtain?"

The Prince paled briefly and looked back over his shoulder to the archway. "Of course not. We're completely alone."

He never had been much of a liar, not to her, anyway. "Too bad," she said and paced away from him to the far side of the room. "Because I know she'd like to hear my news. I've decided to give you the divorce you've been begging for."

If she hadn't hated him before, that changed instantly. His face brightened; the corners of his mouth turned upward in a smile, and he almost clapped his hands together for joy. Then, he caught himself.

"It's against Rankan Law," she reminded him. "We're both of Royal Families. But let's admit it, my love, we're so far outside Rankan tradition that it doesn't matter spit or blood what we do. The throne belongs to a usurper now, damn Theron's soul. Your loyalty is to your Beysib

allies, and mine is to Chenaya and Land's End. You're no more a Pankan prince than I am a princess. I'm a gladiator now, an auctorata.

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You . . ." she hesitated, then gave him her most withering look. "You're a plaything for Shupansea and a puppet for Molin Torchholder."

Kadakithis came toward her, his arms outstretched. "Daphne, I'm sorry. I never expected—"

She waved him off, and again crossed to the farthest side of the room away from him. "Spare me any more of your winnings, Kitty-Kat." She knew how he hated that name. "You never expected me to be so reasonable? So generous as to give you the divorce? Or such a bitch?" She threw back her head and laughed, pleased by the effect it had on her weakling mate. "Well, I don't intend to disappoint you, darling." She felt the heat rise in her cheeks, though she tried to smother her anger. "I'm not going to be reasonable or generous. I am going to show you what a bitch I really can be."

He stared, apparently at a loss for words. She found him funny as he stood there, mouth agape. He persisted in thinking of her as the sweet, demure child he had taken for his bride, the child who'd loved and obeyed him and had never said a word about his philandering or his spineless scraping before his brother, Abakithis.

That Daphne was dead. The Raggah and the filth who lived on Scavengers* Isle had killed her.

"You want your divorce? You want to marry your fish-faced lover?"

She laughed again. "You can, my Kitty-Kat." She pointed a trembling finger and released emotions too long held inside her. The bastard! He hadn't even tried to find her! "But there's a price to pay, first." Her lips curled ferally. "There's always a price."

"Anything!" Kadakithis stuttered. "Just tell me—"

She interrupted him. "Oh, you'll regret that word. But not so fast, former love of my life. This is my last grandstand as your wife, and I want a handpicked audience. Only then will you learn the terms of our divorce."

Kadakithis's face turned stony. He glared at her. "Is this another game you're playing?"

If she'd had something close at hand she'd have thrown it at him. In fact, she wondered now if he'd had the room cleared just to avoid such an incident. It was remarkably bare of small objects. "Of course, it's a game," she answered, recovering a measure of calm. "You poor boy. Will you ever grow up and open your eyes? It's all a gods-damned game."

You'd better learn to play, instead of hiding here behind your nice safe walls. As it is, you're nothing but a pawn for Shupansea and Molin. Be a player, damn you! For once in your innocent, naive life open your eyes and be a man! Until you manage that nothing here will ever truly be yours. Not this city, not Shu-sea, nothing."

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He trembled visibly. She saw that from across the room, but strangely she found little joy in her triumph. She knew few people had ever dared to talk to him that way, or dared to tell him such a truth.

"Your audience," he reminded her. He could barely get out the words;

his lips made a thin, taut line, and his eyes were narrowed slits.

Daphne drew a slow breath, her anger finally spent. She had not realized the depth of the bitterness she'd harbored against her husband. But that was suddenly gone, at least for the moment. There was still the purpose though—the reason she'd decided to grant the divorce.

"You," she said softly, "and Shupansea, and Molin." She raised a finger for each name. Lastly she lifted the little finger of her right hand.

"But most importantly, our dear garrison commander."

The Prince raised an eyebrow suspiciously. "Walegrin?"

She allowed a small, cruel smile. "His fame precedes him, does it not?

My terms will be of special interest to sweet Walegrin."

There was no love in the look he gave her, no regret. A shared past, shared dreams and ideals, they meant nothing to him anymore. He wanted only his divorce, and as quickly as possible, she saw that in his gaze. The chill in his voice made even Savankala turn his head away, and the room grew darker as, beyond the window, a cloud passed over the sun. "When and where do we play your game?" he said.

There was only one place. "The Hall of Justice," she answered. "Tomorrow. You can sweat for a while wondering what I'm planning."

Kadakithis folded his arms over his chest. "Then the gods be with us all."

She spat on his lovely, marbled floor. "Don't blaspheme," she advised acidly. "The gods have nothing to do with this business."

She left him then, passing within a hand's breadth of him on her way to the door. She smelled his essence and the clean crispness of his garments. She felt the warmth of him they passed so closely. But she gave him not another glance. She was numb, she told herself, numb.

In a strange kind of serenity she walked through the palace, through the Hall of Justice, and across Vashanka's Square. Her palanquin and her friends waited at the Processional Gate. They hailed her as she joined them. Each man held a fine silver goblet.

"We sent the wine back," Leyn informed her, "and requested water, instead. There's still a day's training ahead of us when we get back to Land's End."

She didn't have it in her to smile. She parted the curtains of her transport and climbed inside. "Take me home, Leyn," she whispered. "Please take me home." She let the drape fall between her and the rest of the world and did her best to smother the sounds of her tears.

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Dayrne fed scraps of freshly killed meat to Chenaya's falcon. Reyk was reluctant to feed, however. The bird took the bits, chewed them briefly, and dropped them to the bottom of his cage. He emitted a long, shrill call, spread his wings to their fullest, then folded them again. He crawled into one corner, finally, and turned away from his feeder.

Dayrne gave up. He set the bowl inside the cage where Reyk could reach it if he changed his mind.

"He misses Chenaya."

Dayme looked around. He hadn't even heard Daphne approach. A frown creased his lips. Didn't she ever wear anything but her training garb anymore?

"You're armed," she noticed. "Going out?"

He glanced at the sky. Twilight crept slowly over the heavens. It would be dark soon. Asphodel would be in the Promise like a mother hen protecting her clutch. He remembered the small dagger she wore in her garter and smiled grimly. If the Raggah were involved, she'd need a hell of a lot more than that.

"Personal business," he told Daphne. He turned and walked through the aviary, paying no attention to the other falcons in their cages. Birds were Lowan's hobby, not his.

Daphne kept pace beside him as he headed for the estate. "Let me help," she offered.

Dayme paused. If there were Raggah to hunt, didn't Daphne have the right to join him? He shook his head. Despite all her training and skill, she was a princess of Ranke. He had no right to risk her safety. Besides, he had no proof that the Raggah were his prey. Only a suspicion.

"Personal," he repeated. He increased the length of his stride, leaving her behind. She didn't try to keep up, but stopped instead and glared. He could feel the power of her anger at his back.

The twelve original gladiators who had accompanied Lowan Vigeles to Sanctuary had all been quartered within the estate. Two were dead; they were only ten now, but his grief was eased by the knowledge that his brothers had died bringing an end to Zip's tyranny. There was honor in that, so their deaths were good-

He sought Dismas and Gestus in the rooms they shared. Dismas was curled on the edge of the bed with a book of poems. His lover, Gestus, busied himself with a whetstone and a favored dagger. They looked up when Dayme entered.

"I'll be gone most of the night," he said softly. "Perhaps for the next

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few nights as well. I'd like it if the two of you took charge of the watch tonight. Double the guards on all the other gates, too."

Dismas closed his book. "Expecting trouble?"

"In this town?" He didn't need to say more. His comrades set aside

their diversions and rose to follow him out.

"I won't ask your business," Dismas said as they closed the door behind them. "But do you need any help?"

"Personal," Dayme answered as he had to Daphne. Among the ten no other explanation was ever necessary. They were all auctorati, free fighters, at liberty to come and go as they pleased.

He left them, strode through the estate and out to the main gates. Leyn and a dark-haired giant named Dendur, one of the new recruits, stood duty. He exchanged a few words, then passed into the street.

The entrance to the Promise was as dark as ever. There was no stone waiting on the pillar for him, though. It didn't matter; he didn't plan to let Asphodel know he was here. He stole into the bushes and glanced at the sky again. One night past full moon, Sabellia still filled the world with her pleasure.

Light enough to see by—enough light to be seen.

He crouched lower and began to move.

The Promise of Heaven was a large park, triangular in shape. Three entrances and three main walkways welcomed visitors, but dozens of

smaller trails snaked among the trees and foliage. All along these trails in small, secluded niches stood pillared busts and statues, little shrines to all the various gods and goddesses that had ever been worshipped in Sanctuary, each cared for by their various priests.

By daytime, the park was the shaded haunt of those priests and their acolytes, of philosophers and their students. It was a school where learned men met to share discourse, where supplicants sometimes came to pray.

By night, however, the niches belonged to the prostitutes—and to their supplicants who came to play.

Or prey, Dayme reminded himself as he crept from place to place.

Here and there, a giggle rose on the breeze. Here and there, the sounds of quick and furtive lovemaking. Dayrne was above embarrassment. He went about his search with a singleness of mind.

Sabellia sailed serenely through the night, marking the time.

He wasn't sure when he first felt eyes upon his back. He realized only that someone watched him, someone as quiet and subtle as he. He moved to his right, and they moved with him. He circled left, and they followed.

Oh, they were good, indeed! Whoever his companion was, he couldn't spot him. But he knew someone was there.

He headed for the idol of the Ilsigi goddess, Shipri. A large niche, he remembered. There would be plenty of moonlight. If he was clever, he might lure his tag-a-long into that brightness. He fingered the pommel of his sword and pressed on.

Then, he cursed. There were voices in the niche. Of course, there would be! Shipri was a goddess of love and motherhood. What better place for a prostitute to set up shop? He parted the bushes for a look.

The voices stopped suddenly. At first, he feared he had been seen. But neither the man nor the woman there turned his way. Indeed, their eyes never seemed to move at all. After a moment, the man resumed the conversation, but the woman gave no answer. She didn't speak a word. Neither did her gaze leave her partner's face.

An alarm jangled in Dayrne's head. He peered closer at the black-cloaked man, unable to tell much about him save his height. A hood concealed his features, also any weapons he bore. But he was tall, much too tall for a Raggah. And he spoke Rankene.

"Come with me," the man said, crooking his finger. The prostitute

smiled and fell into step beside her suitor. They left the niche and walked down the pebbled path.

Their tread made no sound!

Almost, Dayrne leaped from his hiding place, drawing his sword. Sorcery! If he struck swiftly, the fiend might not have time to react. A clean stroke through the neck—separate the head from the body—that was the best way to kill a wizard.

But he stopped himself. That might save this lady, but what of the other missing whores? He owed it to Asphodel to try and find them. He didn't relish the task, and he cursed his own sense of loyalty. Still, he owed. There was no more to be said about it. Of one thing he was sure, though. This villain was no Raggah.

Dayrne followed the pair. Apparently, the wizard knew the park well. Shipri's grove was isolated in a little-traveled area of the Promise. The walkways were empty. They wove a careful course toward the high wall at the southeast corner. Dayrne rubbed his chin. He'd expected them to make for one of the entrances. Where could they be going?

In the very corner where the two walls joined stood one of the tallest of the park's god-sculptures. Dayrne ducked behind a shrub while the wizard and his catch approached the Father of the Ilsigi pantheon, mighty Us.

The wizard left the prostitute in the god's shadow while he went to the jointure of the walls. He put his left hand on a certain brick about shoulder high in the east face. His right found another brick in the south face

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at belly level. The two bricks were barely within his reach, and he strained to press them inward.

Dayme heard a grinding of stone against stone as the statue of Us moved on its base.

The wizard crooked a finger, and the prostitute went to his side. He led her down into a black crack at the idol's feet and the darkness swallowed them. Dayme bit his lip. She'd gone like a sheep to slaughter, without protest, smiling as if she'd smoked a whole bag of krrff.

Again came that grating sound, and the pit suddenly sealed. Dayme leaped out of his concealment and raced to the wall. Which were the right stones? He strove to remember. He was taller than the wizard, and his arms were longer. He chose a pair and pressed. Nothing happened. He tried again. Still nothing. He was sure he had the correct left-hand

brick. But which was the right?

Suddenly, Us moved. Dayme thanked his own gods, stepped to the edge of the opening and looked down. A set of stone steps descended into utter blackness. He spent only an instant wishing for a lamp or a torch, then took the first step.

The air was oppressive and stale. He glanced back upward at the square of moonlight and drew a final fresh breath. He didn't take time to search for the closing mechanism, but drew his sword and began to feel his way forward, brushing one hand along the slime-slicked wall.

The tunnel led in only one direction. He'd heard rumors of such tunnels, but all reports had confined them to the Maze. Apparently the reports were wrong.

The darkness made him pause. It was worse than being blind because he knew that he could see. His eyes were wide open, shifting from side to side, straining for some object or bit of light to fasten onto. His heart thundered in his ribs. Still, he pushed on, mindful of the promise he'd made to Asphodel.

A web draped over his head. He opened his mouth, a shout rising in his throat. Barely, he choked it back, and he rubbed his sleeve over his face in a frantic haste to free himself from the sticky strands.

Now, how in hell had that damn wizard dodged that?

He crept on, all too aware of the closeness of the walls, of the weight of the earth over his head.

Then—was that a light?

He moved a little faster, careful still to make no sound. The tiny spot of light became a flame in the distance, then a sconced lamp with another just beyond it. Dayme hovered at the edge of the darkness and listened.

A low voice rode on the stagnant air. Impossible to distinguish the words, but by the rhythms and stresses, Dayme thought it some kind of

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chant. He saw nothing ahead, though, so pressing against the wall, he ventured on into the light.

He stopped again. A too-familiar scent wafted through the tunnel. Dayme sniffed. His brows knitted together for an instant, and he clenched the hilt of his sword.

A death smell hung in the air, the unmistakable odor of rotting flesh. Too many years in the Rankan arenas as a slave and as an auctoratus had

made him familiar with that stench. Gritting his teeth, trying not to breathe too often or too deeply, he followed the scent and the voice.

A shriek ripped through the tunnel. The fine hairs on Dayme's neck rose straight up. A woman's voice! Another cry echoed after the first, then a pause, and a long series of screams and broken sobbings.

Dayme abandoned stealth and ran forward. The chant had risen to match the intensity of the screams. A mad cacophony of sound swirled around him. He ran wide-eyed and fearful, yet the fear did not stop him. It drew him, instead, until he found the entrance to a side room off the tunnel.

He realized at once the tunnel's original purpose. He was surely close to the palace by now, and this was an old escape route used in times of emergency, built by the Ilsigs, perhaps still unknown to the current Rankan occupants. The side room was full of empty weapon racks where fleeing men might once had grabbed swords before emerging above-ground in the Promise.

But not all his arena experience had prepared him for the rest of the sight.

In the light of a dozen oil lamps Dayme saw the bodies of Asphodel's missing prostitutes. They hung by their necks from metal spikes driven deep into the walls, twisted ropes biting through the bloated flesh of their

throats. Plainly, though, they had been killed before they were hanged.

The first few women had merely been stabbed through the hearts. The purpled, crusted wounds showed visibly on their bare breasts. The next one had been disemboweled; the flesh of her belly had been peeled back to reveal emptiness; she looked like nothing more than a gutted fish. The mutilations grew progressively more cruel. The skin and muscle had been sliced from one, leaving the organs in full view. Another had been left relatively intact with only dark holes showing where the organs had been removed. On yet another body the visible veins and arteries had been precisely, surgically opened, making a strange and gruesome mapwork.

Blood had stained the wall a nauseating color where the corpses hung. Old puddles and rivulets of blood had dried and crusted on the floor beneath them.

Dayme reeled at the insanity of it.

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He fixed his eyes on the center of the room. Bound upon a cross-shaped altar a woman screamed again, her terror filling the chamber and the tunnel beyond. It was the whore he'd followed from Shipri's niche. Whatever entrancement her captor had placed upon her had faded. Her feet and wrists bled as she struggled in her ropes.

At her head stood her captor. The wizard's eyes snapped open and fixed suddenly on Dayrne. The chant died in his throat. The gleaming knife he'd brandished over the prostitute turned point first toward the gladiator, and he snatched a second dagger from a table of instruments close at hand.

Outrage smothered any thought of fear. Dayrne started across the room, raising his sword. The wizard stepped swiftly to the altar's far side, putting his victim between himself and his unexpected attacker. As he moved he brought the points of his two blades together and barked a short command in a language Dayrne didn't know.

A pain stabbed the gladiator's heart. The breath rushed from him, and he clenched his teeth. Still he forced another step forward, fighting the sudden agony. The pain struck him again, and as he took another step, yet again stronger than ever. His knees buckled; the arcane fire in his chest consumed his strength. A red tide flooded his vision. His fingers trembled with seizure on the hilt of his sword.

He forced his head up, expecting a death stroke from one of the daggers. The wizard had felled him easily; Dayrne was helpless at that moment. Yet, his foe kept his place behind the altar and his victim.

Then, Dayrne saw fear, not triumph, on his foe's face.

Fighting the pain, he crawled back toward the entrance. With each retreating step the pressure on his heart lessened. He leaned on the jamb and slowly pulled himself to his feet, gasping for one good breath.

The wizard lowered his blades. A fine sweat sheened on his brow, and the glow of the oil lamps lent him a strange countenance.

Still, the fear was unmistakable; Dayrne saw it in those dark, deep-set eyes.

The prostitute cried piteously. "Help me!" she begged Dayrne. "Don't let him kill me, I'm with child!"

Dayrne stayed by the door. He needed a moment to recover his strength and to think. For all the wizard's apparent power, he feared Dayrne. Why?

"Don't just stand there like a worthless eunuch!" the whore shouted when her rescuer didn't move. "He's going to—"

The wizard frowned and touched her temple with one finger. Her head sagged back before she could say another word. Her eyes fluttered shut. She sighed, then went limp.

But almost instantly, her lids snapped open again. She screamed and cowered away from the wizard's hand as far as her bonds allowed.

The wizard roared in frustration, grasped both his blades in his right hand, and seized the woman's hair in his left- He jerked her head up then sharply down on the altar. She let go a short gasp as her eyes rolled and closed. A fine trickle of blood oozed down the cross under her head and dripped to the floor.

"I get so tired of the noise," the wizard said in exasperation.

Dayme leaped across the threshold, but his foe was just as fast. Again the points of the blades touched, and again he shouted in that strange tongue.

Dayme screamed as fire exploded in his chest and a rush of tears half-blinded him. But he kept his feet and flung himself at the altar. Wide-eyed, the wizard sprang back against the wall, clutching the daggers in shivering hands.

"Whatever god has siphoned my power, I've still more than enough for you," the wizard hissed. But his voice quavered.

Dayme sprawled over the altar and over the woman's limp form, his fingers clutching her thighs for support. He sucked for air to relieve his

tortured lungs and tried to fight the weakness that numbed his limbs. He lunged with the point of his sword, but his strength faded too swiftly, and his foe retreated beyond his reach.

The wizard flattened against the wall, and his fear was a tangible force. Then, fear turned to anger as he realized Dayrne's impotence. "All the way from Carronne I came to this miserable dung-hole!" He was still careful to keep his blades touching and pointed at the gladiator. "The tales had reached even that far of the strange affairs transpiring here, stories of gods and demons and dead souls that walked the streets.

Clearly, there was power here for the taking, and who deserved it more than I? So I came disguised as one of the laborers who build your walls."

Dayrne hissed through his teeth, barely able to form words. "Human sacrifice? Never in our empire—not even in this rotten town!" He tried to glance over his shoulder, wondering if he could make it back to the safety of the entrance where the wizard's spell didn't reach. But he knew that was useless. It was a struggle even to raise up on one elbow and look his foe in the eye.

"The sacrifices are to placate whatever god has stolen my magic!" The wizard dared to come closer. "In Carronne I was a hazard-class magician—curse the fate that brought me here! My simplest spells go completely awry. All those stories of power—there must be some secret!"

"No secret," Dayme managed. "Go back to Carronne." He dragged one foot, then the other, under himself and tried to stand. It was useless.

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His heart hammered against his ribs; the room spun crazily. The wizard's face swam out of focus. "Tasfalen's,"—he fought to get the words out—"magic burned out!"

But the wizard didn't hear or didn't understand. "I'll find the god who has cursed me and broken my skill and offer blood to appease him, until I'm strong again—strong enough to break your secret and seize the magic that pervades this city!"

Another voice called suddenly from the entrance. "It's always good to have dreams." Dayme recognized it immediately and turned to shout a warning. All he managed to do was fall. Daphne didn't spare him a glance. "Have a long one in your death sleep." Her dagger flashed across the space.

The wizard cried out and bounced against the wall, clutching his shoulder. When he straightened, Daphne's blade protruded near his collar bone. A wet stain blossomed rapidly on his dark garment. Still, he managed to lift his own daggers and slam the points together and breathe his Word of Power.

Dayme thought his heart would burst. From the corner of his eye he saw Daphne double over as she stepped across the threshold with drawn sword. The weapon tumbled from her grip-

But then, impossibly, she began to laugh. She straightened, threw back her head and let the mirth flow from her lips. She looked around for her sword, but as she bent to retrieve it she tripped on her own foot and fell, only to clamber up again laughing.

Dayme felt it, too- The hand that squeezed his heart began, instead, to tickle it. His pain turned slowly into renewed energy. Strength flooded his limbs. He chuckled. Then, uncontrollably, he laughed. He looked at the bodies suspended on the walls, at the prostitute bound to the cross, at the astonished expression on the wizard's face.

It was all so funny!

The wizard smashed his daggers together, cursing, and stamped his foot. With a bellow he struck them once more. The blades shattered under the impact, and the pieces fell at his feet. His face paled, and his mouth gaped. Then, gathering his robes about him, he raced from the room and into the tunnel.

Daphne shot out a foot as if to trip him, but he was already gone. She rolled kittenlike onto her back, clutched her stomach and howled.

Moments passed before the twisted spell dissolved. Dayme got to his feet, wiping spittle from his chin. He sheathed his sword and turned to help the princess.

But Daphne rose on her own. "If you breathe a word of this," she threatened, red-faced, "I'll wear your mouth for a garter."

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"Just see to that one," he snapped, pointing to the prostitute on the altar. "Later we'll talk about your following me. I told you this was personal business."

She put a hand on his chest before he could pass her. "You're my business," she answered stubbornly, her gaze hard and glittering. "Good trainers are rare."

He regarded her for an instant, then remembered the wizard. "We'll talk," he said, and he ran into the tunnel.

The echo of fleeing footsteps sounded from the direction of the Promise. Dayme sped after, drawing his blade once again. He quickly passed the final lamp and plunged ahead. The darkness, though, forced him to slow. He put a hand to the wall and hurried as rapidly as he dared, cursing under his breath.

The wizard's footsteps faded. Had he reached the tunnel's end at the shrine of Us? If he had emerged, Dayme knew he might never find him.

His answer came as he spied the shaft of moonlight that lanced the blackness. But strange sounds wafted through the opening, swelling as he approached—shouts and curses, high, frantic voices:

Dayme raced toward the moonlight. It had to be the prostitutes! He took the steps two at a time and ascended into open air.

The women of the Promise surrounded the wizard in a wide ring. He spun in confusion, weakling brandishing Daphne's dagger. It gleamed wetly with his blood. The whores, too, waved daggers, the small weapons they wore in their garters. Still, they didn't know their foe's power!

Dayme tried to warn them. "Asphodel!"

At his shout, the wizard whirled. Their eyes met for an instant. Hatred and anger burned in that furious gaze, and Dayme felt a force reach out for him.

The prostitutes saw their chance. They fell on the wizard, hacking and stabbing with their tiny blades. Arms rose and plunged with frantic outrage and swiftly blackened with the blood of their stalker.

Dayme could only stare as the wizard sank under the onslaught. The women did not stop. They stabbed and stabbed, giving release to all the rage and terror they had lived with the past nights. Then, Asphodel stepped back gasping and wide-eyed, her white dress a stained ruin. Dayme went slowly to her side.

"Who was he?" she asked, barely able to speak as she trembled.

She might have been a spectre that haunted the park the way she looked. Dayme wiped a smear of blood from her cheek and patted back the hair that had fallen around her face. "He came from Carronne," he finally answered. "I never learned his name."

Asphodel sighed and looked over her shoulder. The whores stood

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away from their grisly work. Pieces of the corpse lay hacked and scattered around their feet. The women stared from one to the other with expressions that betrayed confusion in some, fury and vindication in others. One by one they drifted back into the bushes. From somewhere in the foliage came the sound of weeping.

"I guess it doesn't matter," Asphodel said. "One of my ladies found this opening, and we waited to see who came out. I knew it had something to do with my missing ones." She sighed again and peered into the

tunnel's gloom. "They're dead, aren't they, Tiana and all the rest?"

He nodded quietly. "All but the one he took tonight. She's still alive, though somewhat battered."

Daphne chose that moment to emerge from the opening with the prostitute slung over her shoulder. She dumped her burden unceremoniously in the grass.

Dayme frowned and knelt beside the woman. "He didn't hit her that hard. She should have come around by now,"

Daphne spat. "She did. Then, she took a good look at—" the one-time princess, hesitated, looked at Asphodel, and spoke more softly. "She saw her friends and realized how close she'd come to joining them." Daphne shrugged and cocked her head to one side. "She fainted."

Asphodel glanced from Dayme to Daphne and back again. She realized who the princess had meant, and that the younger woman had tried to spare her some horror. Her old eyes misted over, but she blinked back any tears-

"Some of my brothers will bring them up in the morning," Dayme said gently. "There's no need for you to see them the way they are."

"They're family," Asphodel answered. She held up her dagger. With a look of disgust she flung it aside and wiped her hand on her dress. "I'll be here to help."

Dayme started to protest, but Daphne touched his sleeve. "It's her decision," she told him. "You know, personal business." Then, with her usual tact, she pointed to the wizard's remains. "Besides, they don't look any worse than that."

Asphodel walked to the corpse and stared at it for a long moment.

Daphne went with her, bent down and retrieved her dagger from the ground near the wizard's hand. "It's Chenaya's," she informed Dayme.

"She'd be pissed if Host it." Then, she turned away and vanished into the park.

Alone, the old whore turned to Dayme and touched his arm. "Thank you," she said.

"For what?" he answered with a shake of his head. "I didn't do anything."

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It was almost true. With all the blood spilled this night, his was the only clean blade in the park.

Daphne scandalized the palace by arriving, not in a gown, but in an outfit borrowed from Chenaya's closets. She looked as beautiful and deadly, all in soft black leather, gleaming with buckles and ringlets and weapons. Her night-black hair flowed over her shoulders. Pride stiffened her spine; she lifted her chin high as she strode into the Hall of Justice.

Two seats had been placed upon the dais. Kadakithis and Shupansea sat there side by side, looking down upon her. Molin Torchholder stood beside the Beysa, Walegrin by his prince. It was the audience she'd requested and no one else. Her husband simply had no sense of theatrics. But then, he had no sense, period.

She looked up and met his stare as she stopped at the lowest step. His jaw gaped in astonishment. It was the acknowledgment she had sworn to get from him—and it tasted sweet indeed.

"Second thoughts, my husband?" She rested one hand on her hip, taunting him.

His hands fluttered. "You look—" he bit his lip and cast a sidewise glance at Shu-sea. The sentence hung unfinished. The Beysa at that instant looked less like a carp, more like a shark protecting her catch.

Daphne had expected to gloat, to draw out the moment of her triumph, but she found now she had little stomach for that. Better, she

decided, to end this quickly, break her ties with this pathetic little man, and get on with her new life.

"You want a divorce, Kitty-Kat?" She looked at each of the four on the dais and grinned. It's all a game, Chenaya had once told her, everything is a game. Daphne realized the truth of that. These were the master gamers of Sanctuary she faced. "These are my terms."

"List them, Princess, and we'll consider."

Daphne shot Molin a withering look. "Shut up, Torch. This is between Kadakithis and me. You're merely here to witness, and I extend you that courtesy only because I know you're even more eager for these two to wed than they are. I half expect you'll share the marriage bed."

Molin maintained an outward calm, but Daphne knew him better than that. She turned back to her husband.

"First, I want the estate immediately south and adjacent to Land's End. It's abandoned right now, but the way people are flocking to this pisshole these days it's not likely to be so for long." She paused, and her brows narrowed, "I require agreement. None of this is negotiable."

Kadakithis rubbed his thinly bearded chin and glanced at Molin. The

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Torch gave a not-very-subtle nod, and Daphne smiled to herself. Puppet and puppet-master.

"We'll draw up a deed," the prince answered.

"Second term," she continued. "One half of your personal fortune."

Kadakithis rose from his seat. His eyebrows shot upward, and he gripped the arms of his chair to steady himself. "What!"

Daphne clucked her tongue. "Won't it be worth it to get rid of me? Besides, think of all that gold on the Beysib ships. I'm sure your bride will offer a dowry worthy of a man like you."

The prince sank back into his seat. At last, he waved a hand. "All right, damn you! Yes, I'll even agree to that. As you say," he added caustically, "it'll be worth it to be free of you." He glowered down from his high position. "You're not at all the sweet wife you used to be,"

The accusation caught her completely off guard, and she barked a short laugh. To her utter surprise she found within herself a sudden sympathy for Shupansea.

"Third term," she said, regaining control of herself. "I retain all my titles and any property in Ranke that Theron hasn't seized along with the throne."

"Done," Kitty-Kat agreed disinterestedly. "What else?"

She rested a hand on the pommel of her sword and let go a small, inaudible sigh. "There was one more term, originally," she said. She faced Walegrin and waited until he shifted uncomfortably. "I wanted the first knuckle of the little finger of your right hand to wear on a chain about my neck," she told the garrison commander. She watched all their faces as she said it, and she wasn't disappointed by their reactions. "Look at them," she said, addressing him directly. "They'd have given it to me, too."

Molin stepped to the very edge of the platform, but Kadakithis caught his sleeve and pulled him back. "You're insane!" her husband shouted.

"That's right!" she shot back. "You made me insane when you abandoned me to the gentle mercies of Scavengers' Isle!"

Only Shupansea kept a measure other composure. She leaned forward, regarding Daphne with sudden interest. "Why our commander?"

Daphne faced Walegrin again. "You betrayed the Lady Chenaya," she charged, "and let Zip go free after she handed the little bastard over to you. Now, the common people of the city shower her name with praise and beflower her gate while Molin and the powerbrokers of Sanctuary rant and rave about her so-called treachery. Yet, no one speaks of your treachery, Walegrin. You made love to her, then you betrayed her. You helped shape her plan, and you killed piffles right beside the rest of us." She stabbed a finger at the Torch and Kitty-Kat. "Then, on their orders,

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you freed the man who murdered your little niece and gutted your own sister with an ax." She gave him a cold look, finding small reward when he turned away from her gaze. "You've thrown away your honor, Commander. Molin and his cronies may praise you for your obedience and sense of duty. But the common men and women of this town know you now. Look in their eyes the next time you walk the streets. You'll find reflected there nothing but scorn."

She turned to Molin who seemed ready to swoop down on her like the carrion bird he so resembled. "Keep your toy soldier, Torchie. But keep him away from me. He pollutes the air."

"I am curious," Shupansea spoke, leaning forward. "If you wanted our commander's finger, why did you change your mind?"

Daphne allowed a wan smile. "It's nothing any of you will ever grasp," she answered. "But I found true honor in this city last night among some whores in a dirty park, where a group of women struggle every moment of their lives to eke out an existence you and I would die to avoid. For all their misery they take care of each other like a kind of family." She hesitated. "I've found a similar kind of honor at Land's End, but you wouldn't understand that, either. Walegrin can keep* his finger." She cocked her head to one side, recalling her night in the tunnel and an odor that still lingered unpleasantly in her memory. "It would have made a smelly bauble, anyway."

She gave her back to the masterplayers, then, winning her best victory by walking away from the game.

Just beyond the Processional Gate she found Dayme waiting. He'd washed and changed since the morning's training session, and his essence was sweeter than the day, itself. "I thought I'd walk you back," he said.

She grinned up at him. He really was the hugest man she'd ever seen, yet she found in him the most unexpected gentleness. Chenaya was a fool not to love him. Daphne shielded her eyes from the sun as she gazed at his face. The brightness lent a halo to his features.

"How about I buy you a mug, instead," she offered. "You pick the tavern. Make it someplace raunchy."

He frowned. But then, he clapped an arm around her shoulders, and his lips curled upward into the barest smile. "I think I can find a place to make you blush," he said.

"A gold sheboozh," she answered, "that you can't."

THE VISION OF LALO

Diana L. Paxson

Lalo twitched the mask back into position over his nose and mouth and dipped his brush into the gray paint once more. Another three feet of this wretched wall and he could stop for a bit. The brush rasped the coarse canvas, deftly suggesting texture; a touch of black gave it depth, and another stone was finished. From somewhere out front he heard hammering. The opening of the second production of Sanctuary's first and only resident theatre troupe was two days away. The painter wondered if either their rehearsals or his sets would be finished in time.

Lalo stepped back to consider his work and grimaced beneath the mask. Even with shading the canvas looked like a collection of blobs. He supposed that from the audience the flat would create the illusion of

reality. It occurred to him then that if he took off his mask and breathed on those rocks that they would be reality. . . . Was he resisting the temptation because he was not sure the stage would take the weight of the stones, or because he feared that he had lost the power to make them real?

Lalo told himself it was a small price to pay for the return to (relative) normalcy in Sanctuary. Perhaps his son Wedemir and that girl he was courting up at the Palace would be able to raise all of their children in peace. Except when some spell-supported building collapsed as its magic decayed, the debris of the explosion of sorcery that had nearly destroyed Sanctuary had been cleared away- The town was rebuilding. Lalo supposed he should be glad. But the period of escalation in magic had also seen the flowering of his own creativity. He was not sure now which of his talents were magic, and which had been simple craftsmanship. He felt

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half-blinded—

see.

-"head-blind" the mages called it. But he dared not try to

And so he was painting scenery for a production of something called

The Accursed King, which seemed more depressing the more of it he heard.

"We'll take it again from the beginning, then," said Feltheryn over his shoulder as he strode onto the stage- "Two days to opening, dear gods! But at least this piece can offend no one . . .," The repercussions of the troupe's first production were only now beginning to fade in public memory.

Feltheryn the Thespian, the troupe's founder, director and star, took his place before a post that was going to become a tree as soon as the carpenters got around to it, and thumped his staff against the floor. Simpering girlishly, Glisselrand scurried across the stage after him and took his elbow.

"Tell me, my daughter, where have you come to now

With your blind old father? What is this place, my child?"

Feltheryn's stentorian tones rang out with remarkable resonance for a monarch as enfeebled as he was supposed to be.

"It's little I ask, and am well content with less.

Three masters—pain, time, and the royalty in the blood—

Have taught me patience—"

The stage shuddered as something large and heavy hit the floor.

Feltheryn broke off and turned. "Patience!" he roared. "Gods give me patience—I have to work with fools!"

"It was the hoist," came a plaintive voice from backstage. "It wasn't my fault, master—the rope slipped—"

"Lempchin! You misbegotten son of a sheep-swiving Rankan!" He gathered breath, and ominous tones rolled across the stage. "What fell?"

There was a silence, and Lalo bent to gather up the brushes that had been knocked from their stand.

"It was ... the thunder machine."

"Vashanka's rod! Do you know how much that thing cost? A gift from the Prince himself it was, and after everything—" he took a deep breath, then launched into a monologue of sorrows as eloquent as anything in the play.

Lalo found that he had put the brushes back into their case instead of on the stand, and grimaced. How could anyone be expected to paint—even to paint scenery—with this sort of thing going on? Darkness had

fallen an hour ago. Gilla would already be angry with him for being late, but perhaps dinner would not be completely cold. He was hungry and tired. As Feltheryn stormed backstage to survey the damage, Lalo fin-

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ished capping his paints and putting them away, strapped the brush case to his belt, and headed for the door.

"Oh Lalo, are you going already?" Glisselrand called after him. He mumbled something about Gilla and continued up the aisle. "Yes, do give my love to dear Gilla—I'm working on a shawl for her—rose-colored yarn with lemon yellow and a lovely purple from Carronne. . . ." As the door closed behind him Lalo could still hear her describing the color scheme.

He shook his head. The tea cozy had been bad enough. The thought of a shawl large enough to cover Gilla. . . . He shuddered. And Gilla would insist on keeping it! He wondered if he could persuade her to keep it somewhere out of sight. . . . Still contemplating the horror of Glisselrand's sense of color unleashed on something the size of a shawl, he hurried on through the darkness.

Lalo had rounded the corner of the Serpentine and was starting down when he became aware of the footsteps behind him. Close—too close—they must have been waiting in an alley, or perhaps his own abstraction had kept him from hearing them before. Reaching for his knife, he started to turn.

Shadows rushed toward him. Beyond them he glimpsed the mocking grimace of the Vulgar Unicorn on its sign as the door of the tavern opened and light streamed into the road.

"Help! Thieves! Help me!" Lalo knew the futility of his shout even as it left his throat. His knife glinted as he brought it up. He struck something soft, heard a grunt and leaned into the blade. Then a blow numbed his hand and the knife went skittering across the stones. He lifted his useless arm to guard his head. Someone laughed—his attackers, or the men who were coming out of the Unicorn?

This can't be happening now, Lalo thought in confusion as he was knocked against a wall. Not after so many years! Not so close to home—a blade flashed toward his shoulder; he dodged and felt the sting as its tip scored his arm—as if I were a foreigner or a fool!

How could he have been caught this way? Someone grabbed for the case that held his brushes and Lalo struck out, tried to duck as he sensed something falling towards him, but not fast enough, not quite fast—

The shock of the blow stopped the world.

Light and shadow, the hoarse gasps of his assailants and the shouting beyond them all faded as his senses whirled away.

Gilla, I'm sorry—

And then both regret and pain were extinguished as Lalo fell endlessly downward into the dark.

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Darkness . . . a musty smell that makes the nose wrinkle. Limbs stiff from spelled sleep, stretch, lungs draw in stale air. Dust tickles dry nostrils. and Darios wakes fully with a sneeze. Ears strain, but there is only the sound of his own ragged breathing. He sneezes again.

I'm alive! I survived! Even in the darkness, Darios can feel his skin flush with pride. He remembers the panic as the defenses of the Mageguild began to unravel, remembers collapsing walls, and the roar of rioting crowds. They were all running—apprentices and masters as well. Did none of the others remember this vault beneath the stables sealed by potent magics before ever the Nisibisi rose in the North or the Beysib sailed into

Sanctuary's bay? Those magics would last as long as the Mageguild, preserve him in a timeless trance as long as—

—As long as its wards remained intact, until a ranking Hazard came to set him free. . . .

But Darios is alone in the vault, and the doors are still sealed.

He swallows, reaches out and touches cold stone. Exploring fingers find wetness. Water is sliding down the wall from somewhere above. Darios brings his fingers to his mouth, and the moisture enables him to swallow. He takes a deep breath and pronounces a Word ...

But the darkness remains unbroken. For the first time, Darios feels the chill touch of fear.

From the sounds around him it must be morning. Lalo took a deep breath, winced as pain split his skull, and thought better of trying to open his eyes. But it was not the throbbing ache that came from drinking—it had been years since he had felt that particular pain—and already he was remembering swift footsteps and the scuffle in the dark.

I'm still alive! he realized in wonder.

"Are you back with us, then, you foolish man?" asked Gilla. "What were you thinking of, to take that route home at night, alone?"

Anxiety had sharpened her voice, but Lalo smiled. Even her scolding was welcome when he had not expected ever to hear it again.

"You've been luckier than you deserve!" she went on. "Dubro was sure you were dead when he found you with that great gash in your skull."

That was probably true, thought Lalo, remembering the blow, as if Feltheryn's thunder machine had fallen on him. "Sit up now, and I'll give you something to help with the pain."

Biting his lip, Lalo got his elbows under him, and then, very carefully, opened his eyes. But he must have been wrong about the time, for it was quite dark still-

"Open your mouth—"

"Light a lamp first," he answered. "So that I can see the spoon."

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"A lamp? I'll open the shutters wider if you want more light, but why —" Gilla did not finish. There was a moment's silence, then a breath of air brushed his forehead.

"Lalo—" she said tightly. "Why didn't you blink? Didn't you see my hand?"

"No . . ." He turned towards the sound of her voice, straining to see despite the pain that pulsed frantically against the confines of his skull. He reached out, and felt the strong grip of her work-roughened fingers clasp his.

"No. Gilla, I can't see anything at all!"

After that, Lalo supposed he must have become hysterical, tearing at the dressings on his head until agony slammed shut the doors of consciousness again. When he woke once more, his eyes were bandaged. Blind ... he thought, as memory replayed what had happened. Will it go away? What am I going to do?

For a week they waited for his head to heal, hoping that the blindness would go away. The Prince sent his own physician, who examined the wound and clucked solicitously, prattling of evil humours and the aspects of the stars until Gilla booted him out the door. Wedemir came, and came again with the surgeon from the garrison, a man who seemed more knowledgeable, but hardly more encouraging. He could only tell them that he had seen a blow on the head cause blindness on the battlefield. Usually sight returned in a few days.

"But not always?" asked Wedemir. Lalo could hear them whispering in the corner. They did not realize how the loss of one sense focused concentration on those that remained.

"Not always—" the soldier agreed. He did not know why Lalo's sight had been affected, and the only treatment that he could recommend was time. "Are you coming, Wedemir?" The surgeon's voice faded and then grew louder, as if he had reached the doorway and then turned.

"Yes—just a moment—"

Lalo felt the rough grasp of his oldest son's hand.

"Papa, I've got to go back on duty now. I'll be back soon, though, to see you!" The tone was bracing, but Lalo could hear the waver that Wedemir tried to hide.

"Duty, hah! You just want to see Rhian again, I know!" piped up Latilla. "Did you know he's got a girl at the Palace. Papa? A Rankan lady, she is, and very pretty. I saw her when I was visiting Vanda last time."

"She's not my girl—not yet, anyway," Wedemir interrupted. "She was pledged to an apprentice in the Mageguild, and she says she is still

bound . . ."

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"The Mageguild?" said Gilla. "But the ones who survived are scattered throughout the city now, or fled—"

"Don't you think I've tried to tell her?" asked Wedemir. "If her lad were still alive, surely he would have sent her word by now! It has been almost a year since they broke the Globes of Power. If he is still living, he doesn't deserve her!"

"Wedi's got a girrill—Wedi's got a girrill!" Latilla sang, until a squeal and a torrent of giggles told Laio that her brother was tickling her as he used to when they were younger. Lalo tried to imagine what was going on, but he could only remember how they had looked as children, long ago . . . when he could still see ...

Lalo felt his cheeks grow wet with easy tears.

Wedemir accompanied the surgeon back to the barracks, and Vanda went back to her Beysib mistress in the Palace. Glisselrand sent over a crocheted bed-shawl which Lalo was glad he could not see. The household began to settle into a routine.

Lalo dreamed of the paintings that he had never found the time to do and hardly noticed what they fed him, but he heard Alfi and Latilla complaining and realized that Gilla had stopped buying the delicacies the family had become used to. She was shifting back to a style of cooking he remembered only too well—beans and whatever protein was cheapest—poverty cooking. Once more he felt the treacherous tears slide from beneath shut lids.

She does not think I am going to get well . . .

Did he?

During the first week Gilla had been always with him, her sharpness sheathed in uncomplaining, patient care. But that was changing. His wife still made sure he was fed and tended, but now it was Latilla who sat with him, Latilla who cut his meat and set the spoon into his hand.

"What is your mother doing?" Lalo asked one morning—he could tell it was morning because of the freshness in air that would be weighted with all the smells of the city by the advancing day.

"She's gone up to the Palace to visit Vanda," answered his daughter brightly. "Vanda says the Beysib ladies need a lot of sewing done, because of the wedding, you know, and Mother does lovely work—"

Lalo groaned.

"Papa—are you all right? It doesn't matter if Mama's not here—I'm here. Papa, and I'll take care of you! Please, Papa, don't cry!"

He felt the soft touch of her hands smoothing his hair, the coolness as she sponged his tears away.

"I won't leave you!"

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Lalo reached out and found her shoulder and Latilla hugged him fiercely. Her arms were still thin—a child's arms, but her body was beginning to ripen. She was twelve now. Would he ever see her promise of beauty fulfilled?

Gilla is looking/or sewing to do because she does not think I will ever work again—the cold fact of it shook him. Was that why she had drawn away? Lalo wondered if he was seeing what Gilla herself did not yet consciously know. He thought he understood. He had failed her for the last time. Gilla's first responsibility was to her children now. Though Lalo's body still lived, his life, and their marriage, were at an end.

Without meaning to, his grip on Latilla had tightened; she squirmed,

and abruptly he let go. The girl straightened with a sigh and began to prattle about the bird that was perching on the windowsill. Lalo lay back against his pillows, hardly hearing her. Was this the way it was always going to be?

He supposed that Gilla would bear her fate in uncharacteristic silence. But Lalo was consuming resources that should have been used for the children. And Latilla—all she knew now was that she had her father to herself at last. But Lalo could see clearly how her care for him would steal her youth away.

Perhaps he could sit at the corner and ask charity of passersby. . . .

In Sanctuary? As well seek warmth from a beynit, pity from a Stepson, motherly love from Roxane! A bark of bitter laughter brought Latilla back to his side.

"Help me get dressed!" he said with sudden energy. "Without exercise, my legs will be as useless as my eyes' Come, Latilla—I want you to guide me through the town."

Once, long ago, Lalo had observed that the blind might be blessed, because they could not see the squalor of the town. Gods help him, he had thought it funny at the time. Now, holding to Latilla's shoulder, he realized that he should have known it was not true. As they moved

through the town, memory and imagination supplied images to go with the sounds and stench around him, picturing a thousand evils and never knowing which of them he imagined and which were true.

The Maze at night was like that, when danger coiled in every dark alley, and only the glare of a torch could burn the fear away. But all of Lalo's roads led through darkness now.

Slowly they made their way through the conflicting enticements of perfumes and cooked food in the Bazaar, the cacophony of hawkers crying their wares and the babble of not always good-natured chaffering, Lalo's nerves were still twitching as they passed the mournful lowing and the sick stench of cow shit that came from the pens of the Shambles, and

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went on toward the harbor, where a brisk sea breeze did battle with the myriad odors of the town.

Gulls screamed around him as they neared the wharves. Lalo could hear the flap and the flutter as they swept past, squabbling over spilled fish guts. As Latilla led him out along the echoing wooden planks of the pier, he tried not to remember the dazzle of sunlight on waves, the pure beauty of the birds when their wings drew a silent arc across the bright

sky.

In the play, thought Lalo, the king had lost his sight because he insisted on seeing too much—on bringing things better left hidden into the light. Am I being punished/or my vision? Have I been blinded because I dared to look upon the faces of the gods? he wondered then. But Us himself had given that gift to Lalo, and if the gods had wished to chastise him, the past few years had offered them some spectacular opportunities to strike him down.

Or was it because I wept/or lost magic and never thanked the gods/or the blessings that I had? I have nothing now. All my visions must remain imprisoned behind my eyes, and I in this useless body, a burden to those I love!

** "Tilla—Latilla! It is you! Where have you been?" a girl's voice cried.

"Hello, Karis—" there was a pause, and Lalo knew that Latilla must have made some sign that indicated his disability, for the other girl's voice was considerably subdued when she replied.

Lalo's hand touched the splintery, weathered wood of a piling and he guided himself down.

"Are you all right, Papa?"

"Yes—yes—" he forced an answer. "Just a little tired. Let me sit here with my back against the piling for a while. You go on—talk to your friends. I will do well enough here."

For a few moments he could feel her near him- Then her light footsteps grew fainter as she moved across the planks. Soon he heard the ripple of conversation, and a girl's light laughter.

Waves lapped against the base of the piling as a fishing boat came in, timbers creaking, sails flapping as the curve of the land cut off the wind. A man hailed the shore. Lalo felt the pier shake as someone ran forward to catch the line and make it fast. Familiar sounds, all of them—he tried to visualize exactly what the boat would be doing now, how they would take down the sails and warp the craft in to lie snug against the pier. But he could not remember.

He rested his face in his hands- How many times had he come here to think, sometimes in joy, sometimes in despair? Why had he never set his

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mind to really seeing what was going on around him, instead of chasing his own thoughts until he grew tired, or Gilla came to drag him home?

Memory moved back to the time of his greatest agony (until now)

when Enas Yorl's gift had turned to a curse from which he saw no escaping. Lalo remembered how he had gazed into the polluted waters of Sanctuary's harbor. He would have thrown himself into them that day if it had not been for the horrors he saw floating there.

But you cannot see what is in those waters now. . . .

Were the words that came to Lalo's mind his own? Softly, how softly, the wavelets were lapping—they made a hushed, soothing sound, like a lullaby. He turned a little, head tipped toward the water, listening.

Gently rocking, peacefully floating . . . soon the tide would be turning, and all broken and useless things that had been cast into the bay would be carried out to sea. The weight of his head drew him downward . . . moist air cooled the tight skin of his brow. How easy it would be to let himself fall . . . When the dark waters had closed over him it would not matter if he could see.

He let out his breath on a long sigh, not allowing himself to think, wanting only coolness, darkness, rest. . . .

"Papa, Papa! Watch out!" Sharp fingers pulled him upright. For a moment Lalo tensed in resistance. "Papa, were you asleep? You almost fell in!"

Lalo shook his head despairingly. He had been so close! He struggled to his feet and took a step forward, then stopped, confused. Which way was the water?

Latilla's thin arms closed around him. "It's all right. Papa. You're going the right direction—I won't let you fall!"

The water was behind him, then- All he would have to do was turn, and leap—he felt wetness on his hand. Latilla's tears. . . . One leap and it would be over for him, but not for her. The child would have felt guilty even if his death had appeared to be an accident. Latilla thought she had saved him. Lalo could not kill himself before her eyes.

Oh, my little one—he thought, holding her, ;/ only you could set me free. . . .

He let Latilla lead him homeward without even trying to keep track of the way, let her bright chatter flow over him without answering. The house was full of the rich odor of roasting fowl as they came in the door, but even the relief in Gilla's voice as she announced that the Prince had awarded Lalo a pension could not cheer him. He told them that the walk had tired him, and lay down with his face to the wall.

Darios breathes slowly, deeply, trying to control panic with the knowl-

edge that he is not going to exhaust the air in the room. The water that drips down the wall proves the vault is hermetically sealed no longer. That must be why he has awakened—even the magic that made this place is finally beginning to decay.

But not entirely. The spells that hold—and hide—the door are still intact. Darios has worn his fingertips raw, feeling every inch of stone. He has even spent some of his dwindling strength to conjure up a magelight, but the blue flicker shows him the same blank surface his fingers have found. Without some way to replenish his energy he dares not try that again. He will not die of thirst or suffocation, but without food, how long can he survive? If he uses no energy, and stills his bodily processes in trance, Darios can extend his existence. Buy why? Why, if he is bound to starve to death in the end?

If only he could remember the Sigil on the outside of the door!

That night, he had thought only of getting into the vault—he had been sure that his master was just behind him. . . .

Darios takes a deep, shuddering breath and forces himself to stillness again. Are all the wizards in Sanctuary dead? He tries to use his inner vision, but he has not received the proper initiations to walk the Wizards' road. All that comes to him is the face of Rhian, gray eyes clear as rainwater, auburn hair taking fire from the setting sun. . . .

Am I being punished for deceiving her? Darios wonders. It was only a little magic, a small glamor to make her look at me! He was a student, and he looked like one—a little round in the shoulders from hunching over a desk, and in the belly, too, though he supposed his gut was growing concave by now. Pale from long hours indoors, how could he compete with the hard-muscled, bronzed men of the Palace guard? But he had skills a soldier never dreamed of, and it had only been a small spell to make him look taller, to broaden his shoulders, to give his dark eyes a mystic gleam.

And it had worked! Rhian had given him her love!

Oh my sweet girl! His heart cries. Where are you now? Did you survive, do you remember me? The brightness of her eyes holds his fear at bay. Still clinging to that image, Darios forces himself back into the half-sleep that will preserve him another day.

"Papa—I've brought Rhian to see you—"

Wedemir's voice, brittle with that conscious cheerfulness with which everyone spoke to Lalo these days. Did they think he could not hear? He heard the rustle of silken skirts and turned his head toward the sound. What did she look like, this girl with whom his eldest had fallen in love?

"I'm glad to meet you."

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Her voice was subdued. Lalo wondered if she were embarrassed because of his blindness, or whether she had her own sorrows? Even the privileged ones at the Palace had reasons to grieve, these past years.

"You are in service with the Beysa?" he asked. He wanted to hear her speak again. Silk whispered as if she had shrugged.

"The Prince wants to build understanding between our people and hers. I was glad to be offered the position. My father brought his family here when the Prince was made Governor, but my parents had gone back to Ranke on a visit when the Emperor . . . fell."

Lalo thought she sounded more wistful than bitter. Her voice had a spicy warmth to it. What kind of face would go with those tones? Drifting, he visualized cleanly modeled features, bright eyes, and hair of some warm color—something like cinnamon, perhaps.

He could hear Wedemir talking to his mother in the other room.

"They tell me that my son is courting you," Lalo said then. There was a pause, as if Rhian had looked around to see who else was there.

"Wedemir is a good man," she said slowly, "but—" Suddenly it

seemed to him that her Rankan accent was very clear.

"But he is Ilsigi, and a commoner!" Lalo fought to subdue a bitterness he thought he had forgotten.

"Oh, it is not that!" Rhian said quickly. "What does all that matter, now? But before I met Wedemir, I had given my word—"

"To a mageling—" Lalo remembered now. "Wedemir was telling me. Did you love him so much, then?" He stopped, wondering why he dared question her so sharply. Was it perhaps just because he could not see her? And was she answering so freely because she did not fear to read condemnation in his eyes?

Rhian sighed. "Wedemir is very warm and alive. When I am with him, I feel safe. I know that I am loved. But I gave Darios my word."

"Death cancels such pledges," said Lalo.

"Darios is not dead."

"She keeps on saying that!"

Lalo started, realizing that Wedemir had come in from the other room.

"Rhian, if he is not dead, he has deserted you! You owe him nothing either way!"

"I can feel his presence! If he is dead, then his spirit is haunting me!"

Her tone had sharpened, and Lalo's sense of her presence grew clearer.

She was turning from him to Wedemir, her gaze more luminous, as if her eyes had filled with tears. Or was it only the pain in her voice that made him think so?

"In my dreams I see him, Wedemir - . . . Darios is trapped in darkness, and he cannot get free!"

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Trapped in darkness! thought Lalo. Like me! Like me! For a moment a terror that was not his own washed through him. But he could hear voices, feel the sun on his face and breathe in the wind. It occurred to him for the first time since he had been blinded that there were worse fates than his own.

"He is not dead yet," Rhian continued. "But he is dying. He has been buried alive, and if I can't find him, he will starve to death in the dark. He has lost hope, but still he thinks of me. . . ."

Again, the sense of panic washed through Lalo's awareness, as if what the girl was feeling had somehow been transmitted directly from her to him.

"But where?" exclaimed Wedemir, humoring her. "Most of the wreckage from the riots has been cleared away."

"Not all of it—" said Rhian slowly. "No one has dared to touch the parts of the Mageguild that fell down. That's where Darios was living. What if he sought shelter in the cellars and was trapped there? The possibility comes between me and sleep!"

"Well that's easily checked out!" Wedemir laughed. "I'll get a permit from the Palace to excavate, go down there with a fe^ of the lads and some picks and shovels and dig the nibble out. We'll lay your ghost for you, Rhian.*"

Lalo could feel the sudden hostility between them. He understood Wedemir's reaction—he was fighting for his love. But beneath her Rankan elegance this woman was the true steel. The boy would ruin his chances with her if he went on this way, no matter what the diggers found. Why couldn't Wedemir see that? Lalo felt himself straining, as if a look could silence his son. But he knew that he was seeing through both of them, seeking, like Darios, to pierce the dark.

Darios knows when he is dreaming, because in his dreams, he can see. But when he opens his eyes into darkness, he is afraid. He is going to die. . . . Why does he keep trying to keep his body going when there can only be one end? He will go through the only door that will open for him now, and hope the gods will forgive him all the petty deceptions and angers of a

student mage.

I have done nothing really bad, he tells himself. Nor anything particularly good, either, his thought goes on. But he has done one thing for which the Judge might indeed condemn him, though he supposes that hardly a man in the Mageguild or out of it would care. He has deceived a woman in order to compel her love.

Was that evil? He asks himself. What would that deception do to me—to us—if I were to live? He thinks of Rhian's bright beauty, and knows

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that his own falsehood would stain it for him, in time. As outer vision is denied, his inner awareness becomes clearer, showing him a future in which one deception leads to another, until he hates Rhian's truth for showing him his own deficiency—until he hates, and at last destroys, the clear gaze that would prevent him from seeing himself as he has made her see him.

Is this knowledge why he is suffering? But now Darios knows his sin. Surely he has been punished enough. Once more. he tried to remember the SigH on the door, the pattern which he must trace in order to be free. . . .

But he cannot see it!

And there is no use in praying for rescue. Darios remembers only too well how the Spell that seals the vault is set to respond if anyone tries to open it by physical means. . . .

Lalo knew that he must be dreaming, because he could see. He dreamed with a clarity of vision that had never been his in waking life, or even in sleep, before his sight was taken away. In his dreams, he ranged through Sanctuary at will, invisible, invulnerable, as if all the energy that had no outlet by day was fueling his nocturnal wanderings—nocturnal in their beginnings, though once he had begun his dreaming, Lalo might find himself moving through night or day, through scenes from the past, or sometimes among people and events whom his waking mind would not have recognized. But he had never tried to bring these visions into waking memory. The contrast would have been too cruel.

It was morning now. The clear light glowed in the faces of the young, who woke wondering what the new day would bring, and revealed without pity every line and shadow in those of their elders, who knew only too well. Still, there was a welcome freshness in the air, and the sunlight gleamed cheerfully from the temple domes. For a moment Lalo thought that he had gone back to his own youth, when the great caravans used to bring the town a rough prosperity. But as he looked more closely he saw the mended cracks the new gilding tried to hide, and turning a corner, recognized the jagged outlines of the Mageguild. This was the present

then, or perhaps the future, for the City walls beyond it were perceptibly higher than he remembered them.

For such an early hour, the place seemed very active. . . . Lalo moved closer, and saw a familiar curly head—his own son Wedemir, with a crowd of his friends from the garrison, big, bronzed men, who laughed and traded good-natured obscenities. But they were carrying picks, not pikes, and instead of swords they swung shovels. Wedemir was trying, with indifferent success, to get them organized. A short distance away Lalo saw his daughter Vanda, and with her another girl whose auburn

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hair glinted beneath her veil. Rhian— suddenly Lalo was certain who this must be. But how had he known?

He moved toward them, calling a greeting, but they looked through him, no more able to see his spirit than he had seen their bodies when they visited him.

Sight and vision are not necessarily the same. . . . The awareness came to Lalo like the answer to some long-debated question ... He was on the edge of understanding when a shout distracted him. The soldiers were attacking the rubble at the edge of the Mageguild's great hall. Dust puffed up as the first of the great stones was moved. Wind lent the

moving particles form and substance. Figures for which ordinary humans have no names seemed to hover for a moment above the workers, then the wind swirled them away. Was that a trick of the light, or was Lalo perceiving the elementals that had been bound to those stones?

Sight ... or vision?

That first success had encouraged the diggers. Picks shattered stones into fragments small enough to be carried away. Now they had bared the ground level. Someone shouted, and the men crowded around a rubble-choked depression next to the wall.

"What have they found?" Vanda asked her friend.

"It should be the stairs to the vaults beneath the Mage hall," answered Rhian. "Darios boasted that he knew the way—he should not have told me, I suppose, but he would never believe he did not need to impress me. . . ."

"His indiscretion may save his life," said Vanda. "If they do find him alive, what will you do about Wedemir?"

Rhian shrugged a little and colored. "I don't know. I love them both—can you understand that? I love them in different ways."

Vanda shook her head. "I have never been in love with one man, much

less with two. Perhaps I am the lucky one . . . Oh, look—" she added suddenly, "the men have found a door!"

The digging had continued while the girls were talking. As the last stones were removed, Lalo saw what seemed to be an unbroken slab of stone. A symbol was cut deeply into the smooth surface; Lalo drifted closer to see. It was nothing he knew, but its loops and angles teased at the memory. Had he seen something like it at Enas Yorl's?

But he had no time to study it. Wedemir heaved up his pick and brought it down with all his strength upon the stone.

Violet light blazed from the sigil, then burst outward in a flare that burned sight away. But Lalo heard the sharp crack, the clatter of falling rock and then screaming and the ominous, agonized rumbling of settling stone. His cry mingled with the others', but the rush of displaced air was

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whirling him away. Vision was still darkened, but upon his inner eyelids he saw the Sigil imprinted in lines of fire.

"Wedemir! WedemirF

Anguish tore Lalo's throat. He fought the darkness; his flailing hands

found something soft and solid, he was held, and presently his breathing steadied. An awareness deeper than sight told him who held him. With a shuddering sigh Lalo rested his head on Gilla's ample breast and breathed in the sweet scent of her hair.

"It's all right—I'm here . . . hush, my love—it was only a dream. . . ." Gilla was patting his back as if he had been her child. A coolness in the air told him that it was still nighttime. He could hear the distant barking of a guard dog, and a scream, cut short abruptly, from the direction of the Maze.

"A dream—" he muttered. "Dear gods, I hope so!" He waited for his heartbeat to steady. Images replayed themselves in his awareness—the Sigil, Wedemir's face as the stones crashed down. . . .

"Wedemir said he would excavate the rubble of the Mageguild," he said finally. "When, Gilla—did he say when?"

"I don't really know," she began, and winced as his fingers tightened on her arm. "Tomorrow, perhaps. Does it matter?"

"We've got to stop him, Gilla. If Wedemir tries to break those wardings, he'll be destroyed!"

"What wardings?" He felt her pull away a little to look at him. "The Guildhall is a ruin, Lalo. I've seen it!"

"So have I!"

"Lalo, what are you talking about?" Gilla said sharply.

"In my dream I saw Wedemir digging among those ruins, and I saw him crushed beneath falling stones."

"You are worried about him—well, so am I—" she said carefully. "Ifs part of parenthood. I've had any number of nightmares in which the children were endangered. It was a nightmare, nothing more." Her voice was so reasonable, so soothing. . . .

Lalo shook his head. "Gilla. don't talk to me as if I were one of the children! You're acting as if I'd lost my mind along with my sight! Listen to me, Gilla!"

"What do you mean? I've been treating you the way I always do. I've had to take care of you, of course, but—"

"Have you always secretly despised me, then?" he shouted. "Even in our worst times, you never slept in the other room."

"You were hurt," she began. "You needed to sleep alone—"

"Gilla, my head healed weeks ago! I'm still your husband—I'm still a man, even if I can't see!"

There was a silence. He heard her shaken breathing and fought to control his own. Her flesh was so familiar . . . Lalo knew the luxuriant hills and valleys of her body better than he did his own. But now he felt as if a stranger were lying there.

"Is that the way it seemed to you?" she whispered finally. "I didn't intend it. But you may be right. I was afraid—all I could think about was protecting the children. Oh Lalo, what can I do?"

Lalo was glad that the darkness hid his involuntary grin. Her question had sounded too much like a verse from a bawdy song that he doubted Gilla knew.

"Let me inside your defenses, love," he whispered, touching her cheek with fingers that had grown more sensitive, moving his hand gently downward until it curved around her breast, teasing her nipple until he felt it harden, and she gasped. For this, he did not need to see.

"Please, Gilla, let me come in. . . ."

The air had freshened and the hush of early dawn lay on the town by

the time they were quiet again.

"After so long, you would think there could be no surprises," Gilla murmured drowsily, rolling away from him. "But each time we make the world anew. . . ."

Lalo emerged from the deep well of pure sensation reluctantly. He could view the images of his nightmare with some detachment now, but they retained their clarity.

"Gilla . . . there's been so much strangeness in my life. Do we dare assume there was no truth in what I saw in my dream? Listen—" he went on as she mumbled sleepily. "We never met that girl, Rhian, until after I was blinded, but I can describe her—someone might have told me the color of her hair and eyes, but would they have said that Rhian wears a blue gauze veil with golden scallop shells embroidered on the hem, or that she has a dark brown mole on the back of her right hand?"

"That's true," said Gilla, fully awake at last. "You have described the girl." Her voice sharpened. "But if what you saw was a true vision, then Wedemir is going to die!"

"It may be a possibility only!" Lalo answered more confidently than he felt, holding her until he felt her tension begin to ease. "You must take me to the Mageguild, Gilla, as soon as it's light. We can save our son if I

stop Wedemir from breaking down that door!"

Once, when he was first apprenticed, Darios had broken a flagon in his master's workshop, and screamed and ran as its contents exploded in fire.

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A prompt spell from the senior mage had sent the flames running back upon themselves until all the stuff was consumed, but the master had afflicted Darios for several days with a demon who tormented him with little pricking flames. Now he dreams that the fire is spreading, licking up the heavy draperies, even consuming the stone. The Mageguild is an inferno; the heat blisters his skin, the light blinds him. He writhes and shrieks and wakes to the cold silence of his tomb.

Shuddering, Darios composes himself to trance again. And again the dreams torment him. This time it is a book which he has been forbidden to read. But if he once opens it, he can escape the tyranny of his masters, for their knowledge will be his own. He makes his way into the chamber and sets his hand to the cover. Light spills from within as he lifts it, brilliance explodes as it flies open. Darios strives to force the cover down again, but he does not know the spell. He screams as the world whirls away.

To wake twice from such a nightmare is an evil portent. Darios would try to stay awake, but awake he is aware that he is cold, and hungry, and alone. Guarding himself with all the spells he knows, he seeks stillness once

more. But yet again he dreams, though he struggles against it. This time he is with companions, fellow-students, perhaps, who are on the track of some treasure. They begin to pull down a pile of rocks, laughing and tossing away the stones. He tries to stop them, but soon they come to a slab set into the ground. Something is written there—Darios tries to see it, but the others are in the way. He sees them pulling at it, and then light explodes from the earth, flinging him away. In despair he cries out Rhian's name and awakens, hearing the regular clank of metal striking stone. - . .

Lalo and Gilla reached the Mageguild as the sun was topping the newly gilded dome of the Temple of Us. Wedemir and his friends were already working. Over protest Latilla had been left behind to watch Alfi, but Vanda and Rhian were here, as Lalo had known they would be. From his tone, Wedemir seemed mildly annoyed to see his parents, and more than annoyed when Lalo asked him to stop. Lalo sighed. It had been hard enough to get Gilla to believe him, why should his son listen to a blind old man?

"For Shipri's sweet sake, hear me out!" he exploded finally. "Wedemir, do you remember the Black Unicorn?" There was an uncomfortable silence. Behind him, Lalo could hear two of the soldiers whispering. He supposed that by now even new recruits must have heard the tale of the creature that Lalo had unwittingly created and unleashed upon the town.

"What does that have—" Wedemir began, but Gilla interrupted him.

"You're a grown man now, and so you think you have nothing left to learn?" she said scornfully. "Especially from your parents? You were not

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so proud when your father destroyed that black beast—don't you yet understand that he is not like other men?"

"Father—" Wedemir sounded subdued when he finally replied. "You know why I am doing this. I must have some reason beyond a dream to give up now . . ."

"Rhian is here, isn't she—" said Lalo.

"You might have heard her voice; you might have guessed she would be here."

"You don't believe me? Keep on digging then. When you have cleared away the rubble, you will find a staircase leading down to a stone slab. There is a symbol carved on it, Wedemir. You must believe me then, for if you touch that doorway, you will die!"

"I'll admit there's no normal way you can know what's under there," said his son. "If we find the door we'll stop. Does that content you, Papa? We will stop, but you will have to choose what we do then!" Emotion

trembled in his voice.

That girl, thought Lalo. He won't give her up any more than I would have given up Gilla at his age.

They sat with Rhian and Vanda as they waited. Lalo could hear the sound of the digging, and memory supplied a picture of the scene. He knew it when they reached ground level and uncovered the beginning of the staircase. He knew when they finished digging it out, and found the stone slab.

The men were very quiet as Rhian led him to the doorway. Delicate fingering confirmed that the sigil was the one that he had seen. Lalo's fingertips tingled as he touched it, and he knew that the magic that warded it was still alive.

And in the silence after he took his hand away there was a sound—too faint to be heard above the noise of pick and shovel, or even over normal conversational tone—a distant voice that called, "Stop! For your life's sake, you must not touch the stone!"

"He's alive!" whispered Rhian. From Wedemir came something like a muffled groan. Lalo winced, recognizing that at this moment his son might well have preferred to have been crushed by falling stone. But he had no choice. He bent until his lips were nearly touching the rock and

took a deep breath.

"What must we do to free you?"

"You cannot," came the faint reply. "The vault can only be opened by drawing the sigil, with the proper words, from inside . . ."

"Do you know the words?" Gilla's voice sounded very loud in Lalo's ear,

"I know the spell, but not the Sign," came the answer. "Tray for the

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spirit of Darios, son of Wint, and may the gods bless you for attempting to help me."

Rhian had begun to sob. Lalo bit his lip, thinking. The contours of the sigil were still vivid in his memory. He could have drawn it, but he could not describe it. The peculiar curves and angles of which it was composed followed no normal human logic, could not be explained in human words. Could the puzzle have been unlocked by the Rankan wizard, Randal, or even by Enas Yorl? Lalo wondered. The foundations of the Mageguild had been here before either. They felt old—Ilsigi magic, or perhaps something that had been here even before. . . .

"He knows the words, and you know the Symbol," muttered Gilla.

"Surely there must be some way—" Lalo sighed. He was glad to know that Gilla really believed him. But even if he had been able to see, he and young Darios were still on opposite sides of the door.

"A doorway—it is only a doorway—" she murmured. "But you can go through such things, Lalo. Remember how you took me with you through the image on the card? Can't you do the same thing for the boy with words?"

Frowning, Lalo reached out and felt her clasp his hand. "I suppose . . ." he said slowly. "Wedemir, my son—do you understand why I must try?"

"Yes, Papa," Wedemir said harshly. Better to have it over with now, whatever the outcome might be. If he had not won the girl when Darios's fate was still in doubt, he would never get her while her first love was slowly starving to death beyond this stone!

"Darios, can you hear me?" he said more loudly. "Listen—I know you've been trained to this—listen, and see what I say—"

"I don't understand . . ."

"Just listen!" From habit, Lalo closed his eyes. He had had the S'danzo

card in front of him before, but he remembered each brushstroke vividly.

"Calm down, steady your breathing—you know how. . . . Imagine you are looking at an archway—the arch of a gate big enough to drive a chariot through. Look at the stones. They are pale granite with dark flecks that glint in the sun ... six great stones on each side, and a larger cap, three on each side of the arch, and a trapezoidal keystone. Do you see it, boy?" Lalo saw it clearly in his mind's eye, not a thing of paint and pasteboard now, but a real gateway, solid stone. There was a faint murmur of assent from within.

"Look through the archway now—you see a garden. . . ." Lalo began to describe the sweep of green grass, the roses, the trees. And as he spoke, he himself saw them. He moved forward. "Go through the gateway, Darios—go into the garden . . . - into the garden, . . ."

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Lalo hardly felt Gilla's arms go around him as he left his body behind him and his own words carried him through. It was no shock to find that he could see, for this was only a continuation of his inner vision. He turned, and saw someone coming toward him. It was a tall young man, well formed, though his skin had the pallor of one who spends his days indoors. His curling black hair and beard were as glossy as the coat of one of the Prince's pampered horses, and his dark eyes glowed.

A handsome man, thought Lalo. No wonder Rhian loved him. A mental adjustment to his own dress clothed him in a clean shirt and one of his better coats- He lifted his hand in greeting.

The young man's eyes widened. "Who are you?"

"Lalo the Limner." It seemed such an inadequate answer to offer this young man who stood in the rich robes of his Order, watching him in wonder.

"I've heard of you. But you're not a mage!"

"I'm not sure what I am anymore . . ." Lalo looked around him. If only he could stay here, where it was so beautiful—where he could see. But at least he knew the way here now.

"But unless we do something, you, my son, are going to be dead very soon"

A moment's concentration brought a tablet and stick of charcoal into his hands. The Sigil still blazed in Lalo's memory. He could not have described it, but his arm moved easily in the contorted swirls of the figure, and he felt a swift rush of delight in the sureness with which he drew, recognizing only now how the frustration of being unable to do so

had galled him. Here, he could paint again, even if there was no one to see.

"Can you remember it?" He held the tablet out to the other man.

Darios gazed at it, his eyes going glassy as ingrained disciplines committed the curves and angles to memory.

"I will remember," said Darios grimly. "I never saw it properly. The Sigil was not in the book I found—only the spell. And if I fail," his lips twisted a little. "At least you have shown me the way to an easy passage. My thanks to you, Master Limner, for that." For a moment the two men clasped hands.

They both looked toward the archway that led back to the world's darkness. Lalo straightened, realizing that he was almost as unwilling to return to the prison of his body as Darios was to go back to his tomb. But he could feel the need of those he had left behind him tugging at his awareness.

Together they moved forward.

Then Lalo was shaken in a tumult of darkness through which he heard

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a great voice crying "Be opened", and the Sigil blossomed upon his

vision in lines of white fire. There was a moment of disorientation. Lalo felt strong arms supporting him. He gazed as the Sigil coruscated through all the colors of the spectrum in a blaze of opalescence, and then both Sigil and stone misted away, and a gaunt figure staggered forward and collapsed into his arms.

"Darios!" shrieked Rhian.

But Lalo had not needed that to identify him. Something in his spirit had recognized the essence of the man he held, that wavered like a guttering candle flame. He stared down at matted tangles of black hair, a patch of blue robe whose cloth was of rather poorer quality than the fabric Darios had worn in the Otherworld, and beyond, to a patch of dusty stone. The bent back heaved; bony fingers clutched at Lalo's arms.

"My son, my son, don't weep!" He stroked the dusty locks as if Darios had been his own child indeed. "It worked, lad—you are free—you are free!"

And then Lalo's hand stilled. When he closed his eyes, he saw the glossy hair and tall strength of the man he had met in the Otherworld. But when he opened them, he knew he held a youth who would be no more than his own height even when full-fed. Instead of a verdant garden, he saw the sordid, soiled reality to which he had been born ... he saw every stinking turd and blessed battered stone ... he saw!

Vanda and Rhian were on either side of Darios now.

"Darios—my poor darling! You look like one of your own spirits!"

Rhian drew his arm across her shoulder.

"Starved—" whispered the mageling, "but even before that . . .

wasn't handsome. A spell, Rhian ... to make you think so. Forgive me!"

"You silly boy!" Rhian shook her head. "Do you think it mattered?"

"We'll take you home and let my mother's cooking put some flesh on your bones!" said Vanda, taking his other arm.

Lalo let go, and the two girls supported him as he stumbled toward the stairs. Gilla set Lalo's hand on her shoulder.

"No—" his voice cracked, and he laid his own hand over hers. "I can see my own way now." She started, and her gaze came back from Darios to meet his own.

"Oh! Oh Lalo!" Her arms closed around him, and he felt her tears wet on his neck. He blinked, and looked past her bent head to the stairs.

Darios and the girls had nearly reached the top now. Wedemir was

waiting for them, stiff as a statue, with all his agony blazing in his eyes.

"And what of me?" he asked as they passed him, as tragically as any character in one of Feltheryn's plays. "Rhian, what about me?"

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Rhian turned to face him. "I am taking this man to shelter. Wedemir, not marrying him," she said tartly. "At this moment, I don't know if I want to marry anyone—not him, or you!" She and Vanda helped Darios on, leaving Wedemir staring.

Lalo began to laugh, because of the swift toss of Rhian's bright head, and the look on Wedemir's face—and for sheer simple joy because he had been healed.

"I still love you, lambkin—" Lalo put his arm around Latilla, who sniffed and turned her face away.

"You love Mama better . . ." she mumbled.

Lalo sighed, aware that there was a part of his daughter that wished he were still blind. But it would do no good to tell her so.

"I love Mama differently—but not more than I love you. That's the

way it's supposed to be. Someday you'll find a young man who loves you that way, and you'll have a daughter of your own. You'll see, . . ." He sighed, remembering how he had rejected this kind of reasoning when he was her age.

"Nobody will marry me—I'm ugly!" she whispered then.

"Did the other girls tell you so?" He squeezed her hand. "Listen to me, Latilla—you will be beautiful! This isn't just your father's love talking, sweetling—I see what you will be!" Gently he turned her to face him, and let outer and inner vision merge, seeing the color of Latilla's mouse-fair hair deepen to old gold, the fine bones define the face beneath the translucent skin.

It was becoming easier. When his sight first returned, Lalo had sometimes had to shut his eyes because the confusion of shape and color was too painful. While Darios lay in the next room, eating Gilla's good food and growing back into his body, Lalo had learned to see once more.

But it was different now. He saw the shabby streets of Sanctuary as a man long away looks upon his childhood home. Recovering one kind of vision had given him all of them, for to Lalo, the ordinary light of day was now as wonderful as the clear light of the Otherworld. He had begun to use inner and outer vision equally as he had never done before.

"I could paint what I see in you so that you can see it too—would you

like me to?"

Latilla looked shyly up at him, then away again.

That's the first time I've ever boasted of it, Lalo realized. No, not boasted, but accepted as one of the things that he could do. / am no longer simply Lalo the Limner, he thought. But what am I?

"I ... don't think so. I believe you—" she added swiftly, "but I don't think I should know."

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Lalo nodded, wondering how many girls twice her age would have been so wise.

"You tell me when I get there, will you. Papa? And then, maybe if Darios doesn't marry Rhian he will marry me. Do you think he might?" She broke off suddenly, blushing, and Lalo saw the student mage standing in the door.

"He might—who knows?" he whispered in his daughter's ear. "Run along now and let me find out if he's good enough for you!"

Latilla giggled, jumped to her feet, and still blushing, darted past

Darios through the door. She left silence behind her. Lalo wondered how to break it. At times it seemed to him that he and Darios had shared one resurrection, but there was no reason the younger man should feel the same.

"Come in," he said finally. "How are you feeling? Have you decided what you want to do now?" Darios sat down on the other bench.

"My own master died, and there's not much left of the Mageguild," Darios said slowly. "What I would like is to finish my apprenticeship with you. . . ."

"But I'm not a mage!" exclaimed Lalo.

"Aren't you?" Darios looked up suddenly, and Lalo saw his dark eyes glowing as they had glowed in the Otherworld. "I know the spells, the recipes, the rules. But what use is that these days, when so much of that kind of magic has lost its power? You have more of the spirit of magic in your paintbrush than the whole Mageguild in their wands. Teach me vision, Master Lalo, and I will take care of the spells."

An apprentice! For the first time in years Lalo remembered that the man who had made him a master had not been a painter, but a mage. There was a pattern here, a power that transcended the gods. Again, inner and outer vision blended, and he glimpsed his life laid out before him like one of the great murals in the temples. He blinked, and it disap-

peared—like Latilla, he was not yet ready to see.

But one day . . . one day. . . .

Lalo looked back at Darios, took a deep breath, and held out his hand.

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Dramatis Personae

The Townspeople

ABOHORR—One-thumbed proprietor of the Vulgar Unicorn, now owned by Strick.

SILKY—A barmaid at the Vulgar Unicorn.

AHDIOVIZUN; AHDIOMER VIZ; AHDIO—Proprietor of Sly's Place, a legendary dive within the Maze.

THRODE—An employee at Sly's Place.

CLEYA; JODEERA—The woman Ahdio loves, and who works for him at Sly's Place. Since she is far too beautiful to travel safely through the Maze, Ahdio has arranged for her to be protected by a disguise of ugliness.

OULEH—A doubly endowed denizen of Sly's Place.

AMOLI—Madam of the Lily Garden brothel, a place of ill repute and endless possibilities.

CHOLLANDAR; CHOLLY—A master of glues and rendering.

FELTHERYN THE THESPIAN—Actor, director, and producer of Feltheryn's Players, a small theatrical company which has found a better audience in Sanctuary than in the capital city.

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GUSSELRAND—His wife and partner in all things.

LEMPCHIN—The youngest member of their acting company.

SNEGELRINGE—The romantic actor of the company.

ROUNSNOUF—The company comedian.

HAKIEM—Storyteller and confidant extraordinaire.

HANSE; SHADOWSPAWN—Native thief of Sanctuary, with often surprising friends and connections. He has recently returned from a lengthy stay in the north.

JUBAL—Prematurely aged former gladiator. Once he openly ran Sanctuary's most visible criminal organization, the Hawk masks; now he

works behind the scenes.

SALIMAN—His aide and only friend.

LALO THE LIMNER—A native Sanctuary artist whose paintings are more than they seem.

GILLA—His indomitable wife.

VANDA—their eldest daughter, employed as a companion to Lady Kurrekai at the palace.

WEDEMIR—Their eldest son, a member of Walegrin's guard, in love with Vanda's friend, Rhian.

LATILLA—Their younger daughter, just on the edge of puberty.

ALFI—Their son, a lively nine-year-old.

MORIA—Once one of Jubal's Hawkmarks, then a servant of Ischade. She was physically transformed into a Rankan noblewoman before the magic died, and the transformation endures. She is in hiding with Slilcho.

MYRTIS—Madam of the Aphrodisia House.

STILCHO—Once one of Shade's resurrected minions. He was "cured" of death when magic was purged from Sanctuary.

ZIP—Bitter, young terrorist. Leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Sanctuary (PELS). Now he and his remaining fighters have been designated as officials responsible for peace in the city.

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The S'danzo

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ILLYRA—Half-blood S'danzo seeress with True Sight. Wounded by PELS in the False Plague Riots.

DUBRO—Bazaar blacksmith and husband to Illyra.

TREVYA—A crippled foundling presented to Illyra by Walegrin.

MOONFLOWER—Seeress of considerable talent and greater bulk mistakenly slain by Beysib bodyguards.

MIGNUREAL; MIGNUE—Her daughter, who loved Hanse and went

north with him, but now dwells alone in Firaqa.

JILEEL—Another, younger daughter.

TERETAFF—Moonflower 's husband.

THE TERMAGANT—Oldest of the S'danzo women practicing her craft in Sanctuary.

The Magicians

ILSIGI MAGES:

MARKMOR—A powerful, ambitious, youthful wizard.

MARYPE—His arrogant, yet blundering, apprentice.

RANKAN HAZARDS DWELLING AT THE MAGEGUILD;

RANDAL; WITCHY-EARS—The only mage ever admitted into the Sacred Band of Stepsons or trusted by them. Now a teacher at the Mageguild.

DARIOS—An apprentice accidentally imprisoned in the Mageguild during the False Plague Riots. He was freed by Lalo, from whom he is now learning a different sort of magic. Before his imprisonment he was Rhian's fiance,

THOSE WHO ADHERE TO NO HIERARCHY OR DISCIPLINE BUT THEIR

OWN:

ISCHADE—Necromancer and thief. Her curse is passed to her lov-

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ers, who die from it. Since the diminution of magic in Sanctuary,
she has been in isolation at her house on the White Foal River

STRICK; TORAZELAN STRICK TIF1RAQA—White Mage who has

made Sanctuary his home. He will help anyone who comes to
him, but there is always a Price, sometimes trivial and sometimes
not, for his aid.

AVENESTRA; AVNEH—Strick's increasingly obese assistant.

Visitors in Sanctuary

THE SHEPHERD—A figure of considerable mystery. By his panoply he
might be an Ilsigi warrior—but all such men have been dead for years.

The Rankans living in Sanctuary

CHENAYA; DAUGHTER OF THE SUN—.4 beautiful and powerful young
woman, the prince's cousin, who is fated never to lose a fight. In her

arrogance and innocence she made more enemies in Sanctuary than even fate could handle and has left town until her reputation repairs itself.

DAYRNE—Her companion and trainer.

LEYN, OUIJEN, DISMAS, AND GESTUS—Her friends and gladiators at her father's school.

DAPHNE—Rankan noblewoman and first wife of Prince Kadakithis. Ostensibly sent to safety before the arrival of the Beysib, she was actually kidnapped and sold into slavery on Scavenger's Island, where Chenaya rescued her. She is now divorced from her husband.

PRINCE KADAKITHIS—Charismatic but somewhat naive half-brother of the assassinated Emperor, Abakithis.

LOWAN VIGELES—Half-brother of Molin Torchholder, father of Chenaya. A wealthy aristocrat self-exiled to Sanctuary and hoping to return to the Rankan capital in triumph someday. He operates a gladiator school at his Land's End estate and has built a small, temporary arena there.

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MOLIN TORCHHOLDER; TORCH—Archpriest of Sanctuary's war-god (whichever deity that is at the moment). Architect for the rebuilt walls of

Sanctuary. Supreme bureaucratic administrator of the city.

ROSANDA—His wife. from whom he has been estranged for several years. She lives with Vigeles at the Land's End estate.

RASHAN; THE EYE OF SAVANKALA—Priest and Judge of Savankala.

Highest ranking Rankan in Sanctuary prior to the arrival of the prince;

now allied with Chenaya's disaffected Rankans at Land's End.

RHIAN—A young woman who has taken service with Lady Kurrekai.

STEPSONS; SACRED BANDERS—Members of a mercenary unit loyal to

Tempus. Their years in Sanctuary were among the worst in their history.

Many of them have already left town.

CRITIAS; CRIT—Tempus left him in charge of peacekeeping in

Sanctuary when everyone else left. Also the partner of Straton,

though that pairing has been in disarray for some time now.

STRATON; STRAT; ACE—Partner of Critias. Injured by the PFLS at

the start of the False Plague Riots. He has been Ischade's lover

and, though her curse has not killed him, most of his former

associates count him among Sanctuary's damned.

WALEGRIN—Rankan army officer assigned to the Sanctuary garrison

where his father was slain by the S'danzo many years before. He is now one of three officers responsible for the peace in Sanctuary. He is also Illyra's half-brother.

The Beysib

SHUPANSEA; SHU-SEA—Head of the Beysib exiles in Sanctuary; mortal avatar of the Beysib mother goddess. Lover of Prince. Kadakithis, whom she wishes to marry.

KURREKAI—The Beysa's motherly cousin.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Lynn Asprin

Zaibar bristled and glared angrily as a passerby jostled his back, nearly dumping his lunch off his lap and over the edge of the wharf where he sat. The Hell-Hound's annoyance went unnoticed, however; the pedestrian continued on his way without a backward glance, picking his way through the crowds. Letting his tight-lipped frown soften into a twisted grimace, Zaibar shook his head with an inward sigh.

He'd have to find another place to eat his lunch in the future if he wanted any peace and quiet during his midday break. It used to be that the wharves were nearly deserted during the day between the time that

the fishermen went out with the morning tide and the afternoon when they returned. Now there were trade ships arriving from the Beysib Empire loaded with goods, merchandise as often as not hawked directly from the boats, and the bargain hunters they drew were no different from the noisy, haggling crowds in the Bazaar proper.

Normally, Zaibar avoided tracking, much less participating in, the politics that seemed to thrive in Sanctuary like slime in a stagnant pond, preferring instead the narrow view of a career soldier. By that view, he simply followed his orders without concerning himself with the motivations or machinations of those who issued them. Lately, though, there seemed to be things afoot which affected him directly to a point where he could not purge them from his mind, or avoid speculating on their cause and effect.

One such thing was the town's growing prosperity. Apparently the Beysibs-in-exile who had taken up residence in Sanctuary were approaching some kind of peace or understanding with the powers-that-were in

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their old homeland. In any case, trade was beginning to develop with Sanctuary as the main port. That, coupled with the new construction

(which required constant appraising and reappraising of one's habitual routes through town), was bringing money and jobs into Sanctuary at levels unheard-of when Zaibar first arrived here escorting Prince Kadakithis. Of course, prices on everything from food to women were going through the roof, at a rate that was rapidly outstripping his meager soldier's pay.

Even more noteworthy, however, was what was going on with the Rankan Empire itself, the authority to which the Hell-Hound was ultimately accountable for his actions-

Zaibar had been assigned to Kadakithis, and since that time had received his orders from the local power structure. The chain of command in Sanctuary had become incredibly convoluted over the years, though, with some units answerable only to faceless players in the capital itself, bypassing the prince's authority, and it had all but collapsed completely when Theron murdered his way to the Empire's throne. Now the Empire was in trouble to a degree that it was impossible to ignore, even for those such as Zaibar who would prefer to leave politics to others.

The Hell-Hound shook his head again, remembering with no small measure of disbelief the last briefing he had attended.

The big news of the briefing was that Theron was recalling the Rankan 3rd Commando and the remaining elements of the Stepsons back to the

capital "for reassignment to assist in suppressing the civil disorder within the Empire." Even more surprising to Zaibar was the discussion which followed the announcement.

Rather than working out the details of how to effectively police the city in the face of this sudden loss of manpower, the meeting degenerated into an argument as to whether or not the units in question would comply with the Emperor's orders! Even now, there was little sign of them even going through the motions of preparing to leave.

To a career soldier like Zaibar, this was unthinkable . . . and a far more chilling commentary on the Emperor's fading power than any idle street or barracks gossip. Once this door was open in his mind, countless little observations and oddities flooded through, turning his thoughts and speculations onto paths normally shunned.

He knew it had been some time since a tribute caravan had been sent from Sanctuary to the capital, as there had been no call for guards for such an expedition. Originally he had shrugged this off, thinking that perhaps the Empire had authorized that the extra tax monies be spent on the new construction in town. Now he wondered if the prince had simply

decided to withhold the monies. If Ranke was unable to even collect taxes . . .

This had come to a head when someone in the barracks had speculated that the units being recalled were actually going to return as a tax-collecting force. This was, of course, pooh-poohed by the other soldiers. If that was to be the new assignment, then why not give them their instructions while they were still here rather than having them travel all the way to the capital?

No, every indication was that the Empire itself was in dire straits, and in its desperation was turning its back on Sanctuary . . . cutting it adrift while it tried to muster its strength and forces elsewhere. With the exception of a few isolated households who were conspicuously noisy in their loyalty and preference to all things Rankan, the Empire's influence was all but gone from Sanctuary . . . and the recall of the troops was simply a final, confirming gesture.

It was with no small surprise that Zaibar realized that he no longer thought of the prince ... or himself ... as being Rankan. They had been absorbed into the permanent structure of this strangely addicting town. Sanctuary was their home now, and as much a part of them as they were a part of it. Ranke was just a name, at best annoying when it couldn't be ignored . . . and it was getting easier to ignore it.

Realizing he was dawdling with his thoughts rather than eating or

returning to duty, Zaibar rose and threw the uneaten portion of his lunch into the water. The scraps rippled the steel-grey water which reflected the blanket of clouds above.

Peace and prosperity had come to Sanctuary, the Hell-Hound thought, but it was like the indeterminate cloud cover which hung over the city. Would the sun burn through and bathe the town with warmth and light, or would the clouds thicken and darken into a storm?

A soldier could only watch and wait . . . and adapt.

NIGHT WORK

Andrew Offutt

Hanse believes in very little and perhaps nothing. Therefore he's always ready for anything, particularly the unexpected. It's a trait that has served him well. Because he has to be a pragmatist. Shadowspawn is a pragmatist. —Strick

Wisdom is the ability to believe only what you have to.

—the Eye

Shadowspawn ranged through Sanctuary like a hungry tiger on the prowl.

His real name was Hanse and Hanse was mad. Better put, he was angry, but he was mad, too, in a manner of speaking: mad with anger. Shadowspawn was hardly the first or the last person to be driven into a sort of madness by anger. He had done heroic deeds: he had broken into the manse of that sorcerer and stolen the earring that saved Nadeesh's life and enabled Strick to buy the Vulgar Unicorn from the old physician. And then by all gods, by the will of Injustice Himself—that evil gnomish dwarf who was left hand of ever-fickle Lady Chance—the heroic Hanse had been hit by a stagger spell, punched by three big toughs, drugged, bound, gagged, and popped into a big cloth bag. He had been hauled down to the dock, hauled onto a ship, and dumped into its hold. Destination: slavery, in the Bandaran Isles.

Yet that did not happen. The next time Shadowspawn emerged from the shadowless sack and saw light he was in the murky keep of that most sinister of men, Jubal. Jubal had bought him. True, after some smirking and sneering and taunting Jubal had freed him, but not as an act of decency or in exchange for the pitiful price the crime lord had paid. Oh,

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no. He had named a ridiculous sum, close to sixteen pounds of gold, and Hanse's only choice had been to agree. A ridiculous, monumental sum—five hundred pieces of gold! Ridiculous!

Ole Jubal, Hanse thought, must have been thinking with his nose, not

his brain. And he wants to take over peacekeeping in Sanctuary. Right.
And put me in charge of guarding all the jewelers and shops.

At least Hanse knew now that one of his kidnapers had been Tarkle, whose main occupation was being a bully- And Hanse was just as sure that Tarkle with his brain borrowed from a minnow hadn't acted solely on his own. No, the mage Marype with his pretty silver tresses must have thought up the vengeful plan for the disposal of Hanse/Shadowspawn, a plan that truly did involve a fate worse than death and so was truly wicked, and clever. Marype probably paid Tarkle, too.

Hanse knew four more things, all Musts. He would find Tarkle. He would find Marype. He would have his vengeance. And somehow, somehow he would pay Jubal his damned ridiculous price.

Of course I'm worth //, but that's beside the point.

Shadowspawn ranged through Sanctuary like a hungry tiger on the prowl. And he could not find Tarkle.

Strick gazed across his blue-draped desk at the young woman there. From beneath a great mass of fiery hair that dribbled straggly red bangs over her brows and even eyes like an unkempt hedge, she stared anxiously back.

"I have interesting news for you," he told his visitor, whose name was Taya and whose scarlet mop of hair was a disguise, "from the prince-governor. He is without malice toward you. A small house and a guarantee of funds await you. They are sufficient to set you up in some business venture. You could also use it to leave Sanctuary, if you wish. This is genuine and only truth, Taya. As to my changing your appearance—yes, that is possible, but such a thing is not a matter of a few minutes and the Price may not please you. Meanwhile, you are best advised to go into hiding for a week or so. It is hardly what you're used to, but I'd recommend a room upstairs over the Vulgar Unicorn."

Her eyes had widened when he began, returned to something approaching normal as she took in his words, and now flared wide again. She flounced narrow and shapely shoulders. "That . . . place?!"

The very big man spread his hands in a "why not?" gesture and his eyebrows said the same—he who looked like a swordshnger, a wealthy wizard's bodyguard, perhaps, and who was instead a wealthy wizard who was at the same time friend to prince and thief, Rankan noble and Ilsigi banker, carpenter and smith, whore and orange-pedlar,

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He said, "Who's going to think of looking for you there?"

She swallowed, stared at the close-fitting blue coif or hood without which no one had seen this man; she visibly considered, and at last

nodded. "B-but I wouldn't dare even set foot in that—that . . ."

"Careful, Taya," the spellmaster told her. "I own the place." He mirrored her nod. "The person waiting to see me right now will make the perfect guide, Taya. He will do it for me."

Two people sat in Strick's waiting area below. One, muffled in her costly shawl, was a mildly attractive noblewoman with a ghastly hairy wart erupting from her nose. Yes, Strick could and would deal with that, and be well paid for making her presentable again. The other, from whom she kept herself well clear, was an oldster with a voice out of a gravel pit. It was he that Strick's young assistant, Avenestra, beckoned to rise and follow, and he did, banging his staff as he walked. He was surprised to find someone else in Strick's office, and peered closely at her. Unusually keen of eye—especially at night—he recognized the softly weeping girl there with the white mage. She, meanwhile, glanced up at him and shrank at sight of wrinkled brown hands emerging from an old tan-once-brown robe with its hood all crumpled on his back and around his shoulders. His face was darkly shadowed by a funny feathered hat from some far place, doubtless to hide features ravaged by time and disease and even worse—if anything could be worse than time and disease to a very attractive young woman who had been concubine to the prince-governor from Imperial Ranke. Once-Imperial Ranke.

"Skarth," Strick said, "this is someone who needs to vanish in the

Maze for a while."

The big hat nodded and its big bright yellow feather waggled tiredly.

"She also resembles someone I once was so rude as to bind and gag in a certain bed in a certain large building!"

Taya gasped and looked at him sharply. He had entered with a limp, bearing a staff or cane in one of those dark, aged hands. Now she also saw an overdone black mustache, floppy as the feather and big and droopy as Strick's oversized blond mustache.

"Taya is in disguise. Taya, this man is in disguise. Please, just wait outside for a moment, will you? I need to impress on him the importance of his job in escorting you."

"Uh—oh, oh, all right," Taya said, who was accustomed to being asked to leave someone's presence and wait somewhere or other while more important things happened than a prince's mere bedwarmer, and hardly accustomed to thinking much for herself.

She rose, bulky and silly in yards and yards of S'danzo garb that hardly went with the lavishly proportioned red wig. The white mage's

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pneumatically overweight young assistant/receptionist/fetch-and-carrier smiled at her and showed her along the corridor past that burly man who looked like a swordslinger, a wealthy mage's bodyguard, and was. Like the beyond-plump Avenestra, he wore garments of the color that had already come to be known as Strick blue.

"What'm I supposed to do with that?" the one called Skarth was meanwhile asking Strick. He gestured after Taya, Abruptly losing his limp, he paced with uncommon grace to lean on the back of the chair she had just vacated,

Across his blue-draped desk, the man all in blue told him.

"Uh." A withered old brown hand gestured. "No problem with that. Iffen any of these young jaybirds try to cock their combs at that fair young lass I'll whock 'em with my stick, I will!"

Strick winced. "Next time you consider a disguise that elaborate you might try to gain a lesson or a little advice from Feltheryn."

"Wh—oh, that actor? Not a bad idea, though. What did you find out about Tarkle?"

Strick sighed and looked morose. "Nothing, yet."

In an astonishingly young and vibrant voice for such an oldster, the man called Skarth said succinctly, "Shit."

"Wait." With a smallish smile twitching at his mouth, Strick dropped a small brown and yellow tiger-eye into the brown old hand.

"Glass," Skarth said in instant appraisal, and Strick laughed.

"True. But it's also today's message token. Hand it to Abohor and ask him what you want to know. By tonight either he or Ahdio will know where Tarkle stays."

On the way out of Strick's, Skarth offered the ridiculously disguised girl his hand. She shrank away. She hustled along beside him, while he walked bent, rolling along like a sailor, clonking the hard-packed earth of the streets and "streets" with his staff.

She had one sentence of him as they made their way through a nice calm windless Sanctuary; Taya asked how it was that he was obviously of considerable age and yet his mustache was so black.

"Dye," Skarth said, from the throat. "The only way a S'danzo could have red hair."

Taya clamped her soft and sensuous lips and wasted no more words on

so surly an escort.

When at last they entered the area called the Maze with its noise of yapping dogs and bustling, jostling people amid the odors of cooking and sweat and the ordure of yapping dogs, Taya shrank, bundling into herself

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and her acres of clothing. Someone jostled her hard and she sought Skarth's hand. He jerked it away.

"Clay might come off," he muttered in manner snarly, and led her on, on to that tavern with the laughably obscene sign featuring an impossible animal performing an impossible act upon itself.

Marype, apprentice to the master mage Markmor until the latter's timely demise, stood gazing down at the smallish pile of white ash in the bottom of a bowl of pure silver. The face of Marype was serene, brows up and eyes large and contemplative.

"You had a short and decent life but not too much fun of late, hmm, Marype?" he murmured. "Once I was out of the way you took over this fine palatial home of that slimy krrf-dealer trapped forever in un-life, . . . tricked that doltish slut Amoli into helping you without knowing your master plan . . . only to lose that old leech's earring to that most un-

common of common thieves' Next you showed my training well: actually succeeded in bringing me back to come up with an ingenious vengeance on that thief . . . and yet got us both defeated by a gluemaker with a belly the size of the barrel of beer he must store in it. Demeaned and shamed me in the process . . . and forced me to yield up my secret name to the gluemaker and those other two. In the event you wondered why, why as you felt your self leaving you, Marype; why, why I would take your body and leave you in mine and make sure that this time it is dead without possibility of return - . . well, that was it. To be demeaned and shamed by those three, to know they were laughing at us. Are laughing at us. That, darling apprentice, that I could not and cannot bear."

Looking down at what had been Marype and Markmor, the Marype who was not Marype heaved a mighty sigh. And still he stared down at the ash that had been both he and his apprentice. Nearby a happy little rodent in a golden cage glanced up from its dinner, worked its mouth and whiskers rapidly, and went back to dining. .

"Your first plan was good, boy. The Empire of Ranke has failed and is dying. The battle of those two power-seeking females nearly destroyed this town, and Kadakithis the Rankan was lax and late—is late—in coping. Simple matter to spread poison words and poison thought about him. Simple matter to see his oute wife dead and bring about his complete fall; to take full control of this town! Firaqa is well governed, ruled by wizards . . . why not Sanctuary by a wizard!"

The face of Marype, a not unhandsome one, smiled. He glanced over at the cage of pure gold on another of this large chamber's three worktables. Within was a happy vole—a darkish gray mouse but for its short tail—happily dining on choice foods. In that rodent of necessity reposed the

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soul of the mage Markmor, else he could not have assumed the body of his apprentice. Markmor was long dead, resurrected by Marype only to run afoul of the gluemaker Chollander. Now Marype was dead; now the essential intelligence of Markmor resided in this body. That created anomaly, for a body could not house two souls—and yet without the soul of Marype this one would be impossible to maintain. Markmor had no desire to have the well-made, youthful body he now occupied rot into putrescence about him.

The brain of Markmor guided the body of his apprentice and son of his former chief rival, years ago. Within the body necessarily remained the soul of Marype, and so—the vole. It was a happy vole, mindless, well taken care of, and well guarded in this spell-warded chamber.

"Shadowspawn, that street slime Hanse, is disposed of," Markmor said, pacing over to a mirror to look into the face of Marype and watch its mouth move. "A city cannot be taken without money, and plenty is coming in, thanks to your plan." He smiled, watching Marype smile at

him.

Long ago Markmor had learned to make gold. Good gold; real gold. He was not sure that any other sorcerer had ever succeeded. Yet if he simply created the gold necessary to bring about his ends in Sanctuary, he would need more and more and ever more, for he would have destroyed its precarious economy. No, money must not merely be created but be generated; earned, brought into Sanctuary, to aid the economy rather than harm it. That had been Marype's ingenious plan, for while he had been a stupid boy he had not been ignorant or without cleverness.

The same as Shadowspawn, the master mage thought. And so the rising number of persons missing from Sanctuary. They were not missing. They were merely relocated in the Isles of Bandara, to the considerable profit of Markmor of Sanctuary.

Markmor of Sanctuary strode to the door, slim and young and leggy in black tights and boots under a belted tunic the color of old gold. "Tarkle!"

The hulking fellow appeared, a man beyond homely but looking respectful—ugly both inside and out, Markmor knew, with hair a brown tangle like an overgrown bramble patch fit only to hide a fearful rabbit. But then Markmor also knew without caring that his own new beauty was external only.

Respectful too were Tarkle's manner, and tone, and choice of response:

"Sir?"

"You and your associates will do tonight's work in Downwind, Tarkle."

"Downwind!'"

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"We leave the Maze alone for a while—and who misses anyone in Downwind? After—"

"Nobody."

"That, damn it, was a rhetorical question. Be quiet and listen. After tonight's work in Downwind, return here. But tomorrow it is time you got out of that dingy hole you live in. You will go there and decide what you have that you consider of value, and fetch it here."

"Here?"

Markmor fought his exasperation with this semi-intelligent semihuman, "Yes, here. The room done in greens is yours."

Tarkle's eyes showed joy. "Yes, sir! Oh, I do thank you, sir!"

"I want you close by me, Tarkle."

Immediately Tarkle moved a pace closer.

Markmor took a pace backward and lifted a staying hand. "I don't mean now, you . . ." He broke off and sighed. "Be prepared for a new appearance."

Tarkle looked around as if expecting a new appearance.

The wizard ignored that and wished he knew how to make brains. Or to transfer one from, say, a cat to a human, for instance, thus increasing Tarkle's intelligence severalfold.

"Be prepared for a new appearance," Markmor said in Marype's voice from Marype's mouth while he twitched a lock of Marype's long silver-blond hair. "I am tired of all this hair. Today I cut it off and color it, and I don't want you taking me for someone else when you see me tomorrow"

Tarkle smiled and nodded. "No chance, sir!"

He saw Marype nod, and wave a hand, and a happier Tarkle louted

out.

Markmor secured the door and returned to gaze into the mirror. "That big beast is useful, but his mother must lament the fact that she never had any children. Shadowspawn is disposed of," he repeated in a low, controlled voice Marype had seldom used, "and three more must go. Three who know my secret name. The white wizard they call hero of the people . . . that mail-shirted pretender at Sly's Place, and the gluemaker."

Markmor chuckled and again the plump vole looked up. "Best he go into his own kettle. What a lot of glue he will provide for the good citizens of my city!"

Skarth showed the Vulgar Unicorn's new man the glass tiger-eye.

Shmurt dragged his gaze off Taya, said "What d'you need?" and reached for it.

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Skarth snatched it back. "Can't. I have to show it to Abohorr tonight, to get a message."

"Irregular," Shmurt said. He had been caretaker of an apartment building now mostly rubble, then unemployed, then construction laborer. Only recently had the Vulg's new owner installed him as day man.

"Strick said to tell ye a word," Skarth told him, and dropped his voice so that Shmurt leaned forward across the bar. "Boodoovagoolarunda," Skarth whispered.

Shmurt smiled and shook his head- "Don't know where he gits them words! What d'you need?"

Skarth told him.

"She wants to stay here?"

"Right."

"You sure?"

"Shmurt . . ."

Shmurt nodded hurriedly, raising both hands in a fending gesture, and soon they had Taya installed, happily or un-, in one of the rooms upstairs over the tavern.

"Classiest roomer this place ever had," Shmurt said as he and Skarth came back down. "Don't believe I know you. Live close by?"

"Name's Skarth. You've seen me often enough. I live over on Red Court. Sure ye don't know me?"

"Can't say that I do, Skarth. Sorry'f I should."

Skarth chuckled and ordered a small pail of beer. While Shmurt saw to that, the old man glanced in surprise at an unlikely pairing in a dim back comer of the main room of the already dim dive. There where eyes less keen might have missed them sat Furtwan Coinpinch, changer and sometimes pusher, and Menostric called the Misadept, the cheapest mage in town. Well, the least expensive, anyhow.

"Watch those two, Shmurt," Skarth said, his staff banging the floor as he headed for the door. "They could steal your eyeballs and ye'd not notice till ye tried looking for 'em!"

The two men in back looked up. "What in the fart was that?" Furtwan demanded.

"Skarth," Shmurt called. "Don't you know ole Skarth?"

Then he returned his gaze to the empty doorway, trying to fathom who in the fart Skarth was and why he seemed almost familiar.

Ole Skarth was making his way up the street and into the market area, his staff bang-banging rather than tap-tapping. So many people thronged here that it felt a lot warmer. Business was brisk these days, what with all

the employment available to anyone who could dig, cut stone, lift stone, carry stone, mix or carry or spread mortar, or swing a hammer or pick or

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sledgehammer. He saw Hummy and her daughter buying meat, real meat, and he was glad; that meant Hummy's husband had gotten on with the many others working in construction; the rebuilding of a better, handsomer, safer, and prettier Sanctuary, according to the official documents tacked up here and there for everyone to read or pretend to read, after nature and two viciously maniacal women and some dyspeptic gods and those outlanders of Tempus's and what some referred to as Nature had done their best to make this old city only a rubble-strewn memory. There was Lambkin buying food for her brothers and father, too, which meant that the latter was no longer taking odd jobs but "workin' regular" in the current popular phrasing, at some aspect of construction.

Skarth bang-banged his way among them and the noise of their comments and dickering, trying to remember to stay bowed and to lurch, when a voice sliced right through all the others:

"Hanse!"

Skarth didn't think fast enough, and did the worst thing possible: he froze and started to turn. He arrested the movement, but knew it was too late. The point was, the voice was an impossibility: Mignureal's. After so

many years of noticing each other more than somewhat and then living together up in Firaqa, he and she had agreed to irreconcilable differences. Besides, she had good work and was happy. She remained in Firaqa. Even though this and that had happened along the way so that he had hardly come directly back down to Sanctuary, he knew perfectly well that Mignue could not be in Sanctuary.

The voice sounded like hers just the same, and startled him enough so that he responded and gave himself away. Now he stayed bent while he turned the rest of the way around. He saw her, and sighed. Yes, she sounded like Mignue all right; and with reason. He was gazing at her younger sister, Jileel, the one who used to peep at him around her mother's voluminous skirts and who now was nearly five feet tall and looked at him steady on from large eyes made even larger and lovelier by kohl, and who appeared to have bought two good melons and stuffed them down her blouse.

His roving gaze showed him that no one seemed to be paying attention, and he lifted a finger to his lips. At the same time he shook his head slightly and moved toward her.

"Shh, I'm supposed to be disguised. How'd you know?"

"Oh, I'd always recognize you, Hanse," she told him almost breathlessly, as if he were unmistakably and indisputably just the best-looking

thing in the hemisphere. He stood beside her now, head bent so that the big feathered hat from Firaqa shaded the movement of his lips.

"Why are you disguised, Hanse?"

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"Stop saying that." He glanced around. "I'm Skarth, girl, Skarth. Some people bagged me and sold me to slavers. I should be 'way out at sea right now, in the scummy hold of a scummy ship. They don't know I got away. I don't want them to know until I'm ready. Right now I'm trying to find out where the main one lives."

"Oh. Oh, Han—Skarth, how awful!" Her hand rushed to her heart in a girlish way and when it banged her chest he'd have sworn it bounced.

"You were al-almost, you were aimo—oh, oh!"

He rolled his eyes for no one's benefit but his own and nodded. "Right. It hurt, and cost me a lot of time and trouble. Worse, I owe a certain grasping snake a fat favor and a lot of gold."

"Gold!"

Again Hanse rolled his eyes. He had to get away from here, from her.

"You know what they call me?"

She nodded with some pride and an after-all-I'm-not-just-a-child attitude. "Of course. Shad—"

He interrupted quickly. "Right. Well, watch that shadow right over there and you'll know why."

She turned her head and partly her body to look in the direction he indicated, and Hanse took a sideward step and a backward one, grunted when he backed into someone's fat bottom, turned, and hurried down a narrow street. More walking and a few turns brought him to Red Court, where he did indeed live, in a decent second-floor room equipped with a huge old wagon wheel of solid wood. By the time he had opened the door he had straightened up and stepped into the room with his normal gait, a smooth gliding pace that jarred no part of his body.

An emphatically red cat of improbable size greeted him with an emphatic and distinctly accusatory noise. Somehow the animal's eyes looked accusing, too. Then its nose twitched a few times and its entire demeanor changed to one of loving cajolery while its emerald gaze fixed in a stare on the small pail its man carried. It banged its sinuous body constantly against its human's legs while Hanse moved to the little kitchen area and poured beer into an orange bowl that was larger than anyone would expect to be a cat's.

"Sorry I had to leave you so long, Notable," he was saying, "but

Skarth can't be seen with that big red monster too many people already know is Shadowspawn's shadow. Here you—dammit, Notable, ease up, you'll spill the beer and me too!"

He had to hold the bowl up while he squatted to restrain the cat long enough to get the bowlful of beer on the floor with the other hand. That operation was no simple one; Notable was large, heavy, and squirming

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like a barrel of worms. Released, he attacked the beer like an army of thirsty horses finding an oasis after days on the desert.

Hanse, called Shadowspawn and more recently Skarth, stepped back and away, paused to set his sense of direction, and thrust his left hand up his right sleeve. That hand whipped up and back just past his ear as he spun. The arm snapped forward and a long flat piece of steel appeared with a thunk in the wagon wheel set up against the far wall. Getting the thing up here had not been easy, but it was perfect, a solid wheel of wood joined by wooden pegs, not nails. He had removed the iron rim. Now the wheel showed numerous holes and gouges, the marks of throwing practice with hiltless, guardless knives and stars. The hub was particularly chewed up, while the wall above and around the target was unmarked.

"Damn. I was so concerned with getting beer for you and trying to be a limpy old man I forgot to buy anything to eat. Anything here or have you eaten it all? A couple of big rats haven't come in and emptied the larder, have they?"

Notable glanced up from his bowl, whiskers dripping, and gave Hanse a cold stare.

All in blue as ever, Strick sat alone. Before him on his blue-draped desk rested a small box and, on a scrap of parchment, several strands of human hair. Hair and casket had come to him from the hands of Shadowspawn, who had them from the privy chambers of Marype the mage. The hair was the puzzler; to a man of Strick's talents its aura was distinctly that of Markmor, and yet it was not brown or gray, but silver-blond. Both Avenestra and his own examinations assured him that these hairs had not been dyed. The hair was Marype's. The . . . owner seemed to be Markmor.

"Impossible," the spellmaster muttered. "I saw him that night with Marype in Ahdio's back room. He was alive, talking, snarling at his apprentice and even told us all three his secret name—a valuable gift, if he'd been alive. But both of us sensed that he was not, not really. Marype had given him temporary life. Yet this is not dead hair. That is, it didn't come from a corpse; a revenant. It's Marype's. And Markmor's . . ."

From pale blue eyes he regarded the wall opposite without seeing it-
His fingers moved over the strands they held, moved and moved while he
contemplated. Since his arrival in Sanctuary he had made it his business
to learn and learn, about the city and its denizens both present and past.
Markmor had preceded him, and been one of the most powerful and
dangerous wizards in this sad city just before the arrival of the Rankan
governor. Markmor had been beyond competent, and everything Strick

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had learned indicated that his apprentice had not come close to learning
all the master knew, or approaching his talents.

Strick's big orange-yellow mustache writhed as his lips began to move.
Almost inaudible words emerged. It was a practice that aided thinking,
of gathering facts and matching them, piecing them together into hypoth-
eses and conclusions. Or maybe it was just a habit.

"For some reason Marype brought Markmor back. I know that; Ahdio
and Cholly and I saw them both together, and Marype wasn't pulling
strings. What does this tell me? That they are one?"

He shook his head. "No."

He stared longer at nothing, and abruptly those almost watery-pale eyes blinked and came alive. "Unless Markmor has taken the body of his aide! Oh, what a monster that would be; another Corstic to waste a young man's youth! But worse—not to destroy his body but to seize it, to use it ... By the Flame Itself, this is a very, very bad man and this poor staggering town cannot afford another such!"

After a time he heaved a sigh from the barrel chest any fighting man would have been happy to gain. Now Strick of Firaqa was torn. His burden, the Price he had paid for his powers, was twofold. One part of that Price was forever hidden beneath the flapped skullcap he wore, always. The second part was that Strick cared, cared, because he must. He had to. He must help people, not harm them. That meant he wove the spells that people called white magic, and that only.

"But . . . isn't harming Marype/Markmor helping people? Does it serve good to—try to; maybe with Ahdio's help—to try to send an anti-sorcerous spell on Marype/Markmor?"

In blue skullcap and tunic over blue tights as ever, Torazelan Strick ti Firaqa sat alone, and fought himself.

"That you in there, Hanse?"

"Thanks for keeping your voice down, Aboherr. You know—you must

have less belly than any bartender in this town or any other!"

"I'm startin' to put it on again," the man behind the Vulgar Unicorn's bar told him. "This work is ail standin', but hardly the work carpenterin' is. I'm a lot happier, too. You? Is that a disguise?"

Abohorr couldn't see the roll of dark, dark eyes within the deep shadow of the large hat. "Must be. Here." A wrinkly brown hand stretched out to leave an imitation gemstone in Abohorr's thumbless one.

He squinted at it. "Some of your skin seems t'be flakin* off, uh, Skarth."

"Damned clay! Strick asked you to find out where somebody lives. That says he wants you to tell me."

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Abohorr nodded, but didn't look happy. "I understand. But I haven't found out. That fellow hasn't been in and my casual tries to find out anything about him got me nothin'. I'm sorry, Hanse."

"Damn. Not as sorry as I am." He glanced around and paused to watch the girlish woman moving among the tables delivering cups and bowls and collecting coins. "Silky looks good. Odd; she's wearing more'n I ever saw on her! She working out all right, Ab?"

"She's all right. Most customers leave her pretty much alone. Ah, she don't mind a pat on the butt now and agin, but she does hate t'be pinched. Broke a good jar over Harmy's head a few nights ago when he pinched 'er. Drenched 'im with beer and stretched him right out on the floor, she did! So she made an announcement—sure can be loud when she's of a mind to!—an' I did, and the boss sent over that sign."

Abohorr jerked his head at the wall behind him. Hanse looked, and sighed.

PINCHING HURTS. PINCH AND
YOU'LL GET HURT WORSE.
GUARANTEED.

—The Management

"Ab."

"Hmm?"

"What's it say?"

Abohorr reared his elbows up off the counter and turned to gaze at the sign. "Pinchin' hurts," he enunciated slowly. "Pinch and you get hurt

worser. Somethin'—I guess that word is 'signed'—the Management." He turned back to Hanse, who had made a chuckly sound. "That's Strick. An' me, I guess. I got to ask him ... do I call myself manager?"

The large hat with the large droopy feather wagged. "Better ask him. Seen Gralis, Ab?"

"You ain't heard? He tried to mug the wrong man. Him and several others—but I hear Gralis swears he was by hisself. Anyhow he got his collarbone broke."

"Damn. I wanted to ask him to help me with something." Hanse thumped the bar with a wrinkly brown hand. "Got to go, Abohorr. Thanks. Pinch Silky for me."

Abohorr stared down at a flake of brown wrinkle on his counter, then lifted his eyes to watch Skarth depart, banging that staff on the floor all the way to the door. With a wag of his head the new One-Thumb picked up his bar cloth to wipe away evidence of Skarth's apparent leprosy.

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The two youths accosted the old cripp just as he was about to emerge from an alley onto the Serpentine. Teeth flashed as they grinned at the silly oldster who had to lean on a staff but still walked with a rolling limp.

"Nice hat you got there, citizen!"

"I'll have that feather, paw-paw. You don' need it."

"This here hat is all I got in the world that I love," an old voice quavered from under the outsize headgear, "an* it ain't for sale. You two nice boys just git along now."

They laughed. "Who said anythin' about buyin'," the leftward one said, moving in.

"Got a shock for you, citizen," the other said, with a chuckle that more resembled a giggle. "We ain't nice boys." He was moving in.

"Well, y'oughtta be! Look atche—Synab's boy Hakky an' you're Saz's little brother Ahaz, ain'tche?"

The youths paused to exchange a glance. "He knows us!" Ahaz whispered, high-voiced.

"Shu'up," Hakky told him. "So we have to leave some work for Cholly the gluemaker, then."

Each took a deep breath, fixed his gaze on the crippled man under the

big hat, and again started toward him. Hakky's knife was in his hand.

Their quarry underwent a miraculous cure, but rather than straighten up he remained stooped. Neither accoster recognized it as a combative crouch until he shoved his staff between Hakky's legs and jerked it up hard, and even while Hakky was sucking in an audible, high-voiced gasp of pain, the quarry danced back and gave Ahaz such a crack in the side of his shin that the youth squealed and went down. After bouncing off the alley's right wall.

When they got their groaning selves together after a minute or so, their intended prey had vanished, seemingly into the shadows.

"Damned old faker!" Ahaz whimpered. "What a mean trick! And us just boys, too!"

That was when Hakky kicked him in his other leg.

And cried out at the pain his violent movement sent sizzling into his bruised and swelling genitals.

A few minutes later the damned old faker used his staff to poke aside several of the thirty-one dangling strands of Syrese rope hanging before the entry to that low dive called Sly's Place. He step-clonked in, glanced around at a fine big crowd of drinkers and babblers, and step-clonked down the single step into the noisy, odoriferous main room.

Ouleh the man-killer sat on someone's leg, her Ouleh-stuffed blouse

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cut down to here, while a homely woman in a long heavy-looking skin waited tables and a gimp-legged youth bore pottery back to the counter, where a very large man in a linked-chain mail coat was laying a big pickled sausage on a little tray between two bowls of beer. Ever moving, watching his place and his help and his patrons, his eyes did not miss the advent of the gimped old fellow in the wild hat. Besides, he was making enough noise with that outsize staff of his on the floor of oiled wood to make a god cover his ears.

He step-clonked his way to the counter.

"Are you Ahdio?"

The mailed man grinned. "Uh-huh. What do you want me to call you tonight—Notable?"

Under the hat a black mustache moved, but was too full to allow teeth to flash in a rueful smile. "You know everything, don't you? You really a sorcerer, Ahdio?"

Ahdio set a hamlike hand to his chain-scintillant chest and took on a sweet and innocent look—as much of one as that slab of face was capable. "Me? Are you a member of the Hell-Hounds?"

Under the hat, Hanse snorted. "Call me Skarth. I live in the Maze. You've known me for years. Draw me a beer and I'll leave it for Sweet-boy."

"Nice of you," Ahdio said, moving for the beer, "but that cat hit a rat like a lightning strike this afternoon and ate everything but the viscera and the contents of its bowels. He always leaves those for me. Catsl Anyhow he's been sleeping it off for hours and probably couldn't even be bothered to stick his tongue into a bowl of beer. How's Notable?"

"Not that sleepy," Hanse assured him, "ever! Thanks." He slid his hand into the handle of the unglazed mug Ahdio set before him, watched a wrinkle or two flake off, and made a snarly noise. "You find out what Strick asked you about?"

"I did. That individual lives in Downwind." Ahdio leaned forward and lowered his voice, although that hardly seemed necessary, in the lowest and noisiest dive in the city and probably on the planet. "Brick, painted blue maybe twenty years ago, four stories high, on Happiness Street. Backs up to an alley just across from a small barn that looks more like a stable and used to be. He goes to sleep to the sound of goats, I reckon. His room's on the fourth floor, in back."

"Perrfect," Hanse purred. "Top floor rear, hmmm? Just perfect. Look around, Ahdio. You see anybody who looks trustworthy?"

Starting to look, Ahdio snapped his gaze back to the man in the hat.

"Where do you think you are, the Golden Oasis?"

Hanse chuckled. "Put it this way, then: I need someone who's strong

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enough and willing enough to help me with some night work and who I can trust to keep his mouth shut at least until tomorrow."

Ahdiovizun was frowning. "You aren't thinking of killing a man, are you, Hanse?"

"Absolutely not." A wrinkled brown finger rose between them, wiggled. Ahdio leaned closer to listen to what Hanse did plan to do. Suddenly every ounce of flesh on the tall, heavy man's form was jiggling with his seismic laughter. He was at least a minute letting that laugh run its course, and easing his belt. and wiping his eyes.

"Skarth, that—that's irresistible." Ahdio glanced over and called his limping helper, too often called "the Gimp" and supposedly Ahdio's

cousin's son from Twand. "Throde! C'mere a moment, lad," Ahdio lifted his head, "Frax! Come 'ere a moment, will you?"

Thus it fell out that Strick's bodyguard served as manager of Sly's for a few hours, while Ouleh and Nimsy helped Ahdio's wife tend to business, and Hanse, with a cloaked and hatted Ahdio and Throde, drifted down into that lowest of low ghettos of poverty and stench. Downwind. There the other two learned that under his robe Hanse wore black, black, black, and knives. Both of them recognized the working clothes of the cat burglar called Shadowspawn. He had a lot of good strong rope, too.

Shadowspawn and Throde, wall-climbers both, had to work together:

although Ahdio was mighty big, they got him up the side of the building.

Linza was the best thing that had happened to Tarkle in years. He could never understand why he wasn't more popular, among people of both sexes. Oh, no one had ever told him he was handsome or cute either, but what were looks after all when a man was bigger than big and could handle anybody, anybody at all, and really did try to be likable? He had bought beer, ale, even wine for more than one girl and a couple of women, but somehow or another before That Time of Night came around he had somehow or another alienated them and they somehow or other abandoned him to go home alone. Tonight he counted himself really lucky. Oh, true, Linza's eyebrows met in the middle about like those of that bastard Hanse, and under those brows—or that brow—one

of Linza's eyes looked ahead and one sort of looked off to the side, and her nose wasn't so good (but only when looked at from the side) and she sure wasn't fussy about washing her hair either, or doing much of anything with it. And he wasn't too crazy about her voice. But after all what were those; just imperfections. The point was that she had a really good body and was willing to share it with Tarkle. That was what counted, after all.

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Besides, she had run out of any kind of wherewithal whatever and didn't have anyplace to stay tonight.

So, holding her close as they climbed the stairs and sort of letting his hand slide up under that big soft bosom of hers so that he could feel the restless pendulum's warmth on the edge and back of his hand, he escorted her to his place and up the three flights to his room. They didn't talk much, but Tarkle wasn't too good at talking anyhow and by now Linza was lurching quite a bit from all those mugs of beer he'd bought her at the Vulgar Unicorn. This was a wonderful night, he thought, as he steered her leftward at the top of the steps, and it was going to be even wonderfuller. Plenty of bed-bouncing tonight! He was about to drown—happily—in big soft restless pendulums'

He knew Linza would like his room. Tarkle was big enough so he

didn't have to worry about anything even in this neighborhood, but the fact that his room was on the fourth floor would make her feel safer. He had a pretty good chair and one not quite as good, and two rugs, and that nice piece of wood on the wall, and a good big window—with curtains, even—and a good large, padded sleeping pallet, and a table and even a washbowl. All that luxury was in addition to the two beer barrels he had stolen and cut in half, so that one made a lamp table and the other a nice seat or footrest or whatever it was a person might need. His clothing and the few valuables he kept here were in the big heavy press standing in the far comer.

"Ah, locked up tight," he said, and Linza with her arm around him squeezed his waist and made a sound somewhere between a giggle and a chuckle and a hiccup, and Tarkle congratulated himself on his good fortune and again counted himself really lucky to have her here with him.

He got the door unlocked and, with a sweeping gesture, pushed it open and swung his arm wide in welcome,

Linza started into the moonlit room, and shivered against him. "Quite a breeze comin' in that window," she said. "You ought to have curtains—hey! Is this a joke er somethin'?"

Tarkle was staring into his room. His whole stomach felt as if it had sunk into his crotch but a great big lump had come up in his throat and despite the draft from the curtainless, open window he was hot, hot,

prickly and sweaty in the armpits.

His room was empty.

No curtains. No rugs or cut-down beer kegs. No table and no chairs.

No sleeping pallet. No piece of wood nicely mounted on the wall. No

lamp and no washbowl. This was impossible; he'd had to plead and bully

the aid of two other strong men to wrestle the big tall and very heavy

clothespress up here and into his room, and even it was gone!

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It simply was not possible. He was staring into a bare room without even a scrap of string. It looked larger, empty this way; and so lonely, so pitifully bare, so clean; and as a matter of fact even the floor seemed to have been swept clean.

One article, one of all his worldly possessions save what he wore and carried, remained. A pair of winter leggings lay neatly arranged on the floor with the bottoms of the legs pointed neatly toward the doorway where he stood. The legs were well apart; the leggings had been sliced all the way in half right up the middle, right up the crotch.

It just wasn't possible, Tarkle thought, just as his knees buckled.

They celebrated relatively quietly in the back room of Sly's Place, whoever Sly was or had been. Audio's wife Jodeera was not happy with some of what she heard from him and the other two jovial triumphanters; she muttered, "Boys, just big overgrown boys," now and then, and gave her husband dark looks. Others were directed at that bad influence named Hanse and called Shadowspawn. Yet now and again she had to laugh along with this trio of night-stalkers who couldn't stop talking about what they had done tonight-

"Like to ha' killed all three of us," Ahdio laughed, slapping his belly and reaching over to pour another mug of his better beer.

"Well, I told you we should have moved the clothespress when we first got there and weren't already tired," Shadowspawn said, and Throde chuckled.

"Should have seen it," Ahdio said. "You should have seen it!"

"The gods know I've heard enough about it," Jodeera said.

"Not enough," he said, and laughed anew. "Never enough!"

"I druther see the look on that bullying shithead's face," Throde said,

staring wistfully into his severalth beer.

"Like to killed all three of us," Ahdio said, "boosting and pulling and grunting that huge press out the window and up onto the roof! These two were pushing and grunting and cursing and I was dragging and sweating and grunting—and cursing, pulling it up with the ropes . . . That damned press is bigger'n I am."

"You could have hurt yourself," Jodeera said.

"Arrr, m'gal, your husband's big enough to handle a little moving job for a friend," Ahdiovizun said, shaking as his voice rose into another laugh.

It kept rising, and Ahdio kept shaking, and the tailless cat named Sweetboy scuttled with a sulky look as the big man nearly fell out of his chair laughing.

"Besides, I had that dry-tack glue on my feet," he said. "The stuff

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Hanse got from Cholly. It made it easy for me to go up that wall—almost as well and easily as these two wall-climbers." He beamed at his employee and his friend the cat burglar. "Come on back, Sweetboy. Here,

I'll pour you a tot."

"But what if someone had seen you?" Jodeera asked.

"Some—who d'you think might've seen us?"

"Someone walking along the street—" she said, and broke off to glance at Hanse, who had snorted.

"We was down in Downwind." Throde said. "Up a wall above an alley. TVobody walks down alleys in Downwind, day or night!"

"Oh," she said. "I've never been . . . well. A mean trick on a mean man," she said, and again she could not hold back a smile. "D'you think Tarkle will ever find his things?"

"How?" Throde said. "Nobody but Shadowspawn 'n' me could get up on that roof to see all that stuff!"

Despite the impolite noises Sweetboy was making lapping beer out of his bowl, they all looked at Hanse, who had been nursing one mug of beer for a long, long while. He was not laughing, or even smiling, and he spoke to his mug.

"So much for Tarkle," he said grimly. "Now for that swine Marype."

Audio's face went serious. "It's time I told you something Throde heard that little piece of excrement Hakky say the other night."

Hanse turned his dark-eyed gaze on Throde.

"Somebody was talking about you seeming to drop out of sight again," Throde told him, "and Hakky told him—quietly, grinning—that Tarkle told him Amoli had hired him to get rid of you, and even told him how to go about it."

Ahdio snorted. "He said that she said that he said that I said that she

c__"

"Who's Amoli?" Jodeera broke in, and Ahdio had to laugh.

"Not someone you'd be likely to know, sweetheart. She's the proprietor of a whorehouse called the Lily Garden."

The homely woman blinked. She looked at Hanse. "But why—whatever have you done to offend a ho'house madam, Hanse?"

But Shadowspawn was staring at Throde. His face registered astonishment, or perhaps it was revelation. Whatever it was, his eyes showed that he had gone back inside himself, where he was deep in cerebration, and

calculation, and machination.

Abruptly he rose and left. The other three stared at the doorway through which he had departed their company. Ahdio gave his head a shake.

"And good night to you too, Hanse," he muttered.

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Hanse returned to his room long enough to don his padded vest, collect a delighted Notable, and, once they were outside, wait without patience while the cat relieved himself. He was walking away before Notable was satisfied with his ritual sniffing of his urine. The cat snapped his tail to attention and hurried after him, making a complaining noise.

"Be quiet, Notable," Hanse muttered. "We're on business."

Notable replied with a small burbling sound from the throat. It became a hissy noise while he bristled at the dark-cloaked figure that moved toward them just as they stepped out onto the street. When Notable bristled he became about twice as big as he was, which was large enough to frighten big dogs and bigger humans. Yet the smallish approacher took no note, but moved almost stiffly toward Hanse with fixed purpose.

Shadowspawn saw, too, and although he made no sound a knife appeared in his left fist too fast for him to have drawn it. But he had.

"Hanse," Mignureal said in an intense tone. "Hanse!"

"Easy, Notable! Jileel—what are you doing here at this time of ni—"

Hanse's nape bristled and he broke off.

He had heard Mignue's voice, and knew it was Jileel, and yet he had heard more, too: it was that strange voice he had heard from Mignue, on a few occasions. Always when he was off on business; always when she had no idea as to his intent, much less his goal. He stepped leftward so that she had to turn. That way a bit of light from a window up the street showed him her eyes. Yes, and that eerie feeling enveloped him. Her eyes were all fixed and starey, really looking as if she weren't at home in there.

^Hanse—be sure to take that knife with the silver blade."

Hanse shivered. O Father Us! Jileel had it too, then! The S'danzo Seeing ability. And it was as it manifested itself in her older sister, rather than in their murdered mother and indeed any other S'danzo Hanse knew or knew about; Jilee! and Mignue didn't have to be given anything, didn't have to try to See. They just did.

His voice a little shaky, he was putting away his knife as he said or started to say, "I have it—" and another, taller figure in a cloak came up, and the cloak's hood was up, and this one had two others behind it/him/

her, and the sticker was right back in Shadowspawn's hand.

"My hands are in plain sight and you will not need the knife, young man. Do please calm that huge dog as well."

"Termagant!" Hanse said.

"Termagant?" Jileel said in a more normal voice, although it sounded weak. She was reeling, and the tall woman swung an arm around her.

"Mrrraowww ..."

"A cat?!"

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"No. Notable: Easy. No danger." And to the much respected Old Woman of the S'danzo: "What are you doing here?"

At the same time Jileel was saying, "What are we doing here?"

The tall older woman tore her gaze away from the astonishing cat. "I think this wants an explanation, young man."

"His name is Hanse. What are you doing here, Hanse?"

"I have a name, old woman. My name is Hanse."

Blinking in surprise and some confusion if not quite revelation, the Termagant looked down at the girl. "No, Jileel, that is the wrong question. What are you doing here?"

"Uhh ... out ... walking with you? I feel a little funny . . ."

"Termagant," Shadowspawn said in a quiet and decisive voice that commanded the gaze of all eyes. "Those are your bodyguards?"

She seemed to grow taller. "Escorts."

He nodded. "Uh-huh. Jileel, you just had a fainting spell. Take it easy, but step over there with the escorts while I have a few words with the Termagant. Careful, now."

The confused Jileel allowed herself to be eased away by one of the two tall cloaks, while Shadowspawn never took his black-eyed gaze off the senior S'danzo.

"Is this where you live, Hanse?"

"Yes."

"And how is it that Jileel knows where you live?"

"Termagant, I swear to you that she does not. You just heard her ask what I'm doing here. She came to warn me without knowing where I was going or where I live." Seeing her lips part, he raised a hand. "Wait. Listen a moment."

He told her about Mignureal, and how she had more than once warned him, as if with a knowledge she could not have. "But did, Termagant, did," he said. "And now Jileel's done it, just like her sister."

She looked surprised, but not as much as she might have. "I know the truth of that about Mignureal," she said. "Her mother told me of it. It is part of the reason I have been interested in Jileel beyond my usual concern for a blooming young woman of my people. Girl, girl," she corrected herself, too hurriedly.

Hanse knew she was reminding herself to keep reminding him that Jileel was only a girl. And keep your thieving un-S'danzo paws off 'er, streetboy. he thought, but showed nothing.

"Did what she said to you make sense?"

"As it did with Mignue. Once she just seemed to appear—as Jileel did just now—to warn me to be sure to take the striped bowl. It was true I

had one, but she had never seen it. It contained lime. If I had not had lime with me that night, I'd have died of Kurd's sorcery."

"Kurd!"

"Another time she bobbed up to warn me to 'take the big red cat.' She had never even seen Notable—this big red cat, here."

"Big, indeed."

"But if I'd not taken him along, I'd have died that night of a Stare-eye snake. A Beysib's, uh . . ."

"Beynit," she supplied. "You do live an exciting life, young m—Hanse. That monster, Kurd. I think I'll just not ask about that occasion. And on neither occasion Mignureal knew where you were going?"

Rather than risk an error in deciphering that question, Hanse nodded. At least he'd blocked an older person's snotty habit of saying "young man" and "young woman" by the trick of calling her "old woman." He said, "Both times she had no idea. And other times, up in Firaqa."

"And tonight

"I assure you. Termagant, no one knows where I am going. A very bad man tried to have me sold as slave, and I think he has already profited from the sale of many others. I intend to stop him."

"Please . . . would you please say to me her words to you? Jileel's, I mean, tonight."

"Right after you tell me what you are doing here—I mean, did you follow her or go out walking and lose her, or what?"

It took her a moment to digest the fact that he was as demanding as she, even with her. If she found that indigestible, she at least packed it away somewhere in a corner of her craw.

"I was visiting her home. Suddenly she rose and left the room without a word. That is not like her. When we saw her slip out, very hurriedly and cloaked, I counseled her father to silence and I and my two escorts followed her. We followed not as spies, but as protectors, but we did not need to be stealthy; she seemed aware of nothing. She just hurried, hurried. Now I know why—I suppose. Hers and her sister's powers transcend even mi-most."

"Spies can be protectors," he said, letting her know that he knew when a person told a little lie, even the Termagant. And he answered her question: "She stared odd, just the way Mignue does. Did. Her voice was

odd, too, just the way Mignue's was. She said my name two or three times, and warned me to take the knife with the silver blade."

"You have such a knife?"

"I'd show it to you, but I wouldn't want to upset your escorts."

She did not smile, but her eyes did, or nearly. "Now, Hanse . . . can you imagine why such a knife might be of value to you this night?"

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"Will be, Termagant, wilt be, if Jileel has the same power as her sister.

You know about silver and sorcery."

Her little sigh was almost inaudible, but she let exasperation color her tone. "I know about silver and sorcery, Hanse." He said nothing; she started to speak; suddenly her eyes widened. "Don't tell me this very bad man you mentioned is a sorcerer."

"I hadn't intended to tell you. Termagant." When she stared without speaking, he told her. "He is."

She heaved a sigh, shook her head, glanced over at Jileel, looked back at the youthful man all in snug black.

"Hanse; A few days ago I referred to your reputation. Perhaps it is a bit more than it should be ... or a bit less . . . well, perhaps those who talk do not know quite all there is to know about this Hanse person."

"No one does. Termagant, believe me."

"I promise not to try to learn more than you want me to know. Will you come and see me, Hanse?"

"Not tonight!?"

"No, no, not tonight, Hanse. At a reasonable time of day when this night's work is done and you can come and visit me in the next day or three, will you do so?"

"Termagant, I will."

"Good," she said, with an exuberant nod. "Then when you come to see me, Hanse, bring me this." Her long-fingered hands came out from within her cloak, and in an instant she had draped a piece of cord over his neck. Something thumped his chest and he looked down.

He was more than surprised. "You give me an amulet, Termagant?"

"I loan you a keepsake, Hanse."

"I thank you, I think. Uh—is it all right if I tuck it inside my tunic?"

For once, she chuckled. "Yes, Hanse, that will be all right."

He nodded, one sharp brief bob of his head. "Good. Thank you. I am glad to know that Mignu—that Jileel is in good hands. The Termagant herself, and two big escorts."

For the second time he had made her chuckle, even while she rankled at not having terminated their conversation before he did. A very nervy and decisive young man—and didn't he just love and perhaps live for danger and excitement! No tools or concentration were necessary for her to see that, not her. She well knew that her own abilities were almost equal parts intuition, and observation, and the S'danzo ability.

"Good night, Hanse, and good fortune."

"Notable, we have to be on our way. Good night to you, Termagant, and Jileel, and to you too, you great big pair of escorts, you."

NIGHT WORK

With tail high Notable moved along beside his human, who almost at once took up his nighttime habit of keeping to shadows and alleys. Notable saw quite well in such environs at night, and surely gave no thought to the fact that the black-clad man moved just as unerringly. As a matter of fact Hanse was moving almost without seeing. His brain was busy, working to match Jodeera's information with what had happened to him.

Any city such as Sanctuary had its share of whorehouses; good ones, low ones, and intermediate- True. Sanctuary probably had more than its share, particularly of low and intermediate houses. That described the one owned and operated by Amoli: the Lily Garden was not far from the Maze and yet not within those low and dangerous precincts. Thus it was one of the respectable brothels in the town called Thieves' World. Amoli had been friend to the drug dealer Lastel, who had disappeared. Shadowspawn knew of the tunnel leading from Amoli's house-not-home up to the fine home that had belonged to Lastel and was now owned or at least occupied by Marype the mage. In fact Shadowspawn had made use of that tunnel. His nocturnal visit to Marype's den had saved the life of a client of Strick's; in gratitude the fellow had sold tKe Vulgar Unicorn to Strick at a decent price. Unfortunately that same visit had resulted in Marype's taking vengeance on Thieves' World's thief of thieves. Shadowspawn was sure of that. Yet one aspect of the affair had nagged at his mind: how had Marype known who had been in his lair?

So it was Amoli who sent Tarkle after me. So Tarkle works for her? Or

she and Tarkle both work for Marype—or she and that slimebag mage are partners or lovers or both. And the moment I visited his house I was brilliant enough to let her know! Damn! Stupid, Hanse, stupid! Two minutes after I left her that night she must've been hustling her hippy self along the tunnel to tell Marypel

"What we ought to do," he muttered, "is shave some of that fat off the bitch and feed it to her!"

"Mmmaw?"

"Hush, Notable, damn it, I told you to be qui—oh. I thought aloud, didn't I?"

Notable made no comment. He was only an unusually large and unusually smart cat, although once he had been a man.

Abruptly his human seemed to disappear, and in some shock the cat had to spend a second or three finding him- He blinked pupils gone huge and round as a pigeon's eggs as he stared up at the lean man in black, who was ascending a brick wall in a way that could have been used as training for frightened kittens. Unfrightened, Notable followed. He was almost as quiet, almost as competent at wall-climbing. Almost.

Shadowspawn paused on a ledge formed by a set-in second floor.

"Here," he whispered, "you're too slow. Get on my back."

Notable let him know he'd rather just do his own climbing, but he went along. Resentful, he sank his claws well in. Hanse didn't mind; that was the reason he had so recently acquired the padded vest—black. With Notable riding his back without the hint of a purr, Shadowspawn went on up and onto the roof.

Notable might or might not have been capable or willing to make the necessary jump across the long black rectangle that was an alley, but Shadowspawn did not consult the cat. He gathered himself, crouched, measured, shifted to allow for the change in balance caused by the cat's weight on his back. He did reach back with one hand to press and stroke, once, while he murmured a friendly sound. Then he jumped.

Notable made no comment. He just clung, and clung tightly—meaning deeply. Had it not been for the vest, Hanse might well have been wearing several claws to a depth of a foot or so. Again he reached back to give him an encouraging stroke and tried to press his face against Notable's.

Notable moved his head and averted his face.

"Goo-ood Notable," Shadowspawn whispered.

His miffed rider did not deign to acknowledge those sounds he had come to know and love. He began wriggling, preparing to jump down. Shadowspawn pressed harder.

He murmured, "Just hang on, Notable. See, we cross this roof—uh." He broke off while someone passed on the street or "street" below. "Then we break into a trot an'—"

He jumped again, pouncing more as Notable might have done than in the way of a man. He landed almost noiselessly on another roof with his knees bent nearly up to his chest. This roof sloped and Shadowspawn dropped both hands to it, and pressed. He remained in that position long enough to be sure he was not going to lose footing.

Notable meanwhile drew in all claws, gathering himself, then shot out the rearward ones long enough to leap past this maniacal human's head and onto the roof. He ran right up and stopped only when he was on the ridgepole, which was not so narrow as the pointed-wedge sort. Tail lashing, he pretended to have been solely interested all along in gnawing a particular place in his coat. He peeped around casually to see Shadowspawn sitting athwart the ridgepole, unraveling a slender and expensive rope from around his waist.

"If you don't climb on me," he muttered over his shoulder, "it'll be a

lot harder for you to get down."

He followed that with a kissing noise. Notable's tail moved restlessly in indecision but he pretended to have something caught in his paw that needed gnawing out. Another glance showed him that the human had

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tethered his line and was letting himself over the edge of the roof. Trotting along the ridgepole as if it were a broad meadow, the big cat paused to lower his head and stare into Shadowspawn's eyes. Shadowspawn made another kissy noise. Quite delicately for one his size, Notable stepped onto the black-clad shoulder and leaned against the youthful face. He rode down.

Not far. Amoli liked to sun herself, which was why she had caused the little railed balcony to be constructed just outside her window. To her, it was useless at night. Not to Shadowspawn. He whispered, "We're there," and moments later was preparing to enter the darkened room. It was all as simple as that . . .

Except that just as he was about to swing over the sill the door opened from the corridor, and light from ensconced lamps as well as a carried one burst into the room.

"—as soon as we have accumulated enough money from the slave

business," a voice was saying, and it was the voice of Marype, who was just behind Amoli, who bore the lamp, and in those few words he had told Hanse everything Hanse had wondered about; everything he wanted to know.

Cat and cat burglar crouched low in the darkness outside the window, with black-haired tan hand pressing red fur in an urgent request for motionless silence. As he had learned to do long ago from his mentor Cudget, the superb thief called Shadowspawn did not try to see, or to hold his breath; he controlled his breathing while he listened. He heard the door close. He didn't have to look to be aware that the light remained within the chamber. He didn't hear the chest being opened, but he heard the jingle and then the sound of a lid closing. A key turned in a lock.

"Always a pleasure," Amoli said.

". . . business with Tarkle," the voice of Marype muttered, and the door opened again, and closed. The light remained. Shadowspawn stayed where he was, crouched. His head was cocked so that he could stare up at a slow-moving cloud, gray against midnight blue and black. When he decided that it had moved enough, he rose and entered Amoli's private chamber.

She sat before her little table a couple of feet from her bed, gazing into the costly electrum mirror she had propped up while she adjusted her

high-coined hair. With eyes much larger than the gold coins called imperials, she stared at the dark-clad reflection of the young man behind her. The elbow of his upraised left arm pointed at her; the hand was just beyond his ear. Amoli's eyes flared and her mouth began widening.

"You try yelling or reaching for anything untoward and I throw," he told her quietly. "I know who told Tarkle what to do to get rid of me. I

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know who pays Tarkle. I know what you and Marype are up to. I know you told him I'd been there that night, almost the moment I left here.

Also, I just heard you two. Amoli, open that chest.*

She stared at him in the mirror. "I—he took the key."

"In that case we just ruin the lock. I'm no beginner at that."

Slowly, she turned. Slowly, she rose, all prosperously plump and soft in silk and lace of rose and pale blue, scattered with jewels and a wetly glistening string of fine pearls. Only then did she notice the great big red animal-

"Oh!"

Notable replied with a long r-sound.

"Easy, Notable, she's too smart to try anything stupid with two of us armed with all these sharp things." He showed Amoli a clear-eyed gaze.

"You remember I told you about my attack-trained watch cat? Did you think I was joking?"

"You intend to take the money, Hanse? Rob me?"

"I forgot to mention, don't try any dumb words to persuade, either," he told her in that same soft voice. "We all know where that money came from. Even my price is in there—the price the slavedealers paid your lackey Tarkle for me. I have to pay Jubal rather more to be able to call myself free again; he bought me, Amoli, old friend."

She was shaking and her eyes continued wide and glassy as her earrings. "I'll give you—"

"You'll give me the pearls, Amoli, and six hundred pieces of gold. Just six hundred."

"Oh, not the pearls!" Her hand went to them.

He knew at once that it was just as he had supposed; they were indeed good pearls, and they meant more to her than the gold. Hanse was pleased. He said, "Yes, the pearls."

She made a sobby sound. Seeing his implacable stare, she heaved a great sigh and brushed clothing off an apparent low table. That revealed the table as a long, good-sized chest. After a hesitation and another sigh, she squatted beside it. He watched her extract the large black key from her bosom.

"He made me, Hanse. I didn't—"

He moved a couple of paces to be nearer her, and between her and the door. He had relaxed his cocked arm, but made sure she could see the fiat, hiltless throwing knife between his fingers. "Your luck is that you're not lying there wearing this sticker in your key-nook and staring straight up at nothing while / open that thing," he told her. "Don't just blabber and make me mad, all right? Both you and Marype are leaving this town. I hope you don't love him, Amoli. I had decided to let you walk out."

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She heard his gentle emphasis on the words "had" and "you," and again a shiver rustled her silk.

"I don't love him," she said. "He isn't even M—but damn it, I do love these pearls."

He smiled. Her words and tone told him that she had resigned herself,

made up her mind to stay alive and safe. She was going to do it. He watched her lift the lid of the short coffin. She took out the several bags tucked inside and commenced counting out gold coins into one of them. To Shadowspawn the clinking noises were as perfumed lips whispering sweet anythings in his ear.

"Sure a lot more than five hundred imperials in there, aren't there?" he said conversationally.

Either Amoli considered it wiser not to reply—or perhaps too distasteful to think about how much was here and how much of it was about to depart her company.

"What d'you think five hundred imperials weigh?"

"Not nearly enough to be so important," she said.

"Amoli," he said, in a dangerous voice, "I asked—"

"A few pounds. Three or four."

"When you've counted five hundred into that bag, just pop in the pearls and count the rest into another."

"Oh, Hanse, my pearls ... oh, I'm so sorry . . ." She began to sob.

"Well, I could let you keep the pearls, but they'd probably just take

*em away from you."

"Wh—who?"

"The fellows on the next ship bound for Bandara, after I sold you to

*em."

This time her sob was louder and her shiver a real bosom-rocker.

"Or Kadakithis's dungeon guard, once I'd turned you over to him,"

Hanse said, in that same soft and perfectly equable tone. "Did you know I spent a whole night tied up inside a big-but-not-big-enough sack in the hold of that damned ship, Amoli? Hmmm? Oh, I did a lot of thinking—I had a lot of time to think, Amoli."

Weepily she braced herself and lifted both hands to remove her pearls.

Resembling a mother bidding a last goodbye to a darling child just deceased, she moved her hand very slowly to the gold-laden bag. Lovingly, regretfully she deposited the necklace inside. And sniffed loudly. To Hanse's expert eye it looked as if she might be stiffening a bit, maybe preparing for a sudden movement.

"I am so grateful you decided to be smart, Amoli," he reminded her.

"I am not fond of killing, but when I throw a sticker at someone, I

usually aim at the brightest part. You know, the eye."

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The gemmy pendants from her earrings tinkled with her shudder. She sniffed again, jerked her head to clear tears, and shuddered again when that afforded her a sideward glance of a prowling, improbably red cat of a size sufficient to give pause to demons. She wiped her eyes with her fingers, which she wiped on her skirt where it stretched taut over her thigh. And she began counting gold coins into another draw-mouth bag of soft leather.

"Forget about turning me over to the prince or the slavers," she said quietly without looking up, "and you can have all of it."

"Then I'd be rich and probably start thinking stupid thoughts about stupid things like maybe trying to take over Sanctuary. And what's a thief without a reason to go out at night? It's my main enjoyment in life. No, I have a better use for all that gold."

"—nine, one hundred," she said at last. "There." She looked up. Her tears and the lead sulphide preparation she used around her eyes had left dark streaks on her plump cheeks. "Why two bags?"

"Just pass that one to me. I'm going to hand it back to you. For the

sum of one hundred pieces of gold, and good imperials at that, I am buying the Lily Garden. You write that out, Amoli. I'll bet the deed's in the bottom of that chest, right?"

"A hun—" She clamped her lips.

"Yes, I know," he said. "I'm worth more than you got for me, too. As a matter of fact I'm also worth more than those five hundred I'm going to sling through Jubal's window one dark night! Just write it right, Amoli."

Working her bejeweled fingers down into gold and wiggling them about with care, she fished out the little oilskin packet and extracted the deed. She was just beginning to write on it when someone knocked at the door. She jerked hard, then looked at Hanse. He lifted his left hand for an exaggerated inspection of his knife, and gestured loosely with the right.

Amoli twisted half around on her backless chair and spoke to the door.

"I do not want to be disturbed," she snapped. "See that you tell everyone else that. Everyone, Vissy."

"But ma'am—" a voice began; the voice of one of the girls.

Hanse made his voice as deep and growly as it would go, and tried to add a lazy-sleepy note. "Shall we include her in our bondage game, darling, or d'you want me t'just go carve out that little bird-turd's blabbery

tongue for you?"

No further sound came from beyond the door. Amoli returned to printing words on the bill of sale. She signed it; she used her stamp; she twisted around again to look at Hanse.

"It's done. You want to put your mark on it?"

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"Kneel there on the floor, Amoli. That's a safe position, while I sign that document."

She knew very well that he could not write or read, but had not dared try to trick him. Nor did she snort at his words. She assumed the position she had taken many times in her line of work, and waited while he made far more marks on the deed than he needed to make an X; a dozen or so. She was beyond surprised to see that he had printed five rather crudely formed but clearly recognizable letters;

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"Now I tell you what, Amoli," Hanse said, slipping the document back into its packet and the oilskin down into his tunic. "I'm going to make you a guarantee. I'm going to visit Marype. You put your hands

back and cross 'em, and I swear to come back and let you and that bag of a hundred imperials see just how fast you can get yourself out of Sanctuary."

"Whe—where am I going to go-o-o," she whimpered, while he tore cloth and bound her wrists with care to pull the strip of silk between as well as around them.

Suddenly the dark, hawk-nosed face of the sinister nightworker called Shadowspawn came over her shoulder- About an inch from hers, it stared with eyes black as the bottom of a well at midnight.

"You can go straight to any hell you care to, you rotten swinish seller of people," he told her in a voice suddenly quivery with malice, "or just make up your mind to shut up and head for Suma or wherever the next caravan is going. You'll have a hundred fine Rankan imperials, surely ninety percent gold, to get you started in the business you know best."

She swallowed and clamped her teeth, not to mention her lips.

"That's good. Now open wide. Wider, damn you!"

He left her lying on her side and half curled on her bed, facing the wall. Her wrists were crossed and bound behind her with a linking line to her ankles, which were also united and pulled up to the backs of her thighs. A lot of silk crowded her mouth and propped it open; a broad

violet sash held the gag in place. A broad and folded strip of cotton blindfolded her. Hanse let her hear him close the chest.

"All right. Notable," he said, picking up the cat, "now you just sit right here on this chest and keep an eye—no, both eyes on that tired old whore. If that fat butt moves, hit it with claws 'n' teeth both!"

While a new shiver ran through the bound, blind, voiceless package on the bed, Hanse departed. Carrying Notable.

Using the back stairs he knew Amoli reserved for the use of herself and special clients only, he descended to street level and below, and in short order was moving once again through the dark tunnel that connected

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Amoli's house with Marype's home—that is, the house that had belonged to Lastel.

"Last time we came along here a large rat attacked," Shadowspawn remarked. "A very large rat, and I was fool enough to think it was illusion. Remember, Notable? Notable? Ah, you remember—how charming you look pacing along three feet behind!"

In reply he received a low-voiced /--sound.

They went carefully. Shadowspawn liked the dark right enough, but not dark tunnels- He had spent too much very unpleasant time in that maze under Corstic's manse up in Firaqa, accompanied only by the Eye. This time there was nothing. They were not assaulted, either by things sorcerous or un-. Likely Marype's attention had been on his "business with Tarkle," rather than arming the musty old secret entry to his keep in the way he knew best. On the other hand the sorcerous attack on Hanse and Notable had come after their previous visit to Marype's den; perhaps the mage left the way clear for Amoli and maybe Tarkle, but something actuated defenses against someone leaving. Unless Marype somehow temporarily suspended it.

Once again a living shadow and an alert yet purring cat came ghosting into the dark-haired home that had been Lastel's and was now Marype/Markmor's. This time they paced the dim corridors, soft-soled buskins as silent on good carpet as the cat's pads, without pausing to peer beyond the closed doors they passed. Seeing no one, hearing no sound and making none, man and cat went directly to that room containing a worktable and things that made the hair twitch on Hanse's nape. Nor was Notable happy to approach the tall door- Once again of many times the walking shadow could not avoid the thought of how despicable sorcery was to him.

And this time . . . this time the people-peddling slime is here/

Reason enough to be more than cautious. Shadowspawn moved close to the big paneled door and pressed against the wall beside it. He listened— He heard sounds, right enough, within the chamber of Marype's sorceries. 0 Father Us and all gods, how I hate sorcery and those who practice it! And: He's home, all right. Now should I just—

His heart leaped and adrenaline surged when something bumped his leg. He released his breath and concentrated on careful breathing: he had felt Notable, of course. Hanse moved his leg slowly in a return caress/scent-sharing.

Why am I doing this? Why don't we just forget this? he mused. We could go do something fun and less dangerous, like climbing to the top of the governor's palace and jumping off, or lying down for a nap in the stall of an unbroken horse, or—

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The handle clacked and an instant later the door opened. Light burst into the corridor. For once Shadowspawn was not happy to have Notable as company; Hanse might well have stood as he was and let the mage pass. That was not the way of a startled cat. Notable hissed and spat. Just as startled, the emerging Marype reacted automatically with a curse and a kick. His boot made a whump noise in the furry side of a large target

and the cat sailed several feet down the corridor with tail all a-bristle and legs flailing—twisting in air to land on all four feet.

Standing beside Shadowspawn without seeing him, a no longer silver-haired Marype cursed again, stared at the cat, gestured at him, started to mumble . . .

Shadowspawn hit him hard in the stomach, backhand in passing, and pounced three feet backward to spin and come down in a crouch facing the sorcerer. Soft, silent buskins alit almost on Notable. The cat made his spit-sputtery sound again and leaped away; the human was silent and went motionless save that one hand snapped back past his ear. The mage gasped, doubled partway, hands to his middle. He straightened and his mouth snapped wide open to yell. That created a target that was a large one, for Shadowspawn. His arm rushed forward, a long swing with long fellow-through, and the dagger streaked. It streaked into the target: the open hole between Marype's nose and chin. The silver-chased blade pinned Marype's tongue to the back of his mouth. He made a gargly sound and both hands rushed to his mouth. Meanwhile he staggered back into his sorcerous den.

"Wait!" Shadowspawn called, but Notable was barreling past him after the man who had dared kick him and, in a far more important offense, embarrassed him by taking him by surprise.

"Notable!" Shadowspawn charged after the cat.

Inside the chamber a hideous feline yowling mingled with the hideous gargling sounds Marype made around a mouthful of knife and blood.

Hanse rushed in to see the cat looking even bigger because he was all a-bristle. Yet he was moveless, held in frozen motion by some gesture and gargly mumble of the mage, Notable's stiff, extended tail resembling a steel-spined red brush.

"Here, sorcerer, have another knife!"

The wounded, horrified Marype should not have been able to move as fast as he did; fast enough to dodge the rushing blade. Yet in hurling himself aside he hit the edge of his big table, which teetered with a screech of its legs on the floor. Its litter rattled and toppled. Marype stumbled away, and in desperation now he was able to commit the horrible act he had been trying to gain nerve to accomplish; he dragged the knife back through his tongue and out of his mouth. Meanwhile various

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tools and uglinesses of his trade went scattering onto the floor from the rocked table.

That included a very pretty cage containing a small furry animal. The cage hit the floor with a rattly bang that dented and bent the bars of soft

metal. It rolled noisily. In terror the small furry animal squeezed out and bolted. A large furry animal, no longer held by the sorcerer's spell, became pure cat and pounced. A moment later he was crunching. His mouth trailed the stubby little tail of a vole.

And Marype who was Markmor screamed, a high-pitched wail that diminished rapidly—as he did. Marype was gone, dead; Markmor occupied that body while his own soul reposed in the body of the vole. The vole was eaten. Marype's body was neither occupied nor alive. It began to deteriorate, hurrying to catch up to several weeks' delayed putrescence.

The sight was ugly, horripilating; the stench was beyond horrible.

"Gahh!" Shadowspawn grabbed his nose with thumb and curled forefinger hard enough to hurt. "Notable! Out of here! Gahh!"

And he fled, a huge red demonic thing racing after him as if in chase, trailing a straight-out tail like a red bristle-brush. They raced through the house and down to the concealed entry to the old tunnel and along it, and neither stopped running until they were re-entering the Lily Garden.

While he was freeing Amoli of gag, blindfold, and bonds Hanse told her of the horror he and Notable had just fled. "Marype just . . . just . . ."

"That was not Marype," she managed to say, having worked up a little

moisture in her dry, dry mouth and licked her lips many times. "Marype is dead. He was stupid enough to bring back Markmor, and Markmor rewarded him by murdering him. Your cat killed Markmor and you watched what happens to a dead man weeks after he died. And I'll tell you, Hanse, Shadowspawn, thief and mage-killer and probably hero too—you've done me a favor tonight. I've got a hundred imperials and my life and I am very, very glad to get out of this town!"

And she went.

Next day Hanse, undisguised, visited Strick to advise that he had found the perfect disguise and a fine business venture for Taya. Strick did what he could and sent her to Ahdio for a more permanent spell. She emerged still shapely and still attractive, but no longer Taya, former prince's playmate. She was Altaya, proprietor and Strick's partner in ownership of the Lily Garden.

That afternoon two men in Strick blue delivered to the palace the jingly contents of Amoli's and Markmor/Marype's chest, to be used in the continuing reconstruction of the city. "To make it Sanctuary's work

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for Sanctuary," the message signed by Strick and by Hanse read, "independent of Ranke."

Hanse was meanwhile presenting the father of Mignureal and Jileel with a bag containing fine and far too valuable pearls which he had not stolen. He strongly suggested that Teretaff cause the pearls to be made into ear-drops for his several daughters, and "bury the rest under the floor or someplace."

He left without Teretaff's knowing of the sack of gold pieces Hanse had secreted in his shop-home, for safekeeping.

A few hours later in the Vulgar Unicorn, Hanse slipped a lot of golden imperials to the serving girl Silky, and bought drinks for the house until the Vulg grew so boisterously noisy he couldn't stand it, after which he ambled around to Sly's Place. There he bought drinks for the house, but left when the place grew so noisy he couldn't stand it. He went home with a large bucket of beer and enjoyed watching Notable get thoroughly drunk. Watching a cat stagger was more fun than Hanse could remember.

A week later he traded with Cholly the gluemaker for a dagger he recognized: a handsome affair. True, its hilt was marred, but who could resist that nice silver-inlaid blade?

THE INCOMPETENT AUDIENCE

Jon DeCles

ACT ONE

"I don't care if he is the new Emperor's cousin!" cried Feltheryn the Thespian, brandishing a paper broadside that he had just ripped off a wall before its glue could dry. "If Emperor Theron liked him he wouldn't be in Sanctuary!"

"My darling," said Glisselrand, her fingers flying amidst many-colored yams, "there is a difference between not liking one's relatives and wishing them harm. Remember that Emperor Abakithis sent our darling Kitty-Kat here to Sanctuary, presumably because he thought him a threat. Nobody has any doubt that Abakithis wanted Kitty-Kat out of the way, but neither does anybody doubt that he would have dealt severely with anyone who spilled the royal blood."

"I wasn't suggesting that we murder Vomistritus," said Feltheryn, frustrated by his lady's calmness.

Glisselrand laughed.

"If not, my pet, then he is the first critic ever to escape that suggestion after giving you that kind of review!"

(Yes, it was true! The very vilest villain of all had slunk into Sanctuary,

a creature so reprehensible as to make all previous contenders—with the possible exception of Roxane—pale. It had been written—long before the fall of Ranke, long before the fall of Ilsig, long before the first settlers had put down roots at the confluence of the Red Foal and the White Foal rivers—that the appearance of criticism portended the first sign of maturity in an art form. But for his part, Feltheryn rather thought that the

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appearance of critics was the first signal of total social decay, a sign that people had lost control of their own minds and tastes and had therefore to resort to the opinions of others.)

"And rightly so!" Feltheryn growled. He then waxed pedantic: "A critic is one who espouses the idea that one must divorce one's self from emotional involvement in a work of art in order to apply unchanging standards to all such works and thus render a judgment on the individual work based on a reasoned measurement made against those standards. Yet a work of art, by definition, is a thing which directly engages the emotions, carrying feeling through what is only, really, a cold construct: a channel by which the heart of a perhaps long-dead artist may touch the heart of a living perceptor!"

Glisselrand looked up at him from her knitting, today a series of small orange, purple, and red squares which would later be assembled into a folksy quilt that would even later give someone a headache. She raised

one elegant eyebrow in question, prompting him to continue-

(There had been a point, perhaps thirty years earlier in their romance, when he wondered if, at such times, she really understood what he was saying, really cared; or if she was just humoring him. It no longer mattered to him, for the essence of the situation was that she wanted him to continue, and he wanted to continue, and, after all, it wasn't going to change anything.)

He took a deep breath and delivered his conclusion: "That of course means that a critic is someone who is congenitally incapable of appreciating art!"

Glisselrand stopped knitting for a moment and considered his thesis. Then she smiled and her fingers once again flew, gnarled but fast.

"Now that you mention it," she said, "it did seem that way in Ranke. They spoke a great deal about form and structure and style, but I am not sure I ever met a single critic who I felt really understood what he was talking about. Flash without fire, as the poet says. But looking back at our years in Ranke, I do believe we can be grateful that Sanctuary has only one critic, even if he is an especially bad one, and even if he is the Emperor's cousin."

Feitheryn growled again and Glisselrand wondered if perhaps he was

thinking of producing *The Cowslip Flower*, a play in which he was magically transformed into a camel.

"With all the faults this town has," Feltheryn continued, "with all the horrors it has endured, yet the old adage about Sanctuary has proved untrue. It was not, after all, the one place you could find the worst of anything. Stinking Sanctuary could still hold high its head on that one

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point, and I think it could have got along just fine without ever having acquired a damned critic of its own!"

"Well, my dear," said Glisselrand, "I quite agree with that. I just wonder that the people of Sanctuary have fallen for it."

"It's the economics of the thing, of course!" Feltheryn continued to rave. "It's not cheap to come to the theater, because producing theater costs so much, even with the generous patronage we've got here. That's all the opening a vulture like Vomistritus needs! A little clever writing, a wicked turn of phrase, he hires a couple of scribes who can copy neatly if not well, pastes these broadsides all over town to gain an audience, and then the people will spend a copper to read what he has to say before they spend their soldats to come see the play. And the most insidious thing

about it is the smug satisfaction of those who have never been to see one of our performances, yet who feel competent to discuss them!"

"How long have the broadsides been up?" Glisselrand asked, stopping her work once again and fixing Feltheryn with a look not unlike the one she gave the crooked bailiff in the great trial scene of *The Merchant's Price*.

"Well, the paste was still wet when I pulled this one down," said Feltheryn. "It cannot be too long."

"Very good!" said Glisselrand. "Then we shall set Lempchin to running around town today pulling them all down. Better still, we shall give him a chance to practice his performance (he wants so much to go on stage!) by going in disguise, and thereby not making it obvious that we are the ones responsible. Unless Vomistritus is very well off, he won't be able to have his scribes keep making copies as fast as we can take them down. Perhaps he will get tired of being a critic and find some other way to annoy people!"

Lempchin was called, Glisselrand cozened the chubby boy neatly into disguising himself in the interests of the theater troupe's welfare, and Feltheryn was shortly back to preparing the script for *The Chambermaid's Wedding*, the next play the company was to produce.

Their current production, *The Falling Star*, was doing well enough, but Feltheryn was not fond of playing the villain and Glisselrand was waking each morning after the performance with aches and pains brought on by the finale, that desperate scene in which the actress who was the "star" of the title hurled herself from the castle walls rather than face the charge of murder against her from Act Two.

Of course as the villain Feltheryn got that wonderful scene in the second act in which he soliloquized about the joys of lust: and the scene that followed was not without satisfaction as he got to order the torture (horrible, but off stage) of Snegelringe, who would soon deserve torture if

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he didn't stay out of the bedchambers of some of Sanctuary's better class of bored ladies. Rounsnouf, the company comedian, got to play the torturer and he was quite good at it; although one had to keep an iron hand on his performance or he would chew the scenery to such a degree that the audience would begin to laugh, and that was unforgivable in a play of such passion and violence.

It was a good play, no doubt about that! But Feltheryn would have preferred to delay his own murder to the last act. As it was, he lay dead in a puddle of pig's blood at the end of the second act, and there was naught for him to do for a full third of the play but sit backstage in his costume and makeup waiting to take a bow at the end. And he had a

sneaking suspicion that the applause he got would have been considerably greater if the audience had not had time to forget how good he was when Glisselrand plunged the knife from the supper table into his throat.

But enough of that! It was time the company took on a comedy, and The Chambermaid's Wedding was probably the best comedy ever written. Tragedy was all very fine, and it inevitably drew a crowd, but Sanctuary was a town with plenty of tragedy of its own; Sanctuary could use a few laughs, and Feltheryn intended to provide them.

There was only one small difficulty, and that was the lack, in the troupe, of a third-string female. Glisselrand would of course play the Countess, and Evenita the title role of the Chambermaid. But there was Serafina, the Schoolgirl, to cast as well, and one needed a strong actress for that because there were a great many lines, a song, and most of the time on stage the schoolgirl was disguised as a schoolboy. That was because she had a schoolgirl crush on the Countess and, in an innocent schoolgirl way, wanted the Countess to make love to her.

They had tried doing the play with a boy in the part and it had proved a disaster. That was before Lempchin had joined the company. If they were forced to use Lempchin it would be worse than a disaster! Besides which, audiences loved to see a pretty young girl dressed up in tight pants pretending to be a boy. It was traditional, and even a bit erotic.

No, Feltheryn sighed to himself as he sat at the kitchen table looking at the script; they would have to find another female, that was all there was to it. And the best place to look for women was in the Street of Red Lanterns, at the Aphrodisia House. Myrtis had helped them before, she might be able to help them again.

He went upstairs to where Glisselrand was preparing for an afternoon nap, explained carefully what he had in mind, and got her blessing.

Whatever else might be thought of *The Chambermaid's Wedding*, it was the one play in which all the sympathy and love went to the older

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woman, not to the younger title role; and Glisselrand was of an age to appreciate that-

Feltheryn would of course play the Count, who was also in a way a villain; but at least he would be on stage right up to the final curtain.

His trip to the Aphrodisia House was despoiled only by the presence of the offending broadsides distributed by Vomistritus. Apparently Lempchin had not yet got to the Street of Red Lanterns. Feltheryn pulled a few down as he passed them, but the glue was beginning to dry and it was difficult to get it off his hands once it was on. He had to beg pardon

at the door when he finally arrived and ask for a basin and then, as the glue was much tackier than he had thought, he had to ask for help from one of the ladies of the house.

Feltheryn was not beyond appreciating the charms of the lovely young woman who helped him, nor was he in the least insensitive to the fine-tuned professionalism of her performance, displayed in even so humble an activity as helping him get his hands clean. The world's oldest profession was at least eighty percent theater, he recalled from his wild and reckless youth. Any woman could offer sex for money, but it took talent to make that sex so desirable that the audience returned again and again for the show.

And it was a show: the act itself was only the last curtain of an evening compounded of beautiful costumes, exotic perfumes, graceful movement, tantalizing conversation, stimulating music, and a setting that was a marvel of womanly design. To visit the Aphrodisia House was to enjoy a show with only one plot but a constantly changing cast of characters: and it was that fact which made the difference between Myrtis's elegant courtesans and the sad and desperate women who walked by night in the Promise of Heaven.

"There now!" said the young woman, drying his hands with an embroidered towel. "We've got it all off, Master Feltheryn. I'll clean up this mess, and you can go talk with the madam. Do you know the way to her

room?"

"No, I am afraid I have not had that pleasure," Feltheryn answered in his most courtly fashion as he stood from the little table.

"Then I'll have one of the girls show you," she said, beginning quickly to clean as she had said she would. "Shawme! Shawme, would you please show Master Feltheryn up to Myrtis's room? I sent word up to her that he was here."

Shawme, a mere child whose blue eyes held inordinate pride, smiled at Feltheryn and led him up the stairs. A moment later he was seated in a

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small parlour, explaining his needs to Myrtis, the proprietrix of the Aphrodisia House, and sipping the blackberry tea she provided.

"—so you see, lovely lady," he finished, "she must be talented and willing to learn to act if she cannot, and reasonably beautiful, but she must also have the sort of figure which lends itself to wearing men's clothing. For most of the play she must be disguised as a man, and it must not appear laughable that she is so disguised. The audience will suspend its disbelief to see a young girl in tight pants, but it will not accept a full-blown womanly figure in the same outfit. I very much want

to do the play, but without your help I fear I cannot."

Myrtis laughed-

"My dear Feltheryn! The fact is, there are plenty of people running around this town in the clothes of the opposite sex, and most of them are women. For some strange reason they assume cross-dressing to be the one way in the world they can protect their precious chastity. Not that I am in any wise tolerant of any man abusing a woman, mind you, but really, there are so many other and better ways of preventing rape! Why, you will never find a softer, more engagingly feminine roster of ladies than reside within my walls; but any one of them could tell you a dozen ways to keep a man in place if he tried to take something that wasn't his. Yet it is not the lovely, soft, delicate ones who worry, and who sometimes should. It is those hard, intolerant women: the ones with some kind of chip on their shoulder. They never in their lives have tried to make themselves attractive to men, yet they assume they are irresistible to anything on three legs. Ha! They should try working here, coaxing some poor merchant to arousal who is more worried about whether the money is well spent than whether he is having a good time! But beyond that, these women have gone to extremes to make themselves less than attractive to men, have often learned some devastating martial art in response to their fear, and they have acquired manners that would get them barred from my house if they were men; and still, they go through life assuming that rape is around every corner! So they disguise themselves as men, and

spend most of their life energy worrying about whether they will be found out. It saddens me deeply, A woman should live her life going forward at full charge, not cringing back in fear of something that may never happen."

"But Myrtis," said Feltheryn, "some women do get raped."

"Well of course they do!" said the madam- "And some get murdered and some get robbed and some get tortured and a great many are beaten by their husbands in the cozy confines of respectable marriage. By far the greatest number of women die in childbirth! But life is about living. Master Player, not about the piddling little moment at the end when you die.

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Oh, some of these fearful women are dear friends of mine, and I try to understand. But it does seem foolish to put such a high value on rape when a woman in this town is far more likely to be robbed or murdered. What a rapist seeks to take he really cannot, unless the woman lets him; and that is not her body, but her dignity. She may not like the physical part, it may sit with her like a canker for her lifetime if she lets it; but frankly, nobody can use my body to humiliate me. I am flesh, but I am more than that. I am a woman, and inordinately proud of the fact, and

neither pain nor humiliation can touch that. Besides, men get raped too, so it's not much of a disguise in the long run. In fact, in Sanctuary, disguising yourself as a goat wouldn't be much better!"

"I had heard that goat rape was up," Feltheryn said.

"Only since the influx of all those foreigners who are working on the walls." Myrtis smiled. "But getting back to the point, I do believe I have someone in mind who might fill the bill. Her name is Sashana. Her family was killed by Raggah in the desert. She hid among the dunes, and then, being very young, managed to pass as a boy with the next caravan that came by. It was sensible in those circumstances, but now she lives and dresses as a woman. In fact, such a charming woman that I have often wished her fortunes had been a little worse when she came to Sanctuary. She would have made me a bundle! I'll give you her address, and a letter introducing you. She does not disguise herself anymore, but she doesn't take any chances, either!"

It was too late in the day to pay a call on Sashana when Feltheryn left the Aphrodisia House. There was to be a performance, he had to get into his makeup, and before that he needed a little rest. It was not as if he were a young man. He noted, as he left the Street of Red Lanterns, that all the broadsides were, if not gone from the walls, at least defaced enough to be uninteresting to the passersby. He made his way back to the theater, went up to the room he shared with Glisselrand, and lay down on the bed next to her.

For a moment the stimulation provided by Myrtis's elegant environment caused him to think about waking his leading lady for an afternoon tryst; but thinking about it led quickly to dreaming about it, and in his dreams he was more the man than even he used to be. He had discovered, with age, the one truth a young man dare not face; that dreams are always better than reality.

The Lady Sashana lived in a small but well-appointed house in as good a section of town as Sanctuary had. She employed few servants but they were all strong and healthy and Feltheryn suspected, as he waited in her

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parlour, that they could double as bodyguards. There were shelves in the parlour, and on them manuscripts: beautiful volumes bound in fine leather. Reading the titles, Feltheryn understood exactly why Myrtis had sent him to Sashana. Most of the manuscripts were plays, and those that were not were tomes of tales of far lands and enchantments. There were even some he had not read!

Lady Sashana entered the room with a graceful but firm step, the tilt of her fine chin bespeaking confidence and the clarity of her green eyes revealing intelligence. Her hair was chestnut brown, not long but coiffed with beads in a manner that gave the impression of controlled luxuriance.

She wore an emerald satin gown with a mauve chiffon overdress, colors which enhanced her beauty even more in the environment of rubbed woods and buff and cream velour that was her parlour.

"Myrtis's letter intrigues me," she said, taking a seat and gesturing that Feltheryn should take the one opposite.

Her voice was rich and dark and naturally vibrant. Without further consideration Feltheryn knew that she was precisely the woman for the part, if only he could persuade her.

"I am glad of that," he said, "for now that I meet you I see that Myrtis's praises were not half what they should have been. To be brief, I note by your library that you hold an interest in the theater. I note also that you own a copy of *The Chambermaid's Wedding*, and are therefore familiar with the part of Serafina. It is that part which I would like you to play, if you would consider the prospect of performing a play in public."

Lady Sashana laughed, a deep, throaty laugh like the songs of large warblers from the forest.

"Master Feltheryn, can you imagine the scandal it would cause in Ranke if a woman of my position and breeding were to appear on stage? Oh, I should be barred from every respectable house and exiled from court for years! But this is not Ranke, Master Feltheryn, this is Sanctu-

ary, and here I am in little danger of being forced to live the dull, constricted life my mother lived before her untimely death."

She stood and clapped her hands together with all the strength and deliberation of a potter about to assault a new lump of clay.

"Of course I shall do it, if you will promise to teach me all the things I need to know!"

She strode to the shelves and Feltheryn was delighted to see in her walk that she was already transfiguring her body language to that of the character she would play. She would need little coaching for this part, he thought as she removed the blue-bound volume from the shelf. She

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turned to him and held the heavy tome against her breasts with both arms, like a sacred treasure.

"Oh, I love this town." she cried, her eyes glittering with delight.

The next morning the broadsides reappeared on Sanctuary's buildings, but with an improvement; they were put up with a different kind of glue.

The glue that had stuck so tenaciously to Feltheryn's hands was nothing compared to the stuff that caused Lempchin to cry and babble as he returned to the theater from his rounds, his hands, face, and clothes

plastered with pieces of paper bearing the offensive criticisms. He had become, in less than an hour, a miserable little walking billboard, and nothing they tried could make the stickum dissolve.

"Well," observed Rounsnouf as he gnawed on a piece of cold fowl he was having for breakfast, "nothing sticks to an actor like criticism!"*

"Rounsnouf, that is not funny!" scolded Glisselrand, who was dressed in her best and most dignified clothes for a day of canvassing contributions. "Can't you see the poor child is terrified?"

"It would be worse if the glue had been applied to the rim of his chamber pot," Rounsnouf said. "As he didn't get around to emptying them this morning he would be in dire straits indeed!"

This caused Lempchin to howl all the worse and rush toward Glisselrand for comfort; but she dodged him deftly, and he stumbled instead into Rounsnouf, thus gluing himself firmly to the fat little comedian in a way that made them resemble a globular waste receptacle.

"Enough!" Feltheryn cried, now thoroughly distracted from both his breakfast and his script. "Lempchin, stop that caterwauling! And you, Rounsnouf, you've got what you deserve for goading the boy. You're stuck with him, at least until I can get you both down to the Street of Tanners. That glue is a nuisance, but I doubt that it is fatal. It was no

doubt made by Master Chollandar, and I am sure he has a solvent for it.

It will take time, but you will both be free soon enough to cause me other problems. Perhaps we can also get enough of the solvent to take down those damnable posters, while we are at it!"

"Well, thank the gods!" said Glisselrand, clearly relieved that she would not have to accompany anybody to the Street of Tanners. "If that is settled, then I must be off. Goodbye, my sweeting! Be sure and get your nap if I am late."

She kissed Feltheryn on the cheek.

"Don't be loo late, my love," said Feltheryn, kissing her cheek in turn.

"You need your beauty rest as much as I do, with that dreadful leap at the end of Act Three. And don't stray into any streets that look more

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dangerous than others. Remember that the folk of Sanctuary have very little in the way of money to contribute, unless they are truly wealthy."

"I know, I know, my dear." She smiled. "But there are a few people of wealth and position we have not yet visited, and it is my intention to correct that. Goodbye now, and take care."

She exited through the kitchen door.

Glisselrand never merely left a room. She always exited.

Had anybody but Rounsnouf been glued to Lempchin, the journey through the streets of Sanctuary would have been a mortifying experience for the boy. But Rounsnouf being the comedian he was, the trip proved to be an amusing one. When people pointed and laughed, Rounsnouf turned their jibes back on them:

"Don't laugh, lady, I can see the man you're stuck with!"

"If you think this is bad, you should have seen me last night before I sobered up!"

*I told the tailor there was room enough in this outfit for two, so he put somebody else in here with me!"

"This isn't what you think! I'm really Enas Yorl's twin brother. Both of me!"

It was in this manner that Feltheryn led his two charges into the miasma that permeated the Street of Tanners, past Zandula's tannery, and into Chollandar's Glue Shop. A lanky boy with a mop of golden hair asked them to wait and a moment later the master gluemaker emerged from the back, wiping blood from his hands.

Feltheryn wasted no time in explaining the predicament of his comedian and his factotum, adding at the end: "There are also the broadsides. I shall have to purchase some of the solvent for taking the miserable things off the walls of this fair city as well as for removing it from Rounsnouf and Lempchin."

Chollandar grimaced and leaned on the counter of his shop.

"Master Feltheryn, you have been a good customer, buying all the glue for your stage constructions and the like, but . . . Well, I cannot sell you the solvent for that glue."

"Why not?" asked Feltheryn.

"Because Vomistritus paid me an unconscionable amount not to sell it to anybody. I didn't know at the time I made the agreement that there would be problems like this . . ." He indicated the squirming bundle that was Lempchin and Rounsnouf. "But the contract was quite clear. He said he had trouble with vandals, and I assumed he was going to use it to put up some sort of protection. It will hold wood, metal, anything

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you can think of; and of course, human flesh as well, but I never expected . . ."

The gluemaker lapsed into a troubled silence, his eyes cast down on the counter.

"Perhaps I could cancel that contract," suggested Feltheryn, "by simply offering you more."

Chollandar laughed.

"I don't think you can!" he said. "The amount he offered me was so large I thought he was joking. He said I was welcome to check his credit with Renn, which I did, and frankly, Master Feltheryn, I wonder that there's any money left in Ranke at all. If you was to ask me, I'd say the new Emperor is cleaning out the treasury and storing the loot in his cousins' pockets. First Noble Abadas moves in and hires a house full of Ilsigi servants, for the gods know what purpose, and makes it clear that the Emperor has some very nice relatives. Then this not-noble Vomistritus moves in and shows how unpleasant the Emperor's relatives can get. If I was Emperor Theron I'd call Abadas and his family home and cut off the purse strings to old Vomit-breath, as his servants call him. But I'm not the Emperor, and I'm not in a position to just cancel my agreement with one of the Emperor's cousins. Still, it does seem a little inhumane to leave these fellows . . ."

At that moment a commotion in the street interrupted the discussion

and a boy no less pudgy than Lempchin, but with olive skin, came rushing in.

"Master, master!" he cried. "There's a whole army coming down the street!"

"Is that so, Sambar?" Chollandar asked. "Then we must dispose ourselves to defend the fort, eh, Master Player?"

They all went through the front door of the glue shop and saw, if not an army, at least an irate war party. Pages, foot soldiers, and an unnerving number of gladiators. At the front of this column strode an older man with a look like storm clouds on his countenance. In the center of the column eight gladiators carried a veiled sedan chair, and from the sedan chair came the terrified shrieks of a woman having hysterics.

"Oh, dear," said Rounsnouf quietly. "It's Lowan Vigeles, and he seems to be upset."

"Who is Lowan Vigeles?" asked Feltheryn, just as quietly.

"He's Molin Torchholder's half-brother," explained Rounsnouf.

"Then why haven't we seen him at the theater?" asked Feltheryn.

"Possibly because they're estranged," said Rounsnouf, "and possibly

because he keeps to his estate at Land's End, training gladiators, and possibly because . . ."

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Rounsnouf stopped explaining as Lowan Vigeles came to a halt in front of the glue shop.

"So, gluemaker, I see by the company you keep that you have already run afoul of your formula's success!" announced Lowan Vigeles.

Chollandar let out a huge sigh, and began once again his explanation of the arrangement he had made with Emperor Theron's cousin Vomistritus; but the Rankan nobleman cut him off.

"I care nothing for what that pretender's petty relations may offer you in the way of riches! The plain fact is that my sister-in-law, the Lady Rosanda, has got herself as stuck up in this mess as have that man and that boy!"

With that he pulled open the curtains of the sedan chair to reveal the Lady Rosanda, who did not have as much paper glued to her as Lempchin and Rounsnouf, but enough: enough to set off her hysterics again.

"Now, gluemaker, you will get a bottle of solvent, and you will release the Lady Rosanda from her humiliating predicament, and then we will consider the situation of your contract with Vomistritus."

Chollandar threw up his hands in a gesture common to persons of business throughout the world, a gesture indicating a hopeless situation, a gesture indicative of profits down the drain- He headed into his shop, but a gesture from Lowan Vigeles gave him the company of two gladiators, just in case he should try to proffer some other solution to the problem than the solution which had been demanded.

In a very short while the Lady Rosanda was free of the glue and papers and secure once again in the seclusion of her chair. Chollandar applied some of the solvent to Lempchin and Rounsnouf as well, freeing them from both the offending broadsides and each other.

There was then a lengthy discussion between Lowan Vigeles, Chollandar, and Feltheryn concerning the doom that had descended upon Sanctuary with the arrival of Vomistritus. It was revealed that the Lady Rosanda had merely tried to bring home one of the broadsides for the family to read; and that her sympathies, formerly opposed to any operation which had her estranged husband's blessing, were now definitely with the theater. It was also revealed that Lowan Vigeles was a profoundly level-headed man when not provoked by the screams of his sister-in-law, and further, a man well versed in law.

Unfortunately, after careful consideration of the situation, Lowan Vigeles could not think of a legal and legitimate way of breaking Chollandar's contract with Vomistritus; at least not one that would keep the gluemaker both alive and adequately reimbursed.

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The subject of murder was skirted with the greatest delicacy, and clearly left as a last contingency.

"After all," Lowan Vigeles said, sighing, "that usurper, Theron, would like nothing better than an excuse to send his army down here to crush Sanctuary and sow it with salt. But enough! I must take Rosanda home. I will see to it, Chollandar, that it is made clear you had no choice but to use the solvent on my behalf. Yet we must all of us think, and think hard, on some way to undo this Vomistritus before he undoes us!"

"Perhaps," suggested Feltheryn, "we might discuss the matter again after a performance, perhaps over a late supper? I trust that we will see you and the Lady Rosanda at the theater in the near future?"

"Oh, most definitely!" said Lowan Vigeles. "Most definitely!"

Back at the theater, Feltheryn felt ready for his afternoon nap; but Evenita reminded him that he had asked Lalo the Limner to come by

regarding the sets for *The Chambermaid's Wedding*, so he went instead to get his script and the rough sketches he had made, which the master painter would turn into fine drawings and, eventually, stage pieces.

Evenita had also taken the trouble to prepare a lunch for Feltheryn and Lalo in Glisselrand's absence, and as she served them he was once again glad that he and his lady had accepted her petition to join the troupe.

There had been many, many such petitions over the years, from young women and young men of greater, lesser, or equal beauty. And many had made those petitions from similar motives: the desire to leave an unbearable life-and the hope of some measure of glory. But most of those petitions had been rejected. Those might be admirable ambitions, but they were not what made an actor or an actress. To join the theater for those reasons was as foolish as getting married for those reasons!

But Evenita's tale had been so piteous, her life so fragile at that point, that they had relented and accepted her and taken her safely away from her hometown, hoping perhaps that along the way they might find her suitable employment. She had repaid their kindness with a diligence and a show of talent that was quite unexpected, even spectacular, and now she was one of the minor jewels of their little crown. Her dark hair and warm brown eyes, her round face and full lips, were of a kind of beauty that contrasted greatly with Glisselrand's patrician features and auburn hair. And she could cook, as the little spiced clams she was serving them for lunch attested!

Lalo asked a number of pointed questions, made suggestions (most of which Feltheryn accepted), then packed up his sketchbook and bade goodbye. Feltheryn considered the bed which invited his company upstairs, then remembered a detail of the set (a door which had to be real,

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which had to open and close) which he had not mentioned to Lalo, and so he was off running after the painter. By the time he had found him (at the Vulgar Unicorn) and set the matter straight, and got back to the theater again, it was time to get into makeup and run lines.

And as if all the previous excitement of the day were not enough, Glisselrand was late in returning from her canvassing! Feltheryn continued to dress and prepare, but as nightfall came on he worried more and more; and was on the verge of calling the performance and sending out a search party when the door opened and his leading lady rushed in and started to dress.

"My dear, you have no idea what an exciting day it has been!" she said cheerfully, slipping out of her clothes and into her costume.

"I might guess," Feltheryn responded as he applied his lip rouge with a

tiny brush of camel's hair.

"You know," she babbled on, "everyone has told me, again and again, that I must stay away from that shabby little house down on the White Foal, but something inside me, some instinct, said to me that anyone who grew such lovely flowers—you've seen them, haven't you, the black roses?—must be a very nice person indeed! Well, after visiting three homes where they clearly had plenty of money but no taste, and getting not a single contribution, I decided to follow my instincts!"

Feltheryn stopped working on his makeup and sat stock-still, his brush not moving at all. He knew full well who lived in the house on the White Foal River. The hair on the back of his neck began to rise.

"Naturally enough," she continued, "I was not so foolish as to attempt to violate the wards on the iron gate. People don't put up wards for nothing, you know. Instead I went up and sniffed the roses. They have a lovely fragrance. That was sufficient to get the attention of the lady of the house without giving her the feeling that I was being pushy, or violating her privacy. When I neither left nor tried to pluck the blooms, her curiosity was whetted and she came out on the porch. I waved hello and complimented her on her roses and asked if there were anyplace I might purchase similar plants. She smiled at that, with just a touch of contempt I think, but I didn't let it bother me. I told her how much they reminded me of the ones we have to make out of paper when we do Rokalli's Daughter, and that of course let her know that I was with the theater.

—Would you help me with the corset, dearest?—Well, the gate swung open and she invited me in for tea! That is one of the nicer things about being in the theater, don't you think, Feltheryn? Almost anyone is glad to receive a player into their home, perhaps out of the sense of celebrity. Except of course that time in Sofreldo when the whole town censured the baron and baroness for inviting a mere actress to breakfast; but then, that

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was a frontier town, after all. Well, anyway, you cannot imagine how delighted I was to see the inside other house. Feltheryn, it was like being back home again. It was a gorgeous riot of color! Silks, satins, velvets, everything strewn about with the gayest, wildest abandon! I showed her my knitting, and I think she was very pleased. And I gave her a little bag of one of my tisanes, you know, the ones I take along as a gift for people who contribute more than their share to the theater? The poor dear, she seems so shy, really. I don't imagine she has many women friends. She's exceptionally beautiful, and you know how that makes many women jealous. I have suffered enough from that myself, all these years. There now, I think I'm ready!"

Feltheryn swallowed hard.

"Did she then make a contribution?" he asked, opening the door of the dressing room and offering a silent prayer to whichever deity was respon-

sible for the safe return of his lady.

"Well, no," said Glisselrand sheepishly: a very unusual mode of response for her. "She said that at the moment she had nothing suitable in the house. And . . . Well, I hope that you won't be too upset with me, Lamby, but, well, I ... I told her I would leave her name with Lempchin out front, so that she could come to see a show for free. Her name is Ischade, and I am sure that when things look up for her, financially, we'll see her" in the audience all the time."

And as if the previous week's ordeals weren't enough, the morning after Glisselrand gave Ischade a free pass to the theater, Lempchin brought home a dog, a scruffy little bitch with a disturbing gleam in her eye and a glittering nimbus of something about her that made Feltheryn loath to say no when the boy proffered the usual tale of having been followed, and could he keep her?

"If you can teach her tricks!" the master player said. "And if you name her Beneficence,"

"Master Feltheryn," said Lempchin, with a worried but reasonable look on his pudgy face, "you can't go out and call a dog: *Here, Beneficence! Everyone will laugh, and besides, it won't carry!"

"You are right," said Feltheryn. "But when I was a boy, before I became an actor, I had a dog named Beneficence and we called her

Benny, which will carry quite well, don't you think?"

"Oh, yes. Master Feltheryn, yes! Thank you!" cried Lempchin.

The small dog looked up at Feltheryn with an expression of scandalized horror, and for a moment he thought she understood exactly what he was saying. She backed away and let a low growl escape her lips.

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"I am afraid it is that, Benny, or find another home," said Feltheryn firmly.

The dog hesitated, as if she would do just that rather than answer to her new name; but at that moment Molin Torchholder entered the back of the theater and headed down the center aisle, and that seemed to change everything. She looked at Molin, looked back at Feltheryn, did three neat back flips in the air, then disappeared into the scenery before Molin got to the stage.

"A born actress," Feltheryn said, and ruffled Lempchin's hair before turning his attention to his patron.

"I have heard," Molin said, without preamble and with embarrassment, "that Rosanda will be attending the theater. Could you keep me

advised of the nights you expect her, so that I can absent myself?"

ACT TWO

As if by divine edict (and in Sanctuary, it seemed the only way that it could happen) things began to go well. Vomistritus's broadsides stayed up, but his poisonous commentary failed to cut too deeply into the theater's receipts. Those who took the critic at face value and stayed away were balanced by those who were intrigued by his acerbic pen into coming to see what could possibly be so bad.

Lalo delivered final sketches for *The Chambermaid's Wedding* and they proved to be his most inspired designs to date. The flowery pergola for the wedding scene was of surpassing loveliness, and construction of the costumes and properties was begun with much enthusiasm by all concerned.

Lady Sashana proved not only beautiful and enthusiastic, but an apt pupil as well. Glisselrand actually blushed when the disguised Schoolgirl sang her the serenade, and that was no small tribute from an actress who had played the part more than fifty times.

As for Myrtis: she was pleased to contribute the talents of some of her younger proteges to the production, and the girls themselves were pleased and delighted (and amused) to be playing the Chambermaid's virgin bridesmaids.

"The only problem," Myrtis commented, "is that song in which they sing about being pure and chaste. Some of their customers may be in the audience, and if the poor men laugh, their wives will figure it out!"

Lempchin discovered that his new dog could learn any trick with the greatest of ease. It was not long before he had persuaded Glisselrand to sew a fluffy collar for the mutt, and not much more time before Benny

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had got a role in the show, doing tricks for the Countess in the wedding scene.

Master Chollandar stopped by the theater to deliver some glue and related how Vomistritus had demanded half the enormous payment for exclusive rights to the solvent returned on the basis of the one unauthorized use in freeing Rosanda, Rounsnouf, and Lempchin.

"I argued with him," said Chollandar, "but in the end I figured I would have to give him what he wanted. And that's not so bad, because it was really a lot of money that he paid. But I made him print, on each broadside, that the glue was dangerous and might not be removable. And I told him that if he didn't print the message on the poster, I would not be responsible for the consequences."

"Did he accept that?" asked Feltheryn.

"Oh, yes," said Chollandar. "I think he enjoys the idea of spreading something dangerous around Sanctuary. It makes him feel sinister, maybe."

Near the closing of *The Falling Star* a small purse appeared on the table in the greenroom, directly after the performance. Although Lempchin did not remember admitting her, a note within the purse identified the gold it contained as a "small" gift from Ischade; and Glisselrand commented that she was happy the dear shy woman had not only fallen upon better times, but, it seemed from the size of the gift, now reveled in them.

Glisselrand finished the red, purple, and orange quilt, and one day when rehearsals had gone especially well presented it to Sashana: who accepted it gracefully and in the spirit in which the gift was intended- Sashana then asked Evenita (in private) if she had anything for a headache, and Evenita, who also possessed a quilt, rushed to an apothecary for some of the little leaves whose crushed essence was palliative for eyestrain.

The *Falling Star* closed, there was the usual closing-night party for the cast and a few friends, then the serious business of preparation for the next play began. Old sets were torn down, wood and canvas cannibalized,

and the theater rang with repeated speeches and reeked with the smell of paint.

Lowan Vigeles and Lady Rosanda sent their regrets that they had not managed to see the recently closed play, but with their regrets they sent a request for the best seats in the house for opening night of The Chambermaid's Wedding. This presented a problem, as the best seats in the house were those in the royal box, and they would surely be occupied by Prince Kadakithis and the Beysa Shupansea, who, Rounsnouf assured

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Feltheryn, were not the favorite people of the Rankan household at Land's End.

Feltheryn asked Glisselrand's advice in the matter (which was his usual procedure in such thorny circumstances) and she quickly composed a note to Lowan Vigeles expressing regret that the best seats were those in the royal box, which had been flocked at the expense of the prince and the Beysa, who would most surely be in attendance.

"Do you think it wise to say that?" Feltheryn asked as he read the note.

"Read on," his lady commanded.

The note further expressed regret that the theater did not have a second box of equivalent splendor, and noted that in Ranke the company's theater had possessed three such boxes: the royal one at the center, and the two at the sides of the stage which allowed the attendance of visiting dignitaries and guests of the company's director. The note then politely asked whether Lowan Vigeles would like to have the royal box on the second night or a lesser box on opening night, and appended the opinion that many attendees preferred the second night, as the initial nervousness of the performance by then had dissipated.

Feltheryn smiled.

"I see you are angling for more pomp and nocking," he said; and Glisselrand grinned.

"It couldn't hurt, my dear," she said.

Rehearsals continued, the costumes and sets were finished, and in no time at all it was opening night. Lowan Vigeles and Rosanda elected the royal box on the second night, Molin Torchholder accompanied the prince and the Beysa for the first night, and everything went as smoothly as melon with custard. In fact, by the end of the first act the impossible seemed to be taking place.

"Yes, that's him!" said Rounsnouf, who was playing the servant who

turned out to be the father of the bridegroom, who was played by Snegel-
ringe. "That laugh is unmistakable. Look out through the peephole' You
see, that big, fat, ugly man? That's Vomistritus, and he actually seems to
be enjoying himself!"

Feltheryn looked, saw, and had to agree that Vomistritus was big, fat,
and ugly. His face was like a cantaloupe about to spoil. He had sagging
chins aplenty and a grayish tone to his skin that made one wonder if he
coupled regularly with corpses. His stubby fingers rested wetly on the rail
and his bulgy eyes were bloodshot. His mouth was slack; Feltheryn won-
dered if he drooled as well. His teeth were snaggly when he smiled, and
his smile was not unlike that of a shark. He wore loose robes of goose-
turd green that failed to conceal his corpulence.

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The young woman who sat next to him was pretty, and obviously paid
for her participation.

"Suppose he turns out to be an honest critic?" asked Lady Sashana,
stunning in tight blue satin breeches and a white brocade coat.

"An honest critic?" asked Snegelringe, standing close to her but as yet
unable to affect her with his charms (she knew his hairline was receding
under the wig).

"Yes," said Sashana. "Suppose he is actually doing what he thinks he is doing. It may be that tomorrow morning we will awake and find a good review glued all over town."

"Such things have occurred, my child," said Glisselrand, "but rarely. I don't think it is that critics go to the theater hoping to see a bad play so much as that they have seen so many plays they are numbed to the experience. I suspect they are like courtesans: always hoping for the exceptional and most of the time disappointed."

"That," said Feltheryn, taking his eye from the peephole that allowed the actors to see the audience without being seen, "and the fact that it is easier to cut a thing to ribbons than it is to imbue it with life."

"That's from *The Choice of Mages*, isn't it?" Sashana asked.

"Yes." Feltheryn smiled. "When Demetus realizes that even a child can kill, but that he, the greatest of magicians, cannot give life to the dead; not true life- That's when he abandons the warrior's path."

Sashana sighed. "I'd love to play Retifa!" she said.

Glisselrand's eyebrows shot up and for a moment Feltheryn wondered whether the company would make it to the second act of tonight's show. Retifa was one of Glisselrand's favorite parts.

"Of course," Sashana continued, "I'd need about thirty years of experience on the stage before I'd attempt it. And then I just might not have the talent. It takes a truly great actress, like you, Glisselrand, to carry off that part. Have you ever played it?"

Feltheryn relaxed, assured that equilibrium had been reestablished:

and then it was time for the second-act curtain.

By the end of the play everybody in the cast was ebullient, and when the bows were all finished they were giddy with mutual congratulations. It was agreed that never had the town of Sanctuary known so much laughter, so much sheer good feeling. They all hurried to the greenroom and took seats behind the table, backed by big jardinieres full of flowers and potted palms, and soon the room was filled with people congratulating them.

The prince and the Beysa came first, then Molin Torchholder, then several noble families responsible for various aspects of the production. It

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was a shock to Feltheryn when he looked up and saw the doorway filled with goose-turd green, but he took it in good stride when Vomistritus waddled forward and began to congratulate them all.

"Never seen it so good!" the critic burred in a loud but ill-supported baritone voice. "Such finesse! Such style! So much tastier than that tawdry tragedy you did last time' My compliments' You may be sure my broadsides will read in your behalf on the morrow. You, Madame Glisselrand, were superb! I was fere to weeping when you contemplated the Count's infidelity. And you. Master Feltheryn, were such a masterful buffoon; how did you manage that last scene, apologizing to her on one knee? One would have thought a man of your age would have difficulty with so much spriteliness. Ah, but my greatest accolades are for you, Lady Sashana! Your step! Your song! Your amorous elegance! How could anyone resist your entreaties? Why, I must confess, I thought the Countess to have a heart of stone when you pled your case! And if / felt so, then rest assured, all your audience must surely have felt so! For is that not the purpose of a critic? To stand in for the whole audience? To try and feel the play, not merely as he would alone, but as each and every viewer would feel it? Not so different from a director's Job, is it. Master Feltheryn? Only you try to stand in for the audience before the play is played, and / try to stand in for them once you have prepared it. To see whether what you saw is what they see. You see? See! Saw! Ha ha!"

And thus he went on, for considerably longer than was seemly for a man at the head of a queue, and in considerable contradiction to the

tenor of his previous tone regarding the troupe. When finally he left, and the rest of the well-wishers had paid their respects and departed, the whole company was exhausted. They repaired to the kitchen, where Lempchin had broken out cold pasties, and when they had finished rehashing the night's triumphs and restoring the energy expended by acting, they all went to bed, happy: and wondering, each in his or her private way, if perhaps the slight magic resident in the play had wrought some change in Vomistritus.

The second night was as glittering a triumph as the first. Not only did Lowan Vigeles and Rosanda attend, they brought with them enough gladiators that there was barely enough room in the theater for seating. The gladiators were all dressed in their most elaborate noncombat gear, so the candlelight flashing off gold in the audience was very near distracting from the spectacle on stage. Only Lady Rosanda outshone them. She had dressed in High Rankan style in a way that was quite as impressive as the formal cosa the Beysa had worn the night before.

Except, of course, that the Lady Rosanda kept her nipples covered.

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By the third morning Vomistritus's review was plastered all over town, and it was gushing with praise for the production and everyone in it. If any unreasonable prejudice could be found in his words (Rounsnouf

noted over a breakfast of hot lemon-grass tisane and egg bread fried in bacon grease) it was the opulence of his praise for Sashana.

"No doubt she's wonderful," he mumbled as he chewed. "Just not that wonderful!"

Thus it came as a surprise when, on the fourth morning after the play had opened. Lady Sashana arrived at the theater with her bodyguard servants and declared her intention to kill the Emperor's cousin, and the price be damned.

"My poor child!" Feltheryn exclaimed, pulling a chair out from the table so that she could sit down and noting that her face was bruised.

"What on earth has happened?"

Lady Sashana clenched her fists on the table before her and tried to speak, but her breath was coming hard and the emotions that stormed across her face were too varied and confused for articulation. Feltheryn looked to the bodyguards and noted that they also bore bruises; and cuts and abrasions as well. Worse, each cast his eyes to the floor as Feltheryn looked at him, and the red bum of shame colored all their features.

"He—" Sashana began, but she choked on the words.

Glisselrand came into the kitchen, saw Sashana, and immediately put a cup of hot tisane before her. Myrtis entered behind Glisselrand and froze,

her face going professionally blank.

Sashana drank some of the tisane, coughed, then tried again.

"Last night after the performance I received a note from Vomistritus. It said that he was having a small supper party and requested my attendance. After all the nice things he said about the production, and about my performance, I decided to go."

"At that hour of the night?" asked Glisselrand. "In Sanctuary?"

Sashana smiled ruefully.

"I am not a fool; at least not a complete fool! I took along my bodyguards, with the very good excuse that it would be unsafe for me to travel the streets that late without them. Vomistritus met me at the door himself and seemed more than pleased to admit my men. He ordered his servants to provide them with wine and meat, then led me to the upper chamber where the party was."

She took another sip from her cup.

"At once I divined my state, for the room was set for supper for only two. I turned to go, but the door had been locked from the outside. I demanded that he open the door, but he laughed. I used the best voice

that you taught me and called for my men, but there was no response.

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Then Vomistritus went to the table and sat down to eat, uncovering dishes and behaving as if the battle were won. Then, then that overbred imitation of a downwind pud had the colossal gall to quote your speech at me. Master Feltheryn, the one from the second act of *The Falling Star*!"

"Men call me venal, yet they do not know, the depths of my depravity and desire ..." Feltheryn began.

"Yes, that one!" Sashana cut him off. "Can you imagine it? And he delivered it badly! Well, of course I took my cue and went to the table, but Vomistritus is not that much an imbecile. There were no knives. The whole repast was finger-food, and none of it very good-looking, either."

"He might at least have had a decent meal prepared," said Glisselrand.

"How would a critic know the difference?" Rounsnouf asked.

"I told him I would as soon couple with the corpse of a poxed leper," Sashana said coldly. Then a burst of bitter laughter escaped her lips. "I should have known coarse language would inflame him! He rose from the table and came after me, exactly as in the play. But he had not counted on my regular wariness, nor on the dagger I keep in my stocking, under

the skirts of my gown. I slashed for his throat, and by t?ie gods, my cut should have killed him!"

Her green eyes flashed like demon fire.

"What happened?" asked Feltheryn, by habit and nature as good an audience as he was an actor.

"I cut, but his damned fat saved him! He yowled, blood spurted, but my dagger didn't reach the vein. At that his men rushed in and seized me. I think one of them is missing a finger, at least, but there were too many and they got me down. Then things got worse.

"He wrapped a linen round his throat and his eyes bulged all the more, and his servants brought in my bodyguards, all stripped and bound. My men were held and forced to watch as he . . ."

Once more Sashana's voice broke, and rage and desperation and horror all warred for supremacy on her face. One of her servants wept.

"He ... He quoted more of the play," she said at last. "How I do love to break the tigress of her fight ..."

There was a cold, horrible, quiet moment. Then:

"He raped you," Myrtis said quietly.

It was the cue Sashana needed.

"Yes, the bastard raped me!" she cried, and in a swift moment she was on her feet, her dagger in her hand and somehow the delicate cup from which she had been drinking smashed against the opposite wall. "And I will kill him!"

Myrtis alone of the company was able to move, able to act against the icy tide of horror and anger which engulfed them all. She moved to

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Sashana and took her in her arms, where Sashana finally was able to let her tears come, her sobs break.

After a while Sashana quieted, then whispered again, against Myrtis's breast: "I will kill him."

"No, child," Myrtis said. "You will not kill him. If you kill him then it will be over for him, and you will be left with this pain and no place to put it."

"What do you mean?" Sashana asked-

"I mean that justice is a matter of balance," the madam said. "He did not take your life, so taking his life is an inappropriate punishment. We must seek instead to take exactly the things he took from you. We must seek to relieve your pain by putting it upon him."

"Are you talking magic?" Feltheryn asked. "Or . . ."

"Myrtis," Glisselrand said, "I don't think we will find anyone who will want to rape Vomistritus."

Myrtis snorted in a very uncourtesanly way.

"This is Sanctuary, Glisselrand," she said. "That would be the least of our difficulties. It is not the sexual part of the crime with which I am concerned, but the violence and the humiliation. And more than that, a means by which we may mete out this villain's punishment without bringing down the town around us."

Sashana drew away a little.

"Oh, he is very aware of that!" she said. "When he was finished he said that I was powerless to gain revenge because if he was harmed the Emperor would tear down Sanctuary and decimate the population. He was very proud of knowing what decimate meant. He joked about it, asking me which friend out of each ten I would like to see murdered before my

eyes!"

"My lady!" cried the servant who had wept, "let me deal with him, and after I am done I will give myself up to the prince for execution! That will save Sanctuary and revenge us a!! as well!"

"Nobly offered, Miles," Sashana said. "But I cannot sacrifice you in exchange for a creature so far beneath you in worth."

"Lady Sashana," R-ounsnouf said, and for once his comic's voice was pitched in dead seriousness. "If I might offer a plan?"

Sashana turned to him. She still trembled, but the prospect of some action, any action, seemed to calm her. "Yes?"

The comic addressed the madam: "Myrtis, how well do you know the proprietor of the House of Whips?"

"Well enough," Myrtis answered.

"There is a small courtyard in that house, with stocks," said Rounsnouf. "It was a popular place when the Stepsons were here, or so I am

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told, but now its fortunes have declined; especially since that goat

farmer . . ."

"Yes, yes!" Feltheryn interrupted, beginning to see the drift of what the comic was saying. "About the stocks?"

"They seem a gentle torture to anyone who has not endured them," Rounsnouf said, "but in fact being forced to stand bent over at the waist, one's head and wrists through the board and one's rear end exposed, can be an agony. The back hurts first, then the muscles of the shoulders, the legs, and so on. They ache, they cramp, and by the end of the first day one is willing to do anything to escape. And that even without the assistance of the patrons of that particular house, many of whose chief pleasure lies in the infliction of various other tortures upon a bound victim."

"A good beginning," said Lady Sashana, now regaining some of her composure. "But we are not discussing some attractive slave, we are discussing Vomistritus."

"My lady," said Rounsnouf, his little eyes beginning to glitter with creativity, "the courtyard is there for that special taste of public humiliation. There are windows round it from which one may watch what transpires without being seen. That too is a taste to which the house caters. One could stand thus concealed and drop a soldat or two to anyone who gave an especially fine performance. And I am sure there are many in the Downwind who have never been able to afford a night in the Street of

Red Lanterns, many whose tastes might be beyond our darkest imagination. Word could be dropped with the Beggar King, Morruth, and who knows what might transpire? Though you might not guess it, there are those in Sanctuary who are even less attractive than Vomistritus!"

Sashana took one long breath and her shuddering stopped. Her proud chin lifted, but still she looked to Myrtis for some council.

The smile, and the nod, that Myrtis gave might have frozen even mighty Tempus with fear.

"It were best," said Glisselrand, her rich voice suddenly an emblem for reason, "that none involved be recognized- Moreover, what is to stop Vomistritus from announcing himself to his tormentors and offering more money than any of us possess for his freedom?"

Rounsnouf giggled.

"That very glue by which Lempchin and I were bound shall be brushed across his lips," the comic said. "Before we deliver him to his particular purgatory he shall be prevented from praying his way out!"

"Better!" said Sashana.

"And Master Feltheryn," Rounsnouf continued, "we have not performed The Fat Gladiator for some years; can we perhaps use the demon

costumes from the last scene? We shall wait, and we shall lure him to the

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woods with some sort of tryst, just as in the play, and there he shall be set upon by horrors, bound up, his mouth glued shut, and he will not be able to swear who it was who delivered him! Then we can bum the costumes, eliminating the evidence."

They all looked to Feltheryn, but Feltheryn did not answer at once.

That they were asking to destroy some old costumes was nothing. Neither did he mind the risk. Of course Vomistritus would recognize the plot of *The Fat Gladiator* at some point in the proceedings and understand that it was the theater troupe taking revenge upon him; that didn't matter, for the critic could not have them all killed. Emperor Theron would not tolerate that, not even from his cousin. And the criminal in such a case would be obvious to all.

No, Feltheryn hesitated for Sashana's sake. If he approved the plan he would be putting her into a position wherein she inflicted such cruelties as she felt she had endured. Wherein she could achieve a catharsis, but at what cost to her? She was a fine-bom lady; but she had also survived the murder of her parents and the rigors of the desert. How might this chance wind twist the very finest sapling?

But then, how had it already been bent?

Feltheryn nodded.

"But still," the master player added, "there is an untied string. We may prevent Vomistritus gaining any evidence against us, but he will know, and he will try to take a counter revenge if I am any judge of him. We need some sharp and terrible sword to hold over his head, that he may never come back against us again."

There was another silence in the room, then a quiet cough sounded from the doorway. They turned to look and there stood Lalo the Limner, his ginger fringe of hair awry, his fingers stained with paint where he had come early to adjust a few things about the set with which he had not been satisfied.

"I believe I can help with that," Lalo said.

Thus it was that in a strangely deserted park called the Promise of Heaven, a heavy man dressed in goose-turd green was assaulted by demons. He cried out, but his minions were appalled, when they rushed to his aid, to find their way blocked by a contingent of gladiators from Lowan Vigeles's school at Land's End. The cries of their master soon ceased, or at least became muffled, and those minions (having only the loyalty born of cash) quickly retired from the fray.

It was not the first time that park had played host to demons; but later on, the ladies too much enslaved to krrfor too ill featured to work in the Street of Red Lanterns returned, their time well compensated.

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It might have been noted that for a few nights the Schoolgirl disguised as a Schoolboy (in *The Chambermaid's Wedding*) was a little less springy of step. That perhaps the play took on a tenderer note than it had shown on opening night. That certain aspects of the ensemble were sharpened while others were softened.

It might have been noted, but it was not, for in Sanctuary few people came to see a show more than once. And there were thenceforth no critics to be concerned.

For to be a True and Just Critic is a risky business. One must have standards against which one measures, but one must also become submerged in the emotions of the work. One must, like the director, be able to see the play from the point of view of an entire audience. One must, in fact, be an entire audience.

Yet an audience does not simply observe a work of art. An audience participates. If a play is performed perfectly, but with nobody to see it, it is not a play. A painting unseen does not exist, not even for the painter;

for the purpose of art (and of everything else of value in life) is communication. A tree falling in the forest does not make any sound. At least, not any sound that an artist could understand.

An audience does not merely come to the theater, it brings with it Observation, Participation, Response. If the audience comes unwilling to submerge itself in Feeling and Understanding, then it is like a lover who merely lies there, waiting to be acted upon.

It is the difference between those sad women who walk the paths of the Promise of Heaven and the beautiful ladies who sail the satin sheets of the Aphrodisia House. The difference between a courtesan and a whore.

In short, the audience unwilling to act its part is incompetent, and nothing in the performance, nothing in the painting, nothing in the book, nothing in the music will alter its state; and the critic stands in for the audience.

A rain came, brief but enough to wash the ink from the broadsides that defaced the town's walls. On the back wall of a closet in the palace a new portrait appeared, one which Prince Kadakithis was pleased to receive from Lalo the Limner but which he did not desire to display in public, as it showed, with the preternatural accuracy of Lalo's brush, the True Soul of a naked ugly man in the stocks at the House of Whips. It was a portrait which might be of use to the prince should the new Emperor

plan another visit to Sanctuary, and its subject knew the prince possessed it.

A small dog had to be told point-blank not to do so many tricks, as she was stealing the scene in which she appeared from the star,

And one night, when the actors all repaired to the greenroom, the jardinières were filled with fragrant black roses.

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Duane McGowen

Rumor had it that some measure of prosperity was once again gracing the streets of Sanctuary. The reign of terror that had lasted since the False Plague Riots had abated, as the various factions which had fractured Sanctuary into warring districts crumbled in upon themselves or left town for new frontiers or more profitable battles. The streets seemed to be peaceful and relatively calm recently, and business seemed to be returning to normal. "Seemed" being the operative word on both counts.

There could be no doubt, however, that commerce was on the up-and-up these days. Beysib and Rankan invaders alike seemed to favor diplomacy over military action and turmoil. Terrorist activities by the PFLS, which had all but brought the business world to a standstill, were on the

decline. If one were inclined to believe the wildest rumors, it was said among some that Zip, the former PFLS leader, was now in charge of assuring peace on Sanctuary's streets. Though many shook their heads in doubt at this bit of highly speculative information, there could be no denying that the nights were now free of terrorist raids, and that young toughs no longer came to the merchant stalls by day to collect "protection" money from bullied peddlers.

"Sanctuary is finally what Sanctuary should be," the merchant class agreed. For they were making the most profit out of the town's newfound prosperity. The masons, workers, and craftsmen who had poured into town to build the walls commissioned by Molin Torchholder were now plying their respective trades in the city at large. The enriched artisans increased the wealth of the local merchants as buying and selling became the backbone of Sanctuary's upward-rising economy. The most shrewd

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entrepreneurs were looking into the future for wise and lucrative business investments. The town that had once been considered "the anus of the Empire" was now a place for people of that broken and war-torn Empire to come and rebuild their lives.

This was true of many refugees from troubled Ranke, who paid the

caravan-masters handsomely to bring them across the desert to the port city under the rulership of the Rankan Prince Kadakithis and his Beysib consort, Shupansea. Some of these refugees had relatives in the Rankan populace who took them in and gave them shelter and comfort. Others, like Mariat, were not so lucky. Having no one else to turn to, Mariat had brought her three grandchildren, the surviving remnants of her once powerful and affluent family, to Sanctuary to rebuild their lives from scratch. With only her own determination and wit to rely on, she was still optimistic about the future.

Mariat drew her wagon to a halt at the entrance to the Bazaar. Behind her, the other wagon driven by her eldest grandson, Keldrick, also came to a stop. Keldrick and his sister, Darseeya, kept an alert watch to make sure that no one approached the two wagons without warning. Though the boy was only fourteen and the girl twelve, the events of the past year had matured them beyond the normal bounds of childhood. They knew that no unscrupulous eyes should be allowed to view the contents hidden in the two covered wagons. For there lay the future of Mariat's family.

While her two older grandchildren kept watch and the youngest one slept in the back of her wagon, Mariat scanned the Bazaar for the safest, least crowded route through it to the residential parts of Sanctuary. Her little troupe formed an island of motionless calm in a sea of swirling activity. Around them danced the brightly colored skirts of the S'danzo. Merchants cried their wares and buyers bought them. Garrison soldiers

strode boldly through the crowd with the seeming, if not the actuality, of purpose. Here and there, beggars begged and pickpockets dodged artfully from purse to purse. The bleating, baying, and neighing of the animals in their pens were almost indistinguishable from the noises made by the buyers, sellers, and thieves of the Bazaar.

It was not the first time in the past several months that Mariat realized she was out of her element. She passed a hand through her gray hair which had rapidly been turning white as the days dragged by since her former life had come to an abrupt and bloody close. It never even occurred to the middle-aged woman to dye her hair to the color of youth, as many of the women in her former social sphere had done. She bore her gray hair as a badge of honor which should rightly come with age. And her determination and positive outlook kept her face and bearing young and graceful, despite the horrors she had suffered recently.

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She was a tall, stately, slim woman in her mid-fifties. Her posture was straight and perfect, and she exuded the cultured mannerisms and grace of a woman of station, which she had indeed been scant months before.

Mariat had been impressed with her first sight of Sanctuary: the city's tall new walls shining in the morning light. Now she was once again faced with nagging doubts, which nibbled like little demons at the back of her mind, as she surveyed the chaos and pandemonium of the Bazaar. It

was an environment alien to a woman from the upper strata of Rankan society.

"Ah, there you are, madame," called a friendly and pleasant baritone voice which Mariat had come to love during her journey to this place.

She turned and saw the minstrel Sinn heading toward her through the crowd. As he squeezed between two fat merchants haggling over the price of a chicken, his hand deftly intercepted a street urchin reaching for his purse. The bearded, brown-haired bard looked at the quaking youth with mild amusement. The young beggar and thief was astonished at the quickness with which the man had caught him, and now fully expected to be turned over to the watch for due punishment. But Sinn merely smiled, and forced the boy's palm open. The minstrel inserted a silver piece into the urchin's hand, then closed the boy's fingers over it.

"Off with you now," the bard said, "and don't be telling any of your friends that I'm an easy mark, or I'll find you and nail your hide to the city wall."

As the minstrel let the boy go and watched the urchin disappear into the crowd, Mariat smiled and thought how typical such generosity was of the man called Sinn. She and her grandchildren had come to know and love him as he traveled with them in the caravan from Ranke to Sanctuary.

The bard had taken a liking to the three children, and had played with them and sung them to sleep every night. Mariat was glad, for he was the only positive masculine influence that the children had had since their own father, her son, had died suddenly and violently. For some reason, Sinn had attached himself to her family and looked after them during their caravan journey.

Now the bard approached her wagon. After giving the horses a reassuring pat on the nose, he turned and smiled up at the woman who held their reins in her hands.

"I believe I have found us suitable accommodations, madame," he said politely and cheerfully. Though Mariat could no longer make claim to her aristocratic station, Sinn still treated her with the grace and respect due a lady of substance. This not only endeared the charismatic minstrel to her even more, but was a constant source of strength and reassurance

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to her, planting and nurturing the seeds of belief in herself so that she could accomplish the task she had come to Sanctuary to fulfill.

"Come up then, friend," Mariat said, offering him the seat beside her on the wagon. "And lead us to the place you have found. I am parched and travel-sore, and I wish to take a decent bath and eat a decent meal."

"You shall have both and more," Sinn answered, laying his mandolin carefully between himself and Mariat to make sure it came to no harm. The instrument was, after all, the tool of his livelihood. Then he directed Mariat out of the Bazaar towards the inn he had located, and Keldrick followed behind with the other wagon.

Much later that night, Mariat relaxed on a comfortable bed in her own private room. It was the first real respite she had had in many weeks. The establishment Sinn had discovered for them was called the Warm Kettle. It was a quaint and charming inn, located in a decent part of town. "Decent" meaning it was not in Downwind or the Maze. Having only been in town one day, Mariat had already learned that honest people avoided those two thief-infested rat holes like the proverbial plague.

The proprietors of the Warm Kettle were a pleasant, elderly Ilsigi couple. Shamut and his wife, Dansea, had been in operation long before the Rankans took over, and their business went on undisturbed for the most part by any of Sanctuary's troubles. This was mostly due to the fact that they minded their own business and ran an honest establishment.

The couple asked no questions of their clients, and they expected no trouble in return. Shamut had been more than helpful in assuaging some of Mariat's foremost anxieties. The contents of her wagons, which she had guarded preciously across the mountains and through the desert,

were now safely housed in the locked vaults of Shamut's cellars. The Ilsigi innkeeper had also been able to recommend merchants and tradesmen she could contact about business investments. Lastly, he had provided her with the name of the man to whom she would have to go to find out about the availability and price of land around Sanctuary: the city's foremost bureaucrat, Molin Torchholder—Rankan priest.

With her goods and her grandchildren safe for the moment, Mariat sought her first night of true, peaceful rest in months. However, as she unwound and let the sweet winds of sleep carry her into unconscious oblivion, the ghosts of her recent past were resurrected and met her on the threshold of nightmare,

She drifted back to her life of nine months ago. Her husband, Kranderon, had run the most successful and respected vineyard in all of Ranke—the Aquinta Winery. Aquinta was a western province of Ranke, and its soil yielded the most suitable grapes for fine wine. Kranderon's

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family had built a mercantile empire on their vintage, which was considered the finest, most superior wine in all the lands. It was the nectar of emperors and kings, and people of cultured tastes lauded its praises from as far north as Mygdonia to as far south as Sanctuary.

Mariat, who had come from a minor noble house of Ranke, had mar-

ried the dashing young Kranderon, heir to the Aquinta wine empire. For nearly forty years her life had been easy, cultured, and aristocratic. She was accustomed to the finer things of life, to hosting balls and dinner parties and wine-tasting extravaganzas. The former Rankan Emperor, Abakithis, had visited their estate often to personally survey their stock for his own wine cellars. The Emperor had held Kranderon and Mariat in high esteem.

But, unfortunately, emperors have a way of dying and empires do change hands. The new Rankan Emperor, Theron, though a brilliant military strategist, had little appreciation for the finer points of culture and etiquette. His taste ran more towards large quantities of ale than the refined delicacies of vintage wine.

And Kranderon, though farsighted in business ventures and money-making opportunities, was shortsighted in the political and military arena.

As the Rankan Empire began to crumble in upon itself with intrigue, upheaval, and treachery, the former allies and friends of Abakithis fawned upon Theron, assuring him of their loyalties and disclaiming any allegiance or respect for the previous Emperor who had once embraced them as friends and peers.

Kranderon was not so quick to desert the memory of his old friend

Abakithis. The wine merchant openly criticized Theron's administration, and insinuated that the new Emperor had committed treason in playing a part in his predecessor's assassination. His loyalty to the murdered Emperor cost Kranderon dearly.

As Ranke fragmented and languished in turmoil, many outlaw bands began to scourge the outlying province. Theron found excuses to conveniently withdraw Rankan troops from Aquinta. Kranderon was not worried, however, for he felt that he and his men could hold their own against undisciplined outlaws and brigands.

One night nine months ago, however, a suspiciously orderly group of brigands attacked the estate. Though wearing the apparel and brandishing the weapons of outlaws, the men who raided Aquinta fought with the discipline and tactics of seasoned soldiers and veterans of many campaigns.

Kranderon and his men were overrun. The squire of Aquinta saw his only son fall, fighting valiantly to protect his young wife. Kranderon

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himself was taken prisoner, and forced to watch as the soldiers disguised as outlaws had their sport with his daughter-in-law, the mother of his three grandchildren, in view of her fallen husband's corpse. When they had finished with her, one man held her head back by her hair and slit

her throat. The raiders laughed as her life's blood shot high into the air.

They slashed and burned a large portion of the vineyards, and they broke into the cellars and smashed open the aging vintage. Kranderon watched as a fortune in wine spilled across the floors of his home and mingled with the blood of its fallen defenders. Then the raiders hung the squire by the neck with one of his own supple young grapevines. As Kranderon slowly strangled, they fired arrows into nonvital parts of his body to increase his agony. Then they rode into the night, taking no plunder with them as brigands were wont to do.

The message was clear to all the other squires in outlying areas. Theron's wrath was keen and swift to vengeance. The other estate masters flocked to Theron's court to join the ranks of sycophants clinging to the last shreds of a rotted, corrupt Empire.

But the sacking of Aquinta had not been complete, Mariat had cloistered herself with her grandchildren—Keldrick, Darseeya, and five-year-old Timock—in the secret vaults hidden beneath the wine cellars. Those gloomy catacombs were known only to Kranderon and Mariat. It was there that they wisely hid their finest, most expensive vintage. Mariat's quick thinking saved herself and her grandchildren from the maelstrom of violence which descended on Aquinta that night.

The four surviving members of Kranderon's family left their hiding

place and crawled through the wreckage of the once formidable estate. In the throes of initial shock, Mariat was able to organize the remaining servants and bury her dead. Over the next few days, she denied herself the luxury of grief, for she knew that she must act quickly to assure her family's survival. She retrieved her husband's cache of money (which was not small by any means) and arranged for a caravan to take her south, out of the reach of vengeful Theron.

Mariat loaded one wagon full with her husband's finest vintage. The bottles of wine which would have purchased a small kingdom before were now made priceless because Aquinta was no more. The tragedy which had devastated Mariat's family had also placed a fortune in the woman's hands. The irony was not lost on her.

In a second wagon she loaded the few possessions her family would take with them, along with a secret she and her most trusted servants had worked far into the night to harvest. This secret of Mariat's was her key to rebuilding a viable future for her family in Sanctuary.

So now she was here in the city of new hopes and opportunities. As

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dawn broke through the window other room in the Warm Kettle, Mariat

threw off both the bonds of sleep and the chains of the past. She refused to let self-pity or grief deter her from her course. It was a new day in Sanctuary, and time for new beginnings.

In fact, Mariat thought, it would be a lovely day to take the children outside the city's walls for a picnic in the open lands.

It is often thought, but entirely untrue, that evil and ugliness always go hand in hand. In Bakarat's case, however, those two nonvirtues blended together in imperfectly perfect harmony.

He was called "the Toad" by his associates and others (though not to his face). One look at his person would abate any suspicions as to the veracity of the nickname.

His buttocks and gut were mammoth in proportion. Those who dealt with him often wondered if they would have to widen the doors of their business establishments to admit him. Atop those heaps and rolls of quivering flesh sat a hideous apparition of a head. As if in mockery of manly features, Bakarat's neckless head looked as though some insanely humorous god had sculptured in living flesh the likeness of a toad made human.

But Bakarat's mind was by no means as sluggish as his wobbly gait.

The Toad was known as the most successful merchant and entrepreneur in Sanctuary. Though all found the vision of his person revolting, none could afford to offend the wealthy merchant.

The Toad had not attained his exalted economical status by entirely honest means, either. Next to the legendary Jubal, he ran one of Sanctuary's most sophisticated and complex information and crime networks. In fact, it was rumored that the only reason Jubal had not eliminated this potential rival was the fact that Bakarat paid him well to turn a blind eye to his clandestine endeavors.

But Bakarat was also known for his expertise and shrewd deployment of business ventures. And this was why Mariat had arranged an appointment to see him the day after she took the children outside the city walls.

It had been nice to get the children outside the city and into the clean country air for a while. But the day had been profitable in more ways than one for the wine merchant's widow. For the land she saw about Sanctuary pleased her very much, and she was certain that much that had lain untouched for many years could be put to good use.

Now the realities of the business world had brought Mariat reluctantly to Bakarar's doorstep. The disdain she felt for the sniveling excuse for manhood which offered her a chair in his office was expertly hidden

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behind her facade of genteel grace. Mariat was far too good a socialite to let her feelings and emotions show in her demeanor.

Bakarar was also unreadable as he sat down across from her at his desk. When she had asked his scribe for an appointment the evening before, the Toad had immediately put his information network into action to find out all he could about the Rankan woman. After all, it was not often a woman of her apparent stature would condescend to deal with a "Wriggly" merchant such as Bakarar.

What he found out, he thought he could put to good use to serve his own greedy interests. He now knew, through his grapevine which reached even into honest establishments such as the Warm Kettle, that Mariat was the widow of the famous and recently departed Kranderon, squire of Aquinta Winery. This meant that the woman was perhaps well moneyed, and Bakarar's mind whirled with the possibilities of cheating her out of her fortune. It was also a safe assumption that, like most Rankan women of station, Mariat was not the keen business person her husband had been. The Toad relished the idea of taking advantage of the

woman's plight.

"Now, what may I do to serve you, madame?" the Toad intoned, being sure to address the woman according to her former station and thereby hopefully gain her trust. He had to make Mariat believe that he was concerned with her best interests in order to take full advantage of her.

"I have a proposal for you and your friends," Mariat said, coming straight to the point.

"Friends?" the fat man queried. "What friends are those? I am afraid I don't know what you are talking about." He smiled, approximating a look of ignorant innocence admirably.

"Come now, good sir, if we are to quibble over the realities of your business dealings we shall be here all day," Mariat countered, blunt but still pleasantly sociable. "And believe me, sir, with my busy schedule I do not have time to argue over trivial matters at the moment."

"But of course," the Toad said, beginning to re-evaluate the woman's business savvy, "However, I fail to see what my fellow merchants can help you with that I cannot. Perhaps you should tell me a little more about exactly what it is you are proposing?"

"Fair enough," Mariat said, relieved at getting the conversation back to the business at hand. "I want to make you and some of your trusted

merchant associates an offer to take part in the most successful and elaborate business venture to take place in Sanctuary in recent years."

Bakarat raised a suspicious eyebrow,

"Really," he said with a slightly sarcastic drawl. "That is quite a grandiose statement. I trust you have some means other than high-flown

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words to persuade my associates and I of the soundness of this proposal?"

"Indeed," Mariat said, and she reached in her carrying bag and produced a corked and sealed bottle, which she placed delicately on the desk in front of the merchant. She carefully turned the bottle so that he could view its rich, red, full-bodied contents, and she made sure the label pointed in his direction so that he could read it.

The Toad looked even more like his namesake as his eyes bulged when he read the label. It was a bottle of Aquinta's finest vintage; ten years old and oak-barrel aged. Before the sacking of the vineyard, it would have brought at least a hundred gold pieces in the wine market. Now, being part of a limited edition of wine (the vineyard no longer being in operation), it might draw at least ten times that much in auction.

"Huh—uh—how many of these do you have, my good lady?" the fat merchant stammered. Mariat smiled, pleased at having taken Bakarar by surprise and gained the upper hand in negotiations.

The Rankan widow had not spent forty years as the wife of Ranke's foremost wine merchant and learned nothing. Her husband had taught her well the trade of doing business.

"Let us just say that I have enough to interest you and your associates. Perhaps now you would be so good as to arrange a meeting with them tomorrow afternoon in the common room of the Warm Kettle. I have rented that room from Shamut the proprietor, and he assures me that no one will disturb our business meeting."

She paused, smiling at the Toad's gaping maw. Bakarar was utterly surprised by the woman's quick-dealing business manner. However, he soon got control of himself as the engines of his devious mind went whirring into action, calculating how he could best turn this deal to his advantage.

"I believe I know of five men who will be most happy to hear your proposal for the sale of this fine vintage. However, if you will permit me to act as your agent in this endeavor, I will be happy to relieve you of the unpleasant tasks of business arrangements," Bakarar said, conveying himself as the soul of virtue and goodwill.

**I thank you for your generous offer," Mariat replied just as sweetly,
"but I really could not burden you with so weighty a responsibility on my
account."

She rose quickly, holding up her hand to stop any further objection.

"Enough of these pleasantries, though," she said, collecting the bottle
from Bakarar's desk and replacing it carefully in her carrying bag. "I
have other things to attend to today. Thank you, good sir. I look forward
to seeing you and your friends tomorrow at the Warm Kettle."

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With that she took her leave from Bakarar's establishment, and he
attempted to delay her no longer. He had already formulated his plan for
handling this upstart Rankan bitch. He would show her the cost of doing
business in Sanctuary, and he would by all means maintain the upper
hand in the distribution of the wine.

"Bartleby," the Toad called his scribe into his office.

"Yes, sir," the thin, weedy, long-nosed scrivener whined as he entered
his employer's domain.

"Get me Madame Mariat's itinerary for the rest of the day," the fat merchant ordered. "And then contact our good servant, Master Mange, and tell him to meet me with his associates at the Vulgar Unicorn tonight at dusk."

Bartleby swallowed, knowing that the name of Mange meant some skullduggery was afoot. He hastened to comply with his master's wishes.

Molin Torchholder was a very busy man. Over the past years since coming to Sanctuary, he found that most bureaucratic matters had fallen squarely upon his shoulders, and that many of the more mundane governmental duties had become his responsibility. This was primarily due to the fact that Prince Kadakithis could not be bothered with such technicalities. The youthful prince was far too busy pursuing his idealistic dreams for the unification of Sanctuary's varied peoples, not to mention his ongoing "task" of keeping the Beysa occupied, mollified, and satisfied.

However, when word came to the Rankan priest that a woman named Mariat wanted to see him, he put aside his scheduling and planning for the rebuilding and continuing edification of Sanctuary to arrange an appointment to see her. The Torch had known her husband by reputation and had even met Mariat once or twice back in the heyday of Ranke's splendor. He had heard of the tragedy which had struck Aquinta, and he was now curious to find out why Mariat had come to Sanctuary, and what possible business she could have with him.

A soft knock came at Molin's door. It was Hoxa, his secretary, letting him know that Mariat was there to see him. The priest nodded for Hoxa to let the woman into his office.

"Greetings, madame," Molin said, rising and coming to meet her as if she were an acquaintance he had not seen for many long years. In actuality, that was the case, though he had not known her well back in Ranke.

"Lord Torchholder." Mariat curtsied as the priest kissed her hand. "It has been far too long since I have had the pleasure of your company."

"Please accept my deepest sympathies and condolences on the recent deaths in your family," Molin said with unfeigned concern. "Kranderon

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was a fine man and an astute businessman. He will be sorely missed by all who knew him."

"My thanks for your kindness and thoughtfulness," Mariat said, as she accepted the seat Molin offered her. He himself chose a seat next to hers, rather than returning to the chair behind the desk which he had occupied before her entrance. The priest did this as a show of respect, treating her as a peer rather than a subordinate.

It also occurred to the Torch that the woman had been speaking the finest Court Rankene since she had entered his office. She spoke it so naturally that he had slipped into the court language himself without even realizing it. It was going to be a pleasure to hold discourse with someone so cultured and polite.

"And please accept my sympathies, for I believe that you lost your beloved wife not too long ago," Mariat continued.

"Yes," the Torch replied. "But my wife and I had been estranged for some time. Even still, I believe that we can both understand the poignancy of grief which death can bring."

Molin paused, and then continued, trying to get the conversation away from the intensely personal subject at hand.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this timely visit?" the priest asked, broaching the subject as politely as possible.

"I have heard so much about you, Lord Torchholder, since I entered Sanctuary. People say that you have done wonders for this town, rebuilding the city walls and restoring order," Mariat began, smiling sweetly and demurely.

Looking into her face, which was very handsome for a woman of her

years, the Torch realized that it had been a very long time since he had exchanged pleasantries with a woman so near his age and station. This interview was turning out to be an enjoyable interlude for the worry-laden priest.

"You are most kind, madame. I have labored to bring this thief-ridden town up to some measure of respectability. Your kind comments are a tribute to what little success I have had." the priest said modestly.

"It's been more than a little success from my vantage point, my lord. Why, I have even heard it said in some parts of the Empire that Sanctuary is a place to come to start life anew," Mariat returned, maintaining the air of grace and decorum.

"Is this your intention, to start your life over in Sanctuary? I am sure that Kranderon has left you sufficiently provided for. Perhaps a retirement to one of the uptown estates would be of interest to you. I am sure I can arrange a lease for a reasonable price, between friends." Lord

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Torchholder was finding himself hoping that the woman would indeed move uptown and become a part of his social sphere.

"Actually, I had something more audacious in mind, my lord," Mariat

said, flirting gingerly with the priest. "In fact, I am formulating a business venture which will benefit Sanctuary's economy considerably."

That statement took even conspiracy-seasoned Molin by surprise. He blinked at her incredulously.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I think perhaps you would like to have your secretary join us, so he can take notes on what I am about to propose," Mariat said. Suddenly but smoothly the courtly lady transformed into a businesswoman.

The Torch rose and crossed over to the door of his office.

"Hoxa," he called. "Would you please come in here and bring pen and parchment?"

As the priest's secretary seated himself, Mariat laid out her plan for the future. Skeptical at first, Molin soon lost his cynical outlook and was drinking in her plan wholeheartedly. Hoxa was so dumbfounded by the brilliant simplicity of the plan that he stopped taking notes several times just to listen to the wine merchant's widow. Then, of course, they had to go back over the points he missed so they could have them recorded.

After obtaining information and the answers to certain questions from the priest, Mariat left Molin Torchholder with the latter's assurance that

he would be in attendance at the merchants' meeting in the Warm Kettle the next day.

As Mariat left the palace complex which housed the priest's office, she felt light on her feet and much younger than her years. Everything seemed to be coming together beautifully.

Back in the Torch's office, Hoxa also commented with optimism, "I think she can really pull it off. She actually sees Sanctuary as a place to build, not to tear down." He turned to his superior and asked: "Could it be that this is no longer the same city you came to years ago?"

Molin Torchholder sighed and said, "Perhaps we have done some good after all."

As the stranger entered the Vulgar Unicorn, he took in the scenery with one sweeping glance. Though he had been in his share of dives and bars all across the Empire, never had he seen so despicable an assemblage of depraved and unsavory individuals. The denizens of the Vulgar Unicorn made the street slime of the Bazaar look like saints and princes in comparison. There was not an honest face or an untainted soul in the place.

The stranger made his way over to one of two free tables against the

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barroom's west wall. He sat down and waited to be served. He shivered as he contemplated the night dangers of the Maze he had just braved to come to this place.

He did not have long to wait, for soon the barmaid made her way over to his table.

"What'll it be, luv?" she said, with a disinterested glaze in her eyes. Those eyes widened in disbelief at his answer.

"Just a cup of boiling water, if you would be so kind, my girl," the stranger said. "I have some herbal tea which I think I'll take before sampling your establishment's finest."

"Water costs the same as ale," the barmaid said tartly. "That's the rule of the barkeep, Abohorrr the One-Thumbbed."

"Please be so kind as to tell that august personage of monodigitation that I will pay just such a price," the stranger retorted with a sophisticated air.

He watched bemused as the wench tried to work out the meaning of the words.

"That means I'll pay!" he said in mock exasperation. "So just bring me the water, and make sure it's boiling hot."

As the barmaid left to fulfill his request, a heap of filthy rags detached itself from the bar and shambled in the stranger's direction. As it approached his table, the man saw that the rags housed the even filthier body of a wizened old man. Out from the crowd peered a withered and ruined face, across which a deep and ugly scar cut diagonally, in and out of a black and dirty patch over the unfortunate's right eye.

"Spare a few coppers for a man down on his luck," the old beggar wheezed, blowing a noxious fume in the other man's direction.

The stranger, however, proved to be no soft touch or easy mark. He pulled his cloak aside to show not a purse, but weaponry that had heretofore remained hidden. At his side was a stylish, basket-hilted short sword. Across his left breast was a belt housing several feathered, steel darts.

"If you would like to eke out the rest of your miserable existence, I would suggest you move along. Otherwise, I could arrange for you to make an early withdrawal from this hellhole." The stranger was being sarcastic, but there was enough menace in his eyes to warn the old beggar off.

As he returned to his place at the bar, the old man muttered under his breath, "Gettin' pretty damn difficult to earn a decent living these days. Nobody respects the beggin' class anymore."

The barmaid brought the stranger his boiling water, and he brewed himself a cup of tea with it. It was a special krrf derivative which would

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enhance and heighten his artistic senses, though it would dull his practical perspective somewhat. The drug was often used to supplement the working of his trade, that being the singing of songs and the weaving of tales.

As the stranger sipped his tea, a more familiar figure waddled into the Vulgar Unicorn. It was Bakarar, called the Toad, one of the most affluent

men of Sanctuary's merchant class. The fat man waded through the crowd to the remaining free table on the west wall. As he seated himself, ignoring the stranger at the next table, three other seedy characters left their stations at the bar and slid (or more appropriately slithered) into the seats opposite the Toad. They began their devious conniving, trusting the noise of the barroom to cover their clandestine plan-making.

"I have a job for you, Mange," Bakarar said, addressing the oldest of the three men across the table from him.

Like the Toad himself, the man he spoke to fully warranted his nickname. Mange was a bounty hunter. And on one too many nights of sleeping on the forest floor of the swamps, he had picked up a rare scalp disease which caused his hair to fall out in patches. Hence the unkind name "Mange."

"What is it?" the patchy-headed man replied. "The boys and I are always happy to be of service to you."

Mange referred to his two companions. Bakarar knew their reputations from his previous dealings with Mange. The big, muscle-bound, lantern-jawed oaf was named Wik. He was the bounty hunter's muscle. Wik continued drinking ale, paying little attention to the bantering of Mange and the Toad. Decisions and plan-making were the work of those better suited for it mentally. Wik was happy to take his orders and spend the

money he got buying a few moments of even more ignorant (if that were possible) bliss in drunken stupor.

The third man was a skinny, snotty-nosed youth named Speido. He aspired to the thief's profession and had a particular talent for stabbing unarmed and unsuspecting people in the back.

"Listen up, we don't have much time," Bakarat ordered his three companions. Then he laid out the plan that they were to apply their special talents to.

"An old woman named Maria! will be returning to her rooms at the Warm Kettle shortly. She'll be bringing her three grandchildren with her, and they will be returning from an interview at the Scholar's Guild where she was hiring the kids a tutor."

"How do you know when she'll be getting back to the Kettle?" Speido sneered. "Surely she won't be walking the streets at night with those brats."

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"I have paid to have her delayed," the Toad replied in an aloof manner. "My connections in the Scholar's Guild will make sure she leaves at the time appointed."

Mange smiled as the merchant put Speido in his place. The young bravo had a lot to learn when it came to dealing with men of Bakarat's caliber. It never occurred to the bounty hunter to question that what the fat man told them would transpire exactly as planned.

"You three are to kidnap the children," Bakarat continued. "And make sure that you do not harm them. Then take them to the normal holding place and wait for further instructions." Bakarat finished his orders with giving the men Mariat's description. Then the trio of bandits rose and left the Vulgar Unicorn to fulfill their errand.

After they left, Bakarat called one of the local harlots over to his table. As the fat man was distracted with her attentions, the stranger seated behind him slid off his chair and wove his way through the crowd to the door. Progress was slow and cumbersome, due to the crowded conditions, the krrf tea the man had drunk, and the anxiety which was quickly overcoming him.

As he moved through the room, his cloak fell to one side, revealing a mandolin which was slung across his shoulder.

Seeing it, one of the tavern patrons cried for the minstrel to give them a song. Although the man had originally come to this dive in hopes of such employment, he turned it down now as a far more important matter possessed his mind.

He reached the door and miraculously avoided any brawls caused by bumping into the Unicorn's uncouth clientele. He escaped into the night and paused briefly to breathe the unpolluted air outside- Of course, the three men he was looking for had already disappeared.

Taking a deep breath, Sinn took off in a run to make his way out of the Maze.

As he wound his way back through the alleys and twisting turns of the portion of town called the Maze, Sinn cursed his krrf-muddled senses.

Part of his success as a minstrel was due to the fact that he etched every detail of everywhere he went indelibly into his mind. Now, however, he was in a state of panic, fearing for the lives of his friends. And the drugged tea he drank was no help as he struggled to remember the course out of this rat hole. His heart sank as he realized that the thugs would probably reach the Warm Kettle long before he would have a chance to get there and warn Mariat of her danger.

He swore for the one-thousandth time to kick the habit of taking krrf. This time, he had an impetus which he felt might make his oath stick,

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The bard skidded to a dead halt at an unfamiliar intersection. He looked around him bewildered, his heart leaping up into his throat and its very beat screaming accusations of ineptitude at him.

Then he spotted a familiar landmark, a house with red-painted shutters down the right-hand road. He took off again and passed through a shadowy lane. His hopes were just beginning to rise when a figure leapt out of the shadows. Catching him by the arm, it spun him around to face the bare steel of an unsheathed stiletto.

"Since you're in such a hurry," the thief whispered, his rank breath rich with garlic and beer, "you won't mind if I relieve you of the heavy burden of your purse. That way, you can get where you're going much faster." The thief sneered as he motioned with the knife for Sinn to give him what he wanted.

The sudden shock of the confrontation cleared the bard's head. As the drug's effects dissipated, he drove the reason-freezing panic from his mind.

Sinn nodded condescendingly and reached slowly into his cloak. The thief licked his lips, expecting a nice haul from one so richly dressed as the minstrel was.

To his surprise, the thief suddenly found himself looking down the blade of a fancy short sword. The moonlight gleamed wickedly off its sharpened edge, promising death.

The minstrel's quick and deft movement had been a single blur of motion. Now Sinn had the upper hand on the situation.

"Out of my face, damn you," the bard cried. "Or I'll nail what little brains you have to the back of your skull!"

The thief gulped, turned, and ran, disappearing quickly into the shadows of the Maze.

Sinn forgot him instantly and took in his surroundings- He was now completely disoriented and had no idea as to which way he should go to get out of the Maze and make it back to the Kettle.

With a silent prayer for inspiration and direction to whatever gods would listen, the bard fled up the street and into the night.

Mariat let out a gasp of relief as she rounded the street corner and saw the friendly, familiar lights of the Warm Kettle just ahead. It was neither wise nor safe to be walking the streets at night, even in this relatively calm section of Sanctuary. The empty streets and sidewalks she had traveled on her way from the Scholar's Guild attested to that fact.

She cursed those idiot scholars and their paper-shuffling nonsense. She would have had the children home long before dark if they had not batted her around from person to person, like a ball in some children's

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game. After the runaround she had received, she would have walked out on them, were it not for the fact that there were not too many educated people in Sanctuary. Her grandchildren needed tutors, and they deserved the best. She would simply have to overlook the inconvenience caused by the inept clerks.

The Kettle was only four blocks away when a man stepped out of a dark alley and blocked her path. Mariat drew back suddenly and pulled the children close around her.

"What do you want?" She fought to keep fear from showing in her voice. Being an educated woman, she knew that animals were more likely to attack when they sensed fear. And men who harassed women and children were no better than rabid animals.

The man was peculiar-looking. His head looked as though his hair had been torn out in patches, rather than balding naturally. He smiled luridly.

"It's not safe for a woman of quality to be walking the young lads and lassie alone at night with no protection," he sneered. "Perhaps you'll allow me to be your escort."

"I recommend that you step out of our way and leave us alone," Mariat said, addressing the ruffian in such a way as to put him in his place. "I will call for the watch if you do not leave us immediately."

"Oh, now, that ain't polite," Mange drawled, "nor is it particularly wise. My friends behind you might do some injury to your kiddies before those sleeping dogs on the watch got here."

Mariat now whirled and looked behind her. Sure enough, two more figures detached themselves from the shadows and moved to block her retreat. One was a large, hulking brute. The other was a slim, sinister youth. Both looked like they would just as soon slit her throat as talk to her.

"Now," continued Mange, "the boys and I will just take these beautiful children to a place of"—he paused and winked at her—"safekeeping. Later on you'll be notified as to where you can pick them up, and how much their room and board will cost you."

"Kidnapping," Mariat whispered, under her breath. "And ransom . . . who is putting you up to this?" Her voice rose as anger began to take possession of her.

"Shhh. Quiet. Madame Mariat," Mange said, and smiled when he saw the shock register in her eyes as he used her name. "We wouldn't want to wake up the good people of this neighborhood, would we? My, but that could turn into nasty, bloody business, couldn't it, boys?"

Wik and Speido snorted in amusement.

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"And some little children might not get to grow up," Mange concluded menacingly. "Wouldn't that be a shame, Grandma?"

Mariat swallowed, and the paralysis of fear and panic crept slowly through her body. In all her scheming, she had never planned on the life-threatening situation which now faced her. She had been hoping to avoid the more unsavory aspects of living in Sanctuary altogether. Now she knew that was not possible, and some things never changed. Though more prosperous, Sanctuary was still a thieves' world. She hoped that this schooling would not cost her the price of her grandchildren's lives. They were the only family she had left. They were her only reason for living.

"That's better now," Mange was saying as he moved forward. "Nice and compliant, like a good old Rankan bitch."

What happened next caught everyone by surprise, including Mariat. Incensed with rage at hearing his grandmother addressed so, young Keldrick broke free of his fear. He leapt forward with a kick, putting all the weight of his body into it, which slammed with a sickening thud into Mange's groin.

The bounty hunter screamed in surprise and pain, and fell to the ground, rolling in agony and clutching at his crotch.

Wik grabbed hold of Keldrick and lifted the boy high into the air, shaking him. Speido sprang forward and backhanded Mariat across the face, knocking her to the ground. Then he scooped up Darseeya and Timock into his lanky arms.

Suddenly, the feathered shafts of two darts sprouted from Wik's right shoulder. The big oaf bellowed and dropped Keldrick to the ground. Then Wik spun around tugging at the hated sting in his back.

Sinn came roaring out of the night like a demon released from hell. Behind him ran the street urchin to whom, two days before, he had given a silver bit in the Bazaar. The boy, named Jakar, had seen Smn wandering lost in the Maze and had returned the bard's generosity by leading him out of the tangled streets and to the Warm Kettle.

Speido dropped the children he was holding and pulled his dagger.

Mariat staggered to her feet and screamed.

"Murder! Murder! Help!!!" She prayed desperately for the watch to hear and answer her cry.

Sinn pulled up short and drew his weapon on Speido. When the sniveling youth saw that his dagger was facing a short sword, he lost all heart for the fight and tried to turn tail and run for it.

Speido only made it a few feet before Keldrick threw himself across the thief's path. Speido tripped and sprawled headlong on the ground, and

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Jakar leapt immediately on his back and battered the thief into unconsciousness with a small cudgel.

Mange was still lying on the ground clutching himself and watching the world spin around. But Wik, having pulled the darts from his shoulder, roared like a bull as he plowed into Sinn, bowling the minstrel over with the sheer bulk of his weight.

As the giant pinned Sinn to the ground, the bard felt his breath quickly leaving him. He worked his sword arm free and slammed the flat of the blade against the big man's skull. Had he known Wik any better, he

would have aimed for a more vital part of the man's anatomy.

Wik rose from the ground like the personification of wrath. In his upraised hands, he lifted the man who had interrupted a simple, uncomplicated assignment. The big brute ignored the old woman and children clinging to his massive frame who were trying to deflect him from his purpose. He hurled the minstrel at the nearest wall with all the force he could muster.

Sinn felt some of his ribs crack and give way as he slammed into the building. As he crumpled to the ground in a mangled heap, he strove to fight off the darkness which was insisting on overwhelming him. He could not leave Mariat and the children undefended-
But as he lost his grip on the conscious world, he heard at last the unmistakable voice of the watch.

"Halt in the name of the prince!!" they cried.

Then oblivion took him.

Bakarat shifted his massive bulk uncomfortably in his seat. He looked disdainfully at his five fellow merchants seated in the common room of the Warm Kettle. The chairs Shamut had provided for the meeting were quite comfortable for them, but a man of the Toad's prestigious girth needed something more accommodating to his size.

He was about to call for Shamut to give him something more comfortable, when Mariat made her entrance into the room.

The fat merchant regarded her with hate. Somehow, she had made his plans last night go awry. He had learned from his underground network of informants that Mange and his cohorts had failed in their task.

Bakarat did not worry about them implicating him. He had too many friends in high places. But he was exceedingly aggravated at having to enter this meeting without leverage over the woman Mariat.

The Rankan widow cleared her throat and called the meeting to order.

"Gentlemen," she began. "My thanks to you for taking time out of your busy and pressing schedules to come to this little get-together. I promise you I will make it worth your while."

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Bakarat smiled to himself as he glanced at his business associates and saw the skeptical looks on their faces. Although none of them would ever sink to the depths of criminal intrigue at which the Toad operated, they were all shrewd businessmen who looked cynical of the fact that a woman could have something of interest for them to consider, other than her body-

"First," Mariat continued, "allow me to make two special introductions."

As she spoke, a young boy in his early teens entered the room. He brought with him a clean slate upon which he began to draw a map.

"This is my grandson Keldrick, who has recently proved himself man enough to take part in this assembly."

The merchants shifted uncomfortably, not quite understanding what she meant. Bakarar was becoming more and more agitated as the scene developed according to Mariat's plan.

"And may I also introduce Lord Molm Torchholder, who has come to hear and appraise our proposal as well."

Now the men in the room were absolutely stunned. They sprang to their feet, knocking over some of their chairs, in order to give due deference to the Rankan priest whom all knew by reputation. Bakarar was embarrassed to find that his chair followed him when he stood up to bow to the Torch. With his fat rump squeezed against its sides, the chair had a grip on him like a vise.

"Please be seated, gentlemen." Lord Torchholder waved all of them back to their chairs. "Let us hear what Madame Mariat has to say to us."

The merchants sat themselves down and now gave their alert attention to the Rankan widow. The presence of Lord Torchholder gave immense credibility to Mariat. Now they were willing, even eager, to hear what she had to say. All of them except the Toad.

"Thank you, my lord," Mariat acknowledged Molin's statement. "And now to the business at hand."

"All of you are aware that Aquinta wine was the most sought-after vintage in all the Empire. In fact, I have been informed by Lord Torchholder that only the wealthiest of Sanctuary's elite have ever been able to sample its famous bouquet."

"That's true," said one of the merchants, "but what is that to us? We have all heard what happened in Aquinta. There will be no more wine forthcoming from those fields."

"That is sadly all too true," Mariat continued. "But I have called you gentlemen here today to inform you that I possess an entire wagonload of Aquinta's finest vintage, and I have it safely housed right here in Sanctuary!"

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The implications of the announcement were not lost on this group of men. Being merchants, they all knew that one or two bottles of the precious, now priceless wine would bring an unbelievable price at auction. To tell them that an entire wagonload was available was like telling someone that a mountain of gold is waiting in his backyard, ripe for the taking. Even Bakarar, who knew the purpose of the meeting (or so he thought), was taken aback.

"So you're coming to us to back the auction of your merchandise?" one of the other merchants asked hopefully.

"Yes, but that is not the end of it," Mariat said. Now was the time to present her plan—her whole reason for coming to Sanctuary. She said a silent prayer as she prepared to reveal her proposal to these men of business and profit.

Bakarar was feeling increasingly uncomfortable. First the woman had thrown in an ace in the hole by inviting the Torch. Now she was introducing an entirely new scheme. He felt control of the meeting slipping from his already shaky grasp.

"Just a moment," the Toad objected. "Either you want us to help you sell the stuff, or you don't. Which is it? I wish you would get to the point because our time is very valuable."

"Very well," Mariat replied, staying calm and showing much more common sense than the fat merchant was displaying.

"The prime vintage was not the only treasure I have brought to this city." Mariat paused. She had them completely in her grasp. They were all wondering what else could possibly match the revelation of wealth she had already made. All of them were on the edge of their chairs, except for the Torch, who already knew of her plan.

"In another wagon, I brought with me five hundred saplings of my hardiest vines from Aquinta. They have been stripped and prepared for travel, but within six months of their planting they will yield fruit from which we can begin pressing wine. Within three years, we will have the first fine vintage ready. In the meantime, we will slowly auction off the wine I have brought from Aquinta for capital."

She paused to let her proposal sink in. The Torch, she knew, was already willing to back her. The other five merchants were looking at each other thoughtfully. But the Toad was shaking with beet-faced rage. He looked like he might literally croak. He could not accept the fact that he was being outmaneuvered by a woman.

"You're insane," he said, rising and knocking the chair off his huge butt. "And the rest of you are insane if you're going to seriously consider this cockeyed plan. She wants you to pour your money into this ridicu-

lous scheme of hers, and for what?" He turned to Mariat again. "What

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do we get in return for our investment? Three years of waiting and then nothing when it falls apart"

"Please, To—I mean, Master Bakarar, calm yourself. My plan is as wise an investment as most. I am putting my entire life's savings into this venture, and I am opening up this proposal to let some of you in on it from the beginning. All I need is the capital to buy the land, the proper equipment, and hire the laborers. I supply the vines and the supervision of the vineyard. I offer the investors a forty percent share of the first five years' profits, after the wine becomes sellable. In the meantime, I offer the same percentage for all the existing wine we sell over the next three years. Gentlemen, you cannot lose."

"What makes you think you're qualified to run a vineyard?" Bakarar exclaimed.

"The fact that, with my husband, I operated the most successful vineyard in the Rankan Empire—the Aquinta!" Mariat countered the fat merchant. "Who do you think helped my husband all through the years with the operation of the winery? I even ran it alone when he was gone for long periods on business."

It was obvious that the other merchants were rapidly becoming convinced.

"This is madness, I tell you," Bakarar continued, oblivious of all reason himself. "There is no place to plant a vineyard in Sanctuary!"

"No, not in the city proper," Mariat agreed. "But outside the walls there lies tillable land that has lain fallow for years. I have examined the land and the soil, and found plots in the hills and the upper swamps which will be suitable for grapes, given the proper drainage and irrigation."

She pointed to the maps that Keldrick had drawn, and showed the men where she planned to set up the winery.

"That's government land," the Toad shouted. "You won't be able to buy that for the price of your entire stock of vintage!"

"As a matter of fact," Molin Torchholder interceded, "she will be able to purchase it for the price of its back taxes. As the minister in charge of land development, I see no reason why this land should be unused. I have heard Madame Mariat's proposal, and I am ready to enter into an agreement with her on behalf of the prince. Who is with me?"

The merchants all stood and shouted their willingness to participate.

Bakarat was absolutely livid.

"I warn you," he threatened his associates, "if you enter into a pact with this woman, you will regret it."

"Master Toad," Mariat said in disdain. The merchant whirled on her, not believing that she would dare to address him so.

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"This brings me to a bit of unpleasant business which I had hoped to delay until after the meeting. However, your arrogance and threats leave me no choice."

She opened the door and called into the hallway.

"Commander Walegrin, would you be so kind as to step in here, please?"

Mariat played her final card as the officer in charge of the city garrison strode into the room. Walegrin was followed by two of his men, one of whom was supporting the weak-looking figure of Sinn the minstrel.

"Commander, please perform your office." Mariat stepped back as Walegrin approached the completely dumbfounded Bakarat.

"I hereby place you, Bakarar the merchant, under arrest for conspiracy to commit kidnapping and extortion."

Fear struck the Toad for the first time.

"You can't do this to me," the fat man whined and objected. "You've got no evidence, no proof."

"Master Sinn," Walegrin asked, "would you be so kind as to affirm that you witnessed a conversation between Bakarar and three ruffians we now have in custody, in which the said Bakarar contracted their services to kidnap Mariat's grandchildren?"

"I do confirm it." Sinn managed to grate out the words between pain-clenched teeth. Though his broken ribs had been set and taken care of, he was not supposed to be up and about for another few weeks. He had insisted on coming, however, to play his part in the Toad's arrest.

Bakarar finally realized he was beaten, for the moment. He bowed his head in silence as Walegrin's guards bound his wrists. But as he left the room, the Toad lifted his ugly head to give Mariat one final, withering look of hatred and malice.

His glare said better than any words that he would not rest until he

had paid her back for this indignity.

"Don't worry about this dung heap, madame,"* Walegrin said as he shoved Bakarar out of the room. "He's going to be keeping the rats in the dungeon company for a very long time. I hope they won't be offended by his moving in on them."

Walegrin and his men left the room with their prisoner, and Dansea, the innkeeper's wife, came in and helped Sinn back to his room.

Mariat turned to the merchants.

"Well, friends, are we ready to drink a toast to the Aquinta Cartel?"*

They all agreed heartily. Darseeya and Timock came in on cue, bringing a bottle of fine Aquinta vintage, and the pact was sealed with a drink.

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Later, Lord Torchholder witnessed the more formal written agreement as the merchants signed their names to support Mariat's proposal.

And so the Aquinta Cartel was formed and officialized.

It was a beautiful day in the spring of Sanctuary as Mariat and her three grandchildren overlooked the land recently purchased by the Aquinta Cartel.

"There is so much work to be done," Mariat said to Keldrick, Dar-seeya, and Timock. "And we must never shirk from hard work. For on this land, we will build the new Aquinta."

"Keldrick," she said, bringing the boy around to face her. "You are the man of this family now. You must learn to lead as you have learned to be a man. I know you can, for you are the true son of your father and grandfather."

She paused and looked down at the run-down farmhouse which would soon be refurbished to be their home on the winery, in addition to the uptown mansion Lord Torchholder had arranged for them.

"Children, this is home, where we will spend our vintage years. This is where we build anew, from the ground up."

It was an entirely new kind of day dawning in Sanctuary. A day of hope.

QUICKSILVER DREAMS

Diana L. Paxson

"Aglon! I thought they'd killed you!"

He stands in her doorway, a pale figure in the moonlight that filters through the gauzy curtains, but no other man she knows has such fine shoulders or such a head of dark curly hair

"I'm surprised they let you come up to me at this hour—were you off on some mission? Why did they tell me you were dead?" Joia sits up in bed, throwing the covers aside in welcome. It must be late indeed, for the Aphrodisia House is silent.

He does not answer. Shadow veils him as he comes towards her. Then he's by the bed and once more the light falls across him. She sees him pale as a marble statue of a god—all except for the black gash in his throat where the blade went in . . . She opens her lips to scream, but his touch freezes her.

Cold! He is so cold . . .

"Eshi's tits! Joia, you gone crazy?"

The sharp slap was muffled by bed-curtains. Still whimpering, the girl fell back against the silk cushions. A dark figure moved; light sparked from the flints and a wavering spark of lamplight flared and grew.

"You're not Aglon!"

"Aglon's dead! You little bitch, have you had so many men you can't even remember?"

"Ricio . . ." The name ended in a little catch of the breath. The girl pushed herself onto one elbow, brushing tumbled auburn curls away

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from her eyes. "Thank the gods! I thought Aglon's ghost was . . . after me! I was so afraid."

She reached out to him, but he shrugged away her hand. He was very young, and the welts where she had scratched him were already rising red on his chest.

"Ricio, sweetest," whispered Joia. "You're not going to get mad just because I had a little nightmare? Look, I'm awake now. Don't want to waste the rest of the night, do you?"

"What's the use, if every time I touch you, you think I'm Aglon! I suppose all us garrison men are alike to you!" He sounded sullen, and she hid a smile.

"Oh, Ricio, it was a nightmare! He didn't mean anything to me once I met you!" This time he did not brush away her caress, but he was still

frowning. "Look—this is the only thing he ever gave me—" Lamplight played like quicksilver on the glimmering surface of the ball the girl took from the night table. His belt pouch was hanging on the bedpost, and she dropped it in. "You take it, Ricio. I don't need it anymore!"

Despite his pique his body was responding. Joia's hands grew bolder.

"You scratched me . . ." he said hoarsely, turning at last.

"I'll kiss it better, so?"

The guardsman groaned and eased back against the cushions as she bent over him.

"He came to me—last night. It was terrible . . ." Joia took a very small sip from the porcelain teacup that Valira pressed into her hand, then set it down again. Valira sighed. She was only twenty-two; even at the Aphrodisia House that was not yet old. The careful bleaching that lightened her Ilsgi-dark hair into something nearer gold hid no grey. Perhaps it was having a little daughter of her own that had made the other girls think of her as motherly.

"You were with Ricio?"

"He paid for the whole night," explained Joia. "In my nightmare I thought he was Aglon and I woke up fighting. And then he got jealous

when I told him what was wrong."

"Puppy—" said Valira, resting her elbows on the inlaid wood of the table- It was new, like most of the furnishings, like most of the facade of Sanctuary—a glossy surface to hide the fact that underneath, not that much had changed. "You'd think he would sympathize. Aglon was his comrade."

Joia shook her head. "Ricio is very young." Her hennaed curls hung limp, and the violet shadows around her eyes owed nothing to the paint pot. "I told Ricio that I never loved Aglon, but it wasn't true. Oh, Valira,

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I fought him, but I wanted him. He was like ice inside me, and ne just kept on. And now I can't seem to get warm."

Joia was wrapped in a fluffy shawl of silk and wool which had probably been looted from some northern valley, and Valira felt the smooth skin of her own forearms pebble with chill despite the sultry heat of the day. One of the new girls came into the breakfast room, heavy-eyed and abstracted, nursing her own cup of tea.

"I wanted him," said Joia, "and now I'm afraid."

"Did you have a nightmare?" asked the other girl. Flaine was new, and pretty in a kittenish sort of way, another escapee from the streets of Sanctuary.

"I hope that's all it was!" muttered Joia,

"I had bad dreams too—" said Flaine. "They must have been dreams ... he promised me—" Her pouting lips closed tightly.

"Something pinched me all night!" said another girl. "Couldn't sleep a wink, an' when I woke I felt all black-an'-blue!"

Valira raised one eyebrow. The child looked haggard, but she could see no marks on the dark skin.

"We seem to have an epidemic—"

"If Lythande were still in town I'd ask Myrtis to talk to him," Joia said suddenly. "Do you know anyone in the Mageguild who'd take out the price of his help in trade?"

Valira laughed. "When a wizard gets homy all he has to do is summon up a few succubi! Anyway, I've never seen any of that crowd here."

"But you grew up in Sanctuary!" said Joia. "You must know some-

one!"

Valira frowned, remembering a little man with ginger hair whose painting had shown her her soul. He had recommended her to Myrtis, had taught her that even a half-penny whore from Sanctuary's waterfront could have a future. And when his wife, Gilla, stayed here during the False Plague Riots a few seasons back, she had been kind.

"You do know a mage!" exclaimed Joia, watching her. "Please help me, Valira—I'm afraid!"

"Lalo is not exactly a wizard - . . . and his wife is more than enough woman for him," Valira said slowly. "I don't know if he can help. But I'll take you to see."

"Go back to the Mageguild if you want formulae!" Lalo exclaimed.

"I've told you—I don't work that way!" He pushed the diagram back across the worktable to Darios. His easel was waiting beside the window with the finest imported paints beside it. Why was he wasting the morning light talking?

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"All arts have rules. Can it hurt you to try and think systematically?" the young man asked patiently, "Why do you think the gateway you

visualized to reach my spirit when my body was walled up in that vault worked so well?"

"Because I'd painted the thing in the first place—" Lalo began.

"You didn't make up the design!" Darios shook his head. "The details you remembered so clearly came from S'danzo tradition. Without those symbols the Otherworld would be impossible for the human mind to comprehend. The images let us focus our perception of reality, just as we control our emotions through words." The young mage paused for breath. "Look—here is the first plane—that's the world around us, the world you know—" He tapped the crudely drawn diagram.

Lalo glared at him. The boy was unnatural. Lalo was the one who should have been making the careful explanations, complaining about hotheaded youth when his apprentice protested as his own master used to do. But it was only a fluke of fate that had made the mageling his student at all.

"You're wasting your time, Darios. Why don't you go back to the Mageguild? Now that things have settled down, they're trying to rebuild the school," Lalo exclaimed. It was not yet noon, but the day was hot already. He could feel perspiration adhering his thin tunic to his skin like one of Cholly's glues. "What in the name of Us do you think you can learn from me?"

"The things that no one at the Mageguild knows." Darios combed his fingers through his curly black beard. Young as he was, it flowed across his chest like a master's. Gilla's feeding had filled him out. He took refuge sometimes in a dignity that gave him the air of a much older man.

"You can kick me out, but no one can force me to go back there. Even in the old days wizards like Enas Yorl and Ischade could go their own ways, and now Markmor is back, and there are half a dozen other independent operators trying to hide the fact that there's precious little of the old magic left in this town."

"Well, if my magic has survived because it's different," Lalo said triumphantly, "why are you trying to change me?"

"Because magic draws magic," Darios replied. "You've got it, and you can't get rid of it—wouldn't if you could—" The dark eyes lifted, and Lalo grimaced, remembering the days when he had thought both mortal and magical sight lost. He knew better now. Even if fate should blind him again, he could see in the Otherworld.

"Randal tried once to recruit you, and as things calm down, others will be after you—others who fear you and want to get you out of the way. Or who want to use you, as Molin Torchholder is using your paintings of

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Sanctuary's past to shape the future. Don't you wonder about some of those symbols he's having you put in? Here's the key to them—" He tapped the diagram. "I'm just trying to help, you know. Molin or Randal or anyone else with knowledge can use you as you use your own paints until you learn!"

Lalo covered his eyes. His head still hurt sometimes since the concussion that had temporarily blinded him. There was a pounding in his temples now—if he was going to have the headaches, he might as well start drinking again!

"The second plane," said Darios implacably, "is the sphere of the moon. It governs all things fluid, both the ocean and the astral sea. A good source of symbols for operations involving the Beysib, wouldn't you say?"

This afternoon, thought Lalo, Darios is going to practice drawing until his fingers wear away!

They had reached the fourth sphere when the sound of feminine laughter from the kitchen broke Darios's concentration.

"I doubt I'll remember even what we've done so far—" said Lalo, taking pity on him. He could hear Gilla and their oldest son, Wedemir, but neither of the other two voices sounded like the girl with whom both Wedemir and Darios were in love. Darios can't hear the difference, he realized. Maybe I do know a few useful things after all. He opened the door.

A wave of chypre scent tantalized his nostrils even before he saw the two women who were eating Gilla's Enlibar orange nut cake at the new kitchen table. Gowns of sheerest gauze struck a compromise between Sanctuary's minimal demands for decency and the unseasonable heat. They were a strange sight in Gilla's kitchen, brightened though it was by the burnished copper pots and bunches of peppers that hung from the beams.

Parasols of painted silk leaned against the whitewashed wall. One of the women had a tumble of garnet curls dressed high through a circlet of pearls. The intricately knotted dark braids of the other seemed dusted with gold. It was only when she turned to face him that the sophisticated veneer vanished and he saw the bright spirit within, as he had seen it once through garish face paint and the pinched face of poverty.

"Valira! You're looking well!"

Darios, following him through the door, stopped short, staring.

"Joia and Valira are from the Aphrodisia House," said Gilla, suppressing a smile. "Ladies, this is Darios, my husband's apprentice."

"He's wearing a mage-robe—" said the second girl. Her voice was strained.

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"He used to study at the Guild," explained Gilla. The girl looked up then and Lalo recoiled, seeing the naked face of fear.

"Sabellia be praised. Perhaps they can help me!"

Darios sent Lalo a glance in which panic and professional interest warred. The limner found himself relaxing. Magic might still frighten him, but mere physical beauty had no power over him now. Wedemir leaned back in his chair and grinned at the mageling's discomfort.

"Have another slice of cake," said Gilla. "You girls worry about your figures too much to eat properly, but troubles are best faced with a full belly. We'll get some real food into you as soon as the sausages are done."

Valira set down her teacup and laughed. "I remember—you used to feed half the neighborhood when I was a child."

"It's not food I need, but sleep!" said Joia.

Lalo cleared his throat. "Neither of which I can help you with. So just what is wrong?" Joia wiped away tears without smudging her eye paint and began to tell her tale.

"And Joia is not the only one," said Valira when they had finished.

"Doree has been having nightmares too, and some of the others. Well, after the past few years there's hardly a one of us who hasn't lost someone she cared for. We're supposed to be professional, but when a man has been kind to you, it's hard."

"I wanted Aglon alive! Why is his ghost trying to kill me?"

"His ghost, or is it something else, taking that form?" asked Darios.

"A demon lover?" Wedemir laughed. "At the Aphrodisia House?" He sobered as Valira glared at him. "Sorry, lass—but you have to admit—"

"I hope Aglon's ghost comes to the barracks to haunt you!" Joia exclaimed. "You were his friend!"

"Aglon—" said Gilla into the strained silence. "The name sounds familiar. Did we ever meet him, dear?"

"He was one of the lads who helped me dig out Darios," Wedemir said bitterly. "Got knifed in a little cleanup action Downwind a few days ago."

"He was a lovely boy when he was alive—" sniffed Joia. "Always gentle with me; he used to give me things—"

Lalo sighed. "I understand your sorrow, but what can I do? If you want an exorcism, perhaps Darios—"

"Oh, I'm just a pleasure-giri, a hysterical bit of fluff! Of course you don't believe me!" Joia began to cry in earnest now and Wedemir gallantly offered her his military scarf when her wisp of a handkerchief failed. She accepted it with an automatic flutter of her lashes, but Lalo did not think she really saw.

"I have been certificated as an exorcist by the Mageguild," said Darios

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stiffly. "I would be willing to conduct a purification of your chambers tomorrow if you desire."

Joia opened her eyes at the polysyllables and Valira's lips twitched.

"Well, Joia, at least he is taking you seriously," the older girl replied.

"Why don't we let him try?"

"Now on this panel," said Molin Torchholder, "I want you to paint a design of crossed swords and spears on the border of Lady Daphne's gown."

"Hakiem didn't mention that detail," said Lalo, looking from the design he had already roughed in on the plaster to the drawing again. He pulled his straw hat forward to shade his eyes. It was another in the string of very hot days that had been baking Sanctuary, and sunlight blazed back from the white wall with a painful glare. He supposed that he should be grateful he was not working on the new walls outside the city, as had been at first proposed. It was the newly resurfaced wall around the palace that Torchholder had decided should display Lalo's skill.

"Hakiem isn't paying you," said the priest. He stepped back from the wall, and the servant who held the broad parasol moved with him. That was a good idea, thought Lalo. They had already put up hoardings to protect the unfinished work from curious eyes. Maybe he could get a portable canvas sunshade as well. Torchholder turned. "I was there too, remember. Are you doubting me?"

The limner frowned. He had sketched from the storyteller's descriptions without thinking, and as Hakiem spoke he had seen, as if the images

were flowing directly from the old man's memory through his fingers onto the page. Those scenes had felt right. What Lord Torchholder was telling him now did not. And this was not the first time.

The picture of Prince Kadakithis's first entrance into the city showed a rising sun haloing him with gold. But the prince had actually arrived through the north gate. Along with most of the rest of the population, Lalo had been there to see him ride in. He had made the change in the picture, but it had rubbed him the wrong way- Like this. Now he began to wonder about the devices he had been told to paint on the parade shields of the prince's guards. Unimportant details, he had thought them, but what if they were something more? He shivered a little despite the heat of the sun. Danos's warnings were beginning to make more sense to him now.

"If I'm going to make a change in the design, I want to know what it means—"

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"What it means?" Torchholder stared at him. "Why should it have to mean something?"

"In that case, I think it would be more aesthetic to give her gown a pattern of eagles with outstretched wings. In gold, since she comes of noble kin."

The priest's gaze sharpened. "Limner, you presume! You are only a tool in my hand, and you will do as I say!"

"No." Lalo held out his paintbrush, then laid it down. "This is a tool. It has no choice but to do my will- But though you can put me down and hire another painter, you cannot force me to work for you. And there is no other artist in Sanctuary who can do what you really hired me for, is there, Torchholder? There is no one else in the Empire, perhaps in the world ..."

The silence stretched out between them. Beyond the hoardings he could hear a beggar cursing two soldiers with demon-haunted sleep as they ordered him to move on, the whining song of the water seller, a distant scream—all the normal sounds of a Sanctuary summer day. Finally the priest grimaced and looked away.

"Don't argue with me, limner," he said. "Don't meddle with things you don't understand."

Lalo started home down the Wideway as dusk began to shade the streets and the sea breeze lent a welcome coolness to the air. In the end he had agreed to paint the gown as Torchholder had ordered it—for now. It had occurred to the limner that Gilla was a crony of Glisselrand, and the prima donna of Feltheryn's company seemed to be on good terms

with the people at Land's End. If he wanted to know what Daphne had really worn that day, he could ask. But the priest had a point. Even Darios must agree that there was no use in standing up for a principle he did not understand.

He felt exhausted. He wondered how Darios's day had gone—Lalo's lips twitched as he visualized his apprentice trying to maintain his dignity in the Aphrodisia House. He would have to keep a straight face tonight when he asked him how the exorcism had gone.

"Lalo . . ." The croak of a call came from close behind him.

Lalo stopped short in the street, then whirled, hand going to the hilt of his dagger as someone stumbled into him.

"Cappen Varra!" Lalo stared. "Where in Shalpa's name have you sprung from? It's been years!"

"You recognized me!" The minstrel straightened, pushing back the hood of the extremely tattered cloak that covered disreputable breeches and a tunic scarcely less worn.

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"Of course—" the limner began, then flushed, realizing which kind of sight he had been using, for such a getup was inconceivable garb for the

dapper musician he had known. Only the battered harp case was the same. "But this is no place to stand talking. You look thirsty, man, and here's the Unicorn—let me buy you some beer!"

"I'm not going to tell you where I've been," said the harper when they were settled in a back booth with two big tankards of brew. It was early yet for the Unicorn; except for two guardsmen they had the place to themselves, and a slatternly girl was still wiping down the bar.

"You don't want to know, and I don't want to remember. Not sure it's safe to tell you anyway." For a moment the minstrel's fingers closed over the silver amulet at his neck and his gaze went inward. "All I'll say is that when I walked through the gates this place really did look like a sanctuary."

Lalo stared. "Well, it's true that things here have finally settled down. Trade's reviving, too."

"Your trade is prospering, I can see!" Cappen Varra surveyed Lalo's smock—stained now with paint and perspiration, but good linen, and new. "You never used to offer to pay for the beer!"

Lalo took a long draft and grimaced, wondering whether this batch was a little off or he was losing his taste for the stuff.

"A lot of things are different now, including me," he agreed. He looked at his old friend, wondering if here was someone who might understand.

"You haven't—made— anything else, have you?" whispered Cappen Varra. Involuntarily they both looked at the blank wall where once Lalo had drawn the accumulated evil of the Vulgar Unicorn and breathed into it a soul.

"No. I wear a mask over my mouth when I paint these days so tHat I won't breathe life into anything by chance," said Lalo. "But I've learned to do a few other things. Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between imagination, or art, and what's real!"

"I understand—" The harper held out his tankard to be refilled. "I nearly got lynched once when I sang a story I thought I'd made up and it turned out to be true."

"How can that happen?" exclaimed Lalo. "When I paint, or you sing, are we spying on reality without knowing it, no more to be blamed than a mirror going down the road that reflects both the sky and the mire- or are we shaping it somehow?"

"Do the stars or the cards create our futures, or does the person who reads them define what will be?" echoed Cappen Varra. The beer had put the sparkle back into his eyes. "That's a question for the Mageguild, not for me!"

"Not the Mageguild!" Lalo shuddered. "They'd look for a way to sell it. I only ever met one mage who cared for magic more than money. He was the Imperial Magelord, and he taught me how to seek truth in my painting. But that was years ago. He's probably dead by now."

"Got a theory—" said Cappen Varra, whose tankard had just been refilled for the third time. "Reality's not solid. 'S like clay, but most people don't have th' strength to mold it, or know how. The gods can. Mages can shape it with their spells, 'n' artists, sometimes—" he gazed at Lalo owlshly over the rim of his tankard, and the limner realized abruptly that after Cappen Varra's privations, even the Vulgar Unicorn's sour beer had been too much for him. And evening was coming on. The limner could not possibly leave his old friend alone and incapable in this part of town.

"Gilla will have dinner ready by now—" he said briskly. "Why don't you come along home with me?"

Cappen Varra grinned. "Think I'm drunk? Maybe so. Easier this way. I know about changing things, see—I sang a door open to th'other world, sang up a crowd o' demons to kill the folks who'd captured me. Killed everybody. Just like th' Black Unicorn—" His eyes filled with tears.

"Even th' children!"

Lalo cast a swift look at the wall. As the lamps were lit he seemed to see that demonic form still shadowed there. But he had banished it! And after that they had scraped down and replastered the wall!

"Come on! We're getting out of here!" He tossed some coins on the table and grasped his friend's arm. Why had he started asking these questions? The concept of an unalterable fate was bad enough, but the idea of a malleable reality at the mercy of anyone who could master it terrified him.

"Were the girls at the Aphrodisia House very beautiful?" Latilla stared into Darios's face earnestly.

"Yes, of course." The young man blushed, and Lalo hid a smile. "But some of them were very silly as well."

"And so are you," said Gilla repressively. "Eat your supper, Tilla, and let the poor boy tell his tale."

The color faded from Darios's face and he turned to Lalo again. "I wish you had been with me, sir. It was hard enough to do the exorcism with them all chattering around me like magpies, but I managed to complete the ceremony. I don't know if it will do any good, though. Each dream I heard from one girl seemed to inspire the next to tell of some-

thing even more terrible. By the time I got through, the girls were all hysterical."

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"Did you sense anything demonic?" asked Cappen Varra curiously, pushing his bowl away. Drunk or sober, Cappen Varra retained his good manners, but the last of the beer fumes seemed to have worn off.

As usual, Gilla had risen to the occasion. After a disapproving sniff at their breath, she had ladled out enough fish stew with rice and red peppers for everybody. And the minstrel had eaten with an appetite that endeared him to his hostess, who beamed upon him now. She had even agreed to let him stay in Ganner's old room for a while.

Darios shrugged. "The atmosphere was upset, but that's only to be expected. I couldn't concentrate well enough to say."

"I can add some more cream sauce if the stew is too hot for you," said Gilla, eyeing his plate.

"What?" Darios looked down and took another spoonful. "No, it's wonderful mistress—I was just distracted."

Cappen Varra cleared his throat and began a long and convoluted story

about a camel drover, a prostitute, and a priest of Anen.

He was just finishing when the door swung open and Wedemir strode in.

"I've sewn the new insignia on the tunic you brought me, dear. Have you eaten? I can make up some more pilaf—" Gilla began, but Lalo motioned her to silence. Wedemir's eyes met his gratefully.

"I need to apologize to Valira," he said. "Whatever is wrong at the Aphrodisia House is catching! Last night half the men woke up shouting about demons!"

"What do you mean—what exactly did they say?" Darios asked.

Wedemir's face grew grim. "Valira told us that the girls dreamed of lost lovers. Well, the bonds between fighting men are just as strong—and our losses—you know how many have died these past few years!"

"Are their ghosts returning?" whispered Gilla. "Are the dead going to walk among us again?" Lalo shuddered, remembering that terrible time.

"It would be impossible," said Darios. "That kind of manifestation requires a power source of a magnitude unavailable in Sanctuary anymore!"

"They are not returning in their bodies, thank the gods!" exclaimed Wedemir. "But there's enough magic coming from somewhere to power these hauntings. The lads feel they're being watched, things break, they have stupid accidents. The amulet sellers in the Bazaar are doing a brisk trade!"

"Perhaps the exorcism you did at the Aphrodisia House today will stop it, Darios—" suggested Lalo.

"I'll have you up to the barracks tomorrow to repeat the process if it

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does!" said Wedemir, "Another few days of this and the men will be no use at all!"

But Darios was still looking worried, and that night Lalo's sleep was haunted by memories of the Black Unicorn. In the morning they were awakened by a messenger from the Aphrodisia House, bearing a chypre-scented letter from Myrtis herself begging Lalo to come to her.

"A four and a three!" cried Ricio as the dice bounced across the wooden floor. "I'll stake you my new saddlecloth you can't better that,

Ottar!"

Wedemir looked up from his tally sheet as the voices rose. There was no rule against dicing among his soldiers as long as it stayed friendly, but for a moment there had been a disturbing sharpness in the boy's tone. He knew already that Ricio couldn't carry his wine, but all they had here was thin beer.

There was a murmur of agreement from the other man. Once more the dice cup rattled, he heard a shout from the kibitzers as the cubes fell.

"He's taken you proper, Ricio, lad—" said someone. "Better call it a night, now. I know for a fact that you've lost all your pay, and it's against regs to wager your gear!"

"I'm not rolled up!" said Ricio- "Got this!" Laughing shrilly, he held up a shimmering silver ball. "Love gift from a lovely lady. Ottar! Stake you this for all you've won and your back pay!"

"Give it up, Ricio!" called his friends. "Your luck is out. What's Joia gonna think if you lose that too?"

He rounded on them, waving his tankard so that the liquid inside splashed his friends. "Shut up, you! Don't you say her name!" He turned back to Ottar, who was watching him speculatively. "You Traid to try again? You 'fraid my luck'll change?" Ottar shrugged fatalistically. Ricio

laughed, shook the dice cup, and threw. "Five and five!" he cried, slapping the cup into his opponent's hand.

"Hey!" cried one of the others, licking his wet hand, "he's got brandy in here!"

As Wedemir got to his feet he heard the click of dice across the floor.

"Six and six," said Ottar, reaching for the silver ball.

"No!" shrieked Ricio. "You barbarian swine!" Wedemir took another step towards him, and then everything changed. The room was filled with pale-haired northerners, waving bloody knives; Wedemir smelled smoke. He started to turn, saw Ricio's knife flash. Instinct took over and his callused fist connected with the boy's jaw.

There was a sudden silence. Wedemir blinked and rubbed his fist, staring at men who looked back at him with equally astonished eyes. Where

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had the barbarians gone? No one made a sound but Ricio, who moaned as the silver ball rolled from his hand, and Ottar picked it off the floor.

One of the other men sniffed at Ricio's tankard. "Well," he said sadly, "there's nothing but beer in here now."

"Lalo my dear, surely you understand that this has got to end!" Myrtis poured fragrant spice tea into a cup and handed it to him. "The worst of the nightmares seem to be over, but the girls are haunted by their memories. It is bad for trade."

Lalo shifted uneasily on the overstuffed cushion, hoping he would not slide off and spill tea all over the ivory satin brocade. He was a little unnerved by Myrtis's trust. Even Darios, sitting quietly behind him, wore an exasperating expression of calm expectance.

"My pictures won't be what the girls expect, you know—"

"I've told them it's for publicity," said Myrtis. "They'll come in one by one, and you'll draw them. If I don't like the results I don't have to use them, you know."

Lalo put down his teacup and picked up his drawing pad, and Myrtis rang her little bell.

The Aphrodisia House accepted only the most beautiful. Darios's flushed face showed Lato what it was like to look at them simply as a man. No wonder the lad had found his exorcism hard going. But the limner saw them with other eyes. As he began to work, outer awareness fell away.

Not many had spirits as beautiful as Valira's, but in several he found depths of faith and fortitude that would have astonished their customers. He saw on their souls the scars of neglect and cruelty and despair. In many he found jealousy or greed. In almost all of them he saw fear.

"Afraid?" Myrtis laughed bitterly when the last girl had gone. "Of course they fear. Age, illness, poverty—all they have is their beauty. Every one of them fears what will happen when it is gone. The attention their lovers pay them is their reassurance. But you should look again, Lalo—that's not all your pictures show."

Blinking, he focused on the shaded backgrounds with which he had surrounded his sketches, and realized that they were more than random lines. It was not only the portraits that showed fear—the fears themselves were pictured on the page. He shook his head in pity, understanding now what had made the faces that way.

"There are your hauntings, Madam Myrtis," said Darios.

"Destroy them!" she exclaimed.

"I cannot—" said Lalo. "They are not my fears. But perhaps I can change them." A sweep with the eraser and a few deft strokes trans-

formed a demon to a godling, emaciated old age to serenity. Another change took the lines of discontent from a pretty mouth, put hope back into sullen eyes. The sketches had been simple. Altering them into something the girls would be flattered to hang in their bedchambers did not take long.

"Let us see if this improves the atmosphere—" He handed the pictures to Myrtis.

"But that's not what you saw!" objected Darios.

"No, but when Madam Myrtis gives these sketches to her girls, perhaps this is what they will see—and believe—and believing, make it so," answered Lalo, remembering what Molin Torchholder had asked him to do. "I only wish I knew what it was that suddenly gave their fears such power!"

"My lady Kurrekai is one of the great ones that attend the Beysa herself"—the palace maid laughed at her soldier—"with a serpent for a neckpiece an* all. She has a different headdress for every day of the week, an' she's generous. What do I need with presents from you?"

"Even this one?" growled Ottar. He pulled something from his pouch and offered it shyly. The girl exclaimed as the wrapping fell away and the sun glittered on the silver ball. "Pretty, huh? Does your lady have one o'

these? You come out with me and I'll be generous too!"

The girl gave him a calculating glance. Ottar wasn't bad-looking, really. He pressed a wet kiss into the palm of her hand and she felt a warm glow.

"Tonight, then?"

She nodded, laughing, and dropping the silver ball into the pocket of her apron, skipped away. She had scarcely turned the corner before her swain was forgotten. The silver glittered so charmingly. She could hardly keep from pulling it out to fondle, even when she was working.

That night she dreamed of riding in a gilded litter borne by matched slaves, while a whole troop of barbarian warriors who looked like Ottar marched behind. But the litter turned into a darkened alley. She screamed as it was set down roughly, but no one heard. And then hard hands were pulling her out into the street, tearing at her clothing. Hard bodies thrust against hers.

The next morning, she was clumsy as she served breakfast for her Beysib lady, who was on duty with her mistress that day. As she started to pass a basket of oranges, she tripped, and the silver ball fell out of her apron and rolled across the floor.

"How lovely!" said the Beysa, and held out her hand.

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Lalo laid in the undercoat of color for the background with long, smooth strokes of his brush. He knew that Molin Torchholder was watching him, but he continued to paint tranquilly. It was mindless labor, but the durability of the final product might depend on the care he took now. At least there was no way the priest could quarrel with him about this part of the job. The air was beginning to heat as the day wore onward, but it was still reasonably comfortable beneath the awning's dappled shade. He painted quickly.

"You're not stupid, and I know you don't lack imagination," said Molin Torchholder suddenly. "I don't understand how you remain so calm."

The brush splattered paint across white space, and Lalo reached for a rag. He finished wiping the color away, then turned to stare at his patron, his own self-mockery deepening as he realized that Torchholder had not even noticed his clumsiness.

"Other people wear me out with their pleas for place and position, or their accusations against those to whom I've given them. Other people wear themselves out suspecting each other of exotic forms of treason. But not you, Lalo . . . - why?"

Lalo washed out his paintbrush, considering the question. "Perhaps because I want different things?"

"Ah—" The priest nodded. He did not look as if he had slept well.

"And what are your ambitions. Master Limner?"

"To feed my family ... to paint the truth ... to stay alive . . ."

Lalo said slowly. "That's seemed ambition enough, these past few years."

Molin Torchholder answered with a snort of laughter,

"I envy you. The palace was a madhouse this morning ... a madhouse. Two people came to tell me that someone had bribed the workmen to leave weaknesses in my walls. One thought it was agents of the old Emperor. The other was sure that it was the new one, setting things up so that he can attack Sanctuary. Vashanka's rod! If Theron showed up right now I'd hand him the keys!"

Lalo suppressed a smile. In the Aphrodisia House they had demon lovers. In the palace it stood to reason that they would have nightmares about intrigue,

"Somebody else said that the prince had been poisoned, and just as I was escaping from him, one of the astrologers came running up with

some tale that a piece of the Nisibisi Power Globe had been found! No truth to it, of course. I checked. But that one had me remembering when staying alive was almost ambition enough for me!"

Lalo dropped his brush.

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I'm calm. he told himself. I'm calm. Torchholder just said so. But the priest's words reminded him uncomfortably of what Gilla had said.

He straightened slowly and found that the priest was staring at him.

"Now why, I wonder, should that news trouble you?"

"No one wants those days to come again." Lalo dipped his brush in the paint and carefully stroked along a borderline. "Some of the girls at the Aphrodisia House were having bad dreams too. I drew pictures of them, changed the pictures a little, and the trouble seems to be going away. I'm sure there's no connection, though."

"Of course not." Molin Torchholder rose to his feet and stood looking over Lalo's shoulder. "But you didn't do badly, Master Linner. You learned a lot in those days. You want to paint the truth, you say. But we both know that you already can. I keep wondering when you're going to do something with that power."

And with that parting shot he moved onward, leaving Lalo staring unseeing at the wall.

The dead man gets to his feet grinning, his skin still-the color of a fish's belly from the beynit venom in his veins.

"You betrayed me!" The Seysa takes a step backward, aware of the muscular grip of her serpent around her upper arm as its head darts forward defensively. "/ killed you!"

"Yes . . . yes." The creature grins. "And how many more? You killed your own people, Beysaf Their blood cries out for revenge!"

"But it was my duty!" Dimly she remembers that this has happened to her before. She must deny it, but it has never been so real! "And for you above all to betray me ... / let you love me, Tovek—you were a Burek man!"

"The killing went on too long . . ."He comes towards her with outstretched hands and the beynit hisses angrily.

"I stopped it," she cries. "House Burek fled the Empire. Why are you haunting me? We live now in another land!"

"Beysa, you will bring destruction to all who love you. You cannot escape

the past!"

Tovek's hands close on her shoulders, cold, slippery with blood, but she cannot get away. The beynit strikes at him and he laughs. And now his face is changing; alien features writhe beneath the pallid skin. She sees fair hair and light, astonished eyes that harden as they focus on her. Then the serpent strikes again . . .

"Ki-thus! Kadakithis! No!" Her shriek tears the heart from her breast. Hissing—the beynit's hissing roared in her ears. Her fingers tightened on muscular coils that constricted beneath smooth skin.

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"Shupansea! My lady, be still now—it was a dream . . ."

"The prince—" she whispered.

"He is here."

The Beysa's eyes flew open. His hair was still tousled with sleep, his eyes alarmed, just as in her dream. For a moment she thought she saw that other figure too, shadowy, already fading away. As the prince started towards her, Lady Kurrekai stepped between them. The Beysib

woman's arm already bore the twin puncture marks where the beynit had struck her. Her own snake coiled around her neck protectively, tongue flickering as it tested the air; the bite of the Beysa's would do her no harm beyond a little dizziness, but Kadakithis had no such immunity!

"Kurrekai, keep him away from me!" He looked hurt. She choked

back a sob.

"Wait a few moments longer, my lord," Lady Kurrekai said quietly.

"When she is fully awake the serpent will calm itself. Then you may

come to her."

Shupansea lay back, breathing deeply. It had been a dream. Of course it had been a dream. Tovek's bones were dust in the earth of the Glorious Home, and she was safe in Sanctuary.

"And this was not the first nightmare?" the prince was saying now.

"There was only one yesterday," said Kurrekai, "but this is the third tonight, and it is not yet dawn. She will not let me try to drug her, but she must sleep. Perhaps she will listen to you."

The Beysa pushed herself upright against her cushions with a sigh.

"Shu-sea, love, what were you dreaming of?" The prince settled himself carefully on the foot of her bed and took her outstretched hand.

"A man who betrayed me before I ever laid eyes on you!"

"The traitor Tovek . . ." said Kurrekai bitterly.

"Holy Mother Bey," whispered the Beysa, "did you see him too?"

Aroused by her emotion, the beynit lifted its head, then settled between her full breasts again.

"And before that it was two of those Stepsons," said the lady-in-waiting implacably, "marching bold as brass down the hall! The guard saw them too, but he thought it was his own nightmare!"

"Lock the snake up and sleep with me!" cried the prince. Both women stared at him. "I know you don't like to leave it, but you have to rest"

"Kadakithis, I could kill you . . ." Shupansea said slowly. "Even without the beynit. My blood is poison, Ki-thus! Oh! If you were Beysib you would understand!" They gazed at each other across a chasm of race and culture that mocked their clasped hands.

"I understand that I love you," he said finally. "And I am still prince

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in Sanctuary. If you cannot rest, then no man of learning in this town is going to sleep either until you are free!"

"Another week and I should be able to get rooms of my own," said Cappen Varra, handing his empty plate to Gilla for a second helping of pie. "Playing during the intermissions at Feltheryn's theater may not be exactly what I would have chosen, but the work is regular"

"You're welcome to stay on here," said Gilla.

"Well, I need more privacy to practice, you know—I don't like to think I'm disturbing you!" Cappen's glance caught Lab's in warning, then flicked away again.

"But who could mind listening to your music?" Gilla exclaimed.

Lalo suppressed a smile. He suspected that it was not the practice of music that the minstrel had in mind. Feltheryn had hired a new actress for their latest production, and Cappen was already courting her.

Replete, they were all pushing their plates aside when there was a

knock on the door.

"Open up! Lord Torchholder's orders—open up in there!"

Latilla, too young to remember the times when a knock on the door was a signal to hide, was already scampering to obey. Lalo opened his mouth to call her back, then shut it again. If they were Torchholder's men he had nothing to fear. Did he? He fought back memories of the night when Coricidius the Vizier had sent the Hell-Hounds to pluck Lalo from his bed. Surely the priest who had been the closest thing he ever had to a patron could mean no harm to him.

"What does Lord Torchholder want with me at this hour?" he asked as the guardsmen pushed into the room.

"Didn't say. You're to come with us, bring your drawing things."

"He can't be wanting Lalo to draw a picture for him at this hour!" exclaimed Gilla. The man shrugged.

"Got my orders. That's all I know."

It had to be more than artwork, thought Lalo, gathering up his things. Suddenly he remembered his conversation with the priest the previous morning. Darios was watching him, a little pale, biting his lip as if he wanted to speak but was not sure—

"I want to bring my apprentice with me too—" Lalo turned, satchel in hand, and Darios stood up eagerly.

"Got no orders—" the guard began.

"Oh, what does it matter!" exclaimed one of the other men. "He said to get the limner quickly. Can't hurt to take two!"

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They moved quickly through the streets of the city. Even in the Maze folk got out of the way of a well-armed troop who seemed to know their business. Lalo had never gone across town so fast. But it was only as the guards conducted him up the broad staircase towards the royal suites instead of downward to the Hall of Justice lockup that he realized how great his fear had been.

The air in the upper corridor was heavy with the scent of incense and expensive perfume. Embroidered hangings glowed on the walls and Lalo blinked, seeing with doubled vision the flicker of lamplight on figured tapestries and the glimmering afterimages of richly robed courtiers and armored men.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, opened them abruptly as he

heard a low laugh and saw before him the agile form, the sardonic grin, and the gleaming knife of the assassin Zanderei.

"Watch out!" He stopped short and the guard behind him bumped into him, swearing. "He's got a knife!"

"Who? Where?" Swords flared from their sheaths and Lalo was thrust hard against the wall. "You fools, jumping at shadows! There's nobody here!"

Lalo blinked. There was no one now, but he had seen something, or why should he suddenly think of a man who had been dead for years?

"They're all jumping at shadows here, if you ask me," muttered one of the men as they started forward again.

Darios pressed close to him, twitching like a nervous horse. "I thought I saw my old master," he whispered. "But maybe it's the incense—Lalo, somebody has been doing exorcisms here!"

Why? wondered Lalo, unless . . . Before he could follow that thought to its conclusion the gilded doors at the end of the hall were pushed open and they were thrust into the presence of the prince and the Beysa and their attendants. Lord Torchholder was brooding like a thundercloud by the window. As they entered he turned. A gesture sent the soldiers away-

"You told me that you cured the bad dreams of the girls at the Aphrodisia House with your drawings," the priest said abruptly. "I want you to do it again!"

"For you?" He stared around him. Molin Torchholder simply looked angry, but the Beysa appeared haggard, and even the prince was pale.

"For everybody—" said Prince Kadakithis. "It started with the Beysa's nightmares, but everybody's seeing things now. Damn place is haunted! Can't go on like this, you know."

Lalo nodded. Zanderei was his own personal nightmare, but the potential number of specters who might haunt a prince boggled the imagination, especially in Sanctuary. But it was one thing to see, and to alter, the

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simple secrets of girls in a house of joy. The hidden fears of princes might recall deeds that for the safety of the city must not be changed! And even if that could be accomplished, how could they allow the man who had seen all their sins to live?

And it might not work anyway. He had not painted living nightmares, but memories.

"Are the dreams all that is wrong?" he asked carefully, playing for time.

"No!" exclaimed the Beysa. She toyed nervously with the silver ball on the table. "There's a feeling of pervading dread! Even waking, I see shadows . . ."

Lalo shivered. Even as she spoke he could feel it, and knew that this was something worse than his own fear. He felt Darios trembling beside him. He had to do something to distract them—he remembered what Cappen Varra had said about the power of people's minds.

"Darios—" As he spoke, the boy's gaze came back to him gratefully. "It's time to use some of that training you're always talking about. I want you to think of something simple—think of a color, I don't care which one— Think of those hangings changing, that's right—" He paused as Darios's face creased in concentration. "Even the lamplight is that color, everything is—"

Then his breath caught, because everything was turning blue. The Beysa's nictitating membrane came down, her piscine heritage unmistakable in the undersea light.

"You can look now . . ." he said softly, enjoying the way Darios's eyes widened as he saw the change. He trembled on the brink of understanding. If he was right . . . Tensing with excitement, Lalo summoned up the memory of crimson, and visualized the blue shifting into purple that continued to warm until swirls of ruby lapped across the carpet towards Darios.

The young man's eyes danced. A deeper blue flared suddenly between them. Lalo refined his focus and the glow disappeared in a burst of flame.

"Master Limner—" Molin Torchholder's voice broke their concentration. Blue light and red pulsed for a moment, and then they were gazing at the peach and gold hangings of the Beysa's suite once more. "Just what was that demonstration intended to prove?"

"That the palace is not haunted . . ." Lalo answered him. "Don't you see—it is not only your fears and nightmares; any thought, projected strongly enough, will be amplified—"

"That's it! A psychic amplifier—" exclaimed Darios. "I was so sure that everything of that kind had been destroyed—but I ought to have thought of it before! They were made by the Guild in imitation of the

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Nisibisi globes, but of course they possessed nothing like the same degree of power."

"But we had a Hazard," began Prince Kadakithis. "Why didn't he find this thing, if it exists?"

"It could look like anything—a toy, a jewel," answered Darios. "A mage shielded against hauntings might not be able to tell."

"Can you tell?" asked Lalo, blessing the thought that had prompted him to bring his apprentice along.

Darios frowned, and half closed his eyes. They all fell silent as a sphere of pale light appeared before him. "Lalo, watch and tell me if it gets brighter when I move around." Slowly Darios began to circumambulate the room.

"What's that?"

The sphere was blazing. Lalo pointed to the point of light that reflected it from the silver ball in the Beysa's hand.

"I ... got it from my maid," said the Beysa, dropping it. Lalo picked it up as it pooled silver light across the floor, and felt his fingers tingle. It was so innocent a thing to have caused such suffering ... He could breathe life into the things he drew, but the silver ball could take anyone's thought and make it a reality. And all those symbols Darios was trying to teach him—with this they could be as real here as in the Other-world. It occurred to Lalo that such a thing might be more convenient than a pad and pencil, and he thrust the thought away.

"I suppose we will have to call the Hazard back to destroy it," Molin Torchholder said into the silence.

"They'll want it, but not to destroy," said Darios. "And I think it must be done away with—the violence it has seen has soured it. I think that only a mage of great strength and purity of spirit could use it for good now!"

"I don't like the thought of those fellows getting their hands on anything like this again," said the prince. "Just when we've got them under control . . ." All eyes moved back to the quicksilver glitter of the thing the limner held in his hands.

"Perhaps there's another way," Lalo said then.

"It was all your fault, you know," said Molin Torchholder. Lalo lifted

the brush with which he was filling in the ground color for Prince Kadakithis's robe from the plaster and turned to stare at him.

"We've traced that wretched mage-toy back from the Beysa's maid to a soldier in the garrison, who won it from another lad, who got it from his girl at the Aphrodisia House. And she got the thing as a gift from one Aglon, who picked it up when he was helping your son dig your appren-

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tice out of the ruins of the Mageguild not so long ago." His expression was hard to read in the dappled shade.

"Then it's just as well I showed you how to get rid of it, isn't it?" Lalo answered calmly.

"How did you know that if we all closed our eyes and visualized the amplifier vanishing it would disappear?" asked the priest curiously.

"It had no power of itself. Amplifying images and emotions was all it could do—it seemed worth a try."

With an effort Lalo kept his features impassive. Better not reveal how terrified he had been that his plan would not work, or backfire. But that

was over. Now his thoughts were quiet, like the city as it forgot its nightmares and returned to life's waking dream.

"You've changed. You would never have dared to suggest such a thing nine years ago."

"Changed?" Lalo began to laugh. "Who hasn't changed? Including you. And what's the use of it all if we don't learn anything?"

"What have you learned, limner?" Molin Torchholder watched him curiously.

"That I am not a silver ball, to be used or misused at will," Lalo replied. "I'll paint the truth you show me, Torchholder, but don't try to make my magic tell lies."

For a moment the priest looked at him, then he shook his head with a short laugh and turned to go.

Lalo watched as Molin Torchholder made his way around the curve of the wall to return to the palace again. Then his gaze came back to the rough outlines of the mural before him. That lower left-hand corner needed something—some detail to balance the rolling storm clouds on the right. His lips twitched suddenly, and he mixed a little white and black together to produce a silvery grey.

Kneeling, he drew in the outline of a ball between two stones. It must be done now, while he remembered the weight and size, the slick feel of it in his hand. A touch with some other colors reproduced the rainbow glimmer it had mirrored in the Beysa's room. As Darios had said, it was a shame to waste it, but where could they have safely kept such a thing?

It would be safe here. Perhaps no one would notice it. Even if they did, no one could use it—no one but him. / hope I never need to breathe it into life again—but if I have to, I will, thought Lalo as he added the last sparkle of silver and sat back on his heels. Molin Torchholder asked me what I'd learned.

I'm beginning to discover the answer now . . .

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C J. Cherryh

Clouds of steam. The horse stood still while Strat washed it down with rags and slopped water onto the stableyard dirt—a completely ordinary horse except the thumb-sized patch on its rump where there was simply—nothing. It angered Crit that Strat spent excessive time on the creature, but, unlike Critias, acting commandant of the Stepsons, Companion to the God—his partner Straton had no fear of the undead.

The horse had died under him—once. It had come back from Hell for him. It had rescued him from enemies. Straton returned that loyalty.

That small patch was the necessary Flaw—in a creature Hell had given up. But it in no wise flawed courage, or faith.

Better than men, Strat thought. Better than the love of women, who had proven, overall, faithless.

Critias had saved his life multiple times, too; and Strat had returned that favor, such as he could—but Crit was Crit—the ultimate pragmatist. There was only one creature in all the world that a man could believe in to such an extent, and trust absolutely; it stood with eyes shut—enjoying the warmth of life—

After the cold of Hell.

It came to Strat that he had known too much of that cold himself—that if he had any hope for himself he had to shake free of such influences.

There had been, above all, a woman—a sorceress who haunted his dreams.

Be rid of her' Crit said.

But one's dreams did not forget . . .

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A quiet tread scuffed the dirt of the yard, stopped, at Strat's back. He looked behind him, saw his partner standing there fists on hips, saw Crit frowning at him.

"You're on duty," Crit said. "Dammit, Ace—"

Strat thought back to the morning, recollected a promise—to spell Gayle at a problem uptown, night duty, when they were so damned short-handed. He dropped the sponge into the bucket and faced Crit with a shake of his head. "Sorry," he said. "I'll get up there right now."

Crit walked closer and blocked his path to anywhere. "Strat—"

"I forgot, all right?"

Crit hit him on the shoulder, held that same shoulder, compelled an attention he did not want to give. "Forgot?"

"I said I forgot. I'm sorry." He moved to break away, but Crit tightened his grip, jerked him around again for a look straight in the face.

He dropped his eyes. He had no idea why, only that Crit's stare was unbearable—no matter that Crit had pulled him out of situations a sane man would not contemplate, no matter that he owed this man who was closer than a brother- That look on Crit's face wanted more from him than he had left in him to give, more of his soul than he was going to have again in his life, and though he knew it—Crit had yet to accept that fact.

"That's the bad shoulder," Strat said, deliberately pitiful; and tried with a shake of his head simply to go his way, and not to fight with Crit.

But Crit slammed him around against the corner of the stable. "Where in hell is your head?"

Another man he would have taken into bare-handed combat. But he owed Crit too much, and there was too much he'd fouled up on, like this, too much Crit cared about he didn't care about at all.

"Are you seeing her?" Crit shouted into his face.

"You know I'm not," Strat said. "I'm in barracks every night!"

Crit grabbed him by the throat. If Crit strangled him that was all right. He hardly cared. That was the trouble- That was what maddened Crit.

Crit shook him, Crit slammed him back against the post. Strat only stared, short of wind, and said, "Better if you hadn't pulled me out of that cellar . . . Better you'd left me there."

In some part he hoped Crit would give up finally, let him alone, simply let him coast into oblivion.

Or hit him and give him cause—some cause, any cause to fight for—

But Crit, who had killed more men than anyone could remember, some of them piece by piece and slowly, looked at him as if he was feeling that kind of pain himself—as if someone hurt him and made him crazy,

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and he loved that someone too much to do what he would do to anyone else in the wide world who crossed him as far as Strat had.

"What's the matter with you?" Crit asked quietly. "What in hell's—the matter with you?"

One dreamed, that was all.

"I'll kill her," Crit said.

Strat grabbed Crit by the sleeve, hard. Maybe it was a measure of how

far he had come that it was Crit's danger he thought of most acutely. It was all right for him, he didn't matter, he had stopped mattering; but Crit, he thought, Crit had no logical part in this, and Crit, who had come alive through coups and assassinations and battles, had no chance at all against Her. "Crit," Strat said. "Crit, I'm going to the damn palace. I'll be there, I'll be there, all right?"

Crit didn't say anything. That scared him, and got his attention, when damned little else could.

"I'll get up there," Strat said. "I'll do the damn duty.—Crit, I'm through, you hear me? I'm through with her, I'm not going back, I promise you."

Crit still said not a thing.

That scared Strat—more than any threats Crit could have made.

Night, more than night, in days of slow business and unseasonable weather, an exhausted, weary town—those hours when even the inns, even in Sanctuary, began to give up their last customers and throw out the drunks—and the bar help went home, some two by two, some not ...

A woman screamed in an alleyway near the Vulgar Unicorn, a small yelp of a scream, cut off of a sudden, followed by a grunt of pain—the Unicorn's barmaid knew where to put an elbow and a heel. But the man was big and he was gone on krrf. A thump! followed, then a slither—of a light body hitting a brick wall and slumping to the trash at the bottom of it.

The rapist liked that fine. He liked it so well he grabbed the woman up by the hair and kicked her, which it took, besides the krrf these days, to get him excited—

But in the interval of a kick and the body hitting the pavement, the rapist heard another step on the dusty cobbles, a soft, stealthy step behind him.

He let his victim lie, facing—it was incredible to him—a cloaked, aristocratic woman, here, in these streets, in this alleyway.

He heard his earlier victim crawl aside, scrabble in the trash trying to escape, but this hooded, this incredibly elegant slut—amazed him—

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Amazed him so much he was not expecting the sudden crack of a brick across the back of his skull . . .

Ischade faced the bloody, panting barmaid across the body—in a desire both dark and frustrated by the assistance. "Thank you," Ischade said with irony, wrapping her cloak about her for the sensuality of it; and shuddered at what it stirred. "Do you live in this alley? No? I'd seek lodgings on the Unicorn's street—if I were in your place. Too far to walk—at this hour."

"Who are you?" the barmaid asked; it not being incredible to her, perhaps, that a woman in silk and velvet knew her nightly route. Perhaps it frightened her. Perhaps it told her she might have escaped the rat to run straight-on into the cobra's sliding coils—

But: "Go home," Ischade said. "Don't linger here. What's one more body—in Sanctuary?"

The barmaid caught a breath, looked at Ischade a moment longer, as if the spell touched even her—

It might. The curse was never specific. Only Ischade's personal taste was—and Ischade felt nothing but frustration and a rising anger at the girl's very existence, and at her courage—in a world where help was scarce, and no one cared. Perhaps she saw Ischade for what she was. But

few did. Few—hearing of her—understood. People looked for vampires.

"Go," Ischade whispered, and the barmaid turned and ran, limping, for the end of the alley.

Ischade followed her—hoping—in case of some other trouble that might be drawn like predators to a crippled fish. She saw the young woman haul herself up a rickety steps in the alley next, saw the door shut; and eventually saw dim light from the shutter seams, the woman having, after some effort, Ischade supposed, gotten a lamp lit.

One remembered such necessities. Dimly. Long ago.

She had her own necessities—deadly, urgent necessities, since Strat had left—since she had broken the ties that held him. She had lives to hunt, to sustain her own; and she had her preferences in victims.

She walked on her way, walked the roughest areas of Sanctuary, that region south and harborward of the Unicorn. It was a thief who accosted her finally-

"I've nothing for you," she told him, having some conscience, at least, or having acquired one from her associations. He was very young, he had offered her no violence—and perhaps there was something in her manner that warned him, made him the least bit anxious: he looked behind him and to either side, as if suspecting some sort of ambush in which a

woman obviously out of place in these alleys—might be the bait.

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He seemed to decide otherwise then. He whipped out a knife, advanced a step or two as if she might leap at him—or someone might pounce from the shadows. He demanded money.

It was the knife that decided the question. She put back her hood, she caught his eyes and said, in a low voice, "Are you sure you want what I do have?"

The robber hesitated—the knife gleaming uncertainly in the dark. "A whore," he said, "a damned whore—"

"I know a place," she said, because now she had a look at him he was handsome, if he were washed, and he had a wit that might save his life—a few days, at least; and longer, if he would listen.

He came with her to the house on the riverside, that house which passers-by somehow failed to see, or, seeing, failed to notice—a house lost in hedges, behind a low iron gate, behind overgrown grounds and half-dead trees—

She wanted light—and light blazed from candles and from lamps,

bright, so bright her young thief flung up his knife-hand to shield his eyes—he had never put the weapon away—and swore.

Taz swore again once his eyes had cleared and he had gotten a look at his surroundings, an untidy tumble of silks and satins, garish fabrics, costly furnishings—in a house which had ways of looking much smaller outside than in.

A nook and a silk-strewn bed—she never made it, only tidied it occasionally. She dropped the cloak like a spill of ink on the bright rugs, the busy fabrics. She was all in black, a necklace like drops of blood—a dusky skin, straight hair black as night, eyes—

Eyes that every man in his youth knew were waiting for him, somewhere, somewhen, if he was man enough. . . .

He forgot about his thieving. He forgot about everything except this woman, never even took offense that she insisted he go into the back room and bathe— One could hardly take it amiss, since she offered him a gentleman's clothes, the kind of perfumed soap the gentry used, and trailed a finger along his neck and said, softly, smelling of foreign spices and musk—

"Do everything I tell you and you'll be here more than tonight, you'll be here many, many days and nights—do you like that idea? You won't have to steal again. You'll have everything you could want—does that

appeal to you?"

He could not believe this was happening. He only stared at her, with the soap in his hands, and said, "Are you a witch?"

"Do you think so?—What's your name?"

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It was dangerous to answer that with witches. He had heard so. He looked into her eyes and found himself saying truthfully: "Taz. Taz Chandi."

Her finger traced his chin. "How old are you, Taz?"

He said, lying, knowing she was at least older, but he had no idea how much older, "Twenty-two."

"Nineteen," she said, and he knew he had been dangerously foolish to lie: he was afraid then. But she kissed his lips gently and sweetly, and left him to his bath and his anticipations . . . which were for the first time since he was twelve—outlandish and hopeful and full of delicious dreams . . .

Til he heard the front gate squeak and, with thoughts of returning husbands or ogres or Shalpa only knew what sort of interruption in this lovenest, hastily dressed in what the lady had provided.

Crit trod the garden path most warily, with an eye to the front door. He was sure the vampire knew he was there. He had his hand on his sword for all the good it would do, tramping through the weeds, under dead trees, up the rickety steps.

The door opened as he had thought it would, since he had been unblasted by magics getting this far; it opened the instant he trod on the last step, and she came out—wrapped in black and glaring at him with the warmth of an adder.

"What do you want?" she asked. "Am I not through with Stepsons?"

He kept his hand on his hilt, like a religious talisman. He said, "Evidently you aren't through with my partner. I'm here to ask you to leave

him alone."

He was not a man who found asking easy, and all but impossible when it sounded like empty-handed begging—because he had no negotiating points and there was not a damned thing he could do to the bitch, not a damned thing he could do to save his life if she took a notion to do to him what she had done to Strat, and so many, many others.

In point of fact he knew he was a fool to come here, but he had gone in under fire for Strat before, and more to the point, Strat had gone in for him; at times he had wanted to beat Strat senseless for his foolishness—once he had even done it; and once he had thought he had a chance of shaking Strat back to sense. But Sanctuary had dealt hard with them both, as it dealt with everyone who came here. It was a sink that drank down lives. And Strat's seemed to be the price it wanted.

So he came here, unarmed as witches and wizards reckoned such things, and looked up at the witch, and said the only thing he could say:

"Let him go."*

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Ischade held her door in her hands, a shadow against the lamplight slanting past her and reflecting off the boards. She said, "I have, Crit."

"The hell!" He came up that last step onto the porch, where he towered over her. "Stop playing games"

"I assure you." She left the door standing half-open and came closer, holding her cloak about her, black velvet about bare shoulders, a whisper of silk, a waft of musk. He was sure she was naked under it—some other

tryst, some other damned soul. "Leave! Now!"

"Name your price. A favor. A disappearance. I'm not particular. You want some pretty boy, dammit, 1*11 buy you one, just leave my partner alone."

The shapely chin set, eyes hooded like a snake's. "What about you, Crit?"

He glanced away quickly, but not quickly enough.

"Look at me," she said, and he had to, knowing it was a slide over the brink, knowing there was no way out. Her hell-burned eyes had no bottom, except Hell itself, and there was no looking away. But he could still want to be off the porch, down the walk, and out the gate, that was the bad part—he could still want escape.

"Bargain?" he said. When he had begun to deal with her, maybe he had known that. Maybe that was why he had ditched Strat and come here, stupid as it was, because he was out of answers, and he finally cared about something again, and hated his helplessness.

"Get out of here," she said, and shoved him without laying a hand on him. "Get out of here, dammit!"

He caught his balance at the bottom of the steps, he caught his breath

there, staring up at cold rejection of himself, his offers, his stupid hope of weaseling himself and Strat both out of this situation—a hope of escape for both of them ... in a day that Ranke was falling and they were posted here behind the lines, no use, no future, no damn use to anyone including themselves. Strat could not leave this city. Take him out by force and he would escape and ride back to it, that was how bad it was—and he had known that, had not objected overmuch when Tempus had left them here in command of the rear guard.

He had hoped to solve this—cure Strat and get him away from this woman.

"Out!" she said, and that voice went through brain and bone.

He heard the door slam before he got to the gate.

He had thought about killing her—but that thought had completely fled him when he stood in front of her. His hand had been on his sword

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all the time, for all the foolish good it had been: he had not even been able to think of it in that context when he had been close enough.

He flung open the low iron gate, heard it clang shut behind him.

"Ma'am," the boy said tentatively, with his knife in hand—

With a thief's knife, a gentleman's clothes; and a staunch resolve on a

fresh-scrubbed face. "M'lady?"

Ischade gazed at this chivalry in the light and the heat of the candles,

heat so intense it made sweat run, light that blinded and blazed white—

and a fool of a thief stood there with this mooncalf look and a knife for

their mutual defense—

"He could spit you like a pig," she spat at him. "That man's the garrison commander, that's a Stepson, thief!"

One was my lover. One was.

Gods, she thought, dropping her eyes against her hand, shaking her head, I sent him away. I broke the spell, dammit, Isethimfree, there's no more spell, dammit to the hells!

But it was not Crit she was thinking of.

"M'lady?"

It was an anxious voice. The lights had dimmed. She looked at her young thief and saw still the scrubbed, frightened face—the knife clutched in a white-knuckled fist.

"What are you doing with that?" she demanded.

He looked less and less certain—even what he was doing here. He tucked that hand behind him, said diffidently, "In case he was comin' in here, m'lady."

"What, to defend me?"

He shrugged, twitched the knife-arm shoulder, looked abashedly at the floor and up again.

Gods.

She held the cloak about her, she beckoned him closer, she looked at a face that looked so very much different than her unkempt thief.

A pretty boy, Crit had said. When she wanted Strat, who was not a

boy, who was most certainly not a boy—

She touched his face, worked a small sorcery, brushed the hair from his brow. He tried to put his arms around her, jerked her close—

She pushed him away, both attracted and repelled—for all the wrong reasons. She said coldly, "There's clothes, there's money, take what you want and get out of here. I'll call you on another night. For your own sake—listen to me now."

His jaw set. He prepared some foolish argument, some protestation of his manhood, his impatience.

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She waved an arm and the door banged open, disturbing all the candles and the lamps. She let go her spell . . .

He stayed for nothing. He ran. She heard the gate, let him past her wards, and banged that shut and the door, clang! boom! after him.

She was shaking after that. She dropped her head against her hand and tried to forget the lust that was her curse, that at times and by the pull of the moon was stronger than reason, stronger than love—

The desire that killed—killed everyone but Strat. Strat had found a

way to survive, until things changed, until Strat turned moody and sullen and the anger grew in him—the anger to invoke the curse and kill him.

So she had driven him away, given him back to Crit, given him his freedom from her ensorcelments—

Crit, tonight, came here to offer stupid bargains, with no knowledge whether she would even keep her word—Crit was not lying, he could not be lying, under those terms, there was still some attraction; and that fool boy, the thief—with a knife, ready to use it if Crit had burst through the door—

For what, she asked herself, for what, except male stupidity?

For what reason in hell, except a man would not hear No. . . .

For what reason, gods, except Strat was a fool and Strat did not understand her.

Like the boy who thought he was going to be a hero. Like Strat—who did not know how to lose and did not know how to retreat from what he thought was his right and her obligation to him.

Who—gods!—had been with her too long, had been too close to her not to know what she was and who should have, for once in his stubborn,

prideful life, run the way the boy had.

But Strat did not understand that.

She looked up at the ceiling, at the blaze of lights that glittered in her eyes.

And stopped what she was feeling, shut it off cold, because love was the killing-urge, it was all mixed up with tenderness, it wound all through it, because when a man intimate with her started making up his own mind what he wanted, and once frustration became force, that someone died; and it was pleasure and it was anger at a fool and it was pain and revenge all wrapped together.

"Damn!" she cried, to any god who might be listening, and to the thrice-damned and very dead mage who had set the curse on her. Lights blazed about her, candles unconsumed.

Like her endless, deathless life—no less now than it had been a hundred years ago . . .

And so many, many dead to her account - . .

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Crit came quietly into the stableyard of the safe-house, threw the reins over his horse's head, and led the horse through the gate, quietly still, figuring Gayle must be upstairs—not that the commander needed an excuse for late-night exits and entrances—whether from some night business at headquarters or a late night on the Street of Red Lanterns; they had all been working odd shifts, they were still cleaning up paperwork and dealing with files, and whatever sleep Gayle or Kama was getting was hard-won.

He walked the horse quietly to the stable door, and turned suddenly, with a reach at his sword, because of a step alongside the stable in the dark, a large shadow.

Shepherd.

The big man said, "Strat hasn't gone uptown, he's gone to see Randal."

"For what?" Crit demanded in his frustration. He had no difficulty believing Strat had gone off somewhere—Randal was hardly where he would have guessed, but he had no reason to doubt this uninvited visitor. Shepherd—came and went like a ghost, him and his outmoded leather armor and that big clay-colored horse of his, with the panther-skin shabraque; reins of woven grass, the scent of the marsh about him—a

spook for sure if Crit had ever seen one—came in when the Riddler had left with most of the forces, and talked about Debt and the Honor of the Corps, and things that the last guard was too out of sorts to hear these depressing, final days. . . .

Shepherd shrugged, casting a large shadow in the stableyard lamplight as he stood aside. "Your partner's in trouble. But you understand that. Make no bargains with the witch."

"What do you want?" It bothered Crit; it had been bothering Crit ever since this man had showed up, the way this man moved in claiming to be a mere, assumed so much, came and went as if the rules meant nothing to him; and why in hell Crit let him get away with it Crit himself had no idea—

Except there was a great deal in this man that reminded him of the Riddler.

"Go to Randal," Shepherd said, and when Crit started back to the stable, caught his arm. "Be surprised at nothing. Your time here is coming to an end."*

"Hell!" Crit stalked off a few paces toward the stables and stopped abruptly to ask, "Whose time? Who told you?—What's Strat up to, damn it?"

But Shepherd was gone.

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Ischade had left the river-house, walked the pre-dawn streets of Sanctuary with no destination in mind—thinking about Crit, thinking about what existed between those two, and what a fool Strat was—

She would have made him commander over Sanctuary—she might have, if Tempus had not stepped in to redeem his man, and put Crit in command in Strat's place.

She would have made him more than that, if that had not happened;

she would have made him more than a lord of the Rankan Empire—if Tempus had not stepped in, if there had not been the war, and if there had been some hope of Strat continuing to be for her what he had been—

But all those things had turned dangerous, and impossible; and she found herself tonight, having rejected Crit's desperate move, having thrown her young thief out of the house, walking the warehouse district near the river and toward that street uptown that led to the hill—

And thinking of things that might have been—in these strange days of peace in the ravaged streets of Sanctuary; in these strange days of war in the very heart of Empire.

She found herself on the high street, in the midst of which a house stood with boarded windows and bars on the doors—

And downhill—and over a street or two, in an area not so rich and not so poor—there was a house she also knew . . .

"What is it?" Moria asked, when Stilcho waked sweating in their bed, in this fine house they afforded these days. "What is it?"—holding to him; but he would have none of it—some times he would not, some nights he could not.

This time he sat, naked and shivering on the side of their bed—and stared into the dark. "Light the lamp," he asked Moria. "Light the lamp!"

And Moria, born Ilsigi, born a thief and a daughter of thieves in this city, scrambled for straw and lamp and the coals in the hearth, to produce that little flame that shed light on the modest rooms and drove away the visions of Hell—

Because her husband (so she called him) had died once in the hands of

the beggars of Downwind—and all of him the witch had gotten back but his eye, wherefore the scars on his body and the scars on his face.

That eye was still in Hell, where he had been until She had called him back; and when there was no light to distract the living eye it sometimes, even yet, looked into Hell—

Where he saw the dead in their torments, and saw demons, and saw

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the demon that still lurked in Sanctuary, demon of all the wicked desires that had ever existed in human hearts . . .

"Stilcho," Moria said, putting her arms about him, pulling the sheet up around him, against the night chill. She kissed him and he was still cold—

Because She had used him for her emissary to Hell—so many times. He had been Her lover, and died as her lovers must die; and always she

had had that mystical string on him that drew him back to life . . .

"She's calling me," Stilcho whispered, reaching for Moria's arm, holding to Moria's warmth, when the chill of the grave got to him.

Moria held to him. And all the time that they had lived, they, Ischade's fugitive lover and her fugitive servant, on Ischade's stolen gold—had been poised on a knife's edge; and now—now he waked in sweats and heard Her calling him very clearly:

/ need you. She was saying. Come to me. . . .

"I hear her too," Moria whispered. "Oh, gods, no—don't go!"

Haught, the ex-slave, the dancer, the mage—stirred in his sleep too, in a barred boarded house—stirred at the side of the creature with whom he shared his exile—got up from bed and walked to those windows, feeling—something finally, be it only the threat of Hell and death.

He looked out from those windows and saw, with a most curious frisson of fear, the black-cloaked shadow standing in the street—

Saw that hooded figure facing him and looking—he felt that stare go straight to his gut—with full cognizance that he was watching Her at that moment.

"Mistress," he whispered, longing for the safety She might offer—arrogant Haught, who had been Her apprentice. Her most disobedient apprentice. He found himself shivering—but it might be the cold—and with a certain weakness in his joints—it might be hunger; it was only sorcery had sustained him in this boarded-up mansion, past the stores buried in the cellar, which were long since depleted.

It seemed to him—he hugged himself, shivering more and more in the predawn chill—that he heard her voice speaking to him very clearly, telling him if he would serve her again—he might be free.

And magician and sorcerer that he had been, he was only a prisoner now, of something much worse. It was not nails and boards on the windows that kept him in—it was powerful wards; and it was not Tasfalen he lodged with, but an undead housing something that had been Roxane the witch—a presence which made terrible demands of him and which bided asleep, but not asleep, not ever quite asleep; it drank down vials of

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dust he found for it, of its shattered Power-globe—and it only grew more malevolent and more bitter and more dangerous and demanding.

He longed for Ischade's house. With all his heart.

I'm here, he prayed, looking out that shutter, hoping that She would hear that thought as She heard so much that passed in Sanctuary, I'm more than willing, mistress, if only you'll forgive me, mistress, I'll not make those mistakes again . . .

He caught his breath, the impression was so strong—of anger, of summons—he trembled, he began, against his own better knowledge to consider which of the doors and windows he might pry open to admit Her—

To admit Death Herself—or willingly to go to Her. . . -

Zip poured blood over the stones of the little altar he had made—blood he had let from his own veins, there being no better to hand. He had served the Revolution, he had let blood enough of Rankan overlords, he had done all manner of things and killed more Rankene pigs than he could remember—but it had not brought forth his god, the god that was going to liberate the town. The Revolution had died—or won—or things had simply changed beyond a need for the Revolution or a hope for its success. Somehow things had gotten muddled for him, because he had begun sleeping with a woman of the enemy—Kama, Tempus' daughter, of all people, on the outs with her father, but still one of the foreign Enemy—

Perhaps that was the reason his god failed to answer him. He had

found the old stones of this altar on the river-shore, and set it up there during the witch wars and fed it during the Revolution; and he had moved it to this sacred street—stone by stone, until he began to build again in the Street of Temples, well, if not on the street, at least in an alley next the great shrines of Empire and of the quisling Ilsigi gods—

And he had failed at first to find the shape of the ancient altar—he had piled up stones only to see them tumble, or to have pieces left over.

But a stranger had come along at the depth of his frustration and told him—told him without hesitation!—what stone to place on what stone, and lo! the altar had taken shape, firmer than before—

Zip knew that this stranger, with the clay-colored horse, the woven reins, this strange, old-time warrior—had to be special—was perhaps numinous, because the hair still rose on his neck when he thought about it. He made his offerings, he hoped for another such manifestation—

But the stranger appeared elsewhere in the streets of Sanctuary, these days. Zip had seen him by plain daylight, the stranger had turned up riding in the lower town, by noontime; or around the Garrison by moon-

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light; sometimes one saw him riding by the river-shore, in the night—as if he were searching for something lost in the marsh—

The stranger's name was Shepherd, so the rumor was in the streets, and once Zip had seen him stop at that house in the Shambles where the Stepsons lodged, and ride through that low gate that let him into a certain yard—

Where the Stepsons kept their horses in a ramshackle stable.

That association was what gnawed at Zip.

He poured blood from his own veins over these ancient stones, hoping for an Ilsigi god. Even an Ilsigi devil would do—something of Sanctuary's own people and not the occupation forces.

And something, finally, finally glowed within the crevices of the stones—glowed and winked out again.

"What do you want?" he cried, kneeling on the dirty cobbles, pounding his fists on his knees. "What do you want me to do?"

There was silence, and in that silence he heard the slow, hollow ring of a horse's hooves out on the Street of Temples—in this hour just before the dawn. For some reason that leisurely advance seemed ominous to

him, the most dangerous, the most fatal thing in the world, and he knew that rider would stop and that shadow would loom in the alley-opening, saying to him, in a deep voice.

"Boy, what are you praying to?"

"I don't know," he confessed, on his knees before that mounted shadow, and felt cold, cold as the dead in the White Foal.

"Boy, what are you praying for?"

"For—" But revenge was not it, not exactly; and it was dangerous, to say something too quickly or to say it wrong. Zip sensed that, he sensed he was in the greatest danger he had ever been in, that—

God, he slept with a Rankan woman, he had started out wanting revenge on Rankene pride, started out sleeping with her to screw some enemy woman and ended up sleeping with her because it was someone to sleep with, and somehow he got to looking for things from her, like—the way she wasn't at all like the rest other kind, she was good, she could be rough as a dockside whore and gentler than his dreams^ she became—an addiction with him, an unpredictability, he never knew what she was going to be, or why he felt the way he did—but it excited him, she did, and he had to have her—

He was filth before his god. That was all he was, and the questions shot straight to his heart.

But a second time: "What are you praying for?" the stranger asked—it was Shepherd himself. There was a watt of chill swamp air about him.

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"I don't know," Zip confessed, and knotted his fingers in his hair, head bowed. "I just don't know anymore . . ."

"Never go to a god," Shepherd said, "with preconceptions."

"Pre—what?" He squinted up at the mounted shadow, saw the red gleam of the eyes of the panther-head on the horse's chest.

"I'll make it easy for you," Shepherd said. "Wrongs set right. Problems solved. Lives set in order. Is that what you want? Go to the market:

fortune-tellers charge a copper for promises like that. Much cheaper than blood."

The stranger was making fun of him. Zip stood up with his hand on his

knife, with all the old, foolish anger rising up in him. A man could take so much, but not laughter at his expense.

"Wrongs set right," the stranger said in a deep voice. "But what if you're one of those wrongs—what if that anger of yours and that hate of yours had no Rankans to turn to? Can you imagine your life then?"

He could not. He did not know where he would be or what his life would be for, if not Ranke; and Ranke was falling on its own, without any need of him . . .

"You sleep with Ranke," Shepherd said. "You need Ranke, boy, you need it to live, because when it's gone, there'll be nothing left of you. You've had your answer. Quit praying."

Zip's hand fell. He stood there in that cold that came of hearing the truth and knowing everything Shepherd said was true.

He was still standing there when the rider shouldered past him, slow clatter of hooves down the alley and into the dark of the shrines on either hand.

The light was gone from his altar. The very air felt cold. And the stones of that altar suddenly tumbled apart, scattering across the cobbles

of the alley.

Taz the thief stood on the corner of the river-road in the dawn, sullen and out of sorts and watching the house the way he had been watching when Ischade had come out of it and when she had come back and when other men had come to it—well-dressed men, mostly, and one woman and one limping beggar. Taz failed to understand, but curiosity gathered his courage toward the dawn, never having seen her return—he came up to the iron fence himself, and laid a hand on that gate in the hedge.

He yelped in pain, recoiled with a shivering cold up that arm.

But the gate, glowing blue as Shalpa's ghostfire, unlatched itself and swung inward on its own. Taz stood there somewhere between shock and a terrible compulsion to walk that path and, thieflike, prudently, something whispered to him, persuasive as temptation to sin, to reconnoiter

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the place—himself in the fine clothes she had given him; and with all these other finely dressed folk—did he not belong here? Why was he excluded?

Come ahead, something said. come ahead, come ahead—

He took the first step, he took the second, not really wanting it, but he felt his hand brush the gate, felt it leave his hand—

He walked the path and ducked aside into the weeds and into the hedges, where a crack in the shutters gave forth a seam of light into the brush; he worked his way most carefully into this hedge against the house and rose up beneath the window, carefully, carefully to peer into the crack—

Into a room where the witch sat in the glare of countless candles—on the floor, on a bright array of discarded silks. Her face was white, her eyes were shut, her strange guests stood as shadows in the background of this cluttered room.

It was witchcraft he spied on, Taz was sure of it, it was most real and dangerous witchcraft, of a sort he had seen in the skies and in the streets of Sanctuary in recent years, when the dead had walked and lightnings and whirlwind had warred over the harbor. . . .

A thief knew when he was out of his league. Taz was easing backward in the brush when there was a sudden clap of wings, air against his neck, a raven's harsh cry—

And the shutters banged open in his face, inside and out at once,

setting him face-to-face with a startled man: he swore, Taz yelped, and Taz was off through the bushes and for the only way out he knew, the front gate—

But it clanged shut and glowed blue and perilous in front of him, and he whirled around at the creak of the front door behind him.

He walked toward that door—not that he wanted to, but his body moved, and the distance between him and the porch steps grew less and less.

A man stood in that doorway, a one-eyed man who met him as he came up onto the porch, who set his hand on his shoulder and said, half sadly, "You should have run when you had the chance, boy."

But he went inside. He had to. He took his place with the others, a bearded, foreign man, a beggar with the remnants of handsomeness—a Rankene lady, the pale, one-eyed man who had snared him on the porch. . . .

She had never moved. She sat in the midst of this goings-on with her hands open on the knees of her black gown, her eyes shut, her lips moving in a constant murmur.

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"Randal—" Strat felt uneasy on the steps of the Stepson-mage's apartment, uneasy in being in the mage-quarter in the first place, in an area where Rankan personnel were less than welcome, especially these days.

He felt uneasy in the second place because one had no knowledge what sort of wards an anxious mage might set; and Randal, with his enemies, had every right to be anxious.

And he felt that unease in the third place because he had had enough of dealing with wards and with witchery in all its manifestations, and he was disgusted to find his knees all but shaking as he stood on Randal's second-story landing, under a night sky and in a rising wind, and hammering away with more noise than a body ought to have to use to raise a mage out of sleep.

"Randal, dammit, wake up!"

A dog barked. Strat looked over the rail and down, and saw a black cur in the shadow down there, next the bay horse—

Someone sneezed, and instantly where the dog had been was Randal, in a night-robe and bare feet, wiping his nose.

"Damned allergies," Randal said. "I thought—"

"Thought what?" Strat came hastily down the steps, no little annoyed for the public scene.

"Thought—I smelled an associate of yours about you."

That was not what Strat wanted to hear. No. He grabbed Randal by the arm, hauled Randal into the privacy against the bay horse's side, and said, "I want you to come with me. I want you to talk to her. . . ."

Randal sneezed again, wiped his nose with the back of his hand. "For what? What good can I do? The woman's doing nothing against the Guild, and alone—"

"Talk to her," Strat said, holding his arm so tight Randal flinched and physically began to pry loose his fingers. He realized that and let go, took a grip on Randal's shoulder and kept that lighter, with a mortal effort. "I can't sleep, I don't rest—"

"I don't think it's sorcery," Randal said.

"What do you mean, 'don't think it's sorcery!'" Another effort to keep his voice down and the grip gentle. "Man, I'm forgetting things, I don't know where I am half the time, I think about her like I was some damn fool kid with his first lay—"

"It's not witchery."

"Damn if it isn't!"

"Has it dawned on you. Ace, that all of that equally well describes a man—in love?"

Strat stood there with his hand on Randal's shoulder and stared at him

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before he gave him a shove against the horse. "I came to you for help, Stepson!"

"That's what I'm telling you. I know spells. I know bewitchment.

You've had it, but you haven't got it—that horse has, but you haven't."

Another sneeze. "She cut you loose. The ties that've been on you—aren't.

But you keep thinking about her. You can't sleep. You can't eat. You wake at night thinking about her, wondering who she's with—"

"Damn you!"

"So what else is it—but love?"

"You're useless!" Strat said, and picked up the bay horse's reins. "I'm going to have it out with her!"

"Don't!" Randal said, catching at the reins as Strat threw himself into the saddle. "Strat!"

But Strat pulled up on him, reined aside, and the bay took out at a run—
—with a black dog loping along: Strat saw it when they turned the corner and the dog got into the lead, running right under his horse's feet.

The bay horse shied up then, screamed and shied as the dog jumped at its throat, and Strat felt—

—nothing under him. Simply nothing stopping him from flying through the air and landing dazed on the cobbles.

He scabbled for his knees, bad shoulder stunned, knee and hip paralyzed—he fell on his face again, somewhere between pain and numbness, and stopped caring whether he lived or died—because the horse was gone, and all there was in the world was Randal sitting on the filthy cobbles beside him, saying to someone—"I sent it away. I don't know if I should have done that—"

And Crit's voice saying; "You damn fool!"

As someone gathered him off the pavement and cradled his head in his

lap—someone familiar, over a lot of years, someone who kept saying,
"Ace, gods, I'm sorry."

The horse was gone—turned to air beneath him. It was the last gift she
had given him. And it was gone. His friends took it from him. Or she did.
There was only the taste of blood in his mouth.

She did not know why she did what she did—it was only the night, and
the feeling of change in the wind, and the feeling of things slipping away
from her. She murmured, though perhaps none of her folk could hear
her, "Protection for my own is all I can do now. But that I do, as best I
can."

She wanted her own with her tonight. Behind her closed lids she saw
the dying of altar fires, she heard the stirring of gods in their shrines—she

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gathered her forces on this night and she wove spells to protect this place,
such as she could-

Against all wisdom to the contrary—she drew her servants around her,
revised the lines of her power—drew them from all over the city to
protect them on this night: she felt Haught's battering at the wards that
held him, felt the pleas he flung at her, like a moth battering at the

glass—

But one face she saw more than all the rest, one touch she wanted most, and, dyed by a thousand murders and a thousand more black sins, she tried to stop thinking about him, telling herself no, let him go, stop the anger, stop the wanting—

He could be in Hell itself and she could draw him to her: pyromant, necromant, she could still raise the dead—singly and with effort, who once had summoned legions out of Hell's long patrol and set them to march against her rival—

She had lost a great deal—she had blown a great deal of her power away on the winds, had seen the dust of a shattered Globe of Power settle like a dream over Sanctuary, making mages of beggars and diminishing the power of the mage-born irrevocably: if that were not so she could lift her hand, raise the lightnings, change the wind—take the failing Empire, make herself that power that would shake the world.

As it was, the Empire would fail and fall, the greatness would slip away from Ranke, and the marbles crumble and the decline, centuries long, bring new powers, new mages, new wizardry—

She was done with dreams of power. She let Ranke enter its long, long slide to destruction, she listened to the rising of the wind, the echo of that wind in empty fanes and altars, she said softly, ever so softly,

"Goodbye, Strat."

Knowing they would not meet again, even in Hell—her curse being immortality.

"Damn you!" Strat said, when they had gotten him onto his feet. But Crit held him there, in the cold, dusty light of dawn, a stinging wind skirling through the streets of Sanctuary, Crit had his arms about him, held him like a brother.

There was no sign of the bay horse. He ached from head to foot. His knee and his elbow were bleeding, and would stiffen.

"Get up on my horse," Crit said then. "We'll get you another."

He looked from one to the other of them in this beginning of dawn— Crit and Randal, and it was strange, as if having lost everything he had, he could feel so free—

So damnably nothing-left-to-lose—except Crit, standing there holding him on his feet, Randal supporting him from the other side.

He let them help him to the saddle, he let Crit and Randal lead him through the first stir of morning in the streets. He listened to Crit telling him how Shepherd had told him where he had to search, he listened to Randal saying there was something strange in this wind . . .

Shepherd met them at the turning. Shepherd said—leaning on the saddlebow of the big mud-colored horse, and looking straight at them, "Our service is done. Time we were moving on."

A gust of wind rocked at them. A flash of light hit their faces. Crit's horse shied and stood with its ears back, Crit and Randal holding it while Strat held on—and whatever had been Shepherd became a burst of light, a grim figure on a dark horse; a rising whirlwind, and a boy's voice saying,

"Follow the Shepherd. . . ."

"Abarsis . . ." Strat had no idea which of them had said it, or whether his eyes really remembered the figure in the light.

Follow the Shepherd. ...

Time we were moving on ...

Winds out of the desert battered at Sanctuary's shutters, swirled stinging clouds of sand and dust against a brazen sun.

Something fled shrieking on that wind, unbound—a witch's disembodied soul skirled three times about the towers of the Lancothis house, skimmed forlornly along the river and flew—formless and lost—before the gale.

So Haught reported, arriving wind-scoured and dusty at the river-house that day. It was a much-chastened Haught who kissed the hem of Ischade's black robe and begged shelter from this wind.

Ischade considered this contrition. "Don't trust him," Stilcho said coldly, Stilcho being at least the most privileged of her servants, and Haught's logical rival.

"I don't," she said plainly, and picked up her cloak and put it on.

"Stay here," she said. "You'll be safe, at least, whatever happens. . . ."

She left then, took to the winds herself, and lighted in raven-shape by the city gate, where a sullen, closely wrapped crowd had gathered—a crowd through which she moved as a black-cloaked woman, willing no one to see her, or if they saw—to forget that they had seen; that gift she still had undiminished.

She came on the rumor Haught had brought—was there to see the last of the Rankene forces ride through the streets, out the gates.

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They were very few—amazingly few, the crowd murmured, wondering if there were not more to come.

A handful of meres; the few remaining of the 3rd Commando; and last to leave, the Stepsons, Randal the mage; Critias . . . with Strat beside him, on a tall dun horse, no banners, no haste. Strat did not even turn his head as he rode past, near enough she could have touched him.

The riders passed the gates, in blowing dust so thick it made shadows of them, made them nothing more than ghosts in the golden light.

For a moment the crowd began to drift—but one left the gate, one went out leading a mule, quickly lost in the dust. Some said it was another mere; some said it was one of the rebels—looking for revenge, perhaps, Sanctuary's last violence aimed at Ranke.

Ischade knew that boy-almost-man—a scoundrel named Zip, or some such, servant of a god inimical to her: she felt that presence strongly when he passed, before the crowd began to disperse.

After that was just the dust, just the ghosts of buildings in what should have been bright day, the hill lost in haze and dust, yellow sand skirling along the streets.

Roxane was gone, to heaven or to hell or whatever demon wanted her. The gods of Ranke deserted their shrines. Sanctuary was falling away from the Empire, the forces that had sustained Ranke were leaving and she might have followed them—but could not, not as far as they went, and not where the god might lead them. She was always a creature of the shadows, and of candlelight, and needed lives to sustain her life—

Except his.

She cherished that one claim to virtue.

THE FIRE IN A GOD'S EYE

Robin Wayne Bailey

The shallow waters of the White Foal glimmered blackly in the late night, purling with a suspiciously sweet rush and gurgle over its stony bottom. It whisper-whispered, as if it ferried secrets; deepening, as it went south between its inauspicious banks toward Sanctuary and Downwind and beyond to the sea. Sharp as a razor's cut was the line where the water touched the land at the fording point between Apple Lane and the

Generals' Road, but looking far up or down its course there was no telling the river from the sky. For all that a fanciful mind could guess, it might have flowed down from a source somewhere in the dark heavens to touch the earth only briefly, here at the end of the world, before it plummeted over the edge and on, to the underworld. This river, with all the detritus that it carried, with all the dead who had washed up on its shores, with all the souls who had given themselves in despair to its waves, this river would make such a fitting link.

But the lone rider, who sat quietly astride a huge gray horse in the middle of the ford, watching the water foam and rill around the animal's fetlocks, was no poet, just a soul weighed down with weariness and burdens of the spirit. Such thoughts were only the shrapnel of too many sleepless nights, easily kept at bay by drawing a dusty cloak tighter around the shoulders, and pulling a dusty hood closer to shadow one's face.

Sabellia, too, Bright Moon-mother, had shadowed Her face this night, turned away from the world below, and surrendered the world to the darkness. Even the stars, those myriad sparkling tears She had shed for

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Her heavenly children and for the children of the earth, those, too, were hidden behind a thick, cloudy veil.

The rider's gaze turned away from the sky and toward Sanctuary. At a nudge, the horse moved up the muddy bank and turned down the Generals' Road, its hooves clip-clopping smartly on the brick-and-stone paving, ringing even more loudly on the wooden planks of the tiny north bridge that crossed Splinter Creek. The rider halted briefly. Off to the left stood the charred ruins of the house of the dead vivisectionist, Kurd. Next to it, though, stood a new house, shoddily built from scavenged lumber and stones. Lamplight shone through the cracks of hastily constructed shutters, and gruff voices echoed through the door. There was the smell of lime and sand about the place, and unfamiliar tools leaned against the outside walls. Some itinerant workers on the city's new fortifications probably had decided to stay, though the work was done.

Suddenly, the door swung open a crack, and someone peered around the edge, alerted, no doubt, by the hoof-sounds on the bridge. They watched warily as the rider passed by. Obviously, they had quickly learned the ways of this city, this thieves' world.

Off to the left stood the high, stark silhouettes of the city's granaries, barely discernible in the night, though they towered above the new wall. Nearer burned the lamps of the Street of Red Lanterns, where scented women plied special delights and special tortures, according to the appetites of their customers and the weight of their coins. Special effort had been made to extend the new wall around the granaries, while the brothels were left outside in its shadow.

The rider thought about that, then shrugged. In Sanctuary, one might have expected just the reverse.

After a massive construction effort that had been the talk of the Empire, the new wall was finished. It encompassed the entire city now. Atop the huge edifice, watch fires burned, and shadows moved about in the flickering glow. The new, iron-banded doors of the great Gate of Triumph stood open, but a pair of garrison sentries stood at the duty post just inside.

"Whoa, there!" one of them called, coming forward as he curled one hand almost casually about the hilt of his sword. "What kind of foreigner comes visiting our town at such an unholy hour? Come out from under that damned hood. Show your face there."

The sentry's hair and clothing exuded the odor of smoked krrf as he came as close as the rider's knee, and his eyes sheened with drug-glaze as they caught the torchlight from the duty post. His jaw hung just a bit too slackly, and his motions were languid. An addict, probably.

The rider wanted no confrontation, so pulled just a corner of the con-

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cealing hood back and glared at the sentry, who backed up immediately.

"My apologies, Lady!" he mumbled. He took his hand quickly away from his sword's hilt, and shot a fearful glance at his partner. "We didn't know it was you. Of course, you can pass. Welcome home!" He made a deep bow, and the rider passed him by without a word.

Caravan Square was abandoned this time of night. So was the Farmer's Run, though one could never be too sure there, for it was too close to the Maze, and every shadow and dark cranny was to be watched. Governor's Walk was also quiet, and the sounds of the horse's hoof-falls cracked with uncomfortable volume on freshly repaired street cobbles. Even in the darkness the work on the smaller, inner wall that enclosed the palace was evident. The rider continued straight ahead, following that wall.

At the place where West Gate Street joined Governor's Walk, a city watch patrol, six uniformed men, suddenly blocked the way. The oldest of them, a man whose graying curls spilled out from under his steel cap, and apparently the captain, held up a lantern and shined it on the rider.

The light glimmered on a sleeve of metal rings that covered the rider's left arm and the hand that held the reins. It fell, also, on the hilt of a sword, whose tangs were shaped like the wings of a bird. As the rider shifted in the saddle, the cloak parted slightly.

"Why, if it ain't the Daughter o' the Sun, 'erself, it is!" The old man laughed unpleasantly. "Come back to stir up more trouble, have ye?"

A much younger watchman stepped up to his captain's side and grinned. "You know," he said nastily, "I had a cousin killed in that PFLS ambush she set up last year. I can tell it straight, I was glad to hear somebody fixed her . . ."

The old man gave his subordinate a sharp elbow in the ribs and scowled. "Shut yer mouth, Barik!" The scowl turned into a twisted little smile that showed several missing teeth. "Can't ye see she's just on 'er way home after a long while gone?"

The younger watchman gave his captain an insubordinate look as he rubbed his side. "Yeah," he said sullenly. "I guess I can see that."

"Then bid 'er good nightie, boys, an' let 'er pass!" He motioned all his men back and made a deep, sweeping bow that was pure mockery. "Welcome home, Lady Chenaya!" he said grandly. "Our regards to yer noble Rankan family!"

Chenaya was tired and rode on, forgetting about the watchmen and their meaningless taunts. But when she reached the Processional she stopped again. A wind swept up Sanctuary's most famous street, bringing with it the sweet tang of the salty sea, and there, in the silence, she thought she could just hear the rush of the breakers and the rocking creak of the old wharves at the Processional's farther end.

Gods, it was good to be home, and it would be good to rest soon. She wanted to sleep, sleep for days, and wake up to the faces and laughter of those she loved- She had seen too much in her time away from Sanctuary, learned too much, perhaps dared too much. All she wanted was to close her eyes and forget it all.

She rode on along Governor's Walk, past the park called the Promise of Heaven, until she reached the Avenue of Temples. She saw no one else in the streets as she went, and reflected on that. Sanctuary had quietened in her absence. From the park, it was only a short distance to the Temple of the Rankan Gods.

Chenaya dismounted and dropped the reins other horse. She gave it an affectionate pat along the withers before she turned toward the temple steps. The animal was war-trained, bred in the finest stables of Ranke's capital. It wouldn't wander away while she was inside, and she pitied the hapless fool stupid enough to try to steal it, horse bites being a difficult thing for any physician to treat.

She climbed the twelve marble stairs and passed between the columns that formed the temple entrance. A pair of oil pots burned there, providing light, for adherents were welcome at any hour. On either side of the

temple rose the great stone images of Ranke's lost war-god, Vashanka, and Sabellia, the moon-goddess. Streamers of incense wafted up around them from circles of tiny holes cut into the floor about their feet. The sweet smoke curled and swirled, and rose out through round, open skylights.

Between those two deities, though, was the great altar of Savankala, overhung with its massive golden sunburst and ringed with burnished oil pots, whose flames sputtered and danced. There was no statue, no image of Savankala, save the symbolic sunburst. Who, after all, could look on the face of the sun?

Chenaya knelt wearily before the sun-god's altar, made proper obeisance, and fished out from inside her garments a heavy leather purse that hung on a thong around her neck. Loosening its strings, she poured into her hand an egg-sized diamond. It was warm with the heat of her body, and as she opened her fingers wider, its perfect facets caught the firelight from the oil pots. A rainbow of rays shot about the temple.

The stone tiles of the floor vibrated suddenly, and the very air grew taut with an unutterable tension. Above the altar, Savankala's sunburst began to burn with a potent white light, until all darkness fled His temple, and the shadows shriveled into nothingness-

Chenaya curled into a ball around the diamond, and trembled. The

light stabbed her eyes, though she flung up her hood to hide her face and

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squeezed her eyes shut with all her strength until they leaked thick tears.

She did not cry out, though, or call her god's name.

Slowly, the light subsided. Chenaya put the jewel back into the purse and hid it in her clothing again. She rose, then, to stare at the sunburst. It no longer burned with the Bright Father's essence, nor did the temple stones. Yet, in her soul she felt Him near.

She lifted one of the many oil pots, taking care not to drown the wick, and set it in the middle of the altar. Next, she drew a small dagger from her boot. The silver blade shimmered. She raised it quickly and cut a long blond lock from her hair and held it in the wick's flame. It went up in a flash. The singe-smell and the smoke curled upward as Chenaya left the dagger as a further offering on the altar next to the pot. A moment later, she turned away and left the temple.

Her horse snorted when he saw her coming. She gathered the reins and mounted, ready to go home to Land's End. Before she got far, though, something caught her eye, a gleam of metal lying on the ground by the

outside corner of the temple. She cast a glance over her shoulder. No moon in the sky, no stars, nothing to cause such a glitter. Cautiously, she dismounted again.

It was her dagger, point down, stuck in the earth. Her jaw gaped as she bent closer. No mistake, it was hers. She rose again, and peered suspiciously up and down the street. No one, not even the best thief in Sanctuary, could have got into the temple, snatched the dagger from the altar, and gotten out again without her notice. Even if such a thief lived, he wouldn't have been so clumsy as to drop it making his getaway.

She frowned and thought about the gleam that had caught her eye.

There was no such gleam now from any angle as she moved around it.

The damn thing was barely visible in the temple's shadow.

She was too tired for such puzzles. The hour was late, and home was near. If Savankala didn't want her offering, she wasn't going to just leave it in the dirt. It was a good blade. She bent down and grabbed the hilt.

Her senses reeled suddenly, and the earth seemed to yawn as she fell crazily into a great black hole. A scream formed, burbling in her throat. She bit her lip, though, and clenched her jaws tight, refusing to give it voice. Down she tumbled into the strange darkness, deeper and deeper, until somewhere far below, or far ahead—she could no longer tell direction—she saw a greenish glow and a form like a body in its shroud cloth. It, too, was falling, falling toward her at fantastic speed, coming closer.

Now the shroud slipped away from its head, and she saw a pallid, horrible face with no eyes rushing at her.

Chenaya threw up her arms, on the verge of releasing the pent-up scream. She mustn't, she knew. But she couldn't help herself!

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Then, as she opened her mouth, she found herself outside the temple again, and the world was the world she knew. She collapsed back against the temple wall, gasped for breath, and slowly fought down the panic that had filled her. There was no hole, no corpse, no greenish glow. Just

the dagger at her feet.

She stared at the blade. Whatever had just happened, the dagger had been the trigger. Her fingertips had only brushed the hilt, and the world had lurched.

Of a sudden, she kicked the dagger, sending it flying end over end into the middle of the street. Nothing happened. She folded her hands over her mouth and trembled. Maybe it had been an illusion, a standing

dream. No, make that nightmare. She was so tired, but she had to master herself, had to keep a tighter control.

She picked up the dagger and thrust it into its sheath in her boot and mounted her horse. It was just a short ride now to Land's End. She would be there soon, and she could rest, though not sleep. That would come later. At least, though, she'd be home. It would be good to see her father and Dayrne.

But when she made the turn onto the short road from the Avenue of Temples that should have taken her to her father's estate, she found herself at a dead end, staring at the cold stone of the city wall. Damn it! The wall's course had effectively cut off Land's End, and all the other estates, from the rest of the city. No doubt, Uncle Molin had chuckled about that. Hell, he'd probably planned it.

Frowning, she turned her horse around, rode back down the Avenue of Temples to the street called Safe Haven, and from there, to the Wideway, which ran along the wharves. There, the rush of the breakers, the humming of ships' guy wires, and the creaking of old timbers made a magical music, and the smell of the salt sea blew inland, overpowering. Unfortunately, so was the smell of fish. She turned her gaze away from the beautiful sea and concentrated on the road, setting her mount to a gallop until she came to the Gate of Gold, so named because in former times, when the caravan trade came this far south, it marked the way to the

lucrative trade in Ilsig.

Two more guards stood at the Gate of Gold's duty post. They moved into the middle of the road, blocking the way, when they heard a rider coming. Chenaya slowed to a walk, then stopped. One of the men recognized her at once. "Lady!" he said with genuine politeness, inclining his head, then coming to attention. "Glad we are to see you back, though it could be under more pleasant circumstances."

The other soldier also inclined his head. "Many of us respected your

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father," he added gently. "And his accomplishment at this year's Festival of Man .- ."

Chenaya's eyes widened at mention of her father. Respected? Past tense? Forgetting the guards, she spurred her horse suddenly, filled with a dreadful apprehension, and left the gate swiftly behind- There was no road north outside the wall. She rode overland at breakneck speed, pushing her mount, heedless of the dangers—the unexpected trench, the patch

of slick grass. She bent low over the horse's neck. Its mane lashed her face as she sought to outrace the fear the guard's casual words had put into her.

She passed Sanctuary's southernmost estate. It was supposed to be abandoned, but above its private walls, lamps burning in some of its upper windows said differently. She had no time to worry over that, though. She used the reins to whip her horse, driving it faster as the ground rolled up and down.

At the main gate of Land's End, she jumped to the ground, ran, and seized the gigantic iron knocker. Thrice, she slammed it against the metal plate, and thrice more, before a small square portal of wood in the gate's door slid back and an unfamiliar face peered out at her.

"What do you want?" the face snapped. Dark eyes stared warily at her. "It's late."

Chenaya froze, incredulous, then glared angrily. It was her luck that the gate would be guarded tonight by one of Dayme's recruits. This fool didn't know who she was! She grabbed the knocker and smashed it down again and again with all her frantic might, raising a terrible noise.

The gate jerked open suddenly. Curses pouring from his lips, a huge figure stepped outside. Despite his size, he was cat-quick. He caught her hand and pulled her away from the knocker. "There's people sleeping!"

he grumbled. "That's enough of ... !"

Chenaya seized his wrist and twisted hard. It didn't budge the giant, whose size and strength were obviously far greater than her own, but her mere attempt surprised him enough to let her move slightly behind him. She drove her heel into the weak area behind his knee, evoking a startled cry, and slammed her elbow into the side of his head just behind the ear. She didn't bother to watch him fall, just left him lying in the dirt, as she pushed the gates wide and rushed into the courtyard.

Two men, half naked, but with swords bared, came rushing out of the house.

Chenaya stopped and waved her hands desperately. Dismas and Gestus were old friends. They would know her.

They stopped as recognition dawned in their eyes. "Mistress!" Dismas

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shouted excitedly. "You're back!" He turned immediately to his partner.

"Gestus, go wake Dayme. Tell him she's come back. Wake everybody!"

Gestus muttered an incoherent welcome in broken Rankene and ran back into the house. Chenaya whipped off her cloak. When Dismas reached out his hand to clasp her arm in a gladiator's greeting, she threw the cloak over it and dashed after Gestus. "Mistress!" Dismas called in surprise, then he hurried after.

Dayme was halfway down the great staircase when Chenaya reached the main hall. Wrapped only in a brief kilt, he stopped, stood there a moment, and looked at her. Then he rushed down the stairs, only to stop suddenly again. His eyes peered into hers, darted away momentarily, then drifted back. She read so many things in his eyes, things she had seen there before. She knew how Dayrne felt about her, had known for some time. But never had she seen his joy turn so abruptly to pain and hurt.

He reached out and clasped her arm. "Cheyne," he said quietly, using the nickname he had given her years ago. "There's no way to soften it. Lowan Vigeles is dead. So is your Aunt Rosanda."

Stunned, Chenaya could only look at him.

Dismas and Gestus were with them now, and they gathered close in a circle and put their arms around each other. The giant she had beaten at the gate rushed into the room, sword drawn. Immediately, though, he

grasped the situation, looked shamefaced, and put down his blade.

"My apologies. Lady," he said sullenly. "I didn't know who you were, and you didn't say anything."

Dayme started to turn and answer, but Chenaya's unyielding grip made him hesitate. She clung to him, grasping his arms, pouring all her strength into her grip. Hold on, she told herself desperately, locking his gaze. Here's your anchor! She felt Dismas and Gestus, their arms around her, too. Here are your anchors!

"It's all right, Dendur," Dayme said over his shoulder. "Have someone see to her horse, then go back to your post."

The soft closing of the door as Dendur departed made a sound that touched Chenaya with its symbolic finality. She let go of Dayme and slipped free of Dismas and Gestus. Slowly, she climbed the staircase and went to her father's room. The door was closed, but she pushed it open. Everything was just as she remembered it. Nothing had been disturbed. She walked to Lowan's sturdy chair by the fireplace. There was no fire, for it was too warm to need one. She unfastened her sword belt and let it drop to the floor. Then she sank down in the chair, just as her father always did, with the same languid motion, pushed her feet out, just as he

always did, and stared into the hearth, the way she remembered him doing.

Dayme came into the room and closed the door. She looked up at him, and loved him for the concern he wore so plainly on his face. He knelt down beside her and laid his head on the chair's carved armrest. She rubbed her thumb over his brow, over the lines of his hurt, before her own pain became too great, and she turned away to gaze back into the cold fireplace.

"Cheyne?" he said, looking up. He repeated it. "Cheyne?" He leaned closer, trying to make her look at him, but she wouldn't.

"Chenaya?" He shook her arm, rising to his feet, the worry on his face transforming to fear. "Please, talk to me!"

She clutched the diamond hidden in its leather purse under her tunic, and twisted in the chair to avoid Dayme's face. She drew her legs up—her father's chair was big enough for that—and curled into the crook of its great wooden arm. Tears streamed suddenly down her cheeks; she couldn't hold them back any longer. She hugged herself, and cried and cried.

But though she cried, she made not a sound,

Dayme paced about the peristyle, the large central room of the Land's End estate. It was also half garden, and the gray, depressing half-light of the Sanctuary morning streamed in. Though it was spring, there had been so little sunshine of late, Rashan, the high priest of Savankala, and friend of the family, sat motionless on one of the marble benches.

Daphne, recently divorced from Prince Kadakithis, now a permanent resident of Land's End, tapped a dagger blade idly against one palm as she watched Dayrne.

"Word's out all over town that she's back," Daphne said with a wicked smile. "Word also has it that Zip decided hiding wasn't good enough. The little coward sneaked out of town before dawn this morning." Daphne flipped the dagger in the air and caught it by the point. "Anyone disappointed?"

Dayrne was disappointed. His hands clenched into fists. He'd have much preferred to find Zip and all the rest of his little PFLS rats and do to them what he'd done to their comrade, Ro-Karthis. He tried. His gladiators had torn up the town looking for piffles, but they'd all burrowed too deeply into the earth after Lowan's murder.

He'd made an example of Ro-Karthis, though. The people of Sanctuary had never seen a Bhokaran ferryboat. Few living in this hellhole even knew of that country far to the west. The sight had impressed them, though. He, himself, had fired the ship as it floated from the harbor with

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a living, screaming Ro-Karthis crucified on the mast with Lowan Vigeles and Lady Rosanda laid in regal splendor at his feet. Dayrne could still hear Ro-Karthis's shrieks, see the smoke and sparks rising on the wind while the flames burned all. A ferryboat, they called it in Bhokar. Two souls ferried to heaven, one to eternal hell.

It had been too good a death for Lowan Vigeles's murderer, but it had made a point. The few remaining members of the so-called Popular Front for the Liberation of Sanctuary had reportedly crept out of town one by one. Zip, supposedly reformed from the PFLS after being made one of the city's three commanders, had crawled into a hole so deep no one, not the prince, not Molin Torchholder, not even Walegrin, knew what had become of him.

Now, Daphne claimed, even Zip had gotten away.

Dayrne blamed himself. He should never have let old Lowan talk him into taking so many men north to the annual Festival of Man. Oh, they'd done well in the games. Spectacularly well. Twenty-five death matches and only two losses. The Empire's greatest gladiatorial schools had been not just defeated but humiliated by an unknown school from Sanctuary,

of all places. It had driven the odds-makers and the bet-takers crazy.

Ranke would be talking about it for years.

But while he and the best men from Land's End had been up north, Ro-Karthis had used iron claws to scale the wooden stable gate, crept unseen into the main house, and murdered Lowan and Rosanda in their sleep. The gods alone knew who might have been next if Daphne hadn't discovered him. Against orders, she'd been out after dark working the training machines alone—angry, no doubt, because he'd refused to take her to the games.

She'd just come back to her own quarters when Ro-Karthis emerged, bloody knife in hand, from Rosanda's rooms.

Daphne had damn near killed the bastard, and frankly, Dayme marveled at the self-control she'd shown by sparing Ro-Karthis until his return. Of course, Daphne's idea of self-control had been to hamstring Ro-Karthis and sever the tendons in his elbows. It probably hadn't taken her more than the necessary four quick strokes with her sword, either. Then she'd staunched and cauterized the blood flow to save his life.

Of course, long before Dayne had gotten home she'd extracted from the stupid fool the reason for his crime—to revenge the PFLS for the damage Chenaya had done to their organization.

"What I can't figure out," Dayme snapped suddenly, smacking his fist against an open palm, "is why she can't talk! She won't make a sound!"

He turned toward Rashan. "You should have seen her last night. She cried and cried, tears enough to put Sabellia to shame, if hers could hang

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in the sky. But not once did she so much as whimper!" He shook his head as Daphne came to his side. "I tell you, it's weird!" She touched his arm, and he met her gaze worriedly. "It's got me scared," he said, no easy admission for a man like Dayme.

Rashan rose to his feet and he, too, began to pace. "Could it be shock? Maybe you should have told her more gently."

Daphne snickered and shot the priest a scornful look. "Chenaya?" she said with a sneer.

Dayme frowned and shook his head vigorously. "She beat poor Dendur up, rather than tell him her name," he reminded.

Daphne's eyebrow went up in mocking surprise. "Poor Dendur?" she muttered. "He's almost seven feet tall and thicker than the city gates!"

"You're not helping. Princess!" Dayme shouted abruptly, using her title as an insult, as he did on the training field to make her work harder.

But Daphne was having none of it this time. "How can I help?" she answered sharply. She waved the dagger under her trainer's nose.

"Chenaya's in one of her moody snits, and that's understandable, if you ask me. Just leave her alone. She'll pull herself together."

Rashan folded his hands into his voluminous sleeves and gazed toward the ground. "Could it be a spelt?" he wondered aloud. "Or some curse? We don't know where she's been the past seven months, or what she's been up to."

"Knowing Chenaya," Daphne offered as she turned away, "only trouble."

"Don't you have a home of your own now?" Dayme said irritably.

She gave him the kind of smile an adult loves to give a nasty neighbor child just before knocking it back on its side of the fence. He knew well enough she now owned the southernmost estate next to Land's End. It had been part of her divorce settlement from Kadakithis, that and half his treasury.

"It's full of your gladiators, remember, teacher?" She gave him a pouty look. "You couldn't let good men sleep in those drafty, leaky barracks

you made them build, forever. They're gladiators, not carpenters. They'd have turned on you at the first sign of spring rain." She tilted her head playfully and winked at him. "I probably saved your life."

"It could be a curse," Rashan mumbled to himself.

The peristyle's doors opened, and a tall, blond man, clad in a brief red kilt and a gladiator's broad leather belt stepped across the threshold. He stopped there and called out to Dayrne, beckoning as he nodded greetings to Daphne and Rashan.

Dayrne walked over to him. "What is it, Leyn?" he said quietly.

Leyn kept his voice low. "Molin Torchholder is here," he said with a

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look of warning. "He heard Chenaya was back. You know what he wants."

Dayrne nodded, frowning. Someday he'd drive a sword through that old schemer's gut, even if Molin was Chenaya's uncle. The human weasels of the world just weren't to be tolerated by honorable men, and there were far too many such in Sanctuary. He knew what Torchholder wanted, all right.

"You kept him in the courtyard?" Dayme asked.

Leyn pursed his lips and nodded.

"I'll take care of him," Dayme answered, ushering Leyn out and following him. He paused long enough to close the doors. He'd explain to Daphne and Rashan later. "I'm beginning to get irritated with Lord Molin," he added as he and Leyn walked side by side.

"He is a bit of a pimple in the crotch," Leyn agreed.

Dayrne went out into the courtyard and paused long enough to glance at the steel-colored sky. On such a gray day bad news just had to come calling. And there had been too many gray days, lately.

Molin had come with an escort of three garrison guards. Two stood just behind Molin, while the third remained beyond the gate with their horses. Dismas, Gestus, Ouijen, and Dendur stood on the opposite side of the courtyard and scowled unpleasantly at them. Leyn went to join his four friends and added his scowl to theirs.

Dayme went straight up to Molin Torchholder without giving so much as a glance of acknowledgment to the two nervous guards. "This is not a good time, Molin," he said sternly.

Motin Torchholder was unruffled by the use of his first name without the use of his title. "I've come to talk with my niece about Lowan's estate," he said evenly, taking care to maintain his dignity in the face of Dayme's deliberate affront.

Dayme glared into the other man's face, then down at his sternum just under the breastbone, imagining he could see the spot right through Molin's robes. Yes, there he would put his blade cleanly- It would make a soft, squishing sound, steel and flesh, and Molin would give a little moan as he rolled his eyes. Someday.

"She's resting," Dayme finally answered. At least, he hoped she was resting. Chenaya was almost hysterical about not falling asleep. No sleeping, no talking. What was happening to her?

Molin Torchholder regarded Dayme stymie and lifted the point of his nose a bit higher in the air. "I've come twice now," he reminded Dayme. "We've got to get this business settled."

Dayme almost reached for his sword then and there. Instead, he clenched his fist. "You pompous bureaucrat!" he hissed, making the effort

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to keep his voice under control. "Lowan Vigeles wasn't dead a day before you showed up to claim his estate."

A low chuckle came from behind Dayme. "Daphne threw him out on his ass," Ouijen remembered aloud as he idly twisted the long braided lock of dark hair that draped over his shoulder.

Dayme ignored the interruption. "Now, Chenaya's not back a day, and here you are to press your claim again. What's the matter, Molin? Doesn't Kitty-Kat want you at the palace anymore?"

The insults were beginning to take effect on Molin Torchholder. His cheeks had reddened at Ouijen's remark, and now a second time, Dayrne had addressed him personally, and in such a mocking tone. His eyes burned with suppressed anger. "It is not a claim," he stated starkly. "It is a fact. Land's End is mine. Under Rankan law, daughters do not inherit their fathers' holdings. Lowan was my brother . . ."

"Half-brother," corrected Daphne, coming out the door and joining the gladiators behind Dayme. She smiled at Molin and blew him a kiss, all the while tapping the dagger on her palm as she had done in the peristyle.

Molin deigned to acknowledge her. "Princess," he said with a nod.

"Nevertheless, I am Lowan's closest surviving male relative. The fact is indisputable, and the law is the law."

Daphne, Dismas, Gestus, Leyn, Ouijen, and Dendur all crept forward until they stood in a semicircle on either side of Dayme. They were all tapping daggers on their palms now, and they were all grinning unpleasant little grins, winking at one another, and giving tiny provocative nods and suggestive tilts of the head to the garrison guards, who began casting nervous glances toward the open gate at their backs.

"When the Lady Chenaya is ready to discuss it," Dayme said, emphasizing her title this time, "I'm sure she'll send for you." He glanced meaningfully at his companions and back at Molin. "Meanwhile, occupation is nine-tenths of the law."

"And armed occupation is the other tenth," Daphne added, wearing her favorite smile again, the adult one.

Molin Torchholder knew the better part of valor. "Very well," he said finally. "Give my niece my regards, and tell her I'll call on her again in three days' time in the hopes that she'll be feeling better. Meanwhile," he added, putting on a smile very much like Daphne's, "try not to damage or scratch anything." He spun about and motioned his escort out the gate.

The gladiators closed ranks around Dayme. "He's going to be trouble," Leyn said, watching the three departing men mount horses just beyond the gate.

"I could speak to Kadakithis," Daphne offered.

Dayrne's mouth drew into a tight line. "No," he said finally. "Technically, Molin's right, and we can't hold him off forever. Sooner or later, Chenaya's going to have to deal with him. Where is she?"

Gestus answered in his fractured Rankene. "Sees Lady sunrise down by hers temple giving worship." He glanced up at the sky and shrugged his shoulders. "Precious no sun to worship lately."

Ouijen had more recent knowledge. "I saw her just a while ago in the aviary. She was feeding Reyk. I tell you, though, she looked like hell. I don't think she's slept or eaten for days."

"I'd better have a talk with her," Dayrne said. "Somebody close the gate." He let out a heavy breath and looked around suddenly. "And what are you all doing here? Who's running the training drills this morning? This is a school, remember?"

He left them then, and went to look for Chenaya. He would check the aviary out back in case she was still there with her pet falcon, but first, since it was closer, he'd check her room. In the main hall he started up the great staircase. Then, remembering Rashan, he happened to glance down the hallway to the peristyle and glimpsed his mistress just going

through the doors. Dayrne turned and hurried after her.

A strange scene greeted him as he entered. Chenaya shot a look his way and swiftly closed her hand around something she'd been showing Rashan. The priest's face was white as a virgin's wedding sheets. He stared fearfully at Dayrne, as if he'd been caught in a criminal act.

Obviously, Dayrne had interrupted something, Chenaya walked a few paces away from the priest and tried to act nonchalant while she slipped something into a small bag that hung on a thong about her neck. Rashan licked his lips, his eyes darting every which way. Dayrne thought he looked like a mouse suddenly come face-to-face with a very big cat.

Dayrne was in no mood for games. "What is it, Cheyne?" he insisted. "What have you got there?"

Chenaya gave him a stubborn look and dropped the purse down the front of her tunic. Rashan wrung his hands. "I've got something to do," he said suddenly, and he headed toward the door.

Dayrne caught the priest's wrist as he tried to go past. "Oh, no you don't!" He gently but firmly pushed Rashan back. Then he turned again to Chenaya. "You've never kept anything from me, Cheyne, not since we were kids. Don't start now."

Chenaya bit her lip, her face mirroring some inner struggle. She

clutched at the bag under her tunic, but her hand hesitated there, and she said nothing.

"Let me help, damn it!" Dayrne shouted suddenly. His frustration and

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worry built past the point of control. He wanted to reach out and rip the purse from her neck, or grab Chenaya and shake her, or, gods help him, just wrap his arms around her and hold her close until she broke down and told him everything. That last, he knew, would never happen.

Chenaya gave him a doubtful look. Dark circles ringed her puffy eyes, and her cheeks were gaunt. Dayrne realized then that she had not even taken off the armor she had worn last night. Even her garments were the same.

He met her gaze, and this time his eyes did the pleading.

It was enough. Slowly, Chenaya pulled out the purse again and poured the huge diamond into her open palm for him to see. It drew the weak light in the room like a sponge and gave off fantastic flashes of fire in

exchange. Dayrne caught his breath.

"It's called the Fire in God's Eye," Rashan said in a worried voice as he came to join them. He lifted his own hand over the stone, as if warming his fingers before a fire. Tiny dazzling points of light reflected on his skin. "There's another jewel just like it," he continued in a bare whisper. "A twin. Sometimes, they're called the Savankala's Eyes, because they're mounted in the holy sunburst in the great Temple in Ranke."

Dayrne had heard of the stones, of course. He looked incredulously at Chenaya. "You stole it?"

She nodded slowly.

"Just the one," he pressed, "or both of them?"

She tapped the diamond with a finger, indicating just the one jewel.

"And this has something to do with why you can't or won't speak?" he asked again, and again she nodded.

Dayrne began to pace. He was doing a lot of that lately, it seemed. He knew of the stones, but he'd never seen them. Until recently, he'd never been much of a god worshipper, and he'd never been in the Great Temple at Ranke. He turned to Rashan as Chenaya put the diamond back into its purse once again. A sudden suspicion flared up within him. "What do

you know about this?" he said to the priest. "You're Savankala's high holy-holy in this city. Is this why she left Sanctuary? Did you send her to steal this?"

Rashan wrung his hands, and he gave Dayme a look of pained offense.

"No! No!" he protested. "I wouldn't have dared! She didn't say a word to me before she left town!"

Dayrne caught the priest by the sleeve. "Then why was she showing it to you?"

Angrily, Chenaya knocked Dayrne's hand away from Rashan, and she stepped between them. Then her expression softened, and she eased the priest back toward a marble bench and motioned for him to sit.

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Rashan folded his hands in his lap to keep them still. "Each jewel is invested with a portion of Savankala's power," the priest went on in a rush. "They were the god's own gift to the Rankan nation, given generations ago when the Empire was young, as His personal sign of divine favor."

"They're magic?" Dayme grumbled. He turned to Chenaya again.

"Then you are cursed?"

She shook her head violently.

"Maybe this will help." Daphne sauntered into the room, bearing a flat, brown box, which, when its hinged lid was opened, exposed a smooth sheet of soft, wax tallow, and a delicate bone stylus. She offered these to Chenaya, along with a smile of welcome. The two women exchanged embraces and stood apart again. "Just because she can't talk doesn't mean you can't still get some answers." She continued lightly.

"Personally, I think I prefer her this way."

Chenaya ignored Daphne, took the wax tablet, and began to write in the soft substance with the point of the stylus. A moment later, she showed the box to Rashan. It was not writing at all, but a drawing of a sunburst.

Daphne raised an eyebrow. "She's no Lalo," she commented.

The priest peered closely at the wax. "The holy sunburst in Ranke," he said, squinting.

Chenaya shook her head and drew the symbol for Sanctuary beneath the sunburst. Then she pulled the purse from around her neck. Without removing the diamond, she thrust it down in the center of her drawing.

Rashan's face turned a new shade of pale. "Mount it in our sunburst?" he exclaimed with sudden comprehension. "This is stolen! God would strike me dead and destroy the temple!"

Chenaya shook her head emphatically and scrawled on the tablet. His permission.

The priest's expression underwent a slow transformation. His eyes filled with a queer light, and he rose to his feet. "You've accepted it, then. You've spoken with Him again." He reached out and grasped Chenaya by the shoulders. "You are truly the Daughter of the Sun!"

Dayrne watched as Chenaya's face crinkled with irritation and she brushed the priest's hands away. It was an old argument between Rashan and Cheyne. It was no secret that Chenaya was favored by the Bright Father, but the priest had been possessed of a strange fanaticism for some time now that she was, in fact, the sun-god's true daughter. Rashan had even tried to convince Dayrne, and with the help of an even stranger painting, which hung in Chenaya's rooms, he'd almost succeeded.

Chenaya rubbed the heel of her palm over the wax surface, wiping

away the old markings, smoothing it again for more writing. With hasty precision, she carved two smaller sunbursts side by side. Under one, she put the symbol for Sanctuary. Under the other, the symbol for Ranke. Then she wrote, Savankala's will.

Rashan's face transformed. His look of worry turned to determination and excitement. "One in Ranke, and one in Sanctuary," he cried. "Then we must do it immediately." He spun toward Dayrne, gesticulating, his hands aflutter. "This explains the sky of late," he said, "Savankala has risked much to send us this prize. This jewel has traveled without the proper consecrations. Until it is safely mounted in His temple, He is half blind." He touched Daphne's arm as if the two of them were close friends, something the princess would have adamantly denied. "It's just as I've suspected recently. One by one, the gods are turning away from Ranke."

"But why can't she speak?" Dayrne said insistently. "What's this jewel to do with that?"

Chenaya bit her lip, and the stylus remained still above the wax tablet, though her gaze nickered over all their faces, imploring.

Finally, Daphne tilted her head and shrugged. "A girl's just got to have her secrets." She went to Chenaya and took her by the arm. "At least, let me clean you up and get some food down you while Rashan makes his preparations," she suggested with her usual sarcastic lilt. "I

know priests and priestly ways. Something this important will take at least a week."

Chenaya looked genuinely frightened. Frantically, she scrawled across the tablet. Tomorrow. It was the only symbol she made, and she drew it again for emphasis- Tomorrow.

A platter of cold roast pork, the two turnips, and bits of cheese and bread had lifted Chenaya's spirits considerably. The mug of milk laced lightly with amber-colored vuksebah, a very expensive liquor, had done even more. She couldn't quite remember when she had eaten last. Sometime in Ranke before she'd stolen the jewel, she assumed. Once that was in her possession, she'd ridden hard for Sanctuary, killing one horse on the way, avoiding all towns, stopping at one noble's isolated estate long enough to sign her desire to buy another mount, There'd been no time for eating, and little to drink,

A serving woman, under Daphne's orders, had brought the food to Chenaya's rooms, and that had surprised Chenaya. Except for Aunt Rosanda, Daphne, and herself, there had never been any women at Land's End. Daphne, apparently, had taken it on herself to change that.

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There were just over a hundred men on the estate now. Someone had to launder their clothes and do the cooking and marketing.

Daphne had mentioned hastily that, in Chenaya's absence, she had shared some adventure with the poor women who sold their bodies in the Promise of Heaven for coins to feed their children and to keep some kind of hovel's roof over their heads. With her own money, which was quite plentiful thanks to her settlement with the prince, Daphne had hired some of those women, taken them out of the park, and given them decent jobs as household staff.

Chenaya wasn't about to object. Two of those women had just bathed her and dried her with soft towels and combed out her tangled hair. She felt better than she had in days as she dressed in a clean white chiton, fastened her broad leather belt about her waist, and laced on a pair of sandals. That done, she fastened her short sword to the belt, and hung the small bag containing the diamond around her neck once more.

Fed and dressed, she started to leave her rooms. Near the door, though, hung the painting of her, which Lalo the Limner had executed. She stopped before it, feeling the arcane heat that radiated from it, staring at an idealized image of her face with shining blond hair that swept outward and upward and became flame. It had been this portrait and what it portended that had driven her, half mad, from Sanctuary, that, and the very unpleasant ending to her business with Zip and the PFLS.

Only, it hadn't been an ending. She had fallen in love with Zip while setting her trap for the piffles, and instead of killing him when she should have, she'd saved him for prison, instead, and turned him over to Walegrin. Devious were the minds of Sanctuary's politicians, however, and somehow, with her gone, Zip had been released and made one of the city's military commanders, along with Walegrin and Critias. No doubt, she had Uncle Molin to thank for that. And Kadakithis, once her favorite cousin, could not be held unaccountable, either.

They all had played their part in Lowan Vigeles's death. Ro-Karthis was not the only one who had cut her father's throat. Zip, Walegrin, Uncle Molin, Kadakithis. Not one of them was innocent.

She brushed her fingertips gingerly over the portrait. The paint and canvas were warm, almost too hot to touch. It had frightened her that night, watching Lalo, at her insistence, paint it. It had terrified her. His particular magic had revealed the truth she had been unwilling to accept, that she was bound body and spirit to the sun-god. In her fear, she had fled like an unreasoning child.

Seven months had changed that. She clutched the jewel called the Fire in God's Eye, without taking it from its bag. There were more changes yet to come, changes for her and changes for Sanctuary. But first, she had

to survive another night, and she feared, for she could feel herself weakening. More than anything, she wanted to sleep.

But she had to check on Rashan and his progress at the temple. When the diamond was safe in a consecrated mounting, then she could rest, then she could mourn her father and Aunt Rosanda properly, then she could contemplate a new direction for her life.

She left her rooms and passed through the upper hallways, refusing to let herself even glance toward the door to her father's rooms, putting his death out of her mind for now. She went downstairs, nodding curtly to a pair of unfamiliar women who smiled at her from their work in the kitchen, and stepped out into the rear grounds near the aviary. There were a dozen cages there, each home to a fine raptor, and a large cabinet built on a post, which contained bells, jesses, and proper gloves for handling such birds.

Chenaya took a thick leather glove and a jess from the cabinet and went to Reyk's cage. The falcon fluttered its magnificent wings in greeting as it climbed onto her arm, and she slipped the jess onto its right leg. Reyk was excited to see her and he flexed his talons in the glove's quilted

leather. They'd been apart too long, she and this bird.

From the aviary she could see the training fields. Scores of men were hard at work on the great wooden machines and in the sand pits. Beyond were the old, hastily built barracks, no longer in use. Beyond that rose the private wall that encircled Land's End. Opposite the training field, against the southern wall, were the stables. She headed there at a brisk walk.

A large man, unfamiliar to her, bowed when she approached. "Lady Chenaya," he said in a gruff but courteous voice. "You honor us." She nodded and gave him a brief smile, the only response she could make. He had the look of an experienced stablemaster, and she assumed Dayrne had found him somewhere. Indeed, the stables were as clean as any part of Land's End. Fresh straw had been laid, and the horses stood contentedly in their stalls.

With the stablemaster in tow, she went to the stall where her big gray stood. He had been well groomed this morning, and his mane had been freshly clipped close to his neck. He had carried her well the past few days. Chenaya led him from the stall by his halter and informed the stable master through hand signals that she wanted him saddled. He fastened a lead to the halter and led the gray toward the tack room.

Chenaya wandered toward the far end of the stables, where those

horses were kept that were either too young or not properly broken for riding. There she found the colt that she had such hopes for, the product of a god-blessed union between Lowan's snow-white mare and Tempus's

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full-blooded Tros horse. She gazed at the young animal with pleased wonderment. Its coat was a golden color she had never seen before, its mane and tail flaxen. It had the Tros fire in its eyes.

"He grows rapidly, mistress. I've never seen one like him."

Reyk's wings beat the air, and he gave off a shrill cry of menace.

Chenaya had not heard the stablemaster come up behind her. The man stepped quickly back, eyes widening, bringing a hand up to ward off an attack. Chenaya grinned to herself. He knew a lot about horses, that much was plain, but he had a lot to learn about birds and how to approach them. She gazed toward the stable entrance. The gray stood saddled and ready for her.

There would be time later, she hoped, to play with the colt, but there was business to attend to now. She calmed Reyk by stroking the crown of his head with delicate touches. Perhaps she should have hooded him this morning, but she never hooded him. He was just excited to see her.

The stablemaster hurried along ahead of her and set down a step stool

so she could mount the gray with Reyk on her arm. When she was settled in the saddle, she leaned down far enough to touch the stablemaster's shoulder. It was the only thanks she could offer. Then she turned the horse from the stable and waited while he opened the southern gate for her and closed it after.

Chenaya looked at Reyk and stroked his head again. Ready for some exercise, pet? she thought silently. She made an upward motion with her arm, letting go of the jess at the same time, and Reyk soared upward. She watched him as he circled higher and higher in the slate-gray sky. Then she started off, knowing he would follow.

She rode toward Sanctuary's great wall and followed it south to the Gate of Gold, retracing the path she had made last night. The falcon beat her to the gate and perched atop it until she caught up. Then, calling to her, he took to the sky again. Two sentries at the duty post watched as she trotted through. They made no effort this time to delay her.

The Wideway was full of carts and people coming and going about their morning business. Some glanced up with smiles and watched her go by. Others pointedly ignored her. She didn't care. She drew a deep breath of the lively salt air. Far out on the sea, the white sails of the fishing fleet and the Beysib treasure ships knifed through the ashen clouds.

Safe Haven Street was also crowded, and that surprised her. Sanctuary

seemed to have gained populace in her absence. The roadways teemed in marked contrast to their dead-of-night emptiness. She was forced to slow her mount to a walk as she turned up the Avenue of Temples.

Suddenly, her head swam. She clutched at the homless rim of her saddle and wrapped her legs around the horse's barrel chest to keep from

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falling. A queer darkness surrounded her, filled her, though she was sure her eyes were open. Out of that blackness, tumbling end over end, came the same shrouded corpse she had thought was a dream the night before.

Straight for her it flew, and the cloth parted from its horrible face. Its eyeless gaze met hers.

The blackness and the vision exploded in a shower of red sparks, and pain shot through Chenaya's body. She opened her eyes slowly and found herself on the ground. She had fallen off the horse after all. A throng of people quickly gathered around as she tried to draw a decent breath.

An old woman, whose brightly dyed red hair sprouted in all directions about her head, set aside her marketing basket and bent down beside Chenaya. Her wrinkled old face was twisted with narrow-eyed concern.

"Are you all right, honey?" she kept repeating, taking Chenaya's hand in her own.

Chenaya's eyes snapped wide suddenly at the old woman's touch, and her gaze swept the sky, spotting Reyk already in his killing dive. "Get back!" she shouted, pushing the woman away. Barely in time she got the thick leather glove up and gave a sharp whistle. Reyk's weight hit her wrist like a rock, but she caught his jess and held him securely.

She looked at the old woman then, sprawled beside her. "Sorry," she said with a sigh of relief. "He thought you were attacking me."

The old woman put on a dazed smile. "S'all right," she muttered, staring at Reyk as others in the crowd helped her up. "S'all right. You folks at Land's End been right good to some of us," she said to Chenaya. "I knowed who you were when I saw you fall . . ."

Suddenly, Chenaya clapped a hand to her mouth. She'd spoken! She hadn't meant to, but the deed was done. She glanced fearfully up at the sky. Its gray color was already darkening. One hand felt for the diamond in its purse under her clothing. It pulsed against her skin with a steady, inaudible thrumming that unnerved her.

She grabbed the old woman by the shoulder with her free hand. "Get

to your homes," she said urgently to everyone. "Shutter your windows, and don't look at the sky! Believe me! Go!"

The crowd stared uncertainly for a moment, no doubt wondering if she hadn't fallen on her head. Reyk beat his wings as if to drive them away, but still they hesitated. Then, as if sensing her urgency, the old woman made a quick curtsy and hurried away. It was enough to break whatever spell held the crowd. They looked at the sky, at Chenaya, then hugged their baskets to their bodies and hurried away.

Chenaya whirled around and found herself staring at the cornerstone of the Rankan Temple. Here, almost on this same spot, she had found her dagger point down in the earth the night before, and here, she had had

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her first vision of that deathly hurtling specter. Now she had had the second.

"Up, Reyk!" she cried, releasing the falcon. Her horse stood still, waiting, as it had been trained to do. She left him there and ran inside the temple. Rashan and a dozen other priests were hard at work, lowering the sunburst on the great chains that held it suspended above Savankala's altar.

"Rashan!" she called. There was no point in keeping silent any longer.

The damage had been done. She could feel the diamond's pulse against her chest. Rashan saw her and came running as fast as his old legs would allow. The others stopped their work to see what transpired.

"Your voice . . .," he started, but Chenaya waved an impatient hand to shut him up.

"The diamond is in danger," she told the priest hurriedly- "We all are!" She licked her dry lips and swallowed, getting control of herself. "First, though, tell me. Is there something buried under the cornerstone of this temple? Don't lie, and be quick!"

It was Rashan's turn to swallow. "Every Great Temple is consecrated with a sacrifice," he told her.

"A human sacrifice?"

He nodded again. "It was done on the night of the Ten-Slaying in honor ofVashanka some years ago. He requires such sacrifices."

Chenaya cut him off". "Vashanka is lost," she snapped. "Remove his image from this place. But right now, put half your priests to work digging that thing up. Dispose of it. Whatever it is, it is repugnant to Savankala. It pollutes his temple."

Rashan looked indignant. "How can you know these things"

She caught him by the front of his robes and glared. "I am the Daughter of the Sun, old man!" she said, setting him down roughly. "You and the Bright Father both wanted a high priestess. You've preached my heritage all over town, don't deny if I don't any longer. In the desert far from here, Savankala came to me, and I acquiesced." She pulled the purse from under her clothes and squeezed it in a fist. The thrumming was stronger now, more desperate. "That's why I have the Fire in God's Eye. He asked me to steal it and bring it here!"

"But it's a public street!" Rashaan cried, protesting. "If we try to dig it up, Walegrin's men will surely stop us!"

Chenaya grabbed his sleeve and drew him outside. "Look up!" she shouted in his ear.

The sky had taken on the color of a deep bruise. Clouds of purple and yellow rolled in from the north. Only the palest hint of the sun showed through the infrequent gaps. A wind swept down the streets, blowing

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thick dust and refuse. Sanctuary's citizens went running in the gale as their garments whipped about them.

Rays of rainbow radiance began to leak from the purse about Chenaya's neck, giving her face an eerie, up-shadowed appearance. "This

is my fault!" she shouted over the rising wind. "While I kept silent the high priests of Ranke could not find the jewel." She clutched at the small bag again. The light from it was bright enough now to show the bones of her fingers through the skin. 'T didn't even sleep for fear of crying out in my dreams. But I broke my vow to save that old woman's life. The priests of Ranke still wield considerable magic. They know where I am now. The sound of my voice alerted them, as God, Himself, warned me it would, and they want the diamond back!"

"But Savankala wants it here!" Rashan answered, his voice rising 'n pitch, like the wind. He wrung his hands. "What-can I do?"

She grabbed the front of his robes again and pulled him close. The wind was screaming now, as if it were trying to drown her voice and stop her words. "Dig that thing up!" she ordered. "The Bright Father rejects it. The Fire in God's Eye can't dwell in the same house where it's buried. Purify this place. Use every priest you have. And prepare the mounting as swiftly as you can!"

"How much time?" Rashan wailed.

Chenaya gazed at the festering sky. "Very little," she answered with a cold shiver. "Do what I tell you," she charged. "The diamond must stay with me until you're ready. I'll send Dayrne and some men to help with the digging. He'll act as a messenger, also. Send him to me at the private

temple by the Red Foal River as soon as you're done!"

Rashan ran back inside to organize his priests, and Chenaya ran to her horse. There was no sign of Reyk. The dust stung her eyes as she leaped astride her mount and raced away. The streets were almost empty, but still she nearly rode down an unwary pedestrian. He cursed, and she cursed, and then she raced on.

People were huddled in doorways, in nooks and alleys, under carts, behind barrels and crates, all cowering down, faces half covered with shawls or cloaks or collars. On the docks, ships and timbers groaned and creaked. Sails snapped like angry whips, and riggings hummed wildly.

Rising whitecaps danced on the surface of the sea.

Chenaya sped through the Gate of Gold, at last catching sight of Reyk as the falcon followed overhead. In no time she was at the southern gate of Land's End. She pounded furiously on it with her fists. "Let me in!" she shouted. "Let me in!"

The stablemaster opened the gate for her. She raced past him without explanation and rode for the training fields. There she found Dayrne

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running his gladiators through drills even in the face of a budding storm. He brightened when he saw her, but she had no time for friendship.

"Take as many men as can leave right now!" she told him loudly enough for everyone to hear. His jaw dropped when he heard her speak. Then he snapped it shut. He knew her well, and he knew by her face alone when she was deadly serious. "Take shovels and do what Rashan tells you." She started to turn away, then paused long enough to add, "Some of you may have to hold off Walegrin and his men. Don't let him interfere."

She sped away, taking the memory of Dayme's sudden grin as she crossed the field and pulled up before the armory. She dismounted. The door was unlocked. Rushing past the racks of wooden training weapons, she drew down four good swords with sheaths, whose weight and balance suited her. With the one she wore at her belt, that made five. She prayed they would be enough.

Carrying the swords under one arm, she mounted clumsily again. Reyk sprang from the armory's roof edge and screamed shrilly to let her know he was still with her. She rode off, weaving among the banks of huge training machines, casting a glance toward the stables, pleased to see Dayrne's force already assembling there.

At the east wall of Land's End was another double-doored gate with a wooden bar. Without dismounting, she wrestled with it, nearly dropping her armload of weapons, but managing. She sped through, leaving the

doors to bang in the wind.

The waters of the Red Foal lashed the shoreline furiously. She paid little attention, but rode straight for her private temple to Savankala. It stood, white and beautiful and open-roofed, a circular arrangement of eight slender columns, just above the shore. She jumped off the horse, clutching her swords.

The sky churned above her, as if she were the center of a great disturbance. It was not her, though. It was the diamond. Forces were marshaling, forces that would steal the diamond back or destroy it. The priests of Ranke had not suffered the magic-stealing destruction of the Nisibisi Globes of Power, which had robbed Sanctuary of so much arcane vitality. Their magic was still quite formidable. Already, in the strangely colored clouds, she could feel things probing, searching, taking shape.

Here, at her own temple, she stood the best chance of facing whatever shape their magic took. Also, out here beyond the city wall, there was far less threat to the townspeople. Chenaya ran up the three steps, across the round marble floor, to the small altar. Twin braziers stood at either end, kept always burning, tended each day by Rashan. She laid her swords

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down upon the altar and added to them the one she wore. She cast away their sheaths, exposing the bright blades.

Chenaya lifted each blade and prayed over it, then shoved it deep into the coals of a brazier. There was a small chest near one end of the altar where Rashan kept the fragrant incense, kasabahr, favored by the sun-god. She scooped two bountiful handfuls and cast them on the coals. Smoke and sweet scent rose swirling up, and she prayed again, consecrating the blades in the heat and fumes, and with her prayers.

The air screamed suddenly. Out of the vortex of clouds, a pair of demons came shrieking down, the vanguard of an army taking form in the demented sky above the temple. The demons' eyes burned redly, and they reached for her as they dived, slavering, fanged mouths yawning.

Chenaya gave a scream of her own, snatched one of the swords from the coals. The blade shone, endowed with a white heat the braziers alone could never have achieved. It trailed smoke and light as she swung at the first demon. A red flash erupted, the demon wailed in pain, darting aside, and the blade's light dimmed a little.

The second demon flew at her. Again she swung, Striking at the neck as she sidestepped, and again there came a red flash as sword touched demon flesh. Twice more she chopped. Each time the flash nearly blinded her, and the sword dimmed a bit more. The demon emitted a piercing cry of pain. It seemed no more to the eye than a creature of gas and cloud, but Chenaya felt the impact of her blows. It clutched its vaporous body

suddenly, and with taloned fingers, as if to end its agony, it ripped itself apart and disincorporated.

Chenaya had no time to cheer her victory. A rain of demons fell upon her then. She swung her blade in a dazzling arc, driving them back, striking a clawed hand, severing it in a red flash. It dissolved into nothingness before it hit the ground, and the demon wailed. Others pressed her, and her sword dimmed, each blow having less and less effect.

Abruptly, the glow wavered and faded from her blade altogether, and it was just a sword again, its metal scorched and blackened. Before she could react, a demon sprang at her. One hand tangled in her hair, and she screamed with pain, while its other hand ripped open her chiton and closed on the purse and the diamond within. Chenaya tried to push it off, and though her fists beat on nothing tangible, still it struggled and clung on, grappling with the leather thong about her neck.

Then a sword swung down, passing harmlessly through the creature's skull. Chenaya twisted enough to see Daphne, crouched on the altar and swinging ferociously, but ineffectively, at the hideous shapes that swam around her.

"The consecrated swords!" she cried to Daphne. "Use those!"

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Daphne understood at once. She drew a blade and swung it in one practiced motion, and a burst of scarlet erupted over her head as a demon died. The red glow reflected spectacularly on the silver links of the manica she wore on her sword arm. "Nice!" the princess muttered. With a weird smile she chopped at the demon wrestling Chenaya, slaying it.

Chenaya spun toward a brazier, grabbing a pair of swords. She whirled them twice, sectioning a creature as it reached for her. Cold hands raked suddenly at her back, and she cried with pain and despair as the severed thongs gave way, and the purse fell to the floor. The diamond spilled out, glowing like a compressed beam of sunlight.

A demon dived for the jewel, but a golden brown streak beat him to it. Reyk climbed again, clutching the Fire in God's Eye in his razor talons. Immediately, the demons forgot Chenaya and Daphne and swept up into the sky after the falcon.

Daphne wiped the sweat from her brow. Blood flowed from a trio of lined cuts on her unarmored left arm. She glanced down from the altar where she stood. "You'd better have a damn good explanation, mistress," she said with her usual mocking lilt on the final word.

Chenaya ran out between a pair of columns to follow Reyk's darting flight. The demons were too close, too swift, and too many for Reyk to avoid very long. She gave a sharp whistle. The raptor folded his wings

tightly and plummeted earthward, momentarily leaving the demons behind. Chenaya held out her gloved arm, and Reyk landed, dropping the jewel. Immediately, she sent him up again, set down one of her blades, and grabbed the diamond from the floor.

"I wish you hadn't done that," Daphne muttered, glancing at the charging demons and, briefly, at her sword. Its light was almost gone. Still, she struck fearlessly at the first to come near enough.

Then Dayrne was there, too. Picking up the sword Chenaya had set down, he lashed out, cleaving a demon in midair. "Rashan's ready!" He shouted, shielding his eyes against the unexpected flash. "Go!"

Chenaya threw down her blade and grabbed another from the brazier. Daphne did the same, taking the last of the consecrated weapons. "We all go!" Chenaya called back.

"I don't have a horse!" Daphne cried. "Go on!"

Chenaya ran toward her own mount, clutching sword and jewel. "Ride with Dayrne!" she ordered, throwing herself into the saddle. "If I go down, one of you get this thing to Rashan!"

She rode as fast as the horse could carry her, swinging her sword wildly at the pursuing demons. The air shimmered with flashes of red as creatures swarmed around her and tried to drag her off, caught her reins

and tried to tear them from her hands or gnaw them in two, as they

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ripped at her hair and clothes. She felt blood trickle down her back.

Though they were physically weak, their claws were sharp.

The guards at the Gate of Gold saw her coming and flung themselves into the ditches on either side of the road. She risked a glance over her shoulder as they scrambled up, shouting curses. Dayme and Daphne were right behind her. The demons had no interest in them at all. It was the jewel they were after.

She raced up Safe Haven Street and onto the Avenue of Temples. The way was suddenly blocked by gladiators and priests all clustered at the corner of the Rankan Temple. At her cries they turned, dropping shovels and tools, and scattered out of the way. A wide, black pit yawned before her. Even as her eyes widened in surprise, she felt the horse's muscles bunch. She hugged the animal with her knees as it leaped the pit and crashed to the other side, its great hooves hurling dirt.

All the way up the steps of the temple, she fought demons, until the fire faded from her consecrated blade. She threw it down, screaming with

frustration, and clutched the diamond to her breasts as the demons swarmed around her. But Dayme and Daphne were swiftly at her side, their blades still bright and glowing. "Get inside!" Dayme shouted, pushing her toward the temple entrance. "Rashan's waiting! We'll try to hold these things here!"

Chenaya ran inside. A pair of young acolyte priests heaved the great doors closed behind her. It did no good. The demons followed, passing right through the heavy wood, like ghosts.

"Here!" Rashan called from the altar at the front of the temple.

Savankala's sunburst had been lowered on its golden chains until its points touched the floor. Rashan stood before it, waving frantically to her. A half-dozen priests waited on each chain to hoist it aloft again.

"Hurry!" Rashan urged as she reached his side. Demons flew down the aisles toward them. "Place it right in the center," he instructed, pointing to a position on the sunburst.

"Where?" she cried in confusion, staring. Only a couple of grooves and notches had been carved into the metal, far too wide to hold the Fire in God's Eye. "There's no mounting!"

Rashan snatched the diamond from her and held it to the sunburst.

Then he took something from his robe pocket, slammed it over the diamond, gave it a twist, and stood back.

Within a strange bubble of translucent blue, the Fire in God's Eye began to shine with a greater light, igniting the sunburst, itself. As it had last night when she first brought the diamond, the sunburst exploded with a pure white luminescence that filled the temple. The priests cried out, shielding their eyes, falling to the floor to hide their faces. The

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demons, too, shrieked with despair. As the light touched them, they broke apart like brittle things, and the nieces wafted away into nothingness.

When the last demon was gone, the light from the sunburst ebbed. All that remained was a soft golden glow that issued from the sunburst's heart.

Chenaya rose to her feet and helped Rashan to his. "What was that bubble?" she asked breathlessly. "That thing you put over the diamond?"

A rare small grin broke over Rashan's face. "Beysib glass," he answered. "It's something new they've started making while you've been gone. There wasn't time to sculpt a proper mounting into the metal, so I

improvised."

Chenaya raised an eyebrow in amazement. "A bowl?" she said.

The old priest shrugged. "It worked, didn't it?" He turned and gazed at the sunburst. Tentatively, he reached out and touched it with his fingertips. It was more than a symbolic image now. It was holy. It contained a fragment of the sun-god's power. "The Rankan priests will try to seize it back," he murmured lowly so his fellow priests wouldn't overhear-

Chenaya shook her head. "No. Since I was successful, they know it is Savankala's will. They still have the twin stone. The Bright Father has not forsaken Ranke, but now his favor also falls on Sanctuary."

There was a heavy, frantic pounding on the temple doors, and shouts from the other side. At Rasha's nod, the acolytes nearest drew back the bar and tugged them open. The entrance immediately filled with gladiators ready to do battle. When they saw that the fight was already over, they lowered their weapons, looking almost disappointed.

Daphne sighed. "Well, since there's nothing more to do in here," she said to Chenaya, "you should come see what they dug up from under the cornerstone."

They all backed outside. On the ground near the pit lay the shroud-covered form from Chenaya's visions. She bent down and lifted the cloth slowly from its face. "Ugh!" was all she managed. She moved quickly away, scanned the sky, and whistled Reyk down. She wrapped his jess around her hand and gave him a soothing stroke.

"Looks a lot like Kadakithis the morning after our wedding night," Daphne said. She nudged Dayme in the ribs. "I was kind of hard on him his first time."

Dayme's expression betrayed nothing. "I should hope it was the other way around," he answered.

Leyn gestured for some of the gladiators to carry the thing away. Then he turned to Chenaya and Rashan. "It wasn't a body at all," he ex-

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plained. "Rather, pieces of many bodies all stitched clumsily together to make a simulacrum of a corpse." He rubbed the back of his head. "For the life of me, I can't figure why someone would go to that kind of trouble."

"To pollute the temple," Rashan answered, his eyes filling with a sudden understanding. "Vashanka demanded a human sacrifice to consecrate this place. It was to become one of the Great Temples of the Empire, but from the beginning things kept going wrong in the construction. Rooms collapsed, ceilings leaked, columns cracked, and it never quite seemed to get finished." He folded his arms into his sleeves and stared into the hole they had made in the road. "But this was not a proper sacrifice at all. There never was a consecration. Whoever put this thing here saw to that." He clapped his hands with new joy. "We must have a new consecration! A celebration!"

Chenaya caught Rashan's sleeve. "No sacrifices," she told him. "The barbarous Vashanka is forever lost. Savankala frowns on such practices. This will be a Great Temple now, but only if you heed Him."

Rashan looked at her for a moment, then made a deep bow. "I heed the word of Savankala," he said reverently, "and I heed his true daughter."

Chenaya looked at him piercingly. She turned to Dayme and touched his huge arm. Then she turned back to Rashan. "I lied to you about that," she said abruptly, "to convince you to follow my orders. In the desert, I made a pact with the sun-god. There is a bond between us, yes. One that you do not understand and that I will not explain. What transpired is very personal and very private." She looked at Dayme again,

reached out for his hand, and interlocked her fingers with his. "In any case, He has a sincere desire to spread His worship here. Ranke has become moribund. It's an empire without a future. However, in exchange for my bringing the Fire in God's Eye to Sanctuary, the Bright Father has agreed to stay out of my life. My fate is my own again."

Dayme stared down at the hand he held, so small against his own, yet filled with strength. "What does that mean?" he asked, his confusion plain.

She smiled at him. "Don't worry. You and I will discuss it over the days and nights to come." She let go of him then, catching the gleam in Daphne's eyes. "But not now. Right now, I think we'd better refill this hole before Walegrin comes along."

"So you see," Chenaya said frankly, standing before a full court in the Hall of Justice, meeting the hostile gaze of Molin Torchholder who stood at the side of Prince Kadakithis's great chair as her cousin squinted over

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the document she had given him. "I did not inherit Land's End. Knowing the Rankan law, my father left it to Dayme. You know Lowan's writing. You have his seal."

Kadakithis looked utterly uninterested. He handed the document back to Molin and folded his hands in the lap of his expensive silk robe as he gazed down at Dayme, who stood just behind Chenaya. "Then why didn't your man simply explain this to Molin when he came to visit?"

"Because it's a forgery!" Molin Torchholder muttered, casting the document to the floor. It slithered down the few steps of the dias from the throne to Chenaya's feet. "A clever forgery!"

Chenaya declined to pick the document up. She merely smiled patiently at her uncle. She liked to see him twitch. "Because he didn't know about it. Father told only me where he kept his will, and as you know, cousin"—she nodded to Kadakithis again—"I've been out of town."

Kadakithis waved a hand under his nose as if to shoo away a fly.

"Well, it all looks legal to me—the signature, the seal, the whole business. It is a prime piece of real estate, Molin, and I don't blame you for trying. But I'm afraid it belongs to Dayme now."

Dayme stepped forward, the smug glee on his usually stern face almost enough to make Chenaya chuckle. But now wasn't the time for that.

"No," Dayme said gruffly. "It belongs to Cheyne. Rankan law says she can't inherit property, but it doesn't prevent her from owning property. I sold Land's End back to her this morning"—he looked straight at Molin—"for a single gold soldat." He pulled the gold coin from his waistband and held it up for all to see. A murmur of restrained amusement ran

around the court while Molin fumed.

Dayme and Chenaya turned as one and marched from the Hall of Justice, across the courtyard, and out into Vashanka's Square where their friends and comrades were waiting. "Well?" Ouijen said eagerly. "What happened?"

A slow grin spread across Chenaya's face.

"You should have seen Molin," Dayrne whispered, drawing them all closer.

Daphne clapped her hands and laughed. "It worked!" she cried before Gestus shushed her.

Dismas sighed with melodramatic relief. "Thank the gods!" he said. "I practiced all night on that signature. I didn't think I'd ever get it right!"

Chenaya's grin brightened into a smile as she reached up and ruffled Dismas's hair. "You?" she teased. "The best thief and forger ever sentenced to an arena anywhere?"

They walked across the square and out the Processional Gate. The clouds over Sanctuary had vanished. The sky was a wonderful blue, and

the sun shone warm and golden. A fresh wind blew up from the sea. Chenaya stared that way, watching the tops of the masts of ships rocking to and fro along the wharves where she had sat two nights ago and thrown a painting into the water.

"You miss him, don't you?" Dayrne whispered in her ear.

She thought of her father, calling up all the good memories of times they had spent together. "I'll always miss him," she answered quietly.

"But not today!" Daphne snapped. "No morbid moods today." She pulled a fat purse from her belt and tossed it in the air, catching it again before Leyn could snatch it. "It's the Maze for us, my brothers, and a few drinks at the Unicorn. That's as good a place as any to spread the word and let this city know." She waited, looking at them and finally winking.

"Chenaya's back in town," she proclaimed. She turned then, tossing her raven hair over her shoulders, grabbing Leyn's arm, and pulling him along as she led the way.

"Somehow," Dayrne muttered with a weak half-smile, "I think it knows."

Lynn Abbey

Sanctuary had been quiet since Theron's loyalists pulled out. A hundred people, certainly no more than two hundred, had straggled through the new gates to begin the long journey back to Ranke. The ordinary citizen of Sanctuary didn't miss a single one of them. The ordinary citizen of Sanctuary hadn't yet guessed that the city had been cut adrift, to sink or swim on its own strengths. Men and women who had spent their lives complaining about the Empire scarcely noticed it was gone.

For the undermanned garrison, the calm was a blessing. They desperately needed time to reorganize, to recruit new men, to train them, and to test their informant networks in the absence of the Stepsons, the 3rd, and the Mageguild Hazards. A week passed, and another. A storm rolled in from the sea. It rained for three days running, and when the skies cleared, the towering yellow-grey clouds above desert had collapsed. Farmers came to the temples with their thanksgiving offerings.

Walegrin had been brevetted to full commander of the garrison in Critias's stead. It came as a surprise to him. He expected that dubious honor to fall on Zaibar's shoulders. Zaibar hadn't taken a drink in over a year, and he was much more familiar with the corridors of power than a shag-officer like Walegrin, who had spent his life on duty in one imperial backwater post after another. Walegrin was no happier about spending

his days in an airless room hearing reports and giving orders than Critias had been. Whenever the opportunity arose, he assigned himself to a street patrol.

An opportunity arose when the square sails of a Beysib merchanter were sighted beyond the arms of the harbor.

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Sanctuary's harbor was its hope for a prosperous future. Some ancient, forgotten god had amused himself (or, perhaps, herself) removing great bites of continental rock. The anchorage was deep and calm within the tricky rip-current that carried away the Red and White Foal sediments on every tide. Since the days of the Ilsigi settlers, seafaring men had shaken their heads: such a beautiful anchorage, and no good reason to use it.

Then Shupansea and her fellow exiles began tortuous, ongoing negotiations with their enemies back in what they called the Glorious Home. Progress was slow, all could not be forgiven, but—if the exiles longed for the luxuries of their past—a merchant or two could supply them-

The local merchants scented a fortune or two in the crates and coffers piled on the wharf for the staring Beysib clientele. They desperately wanted to want what the fish merchants were selling, but trade was

proving difficult to establish. To mainland eyes, Beysib wares were strange, not intriguing; weird rather than exotic. Fortunately the urge to bargain transcended cultural, linguistic, and monetary boundaries. Each successive Beysib merchant vessel carried more cargo for the mainlanders to examine; each vessel was greeted by more mainland merchants.

They were lined up along the wharf before the Beysib ship cleared the offshore current. A sharp-witted merchant hoped to make a fortune before noon. Walegrin and Thrusher mingled with the noisy throng to make sure those fortunes were honest—merchant honest.

The Beysib ship came into the harbor with her galley oars shipped and her rust-colored sails stretched tight. She rode low in the water, but her lines showed speed despite her heavy holds and metal-clad bow. A catapult rose from her stem; she'd bum the sails of anything foolhardy enough to chase her. The exiles insisted that the ship, and her sisters, were their homeland's cargo vessels—lumbering relations of their warships. It might be that the fish-folk were lying through their staring eyes, but no Sanctuary sailor felt the urge to challenge them.

"Pirates each and every one of them. Barbarians," Thrusher muttered as Beysib sailors swarmed over the rigging as the ship drew alongside the wharf. "They think we're animals," Thrush continued. "They think we've got no souls because we don't have fish eyes like them. Don't think they've made a square deal with us since their first ship put in here.

Stealin' us blind is what they're doing. I'll bet they're selling us garbage."

Walegrin grunted noncommittally; he wouldn't take his friend's bet.

For all that he'd been bom a thrall, Thrusher was a snob. As far as the commander could tell, the Beysib were getting insect egg cases, uncured pelts, and barrels of swamp beer for such goods as caught a mainland

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eye. The Beysib might be selling garbage—Walegrin couldn't be sure—the Sanctuary merchants definitely were.

The two soldiers broke up a fistfight between Beysib sailors and Sanctuary laborers. They fished a careless merchant out of the harbor. A red-haired Ilbarsi offered them a bribe of pickled passion fruit. A Rankan offered them pearls if they'd guard a certain triple-locked chest against all comers. They took the fruit, and took the Rankan to the palace lockup for stealing. The carnival was still going strong when they returned to the wharf.

A woman with a donkey cart blocked their way. The wharf could support a three-horse dray, but there were drainage gaps between the diagonally laid planks. The donkey was sweating in its harness; the woman was pulling the donkey; and the wheels were wedged into the gaps.

Walegrin nudged Thrusher. The woman had to be new in town. Only a stranger would lead the donkey along the wharf rather than across it, much less own a cart that could get both wheels stuck.

"I don't understand it," the woman explained as the two men made a barrier between her and the unamused crowd. She was almost as frantic as the donkey.

"We'll get you out of here," Walegrin muttered. He took the woman's shawl and wrapped it over the donkey's eyes. Donkeys were smarter than horses, but not by much. "Never done this before, have you?"

"Why, no ... When the other ships came in, my brother-in-law was home ..."

Walegrin walked away to exchange places with Thrusher. He got a firm grip on the single axle, then nodded his head, lifted, and scuttled sideways as Thrush got the donkey moving.

"No! No! Not that way. I've got to get out to where they're unloading."

The two men exchanged an evening's conversation in a glance. The cart settled back onto its axle, free now, but still blocking traffic.

"The length of an axle is set by the prince's decree," Walegrin recited to the woman, who was, by then, in tears. "It's matched to the width of these planks and the width of the gap between them." He handed the shawl back to her. "This cart gets stuck out there and I'll have to impound it. I'll have to take it to the palace and it'll go to firewood unless you pay a fine of two soldats."

The woman's tears ceased; she turned pale enough to frighten the commander. There was no fine for women fainting on the wharf, but he had no desire to have his arms full of drooping femininity. To his im-

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mense relief she squared her shoulders and started breathing normally again.

"Is it permitted to tie a cart here—by the cobblestones?"

Walegrin nodded.

"Then I shall carry my goods myself. I cannot risk my brother-in-law's cart. I do not have two soldats."

It was the second time she'd referred to her brother-in-law, and both times she seemed to shrink as she uttered the words. She hadn't mentioned a father or a son, nor a brother or husband; not even a sister's husband. Walegrin looked at her with the beginnings of sympathy. Slaves had more rights than a childless widow cut off from her blood family. "I don't make the laws, goodwife," he said, taking another step toward her. "•I'll carry your goods back here for you."

For a moment it seemed she had been too broken by her misfortunes to take advantage of Walegrin's offer- Her eyes widened; they were blue. It was possible that, if she were not so thin and anxious, she'd be a handsome woman. It was hard to tell, and the commander was about to turn away when she made up her mind to accept his offer..

Since the Beysib traders and their mainland counterparts did not share a spoken language, bargaining was done with gestures. Factotums recorded the transaction in the appropriate languages on parchment, which was then torn and divided among the principals. In theory, there was no need for shouting, but the clamor along the wharf was guaranteed to give all but the deaf a headache.

Chests and bales were still coming off the ship, to be opened on the first empty patch of wharf the merchant encountered. There was no such thing as a clear path and the indigenous criminals were having a field day. Walegrin spotted a light-fingered youth in the act of lifting a sizable

purse. Their eyes met, and the thief kept lifting. A half-dozen overflowing chest separated the law from the lawbreaker, and even if they hadn't, Walegrin had all he could do to keep up with the woman.

She strode past more gimcrack and gewgaw dealers than Walegrin cared to count. Personally, he saw nothing that would tempt him to crack his next egg. But he was a soldier; women were supposed to be different.

There was a hierarchy in the disorder. The frivolities which the fish judged most likely to please the natives were crammed together at the landward end of the wharf. The consignment goods destined for the exiles were more carefully displayed closer to the ship. Midway between them three silk sellers displayed bolts of cloth and finished garments.

Silk had been known since the Ilsigi Kingdom. Mainland silks were thick and brittle compared to the fiber the Beysib Empire produced in

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vast quantities. They took dye poorly and, in any event, not even the Ilsigi alchemists had conjured colors like those the Beysib set in their silks. They shimmered in the sunlight; any fool could see Beysib silks were worth their weight in gold.

Walegrin was not, therefore, surprised when the woman stopped to

examine them, although how she thought she could buy silk when she was scared witless by a two-soldat fine was a question he couldn't answer. Why she would buy it was another puzzling question. For all its beauty, Beysib silk was not selling well in Sanctuary. It came in two equally impractical varieties: gossamer sheer that snagged and tore on a whisper and damasked over a horsehair foundation so stiff that the cloth supported itself.

Perhaps in the Beysib Empire, where it was both cool and dry the year around, such cloth could be made into wearable garments. In Sanctuary, a person could be noticed in Beysib silk, but never comfortable. It was comfort, more than any sense of propriety, that drew Shupansea and the other Beysib women out of their bare-breasted costumes and into traditional Rankene gowns.

The woman studied each length of fabric. She twisted it, and tugged it, and got down on her knees to examine the underside. The merchants began to get hopeful, then she started walking again.

"What are you looking for?" Walegrin protested as his companion neared the expensive end of the wharf. "It's not going to get any cheaper."

She looked at him as if he'd grown another head. "I haven't seen what I need," she announced, and kept moving.

Walegrin tossed a round-bottom jug back to its owner and scurried to catch up with her. They approached the stem gangplank. Beysibs were buying from Beysibs, wailing in their peculiar language over merchandise only a fish could find attractive. The woman was moving slower now. She stopped beside a greasy man hawking ceramic snakes and indicated that she wished to bargain.

The Beysib was almost as confused as the commander. The woman slashed her hand and shook her head as he lifted one garish reptile after another out of its case. Walegrin had a very crude understanding of the Beysin language, but if he had any hope of getting off the wharf before midday, he was going to have to intervene.

He confined the woman's gesturing hands in his own. "The man's shown you everything he's got. You keep pointing at empty boxes, and he keeps telling you that there's nothing in them to sell."

"You understand him . . . ? Then, tell him I want to buy the dross."

"The what?"

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"The dross . . . Dross—the packing around his wretched statues!"

"Dross?"

Walegrin shook his head. He knew several fish words for garbage, a few of which would likely turn the merchant's bald scalp a brilliant shade of red. He knew the fish word for purchase—if buying a woman's time at a brothel was the same as buying something from a merchant. He opened his eyes as wide as he could and started talking. If his luck ran true to form he was about to create a scandal.

The merchant roared with laughter. He slapped his naked belly and turned the crimson color Walegrin had so hoped not to see. His eyes bugged out. "You joking."

Walegrin swallowed hard and, adding more gestures than he'd used the first time, tried again. He got the feeling that the greasy fish understood him well enough and that the third and fourth tries were simply for the amusement of the other Beysib who'd wandered over to watch the barbarian make a fool of himself.

The ceramics seller guessed that the game had gone on as long as it could. The gales of laughter ceased; he flashed his fingers twice and muttered koppit, which had become the generally accepted name for any of Sanctuary's myriad copper coins.

"Twenty copper bits," Walegrin told the woman.

"Now explain to him that I will pay him forty when he comes back next time, but that I can't pay him anything now,"

This time it took no effort at all for Walegrin to show whites all around his green eyes. "Lady, you must be out of your mind."

She was stung by his sarcasm, but clung to her dignity. "I am a weaver. When I have finished with his dross it will be worth a hundred times his twenty copper bits."

Walegrin dug into the pouch at his hip. "Fine. You can owe me. I'm not going to make a monkey out of myself telling your lunacy to this fish."

Irregular copper disks rained into the merchant's hands. He poured them into his coin coffer, then demanded a silver coin for the box the dross was in. Walegrin threw the coin so hard it bounced, and disappeared between the planks into the harbor. The fish revealed his painted teeth. Walegrin was more careful with the second coin. Walegrin picked up the box carefully; it would have cost another five coppers for rope to bind it shut.

"They throw this stuff into the harbor at the end of the day," the

commander complained. "It's garbage. You've paid halfsoldat for garbage you could have fished out of the water tomorrow morning."

She would have preferred to whisper; she would have preferred not to

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reply at all, but he was her partner now and she felt she owed him an answer. "I know that, but once the salt water touches the dross, it's ruined."

"Lady—"

"Theudebourga. My name is Theudebourga."

Walegrin scowled. "Lady, how can you ruin garbage?"

Theudebourga proceeded to tell him. The wharf was still crowded;

they had to go slowly. By the time they had returned to the cart Walegrin knew more about the pernicious effects of seawater on garbage than he'd wanted to know. Thrusher took one look at the pair of them and instinctively knew to ask no questions until after the box was loaded and the

woman on her way.

"The Vulgar Unicorn's probably serving by now," the hawk-faced man suggested. "You look like you could use something to take the taste from your mouth."

The commander allowed himself to be led from the wharf in silence. The Vulgar Unicorn was open, but it was undergoing one of its infrequent cleanings. The shutters and doors were wide open, the common room was awash with sunlight, and workmen were busily repairing a month of damage. The two soldiers kept going until they found themselves beyond the Maze.

Once the Shambles had been as rough a neighborhood as the Maze, though without the Maze's perverse reputation. Later it had swarmed with the dead, the half-dead, and the other assorted leftovers of Sanctuary's magic troubles. Now it was the quarter where newcomers made their homes in abandoned buildings. It was factious enough that the soldiers knew it as well as they knew the Maze, but there were also signs of prosperity. Well-fed children in carefully mended clothes played games beside their mothers, who created gardens wherever sunlight touched the ground.

Not all these diligent women were from way beyond Sanctuary's newly painted walls. Some had been widowed in the years of chaos, some had seized their opportunity and exchanged the Promise of Heaven or the Street of Red Lanterns for ordinary domesticity. Walegrin knew most of

them by name, and a few of them much better, but it was understood these days in Sanctuary that you didn't talk about the past without invitation.

The Tinker's Knob was typical of Shambles taverns: salvaged from the wreckage, it had a lingering charred odor, and a cellar no one cared to enter after sundown. Its sole claim to fame, and the inspiration for its name, came from a hammered plaque depicting the exploits of a singularly well endowed tinker.

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Walegrin looked right past it.

"Want to talk?" Thrusher asked, pushing a wooden mug across the table.

The commander shook his head, but the skeleton of the story rose out of him. "What's happening to this place?" he asked rhetorically. "An honest soldier helps a foolish woman buy garbage from a merchant whose ancestors were snakes and fish."

Thrusher shook his head. "You could've left when the orders came.

You could still leave," he stated the obvious.

Walegrin drained his mug and poured another from the pitcher. He hadn't seriously considered throwing his lot in with the Stepsons when they left. In three years he could convert his officer's commission into a tidy pile of gold and enough land to support a handful of heirs. All his adult life he'd been planning for that conversion. Yet he stayed in Sanctuary where there was no guarantee the Torch or the prince would acknowledge the years he'd spent in the Empire's service.

"Damn your eyes—this is my porking home!" He slammed the mug against the table somewhat more forcefully than he'd intended. The entire room went wary. Thrusher sat back in his chair, taking careful measure of his commander between cautious sips of ale.

There was no doubt the last few years had aged Walegrin. Gods knew, those years aged everyone they hadn't killed. Age had softened the angles of the commander's face, giving it the semblance of wisdom without compromising its strength. He was a good deal calmer than he'd been before leading his men back to the city of his birth with the secret of Enlibar steel almost five years ago.

Thrusher reckoned he might head north to the capital himself if the haunted, self-cursed Walegrin reappeared—and with that reckoning, the lieutenant got a handle on his friend's problem.

"Women, eh? The woman on the wharf?"

Walegrin grunted and spun his mug between his fingers. He preferred not to talk about women. His father had been killed because of a woman—killed and thoroughly cursed. Walegrin wasn't certain that he'd inherited the curse; his half-sister, Illyra, said he hadn't. But even S'danzo Sight couldn't say for certain where ordinary bad luck left off and a curse began.

For Walegrin, the dividing line between luck and curse ran straight through Chenaya Vigeles. Chenaya was the sort of woman a poor man dreams about: beautiful and wealthy, sensual and wealthy, eager and wealthy. When Molin Torchholder said the palace needed eyes and ears at the sprawling Vigeles estate, Walegrin volunteered. Even then Chenaya

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had a reputation that would have given a wiser man pause. And that led to the question: Was it bad luck or stupidity that catalyzed a curse?

Chenaya took a fancy to him, much as a breeder fancies a particular bull or stallion at the stalls. She'd taken him to her bedroom and given him experiences he could never afford on the Street of Red Lanterns. For

a week, maybe two, but certainly no more than a month, Walegnn dwelt in heaven. Then Chenaya figured out just whom her lover worked for. Molin Torchholder's distrust of his niece was a paltry thing compared to Chenaya's hatred of her uncle. A lesser woman might have killed him while he lay defenseless in her bed, but not Chenaya.

The battle lines were drawn and Walegnn of the garrison was both weapon and battlefield. When Chenaya was finally driven from the city—no thanks to the Torch—Walegrin forswore the company of women. He'd need to take a wife when he converted his commission, but a wife was not necessarily the same as a woman.

She's back.

The word came a month ago, in the midst of the awkward investigation into the midnight assassination of the Torch's estranged wife and Chenaya's father.

Be my eyes, my ears, again.

This time Walegrin risked his carefully nurtured patronage with Sanctuary's most powerful bureaucrat. She'll kill me, he'd argued, which, though true, wasn't the real reason he feared Land's End. He knew he wouldn't mind dying if she took him upstairs first. The Torch hadn't pressed the issue, and Chenaya had yet to cross Walegrin's path, but the commander couldn't talk to a woman without thinking about Chenaya. He was as jumpy as a cat on a griddle.

Thrusher knew about Chenaya. There wasn't a man in Sanctuary who didn't know something about the legendary Chenaya. Thrusher even knew about Walegrin and Chenaya. He'd asked for details at the beginning, and, after receiving a florid description of experiences he would never know himself, lost interest. He didn't know how Chenaya haunted Walegrin's idle thoughts; he couldn't imagine confounding Chenaya with a timid, scrawny weaver.

They finished the pitcher and returned to their patrolling. Their camaraderie was broken for the moment. The afternoon was an endless succession of circuits along the wharf and past the customs and storage houses. The big black ship had pulled in all but one of its hoists. The fish merchants were up at the palace making private transactions, but in general the fish stayed to themselves. Cross-culture brawls were the exception rather than the rule.

The big black ship might stay in the harbor a week or more, but after

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the first day few paid any attention to it. Walegrin returned to a commander's duties. Once a day he went over to the caravan gate to inspect whomever the other officers might have recruited. Walegrin pointed out that the recruit would receive the same wages as a soldier in the Rankan

army—five soldats a month, less expenses—but he never said the recruit was, joining the Rankan army. Business wasn't brisk, but the ranks were starting to fill. The third watch, formerly made up largely of Zip and his semi-feral commandos, was reinstated. The two existing watches were reorganized. Thrusher went to the new unit and Walegrin found himself training a wet-behind-the-ears lieutenant named Wedemir.

Wedemir was short and dark, like Thrusher, but with a round face and flat forehead that fairly shouted Wriggly. He gave his age as twenty-two, the same age Walegrin was when he jumped from soldier to officer.

Walegrin judged that the man was young for his years. At the very least Wedemir wasn't burdened with the shield of distrust that Walegrin had carried through his teens and twenties. There was no faulting Wedemir's record. He'd been on the barricades through the worst of the anarchy and seen things, no doubt, that he'd never told his dose-knit family.

"My father's Lalo, the artist," the boy said defensively as he and Walegrin left the barracks on a get-acquainted patrol.

Walegrin grunted. Wedemir's mother was Gilla. His younger brother died in the False Plague Riots and his sister waited on the fish in the palace. Walegrin knew all that and more from the Torch's dossiers. For the moment, the commander was more interested in the movements of a woman coming from the Justice Hall toward the West Gate. He led Wedemir, still prattling about his family, toward the practice ground where Thrusher was explaining the difference between right and left to

the newest recruits.

"I don't think they were ever very happy about me joining. Not that they'd ever say anything outright . . . Well, my mother would, but not my father . . ."

The woman turned. Walegrin caught a glimpse of her profile before Thrush's recruits came between them, not long enough to be sure if the woman was Chenaya or not. Probably not. Chenaya had little cause to come to the palace, and when she did she was usually dressed for war.

"Something wrong, Commander?" Wedemir asked.

Walegrin snapped to attention. He hadn't realized how much time he spent absorbed in his own thoughts until Wedemir had been glued to his side. Thrasher knew how to be invisible; Wedemir didn't. It wasn't the young man's fault, but it kept both of them from relaxing.

"Wait here, I want to get something from the tower room."

"Can't I get it for you?"

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"Gods below, you're not my servant, you're an officer in the R—"

Walegrin caught the untimely word on the tip of his tongue. Just that morning the prince had proclaimed a reduction in the hearth tax without once mentioning Ranke or the Emperor. Whatever they were officers of, it wasn't the Rankan army anymore. "Just slay here!"

Wedemir froze on the spot. Walegrin took the tower steps two at a time. What he wanted was another glimpse of that golden hair to tell him which way not to go with Wedemir. He leaned out over the railing. The men on duty looked with him and at him. The commander spotted his quarry arguing with a water seller. The angle was still bad; he couldn't

see her face.

"What're you looking for?" one of the soldiers asked.

Walegrin gripped the rail with both hands and thought fast. "I was looking to see if there were crowds gathering anywhere. Problems. Disorderlies. Don't want to bore my new lieutenant."*

"It's as quiet as a clam," the second soldier confirmed, still scanning from street to street. "Just the way you like it."

"But there's been complaints coming in all day from the Uptown. Something died, from the sound . . . er, smelt of things. Nothing seri-

ous, though, an' it's not going anywhere so I haven't sent anyone," the first soldier added.

"Something died?" the commander asked.

"We had at least four people come down here since dawn to say that they can't stand the smell. We got nothing more than that. Nobody's seen what died, they just say it smells worse than the charnel house going

fulltilt."

The golden-haired woman headed west. Uptown was east.

"We'll check it out."

Walegrin would have gone Uptown regardless of the gold-haired woman. The soldiers in the tower had been recruited from the men who came to Sanctuary to work on Molin's walls. To them, Uptown was just another quarter.

Wedemir's face tightened when Walegrin joined the words died and Uptown in the same sentence. Reflexively, the young man checked his weapons; just as reflexively, the fingers of his right hand made an Ilsigi wardsign. The commander didn't blame him, though he had no personal

faith in gestures or amulets.

They went through the gate at a twenty-league pace. Urgency radiated from them, and the few people on the streets scuttled under the eaves to let them pass. The stench rose like a wall across Safe Haven.

"What died?" Wedemir asked, for although the odor was unlike anything in his experience it was profoundly organic and decayed.

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Walegrin shrugged and adjusted his headband. Safe Haven was empty, all the windows were tightly shuttered. The commander could follow his nose, or he could trust his instincts. He chose his instincts and left the street for an alley and a flight of worn, stone steps. Wedemir was right behind him. Anyone who lived through that night would never forget this path.

They emerged in a burnt-out courtyard. The Peres house looked pretty much as it had since it burnt. Storms had tumbled a few more of the beams and a skeletal tree, but no one scavenged here for wood or charcoal. After the False Plague Riots there'd been a dozen burnt-out quarters; now only Peres remained. And would remain at least so long as anyone remembered.

A pillar of fire had surrounded the Peres house that night. It reached from the depths of hell to the heights of heaven. It illuminated a war between gods and demons, if not good and evil. Magic fueled it, and when it collapsed all magic was gone from Sanctuary. No one came straight out and said the Peres quarter was cursed, or blessed, by what happened, but it was shunned.

The stench hovered over the ruins, neither stronger nor weaker than it had been on Safe Haven. Walegrin held his breath. He reached into his memory for the tricks of perception every soldier had been forced to learn when magic was rampant- He knelt down and squinted.

Scraggly weeds and nettles with nasty, velvet leaves grew in the ashes, just as a feral sort of magic was creeping back into Sanctuary. Beneath the notice of reputable farmers, or mages, but good enough for the desperate. And not the source of the death stench.

Wedemir hunkered down beside his commander. "Should we have the priests come and burn it off?"

"Probably." Walegrin got to his feet. "Looks harmless enough to me, but what do I know about these things, eh?"

Wedemir was wisely silent. "The other place?" he asked after a mo-

ment.

Heavy vines grew across the windows and doors of the home of the missing and presumed dead Tasfalen Lancothis. They reminded everyone who passed that this was a place not to be tampered with. The Peres quarter was where magic died; the Lancothis quarter was where it lingered. There had always been ghosts in Sanctuary. The problem with Lancothis was not that it was haunted, but that it leaked.

Unpleasant faces appeared in the windows of Lancothis. Strange sounds oozed through its crumbling plaster. Flashes of light in colors the mind cared not to remember shot through the holes in its roof. Rumors said the house wasn't haunted; it was a prison for whatever had lost the

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fight over at Peres. The priests of Us and Savankala professed not to know the truth. Those who did know hid that knowledge carefully.

"What's that?" Walegrin pointed to a second-story window where a tattered curtain waved in the harbor breeze. The vines around the window were broken. Withered leaves rustled in the breeze.

Walegrin frowned. He'd noticed the rupture right off, and hoped his new lieutenant was less observant. He'd sooner go to hell than into Lancothis. Someone would have to find out what had happened, but not

him—not this afternoon—because whatever had happened here, it didn't stink. The breeze was clear and lightly scented with honeysuckle.

Gratefully choosing the lesser of two evils, Walegrin led the way back to Safe Haven, where they followed their noses instead of their assumptions. There were more false starts and dead ends, but finally they reached a house that made their guts heave and their eyes water. With one hand clapped over his face, Walegrin motioned for Wedemir to follow him into the courtyard.

The commander expected to see something vast and revolting; what he saw was an unhappy donkey and a high-wheeled cart, both unfortunately familiar.

Wedemir couldn't understand Walegrin's muttering. He lowered his hand from his face. "Wha . . . ? Ough! Gods—" He hastily re-covered his mouth and lurched toward the archway, where he could be heard heaving.

An anger approaching mindless fury kept Walegrin breathing. He strode across the yard to the reeking midden. He kicked aside a bit of straw. His worst suspicions rolled into the sunlight. Filling his lungs with the foul air, Walegrin bellowed her name.

"Theudebourga!"

Silence. Wedemir rejoined the commander. He didn't recognize the name, but he shouted it anyway. The air wasn't going to kill him, and he wasn't going to be able to stop breathing it. The stench wasn't as noticeable now that he'd purged himself, rather like the numbness that follows an injury.

'Theu-de-bour-gaP

Walegrin grabbed a spar of firewood. He struck the iron rim of the cartwheel with such force that the firewood splintered and both men had to dodge the pieces. When they reopened their eyes a thin nervous woman stood in the archway, flanked by a passel of children and another woman holding an infant.

"What in the names of a thousand forgotten gods are you doing here?"

Walegrin pointed the remnant of wood at the midden,

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Theudebourga's eyes were as wide as any Beysib's and her quivering voice seemed to come from somewhere in the next quarter. "Schapping."

Walegrin glanced at Wedemir, who shrugged and shook his head. "Tell me that again," the commander said in his best threatening tones. "I didn't understand you."

The woman with the infant looked at Theudebourga, as did the children, then they all eased away from her.

"Schapping," she whispered, scarcely louder than the first time.

"Make sense, woman." Walegrin took a step toward her. He'd never struck a woman in anger or the line of duty, but the temptation was growing very strong.

Theudebourga fell to her knees. "Schapping . . . schapping . . ."

Wedemir risked his life and closed his hand over the commander's upraised arm. "Beating her won't help. She sounds foreign. I don't think she understands you."

"She understood me well enough when she got me to buy this witches' brew for her."

Weemir released him. Sanctuary hadn't gotten so civilized that a man could stand on honor for a stranger. Theudebourga would have to stand for herself, which she did, scurrying over to the midden. She plunged her arm into the mess and came up with a fistful of sticky, stringy stuff. Holding it before her like a weapon or a shield, she advanced into Walegrin's reach.

"To make silk, you must schappe—get rid of the part of the cocoon that isn't silk."

In a corner of the commander's mind there was a mote of dusty knowledge whispering that silk didn't come into being as dyed, woven cloth, any more than wool or linen did. Wool came from sheep, and linen came from a plant, and silk . . . ? Did silk come from a cocoon?

When he thought about it, the garbage they had bought on the wharf did look like cocoons all wadded together. But that goo hanging over her fingers like so much melted cheese or worse . . . that couldn't possibly be silk.

"She's trying to make fools of us," Walegrin assured his lieutenant.

Wedemir wasn't so sure. He wasn't an artist like his father, but Lalo had taught him to keep an open mind about beauty. And Gilla, his mother, had taught him to keep an open mind about people. He extended his arm and allowed Theudebourga to drop the mess in his palm. It had a texture appropriate to its smell. Wedemir closed his eyes and remembered the few times he'd encountered real silk. He went past the slime and the stickiness to the fiber itself.

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"I don't know, Commander Walegrin, but I think she's telling the truth."

Walegrin was, to say the least, unconvinced.

The other woman eased forward with her children and the infant.

"Please, lord, I didn't know. Berge said we could make silk, and silk would make us rich. She said she learned how from her husband's people. I didn't know it would reek like this. It's not my fault. Punish her if you must. Take her away before my husband comes back. It's not my fault."

Walegrin didn't doubt Theudebourga was the driving force behind this debacle. Still, families shouldn't cast each other to the winds, or wolves, or soldiers. He scowled down at her, and the infant stared.

With a lamentable lack of tact Walegrin stared back. "It's almost a fish," slipped past his lips.

It was inevitable. In all other respects Beysib men were no different from any other. They frequented the Street of Red Lanterns and the Promise of Heaven. The marvel was that Walegrin had never seen a dark-haired, round-faced, staring child before.

The woman covered her baby's face with her shawl. Walegrin noticed that none of the other children had Beysib eyes. He looked at everything

a second time. That wasn't dirt on their faces. Regrettably, it was all starting to make sense.

"When will your man be back?" he asked.

"Sundown, maybe later."

"Maybe never?"

The woman shook her head. "He'll be back. Dendorat comes back." A world of bitterness underlay her words.

"He'll beat you all when he finds this."

The commander's thoughts turned inward. It was easy to imagine Dendorat, because he could imagine himself feeling as Dendorat must feel. A man leaves his hearth and home to find a better life for them. He comes to the tail end of the Empire and, to his amazement, he finds a better life sweating on the walls of Sanctuary. He sends money to bring his wife and children to the promised land. The next thing he knows she's breeding, and he's the gods' happiest father waiting for a son who will never go hungry. But the son isn't his ...

What can he do? What else can he do? He turns against his wife. He begins to wonder about the other children hung about his neck like millstones. The doubts gnaw at his gut, driving him to despair. Maybe he

never beat his wife before, but he beats her now because she wears the face of his pain . . .

"Commander?"

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Walegrin blinked. He wasn't half-S'danzo like his sister; he didn't have the Sight. But he'd wager next month's pay that he had the story right.

"Commander, what are we going to do?"

They were all looking at Walegrin. The commander knew what should be done. Of course, he was condemning these women and the children to misery, not to mention losing the money he had inadvertently invested in this lame scheme.

"You cannot do these things in the Uptown quarters," Walegrin explained apologetically, not meeting anyone's eyes. "Take rooms in the charnel quarters," he suggested, knowing the sorts who lived there.

"Maybe they won't mind."

Theudebourga pointed at the courtyard well. "But we need fresh water."

She took Wedemir's hardening mess and washed it in the bucket.

When she was finished the water wasn't fit to drink, but the white-gold fibers clinging to her wet fingers had begun to look like silk. She rubbed them dry in a corner of her shawl, then held them out for Walegrin to examine. The breeze in the courtyard wasn't enough to rustle a leaf or turn a hair, but it was enough to lift the wisps out of her hands.

"Clean, clear, fresh water," Theudebourga said as her palms emptied.

"Anything less—the schappe clings and the silk is ruined.

Wisps tangled in the stubble on the commander's upper lip. He twitched, blew, finally caught them in his fingers. Softer than a whore's breast, soft as silk . . . Walegrin twirled them between thumb and forefinger, and let them spin away. He began to suspect he was throwing away a lot more than a few silver coins.

Wedemir interrupted again. "What can we do?"

Walegrin shook his head. The complaints they were getting about the smell would seem trivial when the gutters started running with Theudebourga's rinse water. He quoted from his mentor, Molin Torchholder: "We're guardians of the welfare of the city, not the guardians of any single citizen. There's nothing we can do." He turned to face Theudebourga. "I'm truly sorry, but you can't do this schapping here."

"But it doesn't last," Theudebourga insisted. "Only another day . . .

Once the schappe is gone we must spin it into floss, then the floss has to be woven. Surely no one would complain about spinning and weaving?"

The commander shook his head. Beneath the tears and the pleadings and the wringing hands, this woman had the same temper as his Enlibar sword. Which, he decided, made it all the more important to stand firm.

"And when the weaving is finished, then you will sell the woven cloth," he continued for her. "And with your profits you'll bargain for more of this dross from the fish sellers. Then you'll make a bigger midden

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. . . and a bigger midden again the time after that. And you'll say at the prince's court of justice that you've always done it. The garrison came and didn't stop you . . .

"No, my lady, you won't catch me like that."

"It doesn't have to be like that," Wedemir objected.

"Don't go taking her part in this. I know what I'm talking about.

When something's wrong, you stamp it out at the root. The longer you let it grow, the worse it gets." Walegrin continued to watch Theudebourga. None of this would be happening if he'd done his duty

and impounded the damn donkey cart when he'd had the chance.

Theudebourga touched Walegrin's arm. "Please, don't abandon us;

help us. You know I can do this. I learned this in Valtostin from my husband's family before the army came. We gathered broken cocoons in the spring, but the silk we made was never so fine as this will be. You believe me; I know you believe me."

Walegrin twisted away. It was easier to apprehend a murderer, or examine a corpse, than deal with a determined woman. "All right, until sundown tomorrow ... I can go along with that, but no weaving, no spinning. When I come back here tomorrow night I want to find this place empty. Do you understand, empty? If I can't report that I couldn't find a trace of you, I will personally take all of you and your possessions and your silk down to the Swamp of Night Secrets and leave you there. Just one more day to stink up the air and poison the water, and then you're gone, do you understand me?"

Theudebourga straightened her shawl and her back. "We understand."

Wedemir didn't, but he held his peace. He'd been a soldier long enough to know the difference between hard bargaining and an order. Still, when he and Walegrin were through the archway and beyond hearing, he demanded an explanation.

"Do you realize what you've done to them? Do you think this man, Dendorat, will leave because they say so? He'll beat them, if he doesn't kill them. And the silk . . . The silk is good. Commander. Don't we care about what is good? They told me an officer must judge as well as follow orders. What do I do when I judge my orders to be wrong?"

Walegrin stopped short. There was nothing friendly in his expression when he faced the younger man. "If you're so concerned about right or wrong you should have apprenticed yourself to the magistrates. We're soldiers, Lieutenant Wedemir, we enforce the laws—the emphasis goes on force. No one loves a soldier. People don't think about us unless there's trouble somewhere. At best, we're useful bullies."

There was an uncomfortable silence while Wedemir searched for words

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that would not compromise him, or enrage the commander. "I guess it's a good thing that you've only got a few more years."

The commander resumed walking. They were at the harbor before he spoke again, weighing every word and hesitation. "It is my silver sitting in that midden, but that does not influence me; I counted it lost the moment it left me. I am not without sympathy. There is no question of the right of what they are doing, only that they are doing it in the wrong

place. And I have done no wrong in forcing them to find a better place."

"What better place? Where could they go where they'd have what they needed, and there wouldn't be complaints? The chamels? Downwind? Could you see those women and children lasting three days Downwind?"

Wedemir thought his questions had obvious answers, but Walegrin scratched his ear and took them seriously.

"Well, . . . They should be downwind, or at least not upwind . . . They need clear water, but the water won't be clear when they get done with it, so they need a stream that goes straight to the rivers . . . That puts them outside the walls in a villa. They don't have any money and that Theudebourga, she'd never put her mark on an indenture . . . A patron. They'd have to find someone with a villa wKo'd tolerate the stench for a chance to get a bargain on the finished silk."

"Which villa would you suggest: Eagle's Nest? Jubal's old place now that the Stepsons are gone, or what about Land's End with Chenaya and her gladiators?" Wedemir drawled.

For generations these three estates had marked the end of Sanctuary and the beginning of the wilderness. Now they were all being worked again, each in a different way, but the meaning hadn't changed. At least the meaning hadn't changed for Wedemir. As far as he was concerned they remained equally inaccessible; he knew nothing of what had hap-

pened between Walegrin and Chenaya. So when the commander snarled that he'd see the women in hell first, the lieutenant knew only that he had crossed into dangerous territory.

"I promised my parents I'd visit them if I came close to home." It wasn't an absolute lie. Gilla was always glad to see her eldest son; and he had a sudden need of his family.

Walegrin understood. "I'll go on ahead. No need to catch up with me. You've learned enough for one afternoon, I think."

There was an ache in Wedemir's gut, as if he'd drunk one of Gilla's bitter purges. For a moment he felt cold and alone, then he headed up familiar streets to the just-barely-respectable quarter where his family had always lived. He sought a meaning for the commander's hostility. He was an intelligent youth with a lively imagination. It was impossible for him to guess the truth of the matter, but that didn't stop him from

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finding a satisfactory explanation: each estate he'd mentioned was bound to the past or the Rankan Empire. The silk workers would need a different sort of patron. By the time Gilla heard his thick-soled sandals on the

stairs, Wedemir had his plan worked out.

Walegrin, in contrast, had no plan. He checked out the warehouses with a deliberately empty mind. He'd satisfied himself that the onus wasn't on his hands. His shoulders were relaxed when he crossed the empty caravan plaza on his way to the Bazaar. There was an emptiness in his gut—but that could be entirely attributed to hunger, and he knew just the remedy for that.

It was Sixthday—which was easier than remembering that is was also

Eshi's Day, Spirit's Day, Sabellia's Day, or Somebody Else's Day—and on Sixthday, Walegrin ate dinner with Illyra and her family. There'd been times when he hadn't felt welcome here at all. Then last autumn, for no apparent reason, Dubro solemnly announced that his wife would be pleased to set a place for her brother at the week's-end table.

Their home had grown considerably over the years: a wall here, a roof there, a second anvil, and, most recently, a rebuilt forge with one bay for Dubro and a new one for his journeyman. Illyra's chamber with tasseled curtains stuck out to one side like an afterthought.

Illyra was happy, Walegrin told himself when he noticed that the curtains were roped tight, happier than she'd been when she sat in that airless room Seeing secrets for anyone who crossed the threshold. Hadn't

she always said she couldn't see when she was happy? Illyra was happily surrounded by her family and neither he nor Dubro had to worry about what, or who, she saw.

Walegrin didn't have to duck his head to enter this room, or worry that he'd break a stool when he sat down. Little Trevya saw him first and came racing across the hard-packed floor, her limp all but vanished. She shrieked as only a two-year-old could shriek when he scooped her into his arms. Trevya had always been fascinated by the bronze band across his forehead, but lately she'd discovered a more intriguing toy; the heavy straw-colored braids the band was supposed to confine.

"Want ride!" she trilled when she'd caught them in her fists.

With a patient sigh he leaned forward and let her pull his head toward the ground.

"Again!" She gave the braids a demanding yank.

This is the last time, Walegrin thought as he straightened up. The little beggar's stronger than she thinks . . . and getting heavier. But he was still playing the game when Illyra came through the other doorway.

"Wale—why, you're all covered with spider silk!"

It was a tone they all knew and respected. Trevya dropped silently to

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the ground. Even the hammering outside stopped. Walegrin dusted his shoulders and arms. There was nothing clinging to them, of course.

Against all probability, Illyra was Seeing.

"I stink of it, you mean," Walegrin stammered. "There was a problem over in Safe Haven. Some crazy newcomers fermenting cocoons in their courtyard. That's all."

Illyra gave a little shudder. The image vanished. She cocked her head to one shoulder. The image didn't return; but it had been a true Seeing, however much he wanted her to pretend it wasn't. "It's nothing to worry about," she assured him with an affectionate hug.

That was true. The little impulses that flashed across her mind weren't ominous. They were not always literally true, either—the S'danzo Sight often came wrapped in layers of meaning. Illyra might have let the vision go as both insignificant and obscure, but it meant something to her brother, and that had her curiosity aroused. It nagged at her throughout the meal; she was never more than half attentive in the conversation.

"I'm going to go after a crustade for dessert," she announced, knowing that she already had one secreted in her scrying chamber. She took her shawl and a copper half-bit from the pouch hanging by the door. "I'll be right back."

She was silhouetted in the sunset, then gone. The afterimage lingered in Walegrin's mind. Sunset. Sixthday. There wasn't a warm baker's oven in the Bazaar, nor anywhere else in Sanctuary. It took two days to braise a joint large enough to satisfy the men at her table. She never relied on last-minute inspirations or improvisations . . .

Walegrin followed her out the door and around to the back where the ropes across her scrying chamber dangled.

"Tell me what you See."

He took her completely by surprise. The cards flew from her hands. They scattered across the room, onto the floor, and into the powders she used for her essences, but three fell neatly on the table where she did her work.

Illyra blushed; she began to dissemble. Walegrin's features composed themselves into his interrogator's face and she abandoned the effort before a half-dozen words were out of her mouth.

"I was curious," she admitted.

"I'm curious myself. What did you See?"

"I told you what I Saw. You were surrounded by spider silk. It shimmered with all the colors of the rainbow—"

"What did it mean, Lyra? What did it mean?"

The seeress looked away and caught sight of the cards on the table.

The amashkiki, the spirits of the cards, supported her. Eagerly she ad-

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justed their alignment. "Here . . . The Lady of the Forest. The Lady of the Stones. Between them, the Fifth—"

"Ly-ra ... Do it right."

"No, no, this is right."

"It was an accident."

Illyra hunched her shoulders and thrust her jaw at her brother. "I do

not have accidents," she hissed.

Momentarily chastened, Walegrin allowed her to continue with her

explanation.

"I See good fortune, easily come by."

"Where? Where do you see that?" He prodded the cards. One Lady sat at a stone-weighted loom, the other was a spirit with cobweb wings, and the Fifth of Air was a scattering of petals floating away from a bouquet.

"All I see is something trapped between two women!"

"What do you need me for if you know everything? Go ahead, you tell

me what they mean,"

"Women surrounding me. Women weaving a web around me ... a trap. I don't see any 'good fortune*' in that."

Illyra squinted. The tip of her tongue poked through her pursed lips.

"I suppose . . ."* she agreed slowly. "I could See that. There is a woman in your life right now, and she is weaving something." She tapped her fingernail on the petals of the Fifth of Air. "But this is not an ill aspect."

In her mind Illyra reached for another card; she Saw, and began to

giggle.

"What? What's so bloody funny? Dammit, Illyra, this is my life you're laughing at, isn't it? You don't do this with your other querents, do you?"

Illyra shook her head and gradually regained her composure. He was right, of course. A S'danzo girl learned early not to laugh at her querents, regardless of their questions or her visions. Giggling ruined the mystery, and it was bad for business. She swallowed her laughter. "If you were one of my querents I would tell you that you must accommodate." She paused and swallowed again. "Yes, accommodate your good fortune."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The seeress lifted the edge of her shawl to cover the lower part of her face. "If a querent asked that, I would say: It will be made clear in time. Accommodate your fate, and you will find good fortune."

"And the women. What of the gods-be-damned women?"

"Woman. There is only one woman, Walegrin, I'm sure of that. I don't know about the woman. She is not here. These are not her cards. I cannot say if she will have good fortune or not."

The visionary spell was broken. The giddiness drained from Illyra's

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body- She sighed and began to collect her cards. Walegrin could feel the lightning charge dissipate.

"Accommodate," he repeated. "That word is supposed to have some especially profound meaning for me. You're telling me not to fight what happens, aren't you? Don't do anything at all. Don't get involved, don't care, don't worry. What happens, happens—"

Illyra stood up. "I didn't say that. I said accommodate your fate . . . learn to live with it."

"Same difference."

She gathered the last of the cards. The Seeing had become part of memory where it lost most of its power. Nothing was guaranteed; memory could change over time. "Same difference," she agreed. "Will you stay for the crustade?" She lifted the bowl from the high shelf where she had kept it safe from inquiring eyes and fingers.

Like most superstitious people, Walegrin lived in a world where the supernatural tended to confirm, rather than challenge, his prejudices. He was willing to reach an accommodation with his fate, if accommodation meant that Theudebourga, her problems and her silk, could be exiled from his mind without shame or guilt.

The crustade was calling to him. "I'll stay," he said, taking the heavy bowl. "Wouldn't want to see it go to waste."

The heavens had clouded over by the time Walegrin hauled himself back to the officer's quarters inside the palace. A light rain began to fall—its gentle rhythm on the shutters, not to mention the aftereffects of a huge meal, sent the commander into a dreamless sleep. Godsfearing folk rose early on Seventhday; everyone else slept as late as possible. Walegrin's recent promotion entitled him to lie in bed until sunset if he so desired. He was not pleased when someone came pounding on his door well before midday.

Stark naked and surly, Walegrin cracked the door and braced it against his leg. "This had better be important," he snarled.

The recruit trembled. He restarted his story twice before mustering enough wit to explain that everyone who'd eaten dinner at the garrison mess was huddled up at the latrines. The duty officer couldn't take two steps without retching and there were only a handful of men who could climb (he ladder to the watchtower).

"Shit."

"Yes, sir," the recruit agreed.

Walegrin let the door go. When he'd lived in a barracks with nothing but a chest to hold his worldly goods, he'd always known where everything was. Now that he had a square room to call his own, chaos reigned among his possessions. He found his breeches and shirt on the floor

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where he'd left them, but the sandals . . . Walegrin owned four of the ventilated boots, any two of which would make a satisfactory pair. One was usually visible, while the rest hid in the darkest corners where the commander suspected they consumed his wrist guards, which, at any rate, had disappeared completely. The Enlibar sword, at least, was where it belonged.

"Let's go," Walegrin said when he'd gotten the door latched behind him.

Physicians and mages were summoned to the privies where they decided that the epidemic had just about run its course. The afflicted were unimpressed, but Walegrin could see that most of them, while they'd be

useless for a day or so, were already recovering. Only two men needed sickbeds, and one of them had been sick for a week.

The cook was dragged from the kitchens. He insisted the flux couldn't be his fault; the meat was rotten before he cooked it.

"Why did you cook it, if you knew it was rotten?"

The cook said it wasn't his job to question the meat the stewards provided. He was a cook. He insisted he'd done his job well: after all, the men hadn't complained while they were eating.

Walegrin had him flogged and tied to a post by the stables where the recovering men could offer sympathy, suggestions, and the occasional clot of horse manure.

The cook had a point; he didn't purchase the meat. Walegrin spent the rest of the afternoon looking for the guilty steward. Shunted from corridor to corridor on a stream of insincere apologies, the garrison commander was unable to wring a confession from any of the palace flunkies.

"Somebody paid for a carcass of rotten meat," Walegrin fumed when, in frustration, he made his way to Molin's workroom. "Somebody's responsible. and somebody other than that half-idiot of a cook should be punished."

"Should, should, should," the Torch chided from his chair. "How many times must I explain to you that should doesn't work in a palace?"

"It ought to."

"Suffice to say, the problem's been taken care of."

Walegrin wasn't grateful to have his work done for him. "You knew about it?"

"Let's just say it wasn't a single carcass, and I, myself, spent the night circling my chamber pot and cursing the stewards."

Molin Torchholder was a powerful man in Sanctuary, but not because he had the ear of his god. Walegrin expressed his skepticism.

"It wasn't difficult. I sent Hoxa down to read the provisions receipts.

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One of the understewards is already under lock and key, and I've got the name of a place Downwind—"

"You might have let me know, my lord Molin."

Torchholder smiled pleasantly. "I couldn't find you." He pointed to his table; it was apparent that he did not feel up to standing or walking.

"There . . . Hoxa wrote it down for you. Take it as you leave."

Words could not adequately express Walegrin's feelings as he crumpled the vellum scrap into his pouch, and gestures would have gotten him hung. The sun was setting. He'd wasted the entire day; it was time to go on duty. Half the men didn't answer the roster call; dinner was predictably awful, then a squall blew up and settled into a steady rain. The only pleasant moment of the entire double-watch came when Wedemir announced that the raid on the Downwind abattoir had been a success. The men were drawing lots to see who would question the prisoners.

Wedemir lingered in the doorway. "Sir? About yesterday . . . ? The silk workers, remember? I used your name—"

Walegrin paused and remembered. "Don't worry .about it."

"Did you go to see them?"

The commander shook his head. "If there's ever another complaint. I thought about it, Lieutenant. Everything works out for the best. I can accommodate a silk worker or two."

Wedemir's eyes widened, then he left. For a moment Walegrin was tempted to call him back, but the moment and the temptation passed. The night dragged toward midnight when Thrusher, still looking seedy at the edges, hauled himself up the ladder.

"You sure, Thrush?"

"Yeah, the air'll do me good. Get your sleep while you can."

Walegrin wasn't especially tired, but, as Thrusher said, a soldier learned to grab sleep when he could. He was yawning when he reached the stone-dark landing outside his room. He reached for the latchstring; it wasn't dangling where it should have been. Walegrin swore he'd pulled the string through when he shut the door, but it wouldn't be the first time he'd forgotten. He was on his knees wiggling a brass pin through the latch-hole when the door opened.

The commander gaped at Theudebourga, and she hid a yawn behind her fingers.

"I must have fallen asleep."

The commander remained on his knees. "You - . . . ? What are you

doing here?"

"I have nothing else to give you." She looked away. She might have been blushing, it was hard to tell in the lamplight. "You've been so kind to us."

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"I have?" Walegrin got to his feet.

"When the Beysib came to get us this afternoon, they said that they were following your orders. In truth, I doubted you then, and feared for the worst as they loaded everything into a great cart. When they led us through the gates we thought we were being sent into exile. Dendorat was wild; they struck him on the head and lashed him to the cart. But they took us to a cottage and said we could pay the rent with finished silk."

Walegrin nodded, trying to recall what, exactly, Wedemir said before being assured that there was nothing to worry about.

Theudebourga did not notice his changing expression, "We haven't met Lady Kurrekai yet. Imagine, the cousin of Beysa Shupansea taking all of us under her wing. You must have been very persuasive ... I knew from that first moment on the wharf that you were not one to leave us to our fate."

"Theudebourga—"

"Berge. Call me Berge, it's easier on the ear and tongue." He didn't call her anything. She looked at him, at the shock and sourness on his face. "Dear gods—" She lunged for the stool where she had fallen asleep. Her workbag had fallen on its side, the drop-spindle had rolled across the floor. Frantically, she grabbed for both. The thread broke and the spindle rolled behind the chest. "What use has a man like you for a withered spinster?"

Walegrin heard that she was crying. He wanted her to stop. He wanted to tell her the truth, but his thoughts were whirling too fast to form the words he wanted to say. So Walegrin stood, blocking the doorway and feeling like an ox, while Theudebourga grew more shamed and hysterical.

"Please let me leave," she pleaded.

She had a death-grip on the sack. Wisps of unspun silk squeezed out and were tossed about on their breath. Walegrin felt them clinging to the stubble on his chin, to his eyebrows, and the tip of his nose. He became what Illyra had Seen. His thoughts froze around a single paradox: did the accommodation of good fortune lie in letting her stay, or letting her escape? What did he know about women anyway, except that the ones he got attracted to were no good for him?

Theudebourga hunched her shoulders and tried to sneak past. Her intentions were no match for Walegrin's reflexes—though the commander hadn't counted on having her so close he could feel her heartbeat.

"You don't have to leave." He lowered his arm. "You surprised me,

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that's all. It never occurred to me that the door would open one night and my woman would be there to greet me."

"Don't mock me."

"I'm not mocking you."

Walegrin pushed the door shut. Berge did not object-

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Robert Lynn Asprin

Without thinking, Hakiem took a long swallow of the sour, cheap wine

his tankard held. Normally, he would have winced at the bitter impact of the taste, but today it passed down his throat without notice.

Leave Sanctuary!

Though the very core of his being recoiled from the idea, fighting desperately to eject it from his mind, it remained foremost in his thoughts, clinging stubbornly like some malignant parasite feeding on his brain. It had been this way since his talk with the Beysa, hounding him until he retreated to the Vulgar Unicorn, returning to his old haunt like a wounded animal seeking refuge in its lair. Even here, however, surrounded by the familiar darkness and darker half-heard conversations, there was no escape from the dread pronouncement.

Leave Sanctuary!

Lifting his tankard again, he was surprised to find it was empty.

Was that his third ... or fourth? No matter. It wasn't enough, which was all that counted.

A brief nod at Abohorr was all that was necessary to obtain another. That notable's attentiveness was a tribute to Hakiem's rise in position and status, a rise he had never had cause to regret . . . until now.

Advisor to the Beysa, he thought with a grimace. At first it had seemed harmless, even desirable, to teach the ruler-in-exile the ways and thinking of her new home. Sympathy had grown into friendship, however, until he was regarded as her most trusted confidant . . . almost a surrogate father to the young girl stranded by circumstance in a foreign land. His duties had been light, and his rewards great. Then, without warning, this.

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Lost in thought, Hakiem barely noticed the arrival of his fresh tankard, though from habit he was aware of the bartender slipping more than was his due from the pile of small coins on the table. Rather than take the offender to task for his greed, he chose instead to review the event which had led to his current state of mental confusion.

Visits from the Beysa were common enough, and more often than not, involving subjects of a trivial nature. Usually, all that was required of him was to listen while she complained or emoted about some new discomfort or minor slight, venting the hurts or frustrations her position would not let her acknowledge publicly. Thus, he was unprepared for the direction their conversation took.

"I have news for you, old friend," Shupansea announced after their

normal exchange of pleasantries. "Both good and bad, I'm afraid."

Hakiem had already noticed that his royal visitor had seemed preoccupied and distracted, and was glad the cause was to be revealed without his having to draw it out of her.

"Tell me the bad news first, 0 Beysa," he said- "Then we can dispense with it quickly. If not, then perhaps the good news will cheer us both."

"Very well. The bad news is that I am about to lose one of my dearest and most trusted friends."

Hakiem noted that no name was mentioned, and wondered if the omission was accidental or deliberate.

"That is sad news indeed." He nodded, silently speculating on who it might be that they were discussing. "Friends are always hard to come by and impossible to replace."

"Still, the same news is good," the Beysa continued, "as it represents a promotion for that same friend ... a chance for me to express my appreciation with a long-overdue reward."

"So you rejoice for your friend's good fortune even though it represents a loss to you, personally. As I have said before, 0 Beysa, your

nobility of heart surpasses the nobility of your birth. I would wager that your friend has benefited from your friendship, however brief, just as I have, and will wish you well upon parting."

His comment was automatic, flowery politeness to fill his side of the conversation while he awaited further information. The effect of the words on Shupansea, however, was as profound as it was unexpected.

"Oh, I'm so glad you agree, Hakiem!" she cried, seizing his hand in an uncommon display of emotion, Beysib women being usually very self-conscious about touching males. "I was afraid you'd be upset."

"Upset? About what?" Startled by the turn of the conversation, he practically stammered out the question, though it was now painfully

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clear that he himself was the subject under discussion. "I . . . I'm afraid

I don't . . ."

"I'm sorry. I'm getting ahead of myself. It's so hard for me to remember court formalities when I'm talking to you."

She released his hand and stepped back, striking a regal pose almost mocking in its severity.

"Hakiem," she said in her solemn, court voice. "It is with great pleasure that we hereby appoint you Royal Emissary, our Trade Ambassador to the Glorious Home of Mother Bey . . . such as it is."

Hakiem could not have been more stunned if she had suddenly struck him.

"Ambassador? Me?"

"That's right." Shupansea grinned, abandoning her attempt at dignity. She was obviously delighted at her confidant's obvious surprise. "The appointment papers were just signed, and I raced the rumors through the palace so I could be the first to tell you.*"

"But, O Beysa, I have no qualifications! I'm no ambassador! What would I do in a foreign court? Tell them stories?"

"You'll do what the people of this town do best,*" the Beysa informed him firmly. "Haggle. I can guarantee you the royal opponents you'll be dealing with will present little challenge to you after the training you've had here in Sanctuary."

"But I'm just a storyteller. It takes more than fine clothes to make an aristocrat!"*

"That's what Kadakithis said . . . but he eventually came around to my way of thinking. It's just as well, too. The trade ship has been ready to sail for nearly a week while we argued about who the ambassador would be."

"Trade ship?"

The enormity of what was being proposed suddenly swirled up around Hakiem like a fog. Until now, he had been arguing theoretically about a preposterous idea. The mention of a ship, however, brought home the reality of what was being discussed.

"You mean I am to leave Sanctuary? Make a new home in a foreign land?"

"Well, you can't very well be a trade ambassador from here." The Beysa laughed. "Oh, I know it sounds frightening . . . but it's what I had to do when I came . . . What is it, Hakiem?"

The storyteller had suddenly collapsed into a chair, his face a mask of

despair.

"O Beysa ... I ... I can't do it.!"

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The smile slipped from the Beysa's face as she stiffened into a posture that had no trace of the mockery shown earlier.

"I don't recall giving you a choice," she said coldly, then softened instantly. "Oh, what's wrong, Hakiem? You've never refused me before."

"You've never asked me to leave Sanctuary before," he responded, shaking his head. "I'm not a young man . . . too old to learn new ways. I've had to change my life completely twice already. Once when ... I first came to Sanctuary, and again when I became your advisor. I cannot make such changes again. You see me as shrewd and wily, but that's only because I know this town and the people in it. Take me out of familiar surroundings, and . . ."

"I thought I'd find you here."

Prince Kadakithis was framed in the doorway.

"Well, let me add my congratulations to those you've already received, Hakiem." There was no effort to shake hands, but the prince's smile was warm and sincere.

"He doesn't want the position," Shupansea blurted.

"Oh?" The smile faded as Kadakithis cocked an eyebrow at the storyteller. "I should think you'd find it an honor, Hakiem . . . not to mention a noticeable improvement in your station . . . and income."

"My place is here in Sanctuary," Hakiem insisted stubbornly, his desperation making him bold in the face of royalty. "From what I understand, you yourself have questioned my effectiveness in such an assignment."

"You see?" Shupansea cried in exasperation. "I try to reward his service and do him a favor at the same time, and this is the thanks I get!"

"Highness . . ." Hakiem began, but the prince cut him short.

"I'm sure we can reach some kind of an agreement here," he said soothingly. "Let me talk with our new ambassador for a moment."

"All right."

"Alone, if you don't mind, dear."

"But ... Oh, all right!"

The Beysa swept angrily from the room, leaving an uncomfortable silence in her wake.

"There's been a lot of water under the bridge since we first met, hasn't there, storyteller?" the prince said, making a show of inspecting the room's decor.

"That there has. Highness."

Hakiem was wary of this private audience, but he had to admit the prince had changed since that dusty afternoon he had tossed a poor storyteller a few pieces of gold- The regal brow was marked with worry lines that had not been there when he'd first arrived in Sanctuary, but he

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spoke and moved with a new sureness and confidence that had also been lacking in those early days.

"I'll admit I opposed the idea of your appointment when Shupansea first proposed it," the prince continued, "but after giving it considerable

thought, apart from my fiancée's insistence, I arrived at the conclusion that you were not only acceptable for the post, but that there was no one better qualified for the position."

"Highness?"

The storyteller was taken aback at this revelation.

"Think about it, Hakiem," the prince said earnestly, turning to gaze directly at his subject. "In your capacity as the Beysa's advisor, you have made yourself familiar with the Beysib culture and people, both the high and the low. In fact, you speak their language better than any non-Beysib in the town or the court."

He paused while the ghost of a smile flitted across his face.

"While you may not have formal experience as an ambassador, your years as a storyteller will serve you well, as the bulk of diplomacy is making the untrue or unlikely sound plausible, if not desirable. These things count in your favor, but there are two points that outweigh all others.

"First, you are honest and loyal."

The prince quickly held up a hand to restrain the storyteller's protests.

"Oh, I know you folk from Sanctuary pride yourselves on deception and shady dealings . . . which will also help you as an ambassador . . . and I have no doubts that you would have no compunctions about padding a deal or slitting a throat if you set your mind to it, but in your current position you've had many opportunities to betray the Beysa for spite or personal gain, yet to my knowledge you have not taken advantage of any of them. To my mind, that makes you trustworthy . . . notably more so than many of the advisors I've had assigned to me or appointed myself-

"Even more important, however, is the unmistakable fact that you love this town. While your feelings for Shupansea or myself might wax and wan, I cannot imagine your knowingly doing anything or agreeing to anything that would not be in Sanctuary's best interest.

"It may seem ironic or contradictory, but I firmly believe that you can best serve the interests of this town by leaving it ... by being our eyes and ears, our watchdog, if you will, in the Beysib court during this crucial period. Will you do that for me ... or better yet, for Sanctuary, storyteller?"

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.iakiem grimaced into his wine at the memory.

Do it for Sanctuary.

If the prince ever decided to abandon his royal calling, there was a real future for him as a swindler or confidence man. While the request may have had the appearance of free will, there was really only one answer that could be given. Hakiem had had no more choice than a member of an audience having a conjuror "force" a specific card on him for the purposes of a trick or illusion.

Of course, the prince could have simply ordered him into service. In that case, Hakiem would have had the choice of leaving Sanctuary as an honored ambassador, or leaving it as a fugitive of the prince's wrath. It would seem, however, that Kadakithis had learned the value of a willing volunteer . . . however unwilling that volunteer might be in reality.

Absently, Hakiem noted the contradictory, circular nature of that observation as a gauge of the effects the wine was having on him, and was not displeased at his progress.

"May I join you, old man? ... Or are you too busy with the 'preparations' for your voyage to spare me a few of the millions of words you spend so freely on others?"

Hakiem gaped with astonishment, uncharacteristically at a loss for

words. None seemed required, however, as his visitor pulled up a chair and settled at the table like some huge black bird coming to roost.

"Jubal?" the storyteller managed at last, blurting out the question as if requiring confirmation for what his eyes already told him. "Are you . . . I mean, is this wise?"

He tore his gaze free to glance nervously about the tavern's dim interior, but no one seemed to be taking notice of the figure in their midst.

"I've found that I've been out of view long enough that no one remembers what I look like." Sanctuary's crime lord smiled without humor.

"Especially with the 'changes' I've undergone since I was a 'public figure.* If anything, a disguise would draw attention to me rather than avert it ... especially in the Vulgar Unicorn. Like this, I'm just another old man . . . like yourself."

While it appeared Jubal was correct in his analysis, Hakiem nonetheless felt distinctly uncomfortable . . . enough so to banish any effects of his earlier drinking. As long as they had known each other . . . actually, as long as Hakiem had been in Sanctuary . . . Jubal had maintained an air of secrecy about himself. Originally, he would not have left his mansion without a cloak and one of the blue hawk masks to disguise his features, and after the aging caused by the spell hired to help him heal from the wounds suffered during the Stepsons' raid on his holdings, he

had not appeared in public at all. Ergo, sitting next to an ex-slaver in the

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Vulgar Unicorn, bereft of any effort to mask his identity, had Hakiem feeling that he was in close proximity to a target on one of the military's firing ranges.

"What are you doing here?"

"I've heard about your new assignment," Jubal said, his dark lips tightening into a flat smile. "Good news travels slower than bad in this town, but it still travels."

"I already gathered that from your first comments. What I want to know is why it drew you into the open. Forgive me if I find it hard to believe that you're here solely to wish me safe voyage, but in the past the only times you've sought me out is when it somehow benefited you or your operations. Of what import is my appointment to you?"

The crime lord gave a short bark of laughter and shook his head.

"Your time in court has certainly sharpened your tongue, old man, but then I guess neither of us has ever had much tolerance for small talk when it came to business. Very well, I'll come straight to the point."

He shot a quick glance around the room, then leaned forward, lowering his voice-

"I have a proposition for you. Simply put, I want to accompany you on your new assignment."

"That's absurd!"

The words slipped out before Hakiem had a chance to consider them. He did, however, have time to consider Jubal's sudden scowl at their impact.

"What's absurd about it?" the ex-slaver demanded harshly. "Is my company so repellent to you, or my advice so worthless that . . ."

"No!" the storyteller interrupted hastily. "I meant you already have everything here in Sanctuary . . . money, power . . . what possible reason could you have for even considering giving it all up to travel to a foreign land, one where you are unknown and would have to start building again from nothing? rAof's what I meant was absurd . . . - the whole idea's preposterous."

He gave a bitter snort, reaching for his tankard.

"It's preposterous for anybody to willingly give up their life ... to

gamble everything on the unknown. If/had a choice . . . but I don't. I have to go ... for the prince, for the Beysa, for Sanctuary, What's the comfort of one old storyteller compared to that?"

"It depends on how highly you value what you're leaving," Jubal said easily, ignoring Hakiem's self-pitying comments. "It's strange that you should think I have everything here, but then you've always taken for granted the one thing that's always eluded me."

"And that is ... ?" Hakiem urged, curious in spite of himself.

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"Respect." The crime lord shrugged. "I thought I had it when I won my freedom from the gladiator arena, only to find polite society viewed me as little better than an animal. I couldn't find work that would earn me the kind of money necessary for the kind of life-style I aspired to, so I took to stealing it."

"And earned a certain type of respect in the process." The storyteller smiled.

Jubal frowned at him. "Don't patronize me, Hakiem," he said. "It ill becomes you. I have never been respected in this town. Feared, to be sure, but we both know that's different than being respected. You can't buy respect, or force it at sword point. You have to earn it."

"So why not earn it here?" Hakiem frowned.

"Do you think I haven't tried?" The ex-slaver grimaced. "The trouble here is that too many people know me of old, and that knowledge makes them assume the worst. I'll tell you, just as an example, I've been trying for months to get an audience with your prince."

"Kadakithis? What business could you have with him?"

Jubal shot a glance around, then leaned closer, lowering his voice.

"I was going to offer him the services of my intelligence network. It's worked well enough for my criminal activities in the past, and I thought he might appreciate its value as an aid for governing this town."

"And he refused?" Hakiem frowned. "That doesn't sound like the prince."

"I never got to see him," the crime lord said. "It seems the consensus among those who control the prince's schedule is that the only way I will see him is if he presides at my trial, I tried more roundabout methods, applying leverage to a certain . . . 'friend' of the prince's who is unknown to most, but even there I was thwarted. Everyone believes it's better to buy me off than to go along with whatever I suggest or request."

It's become clear to me that my organization will be more effective and be more acceptable if I disassociate myself from it- That's why I'm interested in accompanying you."

It occurred to the storyteller that, by employing dubious methods in his efforts to gain respectability, Jubal was proving everything his enemies believed about him. He also realized, however, that the ex-slaver had a quick temper, and that it would be wisest not to argue with him. Prematurely aged or not, the ex-gadiator was a force to be reckoned with when it came to disputes of a violent nature.

"Do you expect it will be any easier to find respect in the Beysib Empire, surrounded by a people who are physically different than us?" he asked, tactfully shifting the focus of the conversation.

"Who knows?" Jubal shrugged. "It can't be any worse than here. At

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least there I won't be carrying my past around my neck like a leper's bell. It will be a fresh start for me in a land where no one knows or cares anything about what I've been or done before."

"Of course, that also means they have no idea of what to guard against either," Hakiem observed drily.

The slaver flashed a quick grin in response.

"A land of opportunity, no matter how you look at it."

"Not if those opportunities cause problems for the ambassador," the storyteller warned. "I can't have a ... Excuse me, what capacity were you proposing you accompany me in, anyway?"

"I had been thinking of traveling as your personal manservant," Jubal said, "but I'm open to other suggestions. I imagine that, whatever my official capacity, I will be serving as a confidential advisor to you."

Hakiem's eyebrows shot up.

"Advisor? Excuse me, but I didn't think you knew any more about the Beysib than I do."

"Think again, old man." The crime lord chuckled darkly. "Your battlefield of choice is the courts with carefully chosen words and arguments. My arena is the back alleys, gathering information from the sorts either ignored or hunted by your aristocrats. If anyone, you should know the value of a bit of street-level information when operating in a new town."

The storyteller stared thoughtfully, seriously considering Jubal's pro-

posal for the first time. It was true that the crime lord would be a valuable ally . . . especially if none of the Beysib knew to watch or suspect what appeared to be an aged servant. Still, it was hard to believe Jubal was willing to take part in such a venture, much less accept a role subservient to Hakiem.

As if sensing the storyteller's hesitation, the ex-slaver pressed on.

"There's another thing which can make me a priceless secret weapon, old man."

"And that is ... ?"

Jubal leaned forward, grinning smugly as he whispered.

"I've built an immunity to the bite of those snakes the Beysib women favor so."

"You have?" Hakiem's eyebrows shot up. "I didn't know that was possible . . . except for those who were conditioned from birth, that is."

"It's a secret that cost me dear." The crime lord smiled. "Far dearer than obtaining the solvent for the latest witches' brew of glue going round town. More important, I'm willing to share that secret with you if you'll include me in your plans."

"Me? I really don't think that's necessary . . . though I appreciate

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the offer. I've gotten used to having the snakes around, and they're harmless as long as you give them lots of room."

Jubal stared at him for a few moments, then shook his head ruefully.

"I don't know if it's the wine or your time in court that's clouded your thinking, old man. Hasn't it ever occurred to you that those snakes are perfect tools for murder?"

"You mean assassination? But I'll be an ambassador. They wouldn't dare!"

"I wouldn't bet my life on that, if I were you," the ex-slaver snorted.

"You're going to be trying to establish trade with the Beysib Empire, right? That means you're going to be stepping on someone's livelihood. Whether you're providing better or cheaper goods, you'll be diverting money to Sanctuary that would normally go to someone else, which is going to make that someone your mortal enemy. They may not be able to attack you openly, but it's always possible to arrange a convenient 'accident.' The Beysib aren't that different from us."

It had not occurred to Hakiem that there was potential danger in his mission, yet Jubal's words had the irrefutable ring of truth to them. Strangely enough, however, rather than adding to his reluctance, the possibility of an attack on Sanctuary's trade ambassador aroused in him an angry indignation which had him looking forward to the mission for the first time since it had been proposed.

If some of the Beysib thought they could block trade with Sanctuary by disposing of some court fop of an ambassador, they were in for a rude surprise.

Fast on the heels of this thought, of course, was an added awareness of the desirability of Jubal's company on this assignment.

"Well, how about it, old man?" the crime lord said, catching the change in the storyteller's attitude. "Do we have a deal?"

"Possibly," Hakiem responded warily. "At the very least, your idea is interesting enough to discuss further . . . perhaps in more private surroundings?"

"Very well then, let's go," Jubal announced, rising to his feet. "Time is short, both for decisions and planning. Tell me ... I assume there will be some sort of bodyguard assigned to you . . . have you been offered your choice for that position?"

"It was offered," the storyteller admitted, also rising, "but I really don't have a preference."

"You might want to reconsider that."

A ghost of a smile flitted across Hakiem's face.

"I really don't think I can get you approved in that capacity, Jubal."

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"I wasn't thinking of myself . . . you don't have to tell me how unacceptable I am to the prince. No, I was thinking about Zaibar."

"Zaibar?"

"One of the original Hell-hounds that arrived with the prince," Jubal explained- "We've had - . . . dealings together in the past, and I'd trust him to guard my back . . . assuming, of course, he felt it was within his rather narrow concept of duty. Besides, like me, there's nothing left in Sanctuary for him now, and he might welcome the assignment."

Hakiem was listening with only half an ear.

As Jubal spoke, the storyteller was looking around the Vulgar Uni-

corn, trying to permanently brand every detail in his mind. It had suddenly occurred to him that this might be the last time he ever saw the place, the scene of the start and/or ending to so many stories over the past years. Even if he returned to Sanctuary, this tavern, as well as the town itself, would be different. As he knew all too well, each new beginning is also an ending, and on the road of life, there is no turning back.