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Phoenix

by Steven Brust

The Adventures of Vlad Taltos

JHEREG

YENDI

TECKLA

TALTOS

PHOENIX

ATHYRA

This one's for Pam and David

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PROLOGUE

ALL THE TIME people say to me, “Vlad, how do you do it? How come you're so good at killing people? What's your secret?” I tell them, “There is no secret. It's like anything else. Some guys plaster walls, some guys make shoes, I kill people. You just gotta learn the trade and practice until you're good at it.”

The last time I killed somebody was right around the time of the Easterners' uprising, in the month of the Athyra in 234 PI, and the month of the Phoenix in 235. I wasn't all that involved in the uprising directly; to be honest, I was just about the only one around who didn't see it coming, what with the increased number of Phoenix Guards on the street, mass meetings even in my neighborhood, and whatnot. But that's when it occurred, and, for those of you who want to hear what happens when you set out to kill somebody for pay, well, here it is.

ONE

Technical Considerations

Lesson One

CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS

MAYBE IT'S JUST me, but it seems like when things are going wrong—your wife is ready to leave you, all of your notions about yourself and the world are getting turned around, everything you trusted is becoming questionable—there's nothing like having someone try to kill you to take your mind off your problems.

I was in an ugly, one-story wood-frame building in South Adrilankha. Whoever was trying to kill me was a better sorcerer than me. I was in the cellar, squatting behind the remains of a brick wall, just fifteen feet from the foot of the stairs. If I stuck my head out the door again, it might well get blasted off. I intended to call for reinforcements just as soon as I could. I also intended to teleport out of there just as soon as I could. It didn't look like I'd be able to do either one any time soon.

But I was not helpless. At just such times as these, a witch may always take comfort in his familiar. Mine is a jhereg—a small, poisonous flying reptile whose mind is psychically linked to my own, and who is, moreover, brave, loyal, trustworthy—

“If you think I'm going out there, boss, you're crazy.”

Okay, next idea.

I raised as good a protection spell as I could (not very), then took a brace of throwing knives from inside my cloak, my rapier from its scabbard, and a deep breath from the clammy basement air. I leapt out to my left, rolling, coming to my knee, throwing all three knives at the same time (hitting nothing, of course; that wasn't the point), and rolling again. I was now well out of the line of sight of the stairway—both the source of the attack and the one path to freedom. Life, I've found, is often like that. Loiosh flapped over and joined me.

Things sizzled in the air. Destructive things, but I think meant only to let me know the sorcerer was still there. It wasn't like I'd forgotten. I cleared my throat. “Can we negotiate?”

The masonry of the wall before me began to crumble away. I did a quick counterspell and held myself answered.

“All right, Loiosh, any bright ideas?”

“Ask them to surrender, boss.”

“Them?”

“I saw three.”

“Ah. Well, any other ideas?”

“You’ve tried asking your secretary to send help?”

“I can’t reach him.”

“How about Morrolan?”

“I tried already.”

“Alieria? Sethra?”

“The same.”

“I don’t like that, boss. It’s one thing for Kragar and Melestav to be tied up, but—”

“I know.”

“Could they be blocking psionics, as well as teleportation?”

“Hmmm. I hadn’t thought of that. I wonder if it’s possib—” Our chat was interrupted by a rain of sharp objects, sorcerously sent around the corner behind which I hid. I wished fervently that I were a better sorcerer, but I managed a block, while letting Spellbreaker, eighteen inches of golden chain, slip down into my left hand. I felt myself becoming angry.

“Careful, boss. Don’t—”

“I know. Tell me something, Loiosh: Who are they? It can’t be Easterners, because they’re using sorcery. It can’t be the Empire, because the Empire doesn’t ambush people. It can’t be the Organization, because they don’t do this clumsy, complicated nonsense, they just kill you. So who is it?”

“Don’t know, boss.”

“Maybe I’ll take a longer look.”

“Don’t do anything foolish.”

I made a rude comment to that. I was seriously upset by this time, and I was bloody well going to do something, stupid or not. I set Spellbreaker spinning and hefted my blade. I felt my teeth grinding. I sent up a prayer to Verra, the Demon Goddess, and prepared to meet my attackers.

Then something unusual happened.

My prayer was answered.

It wasn't like I'd never seen her before. I had once travelled several thousand miles through supernatural horrors and the realm of dead men just to bid her good-day.

And, while my grandfather spoke of her with reverence and awe, Dragaerans spoke of her and her ilk like I spoke about my laundry.

What I'm getting at is that there was never any doubt about her real, corporeal existence; it's just that although it was my habit to utter a short prayer to her before doing anything especially dangerous or foolhardy, nothing like this had ever happened before.

Well, I take that back. There might have been once when—no, it couldn't have been.

Never mind. Different story.

In any case, I found myself abruptly elsewhere, with no feeling of having moved and none of the discomfort that we Easterners, that is, humans, feel when teleporting. I was in a corridor of roughly the dimensions of the dining hall of Castle Black. All of it white. Spotless. The ceiling must have been a hundred feet above me, and the walls were at least forty feet apart, with white pillars in front of them, perhaps twenty feet between each. Perhaps. It may be that my senses were confused by the pure whiteness of everything. Or it may be that everything reported by my senses was meaningless

in that place. There was no end to the hallway in either direction. The air was slightly cool, but not uncomfortable. There was no sound except my own breathing, and that peculiar sensation you have when you don't know whether you're hearing your heart beat or feeling it.

Loiosh was stunned into silence. This does not happen every day. My first reaction, in the initial seconds after my arrival, was that I was the victim of a massive illusion perpetrated by those who had been trying to kill me. But that didn't really hold up, because, if they could do that, they could have shined me, which they clearly wanted to do.

I noticed a black cat at my feet, looking up at me. It meowed, then began walking purposefully down the hall in the direction I was facing. All right, so maybe I'm nuts, but it seems to me that if you're in big trouble, and you pray to your goddess, and then suddenly you're someplace you've never been before, and there's a black cat in front of you and it starts walking, you follow it. I followed it. My footsteps echoed very loudly, which was oddly reassuring.

I sheathed my rapier as I walked, because the Demon Goddess might take it amiss.

The hall continued straight, and the far end was obscured in a fine mist that gave way before me. It was probably illusory. The cat stayed right at the edge of it, almost disappearing into it.

Loiosh said, "*Boss, are we about to meet her?*"

I said, "*It seems likely.*"

"*Oh.*"

"*You've met before—*"

"*I remember, boss.*"

The cat actually vanished into the mists, which now remained in place. Another ten or so paces and I could no longer see the walls. The air was suddenly colder and felt a great deal like the basement I'd just escaped. Doors appeared, caught in the act of opening, very slowly, theatrically. They were twice my height and had carvings on them, white on white. It seemed a bit, well, silly to be having both of those doors ponderously open themselves to a width several times what I needed. It also left me not knowing whether to wait until they finished opening or to go inside as soon as I could. I stood there, feeling ridiculous, until I could see. More mist. I sighed, shrugged, and passed within.

It would be hard to consider the place a room—it was more like a courtyard with a floor and a ceiling. Ten or fifteen minutes had fallen behind me since I'd arrived at that place. Loioosh said nothing, but I could feel his tension from the grip of his talons on my shoulder.

She was seated on a white throne set on a pedestal, and she was as I remembered her, only more so. Very tall, a face that was somehow indefinably alien, yet hard to look at long enough to really get the details. Each finger had an extra joint on it. Her gown was white, her skin and hair very dark. She seemed to be the only thing in the room, and perhaps she was.

She stood as I approached, then came down from the pedestal. I stopped perhaps ten feet away from her, unsure what sort of obeisances to make, if any. She didn't appear to mind, however. Her voice was low and even, and faintly melodic, and seemed to contain a hint of its own echo. She said, “You called to me.” I cleared my throat. “I was in trouble.”

“Yes. It has been some time since we've seen each other.”

“Yes.” I cleared my throat again. Loiosh was silent. Was I supposed to say, “So how's it been going?” What does one say to one's patron deity?

She said, “Come with me,” and led me out through the mist. We stepped into a smaller room, all dark browns, where the chairs were comfortable and there was a fire crackling away and spitting at the hearth. I allowed her to sit first, then we sat like two old friends reminiscing on battles and bottles past. She said, “There is something you could do for me.”

“Ah,” I said. “That explains it.”

“Explains what?”

“I couldn't figure out why a group of sorcerers would be suddenly attacking me in a basement in South Adrilankha.”

“And now you think you know?”

“I have an idea.”

“What were you doing in this basement?”

I wondered briefly just how much of one's personal life one ought to discuss with one's god, then I said, “It has to do with marital problems.” A look of something like amusement flicked over her features, followed by one of inquiry. I said, “My wife has gotten it into her head to join this group of peasant rebels—”

“I know.”

I almost asked how, but swallowed it. “Yes. Well, it's complicated, but I ended up, a few weeks ago, purchasing the Organization interests in South Adrilankha—where the humans live.”

“Yes.”

“I've been trying to clean it up. You know, cut down on the ugliest sorts of things while still leaving it profitable.”

“This does not sound easy.”

I shrugged. “It keeps me out of trouble.”

“Does it?”

“Well, perhaps not entirely.”

“But,” she prompted, “the basement?”

“I was looking into that house as a possible office for that area. It was spur-of-the-moment, really; I saw the 'For Rent' sign as I was walking by on other business—”

“Without bodyguards?”

“My other business was seeing my grandfather. I don't take bodyguards everywhere I go.” This was true; I felt that as long as my movements didn't become predictable, I should be safe.

“Perhaps this was a mistake.”

“Maybe. But you didn't actually have them kill me, just frighten me.”

“So you think I arranged it?”

“Yes.”

“Why would I do such a thing?”

“Well, according to some of my sources, you are unable to bring mortals to you or speak with them directly unless they call to you.”

“You don't seem angry about it.”

“Anger would be futile, wouldn't it?”

“Well, yes, but aren't you accustomed to futile anger?”

I felt something like a dry chuckle attempt to escape my throat. I suppressed it and said, “I'm working on that.”

She nodded, fixing me with eyes that I suddenly noticed were pale yellow. Very strange. I stared back.

“You know, boss, I'm not sure I like her.”

“Yeah.”

“So,” I said, “now that you've got me, what do you want?”

“Only what you do best,” she said with a small smile.

I considered this. “You want someone killed?” I’m not normally this direct, but I still wasn’t sure how to speak to the goddess. I said, “I, uh, charge extra for gods.”

The smile remained fixed on her face. “Don’t worry,” she said. “I don’t want you to kill a god. Only a king.”

“Oh, well,” I said. “No problem, then.”

“Good.”

I said, “Goddess—”

“Naturally, you will be paid.”

“Goddess—”

“You will have to do without some of your usual resources, I’m afraid, but—”

“Goddess.”

“Yes?”

“How did you come to be called ‘Demon Goddess,’ anyway?”

She smiled at me, but gave no other answer.

“So tell me about the job.”

“There is an island to the west of the Empire. It is called Greenaere.”

“I know of it. Between Northport and Elde, right?”

“That is correct. There are, perhaps, four hundred thousand people living there. Many are fishermen. There are also orchards of fruit for trade to the mainland, and there is some supply of gemstones, which they also trade.”

“Are there Dragaerans?”

“Yes. But they are not imperial subjects. They have no House, so none of them have a link to the Orb. They have a King. It is necessary that he die.”

“Why don't you just kill him, then?”

“I have no means of appearing there. The entire island is protected from sorcery, and this protection also prevents me from manifesting myself there.”

“Why?”

“You don't have to know.”

“Oh.”

“And remember that, while you're there, you will be unable to call upon your link to the Orb.”

“Why is that?”

“You don't need to know.”

“I see. Well, I rarely use sorcery in any case.”

“I know. That is one reason I want you to do this. Will you?”

I was briefly tempted to ask why, but that was none of my business. Speaking of business, however—

“What's the offer?”

I admit I said this with a touch of irony. I mean, what was I going to do if she didn't want to pay me? Refuse the job? But she said,

“What do you usually get?”

“I've never assassinated a King before. Let's call it ten thousand Imperials.”

“There are other things I could do for you instead.”

“No, thanks. I've heard too many stories about people getting what they wish for. The money will be fine.”

“Very well. So you will do it?”

“Sure,” I said. “I've got nothing pressing going on just at the moment.”

“Good,” said the Demon Goddess.

“Is there anything I should know?”

“The King's name is Haro.”

“You want him non-revivifiable, I assume?”

“They have no link to the Orb.”

“Ah. So that shouldn't be a problem. Ummrh, Goddess?”

“Yes?”

“Why me?”

“Why, Vlad,” she said, and it was odd to have her call me by my first name. “It is your profession, is it not?”

I sighed. “And here I'd been thinking of getting out of the business.”

“Perhaps,” she said, “not quite yet.” She smiled into my eyes, and her eyes seemed to spin, and then I was once more in the same basement in South Adrilankha. I waited, but there was no sound. I poked my head out quickly, then for a longer time, then I stepped over, picked up my three throwing knives, and walked up the stairs and out of the house. I saw no sign of anyone.

“Melestav? I told you to send Kragar in.”

“I already did, boss.”

“Then where—? Never mind.” “Say, Kragar.”

“Hmmm?”

“I'm being called out of town for a while.”

“How long?”

“Not sure. A week or two, anyway.”

“All right. I can take care of things here.”

“Good. And keep tabs on our old friend, Herth.”

“Think he might decide to take a shot at you?”

“What do you think?”

“It's possible.”

“Right. And I need a teleport for tomorrow afternoon.”

“Where to?”

“Northport.”

“What's up?”

“Nothing special. I'll tell you about it when I get back.”

“I'll just wait to hear who dies in Northport.”

“Funny. Actually, though, it isn't Northport, it's Greenaere. What do you know about it?”

“Not much. An island kingdom, not part of the Empire.”

“Right. Find out what you can.”

“All right. What sorts of things?”

“Size, location of the capital city that kind of stuff. Maps would be good, both of the island and of the capital city.”

“That shouldn't take long. I'll have it by this evening.”

“Good. And I don't want anyone to know you're after the information. This job might cause a stir and I don't want to be attached to it.”

“Okay. What about South Adrilankha?”

“What about it?”

“Any special instructions?”

“No. You know what I've been doing; keep it going. No need to rush anything.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

I climbed the stairs to my flat slowly, unaccountably feeling like an old man. Loiosh flew over and began necking (quite literally) with his mate, Rocza. Cawti was wearing green today, with a red scarf around her neck that highlighted the few, almost invisible freckles on her nose. Her long brown hair was down and only haphazardly brushed, an effect I rather like. She put down her book, one of

Paarfi's "histories," and greeted me without coolness, but without the pretense of great warmth, either. "How was your day?" I asked her.

"All right," she said. What could she say? I wasn't terribly interested in the details of her activities with Kelly and his band of rebels, or nuts, or whatever they were. She said, "Yours?"

"Interesting. I saw Noish-pa."

She smiled for the first time. If we had anything at all in common at that point, it was our love for my grandfather. "What did he say?"

"He's worried about us."

"He believes in family."

"So do I. It's inherited, I suspect."

She smiled again. I could die for that smile. "We should speak to Alera. Perhaps she's isolated the gene." Then the smile was gone, leaving me looking at the lips that had held it. I looked into her eyes. I always used to look into her eyes when we made love. The moment stretched, and I looked away, sat down facing her. I said, "What are we going to do?" My voice was almost a whisper; you'd never know we had already had this conversation, in various forms, several times.

"I don't know, Vladimir. I do love you, but there's so much between us now."

"I could leave the Organization," I said. This wasn't the first time I'd said that.

"Not until and unless you want to for your own reasons, not because I disapprove." It wasn't the first time she'd said that, either. It was ironic, too; she'd once been part of one of the most feared teams of assassins ever to haunt the alleys of Adrilankha.

We were silent for a while, while I tried to decide how to tell her about the rest of the day's events. Finally I said, "I'm going to be leaving for a while."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. A job. Out of town. Across the great salt sea. Out past the horizon. To sail beyond the—"

"When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure. Not more than a week or two, I hope."

"Write when you find work," she said.

Lesson Two

TRANSPORTATION

I can't tell you much about Northport (which ought to have been called Westport, but never mind) because I didn't really see it. I saw the area near the waterfront, which compared pretty poorly to the waterfront of Adrilankha. It was dirtier and emptier, with fewer inns and more derelicts. It occurred to me in the first few minutes, before I'd even recovered from the teleport that this was because Adrilankha was still a busy port, whereas Northport had never recovered from Adron's Disaster and the Interregnum.

Yet there were, once or twice a day, ships that left for Elde or returned from there, as well as a few that went up and down the coast. Of the ships leaving for Elde, many stopped at Greenaere, which was more or less on the way, taking tides and winds into account. (Personally I knew nothing about tides or winds, but as I also knew almost nothing about where these islands could be found, I had no trouble believing what I was told.)

In any case, I located a ship in less than an hour and had only a few hours' wait. I had arrived in the early afternoon. We weighed anchor just before dusk.

I sometimes wonder if sailors don't get lessons in how to do strange and confusing things, just to impress the rest of us. There were ten of them, pulling on ropes, tying things, untying things, setting boxes down, and striding purposefully along the deck. The captain introduced herself as Baroness Mul-something-or-other-inics, but the name I caught was Trice, when they didn't call her "Captain." She was stocky for a Dragaeran, with a pinched-in

face and an agitated manner. The only other officer was named Yinta, who had a long nose over a wide mouth and always looked like she was half asleep.

The captain welcomed me aboard with no great enthusiasm and a gentle request to “keep your arse out of our way, okay, Whiskers?” Loiosh, riding on my shoulder, generated more interest but no comments. Just as well. The ship was one of those called a “skip”; intended, I'm told, for short ocean jaunts. She was about sixty feet long, and had one mast with two square sails, one with a little triangular sail in front, and a third holding a slightly larger square one in back. I settled down on the deck between a couple of large barrels that smelled of wine. The wind made nice snapping sounds on the sails as they were secured, at which time some ropes were undone and we were pushed away from the dock by a couple of shore hands wielding poles I couldn't have lifted. Shore hands, crew, and officers were all of the House of the Orca. The mast held a flag which showed an orca and a spear and what looked like the tower of a castle or fort.

Before leaving, I had been given a charm against seasickness. I touched it now and was glad it was there. The boat went up and down, although, frankly, not as much as I'd been afraid it would.

“I've never been on one of these before, Loiosh.”

“Me, neither, boss. Looks like fun.”

“I hope so.”

“Better than basements in South Adrilankha.”

“I hope so.”

In the setting sun, I saw the edge of the harbor. There was more activity among the sailors, and then we were in the open sea. I touched the charm again, wondering if I'd be able to sleep. I made

myself as comfortable as I could and tried to think cheery thoughts.

When I think of the House of the Orca, I mostly think of the younger ones, say a hundred or a hundred and fifty years old, and mostly male. When I was young I'd run into groups of them, hanging around near my father's restaurant being tough and annoying passersby; especially Easterners and especially me. I'd always wondered why it was Orca who did that. Was it just that they spent so much time alone while their family was out on the seas? Had it something to do with the orca itself, swimming around, often in packs, killing anything smaller than itself? Now I know: It was because they ate so much salted kethna.

Please understand, I don't dislike salted kethna. It's tough and rather plain, yes, but not inherently unpleasant. But as I sat in my little box on the Chorba's Pride, huddled against the cold morning breeze, and was handed a couple of slabs with a piece of flatbread and a cup of water, I realized that they must eat a great deal of it, and that, well, this could do things to a person. It isn't their fault. The wind was in my face the next morning as I looked forward, making me wonder how the winds could propel the ship, but I didn't ask. No one seemed especially friendly. I shared the salted kethna with Loioosh, who liked it more than I did. I didn't think about what I was going to do, because there would be no point in doing so. I didn't know enough yet, and empty speculation can lead to preconceptions, which can lead to errors. Instead I studied the water, which was green, and listened to the waves lapping on the sides of the ship and to the conversation of the sailors around me. They swore more than Dragons, although with less imagination. The man who'd delivered the food stood next to me, staring out

into the sea, chewing on his own. I was the last to be fed, apparently. I studied his face. It was old and wrinkled, with eyes very deep set and light blue, which is unusual in a Dragaeran of any kind. He studied the sea with a detached interest, as if communing with it.

I said, "Thanks for the food." He grunted, his eyes not leaving the sea. I said, "Looking for something in particular?"

"No," he said in the clipped accent of the eastern regions of the Empire, making it sound like "new."

There is, indeed, a steady rocking motion to a ship, not unlike my own experience with horses (which I won't detail, if it's all the same to you). But, within the steady motion, no two actions of the ship are precisely the same. I studied the ocean with my companion for a while and said, "It never stops, does it?"

He looked at me for the first time, but I couldn't read his expression. He turned back to the sea and said, "No, she never stops. She's always the same, and she's always moving. I never get tired of watching her." He nodded to me and moved back toward the rear of the ship. The stern, they call it.

Off to the left, the side I was on, a pair of orca surfaced for a moment, then dived. I kept watching, and it happened again, somewhat closer, then yet a third time. They were sleek and graceful; proud. They were very beautiful.

"Yes, they are," said Yinta, appearing next to me.

I turned and looked at her. "What?"

"They are, indeed, beautiful."

I hadn't realized I'd spoken aloud. I nodded and turned back toward the sea, but they didn't reappear.

Yinta said, "Those were shorttails. Did you notice the white

splotches on their backs? When they're young they tend to travel in pairs. Later they'll gather into larger groups.”

“Their tails didn't seem especially short,” I remarked.

“They weren't. They were both females; the males have shorter tails.”

“Why is that?”

She frowned. “It's the way they are.”

There were gulls above us, many flying low over the water. I'd been told that this meant we were near land, but I couldn't see any. There were few other signs of life.

Such a large body of water, and we were so alone there. The sails were full and made little sound, save for creaking of the boom every now and then in response to a slight turn of ship or wind. Earlier, they had made snapping sounds as the wind changed its mind more quickly about where it wanted us to go and how fast it wanted us to get there. During the night I had become used to the motion of the ship, so now I hardly noticed it.

Greenaere was somewhere ahead. Something like two hundred thousand Dragaerans lived there. It was an island about a hundred and ten miles long, and perhaps thirty miles wide, looking on my map like a banana, with a crooked stem on the near side.

The port was located where the stem joined the fruit. The major city, holding maybe a tenth of the population, was about twelve miles inland from the stem. Twelve miles; about half a day's walk, or, according to the notes Kragar had furnished, fifteen hours aboard a pole raft.

The wind changed, sending the boom creaking ponderously over my head. The captain lay on her back, hands behind her head, smoking a short pipe with a sort of umbrella over the top of it, I

suppose to keep the spray out. The change in wind direction brought me the brief aroma of burning tobacco, out of place with the sea smells I was now used to. Yinta leaned against the railing.

“You were born to this, weren't you?” I said.

She turned and studied me. Her eyes were grey. “Yes,” she said at last. “I was.”

“Going to have your own ship, one of these days?”

“Yes.”

I turned back to the sea. It seemed smooth, the green waves painted against the orange-red Dragaeran horizon. I understood seascapes. I looked back for the first time, but, of course, the mainland had long since passed from sight.

“Not one of these, though,” said Yinta.

I turned back, but she was looking past me, at the endless sea.

“What?”

“I won't be captain of one of these. Not a little trading boat.”

“What, then?”

“There are stories of whole lands beyond the sea. Or beneath them, some say. Beyond the Maelstrom, where no ships pass. Except that, maybe, some do. The whirlpools aren't constant, you know. And there is always talk of ways around them, even though we have charts that show only the Grey Rocks on one side, and the Spindrift Lands on the other. But there is talk of other ways, of exploring Spindrift and launching a ship from there. Of places that can be reached, where people speak strange languages and have magics of which we've never heard, where even the Orb is powerless.”

I said, “I've heard the Orb is powerless in Greenaere.”

She shrugged, as if this interested her not at all; nothing as

commonplace as Greenaere mattered. Her hair was short and brown and curled tightly, although less so as it became wet in the spray. Her wide Orca face was weathered, so she seemed older than she probably was. The wind changed again, followed by ringing of bells that were tied high on what they called the head stay. I'd asked what that was for just before the boom hit me in the back. Funny people, Orca. This time I ducked, while someone said something about tightening the toesail, or perhaps tying it; I couldn't hear clearly over the creaking of the masts and the splashing of the waves.

I said, "So you'd like to take a ship through this Maelstrom, to see what's on the other side?"

She nodded absently, then grinned suddenly. "To tell you the truth, Easterner, what I'd really like to do is design a ship that can stand up to it. My great-great-uncle was a shipwright. He designed the steerage system for the Luck of the South Wind, and served on her before the Interregnum. He was aboard her when the breakwaves hit."

I nodded as if I'd heard of the ship and the "breakwaves." I said, "Have you married?"

"No. Never wanted to. You?"

"Yes."

"Mmmm," she said. "Like it?"

"Sometimes more than other times."

She chuckled knowingly, although I doubt she did know. "Tell me something: Just what are you going to Greenaere for?"

"Business."

"What sort of business has us delivering you as cargo?"

"Does the whole crew know about that?"

“No.”

“Good.”

“So what sort of business is it?”

“I'd rather not say, if you don't mind.”

She shrugged. “Suit yourself. You've paid for our silence; we have no reason to report every passenger to the Empire, and certainly not to the islanders.”

I didn't make an answer to this. We spoke no more just then. Currents and hours rolled beneath us. I ate more salted kethna, fed Loiosh, and slept as night collapsed the sea into a small lake which fed waves to the bow of Chorba's Pride, who excreted a narrow wake from her stern.

Around noon of the following day we spotted land, followed by a few scraggly masts from the cove that was our destination. The sky seemed high and very bright, with more red showing, and it was warm and pleasant. The captain, Trice, was sitting up in what I'd learned was called the fly bridge. Yinta was leaning casually against a bulwark near the bow, shouting obscure information back to the captain, who relayed orders to those of the crew who were piloting the thing, or rigging lines, or whatever they were doing. During a pause in the yelling, I made my way up to Yinta and followed her gaze. “It doesn't look much like the stem of a banana,” I remarked.

“What?”

“Never mind.”

The captain yelled, “Get a sound,” which command Yinta relayed to a dark, stooped sailor, who scurried off to do something or other. Greenaere, whose tip I could see quite well now, seemed to be made of dark grey rock.

I said, "It looks like we're going to miss her." Yinta didn't deign to answer. She relayed some numbers from the sailor to the captain. More commands were given, and, with a creaking of booms as the foresail shifted, we swung directly toward the island, only to continue past until it looked like we'd miss it the other way. It seemed a hell of an inefficient way to travel, but I kept my mouth shut.

"You know, boss, this could get to be fun."

"I was thinking the same thing. But I'd get tired of it, I think, sooner or later."

"Probably. Not enough death."

That rankled a bit. I wondered if there was some truth in it. I could see features of the island now, a few trees and a swath of green behind them that might have been farmland. A place that small, I supposed land would be at a premium.

"A whole island of Teckla," said Loiosh.

"If you want to look at it that way."

"They have no Houses."

"So maybe they're all Jherreg."

That earned a psionic chuckle.

An odd sense of peace began to settle over me that I couldn't figure out. No, not peace, more like quiet—as if a noise that I'd been hearing so constantly I'd come to ignore it had suddenly stopped. I wondered about it, but I had no time to figure it out just then—I had to stay alert to what was going on around me.

There was an abrupt lessening of the wave action on the ship, and we were enclosed in a very large cove. I had seen the masts of larger ships; now I saw the ships themselves—ships too large to pull up to the piers that stuck out from the strip we approached.

Closer in, there were many smaller boats, and I thought to myself, escape route. In another minute I was able to make out flashes of color from one pier, flashes that came in a peculiar order, as if signals were being given. I looked behind me and saw Yinta now next to the captain on the fly bridge, waving yellow and red flags toward the pier.

The wind was still strong, and the sailors were quite busy taking in sails and loosening large coils of rope. I moved toward the back and wedged myself between the cartons where I'd started the journey.

“All right, Loiosh. Take off, and stay out of trouble until I get there.”

“You stay out of trouble, boss; no one's going to notice me. “ He flew off, and I waited. I saw little of the happenings on the ship, and only heard the sounds of increased activity, until at last the sails seemed to collapse into themselves. This was followed almost at once by a hard thump, and I knew we had arrived.

Everyone was still busy. Ropes were secured, sails were brought in, and crates and boxes were manhandled onto the dock. At one point, there were several workmen on board at the same time, their backs to me. I went below with Yinta, who pointed to an empty crate.

“I'm going to hate this,” I said.

“And you're paying for the privilege,” she said.

I fitted myself in as best I could. I'd done something like this once before, sneaking into an Athyra's castle in a barrel of wine, but I expected this to be of shorter duration.

It was uncomfortable, but not too bad except for the angle at which my neck was bent.

Yinta nailed in the top, then left me alone for what seemed to be much longer than it should have been; long enough for me to consider panicking, but then the crate and I were picked up. As they carried me, I was tempted to shout at them to try to take it easy, since each step made a bruise in a new portion of my anatomy.

"I see you, boss. They're carrying you down the dock now, to a wagon. You've got about three hundred yards of pier . . . okay, here's the wagon."

They weren't gentle. I kept the curses to myself.

"Okay, boss. Everything looks good. Wait until they finish loading it."

I'll skip most of this, okay? I waited, and they hauled me away and unloaded me in what Loiosh said was one of a row of sheds a few hundred feet from the dock. I sat in there for a couple of hours, until Loiosh told me that everyone seemed to have left, then I smashed my way out; which is easier to say than it was to do. The door to the shed was not locked, however, so once my legs worked, it was no problem to leave the shed.

It was still daylight, but not by much. Loiosh landed on my shoulder. *"This way, boss. I've found a place to hide until nightfall."*

"Lead on," I said, and he did, and soon I was settled in a ditch in a maize field, surrounded by a copse of trees. No one had noticed me coming in. Getting out, I suspected, was going to be more difficult.

This particular bit of island was heavily farmed; very heavily compared to Dragaera. I wasn't used to a road that cut through farmland as if there were no other place for it to run. I wanted to

be off the main road, too, so I wouldn't be so conspicuous, which left me walking parallel to the road about half a mile from it, through fields of brown dirt with little shoots of something or other poking out of them and feeding various sorts of birdlife. Loiosh chased a few of the birds just for fun. The houses were small huts built with dark green clapboard. The roofs seemed to be made of long shoots that went from the ground on one side to the ground on the other. They didn't look as if they would keep the rain out, but I didn't examine them closely. The land itself consisted of gentle slopes; I was always going either uphill or down, but never very much. The terrain made travel slow, and it was more tiring than I'd have thought, but I was in no hurry so I rested fairly often. The breeze from the ocean was at my back, a bit cold, a bit tangy; not unpleasant.

A few trees began to appear on both sides of the road; trees with odd off-white bark, high branches, and almost round leaves. They grew more frequent and were joined by occasional samples of more familiar oak and rednut, until I was walking in woods rather than farmlands. I wondered if this area would be cleared someday, when the islanders needed more land. Would they ever? How much farming did they do, compared to fishing? Who cared? I kept walking, checking my map every now and then just to make sure. We stayed to the side as we walked. We caught glimpses of travelers on the road, mostly on foot, a few riding on ox-drawn wagons with wheels with square bracing.

Birds sang tunes I'd never heard before. The sky above was the same continuous overcast of the Empire, but it seemed higher, as it were, and it looked like there could be times here when the sky was clear, as it was in the East.

It was late afternoon when another road joined the one we paralleled. I found the road on the map, which told me the city was near, and the map was right. It wasn't much of a city by Dragaeran standards, and was quite strange by Eastern standards. There were patches of cottage here and there: structures made of canvas on wooden frames, or even stone frames, which seemed very odd; and a couple of structures, open on two sides with tables in front of them, that could be places of worship or something else entirely. I never did find out. It looked like the sort of town that would be empty at night. Maybe it was; now was not the time to check.

There weren't many people near us, in any case.

I hid in a garbage pit while Loiosh flew around and found me a better hiding place, and a safe path to it. Loiosh did some more exploring, and found one grey stone building, three stories high, set back from the road and surrounded by a small garden. There were no walls around the garden, and a path of stones and shells of various bright colors led to the unimposing doorway. It matched the location of the Palace, and the description we'd been given for it. There you have it.

Lesson Three

THE PERFECT ASSASSINATION

THERE ARE MILLIONS of ways for people to die, if you number each vital organ, each way it can fail, all of the poisons from the earth and the sea which can cause these failures, all the diseases to which a man, Dragaeran or human, is subject, all the animals, all the tricks of nature, all the mischances from daily life, and all the ways of killing on purpose. In fact, looked at this way, it is odd that an assassin is ever called upon, or that anyone lives long enough to accomplish anything. Yet the Dragaerans, who expect to live two thousand years or more, generally do not die until their bodies fail, weak with age, just as we do, though not quite so soon. But never mind that. I had taken the task of seeing to it that a particular person died, and that meant that I couldn't just take the chance of him choking on a fish bone, I had to make sure he died. All right. There are thousands of ways to kill a man deliberately, if you number each sorcery spell, each means of dispensing every poison, each curse a witch can throw, each means of arranging an accidental death, each blow from every sort of weapon. I've never made a serious study of poisons, accidents—are complicated and tricky to arrange, sorcery is too easy to defend against, and the arts of the witch are unpredictable at best, so let us limit discussion to means of killing by the blade. There are still hundreds of possibilities, some easier but less reliable, some certain but difficult to arrange. For example, cutting someone's throat is relatively easy, and certainly fatal, but it will be some seconds before the individual goes into shock. Are you certain he

isn't a sorcerer skilled enough to heal himself? Getting the heart will actually produce shock more quickly, but it is harder to hit, with all those ribs in the way.

There are other complications, too: such as, does he have friends who could revivify him? If so, do you want to allow this, or do you have to make sure the wound is not only fatal but impossible to repair after death? If so, you probably want to destroy his brain, or at least his spine. Of course, you can do this after your victim is dead or helpless, but those few seconds can make the difference between getting away and being spotted. As long as the Empire is so fussy about under what circumstances one is allowed to do away with another, not being spotted will remain an important consideration. You do the job, then you get away from there, ideally without teleporting, because you're helpless during the two or three seconds while the teleport is taking place, and you can be not only identified but even traced if you get really unlucky. So the key is to make sure all the factors are on your side: You know your victim's routine, you have the weapon ready, and you know exactly where you're going to do it and where you're going to go and how you're going to dispose of the murder weapon after you're done.

You'll notice that these methods have little in common with wandering into a strange kingdom, with no knowledge of the culture or the physical layout, and trying to kill someone whose features you don't even know, much less what sort of physical, magical, or divine protection he might have.

It was still fully night, and the darkness here was considerably darker than in Adrilankha, where there were always a few lights spilling out onto the street from inn doors or the higher windows

of flats, or the lanterns of the Phoenix Guards as they made their rounds. In the East there might be a few stars—twinkling points of light that can't be seen in the Empire because they are higher than the orange—red overcast.

But here, nothing, save for the tiniest sparkles that came from curtained windows high in the Palace, and a thin line from the doorway in the front. We waited there, at the edge of the city, for several long, dull hours. Four Dragaerans left the building, all holding lanterns, and one arrived. The light on the third story of the Palace went out, and we waited another hour. I wondered what time it was, but dared not do anything even as simple as reaching out to the Orb.

We returned to our hiding place before dawn. I spent most of the day sleeping, while Loiosh made sure I wasn't disturbed, scrounged for food to supplement the salted kethna, and observed the Palace and the city for me. Yes, the town was pretty much deserted at night.

After dark had fallen, I went in to town and got a better picture of the Palace and looked for guards. There weren't any that I could see. I checked the place over for windows, found a few, and then looked for various possible escape routes. This was starting to look like it might be easier than I had thought, but I know better than to get cocky.

The next night I moved into town once more, this time to sneak into the Palace so I could get the layout of the place. I sent Loiosh to look around the building once, just in case there was something interesting that he could hear or see. He returned and reported no open windows with rope ladders descending, no large doors with signs saying, "Assassins enter here," and no guards. He took his

place on my shoulder and I stepped up to the door. I'm used to casting a small and easy spell at such times, to see if there is any protection on the door, but Verra had said it wouldn't work, and for all I knew it might even alert someone.

This was the first time I'd ever gone into someone's house in order to kill him. In the Organization you don't do that. But this guy wasn't in the Organization. Come to think of it, this was also the first time I'd shined someone who wasn't one of us. It felt, all in all, distinctly odd. I gently pulled on the doors. They weren't locked. They groaned quietly, but didn't squeak. It was completely dark inside, too. I risked half a step forward, didn't stumble across anything, and carefully shut the door behind me. It felt like a large room, though by what sense I knew that I couldn't say.

“Loiosh, this whole job stinks.”

“Right, boss.”

“Is there anyone in the room?”

“No.”

“I'm going to risk some light.”

“Good.”

I took a six-inch length of lighttrope from my cloak and set it twirling slowly. Even that dim light was painful for a moment, as it lit up about a seven-foot area. I set it going a little faster and saw that the room wasn't as big as I'd thought at first. It looked more like the entry room of a well-to-do merchant than a royal household.

There were hooks on the wall for hanging coats, and even a place by the door with a couple of pairs of boots, for the love of demons. I kept looking, and saw a single exit, straight ahead of me. I slowed the lighttrope and went through the doorway.

I had the feeling that, in normal daylight, this place wouldn't have been at all frightening, but it wasn't daylight, and I wasn't familiar with it, and half-forgotten fragments of the Paths of the Dead came back to haunt me as I gradually increased the speed of the lightrope.

“Can this place really be as undefended as it seems, boss?”

“Maybe.” But I wondered, if these people were so unwarlike, why their King had to die. None of my business. I moved slowly and kept the light as dim as possible.

Loiosh strained to catch the psychic trace of anyone who might be awake as we explored room after room. There was one room that seemed quite large, and in the Empire would have been a sitting room of some sort, but there was a large carved orca on one of the walls, with a motto in a language I couldn't read, and in front of the carving, which seemed to be of gold and coral, was a chair that was maybe a little more plush than the rest. The ceiling was about fifteen feet over my head. Assuming the other two stories to be slightly smaller, that agreed with my estimate of the total height of the building. There was some sort of thin paneling against the stone, and parts of it had been painted on, mostly in blues, with thin strokes. I couldn't make out the designs, but they seemed to be more patterns and shapes than pictures. Possibly they were magical patterns of some sort, though I didn't feel anything in them.

I made more light and studied the room fairly carefully, noting the line from that chair to the doorway, the single large window with carvings in the frame that I couldn't make out, the position of the three service trays, which appeared to be of gold. There was a vase on a stand in a corner, and flowers in it that seemed to be red and

yellow, but I couldn't be certain. And so on. I passed on to the next room, still being totally silent. I can do that, you know. The kitchen was large but undistinguished. Plenty of work space, a little low on storage space. I would have enjoyed cooking there, I think. The knives had been well cared for and most of them seemed to be of good workmanship. The cooking pots were either very large or very small, and there was plenty of wood next to the stove.

The chimney ran from it out of the wall behind it to the outside. The opposite wall held a sink with a hand pump that gleamed in the dim light I was making. Whose job was it to polish it? And so on. I went through every room, convinced myself there wasn't a basement, and decided against trying the upstairs. Then I went back out into a chilly breeze full of the salt water and dead fish, and circled the place again, this time without a light. I didn't learn much except that it is difficult to remain silent while stumbling over garden tools. By the time I returned to my hiding place, dawn was only an hour or so away. There was now enough light in the east so that I could almost see, so Loiosh and I used the time to look for a place near the Palace where we could hide. To turn an hour-long search into a sentence, we didn't find one. We left the town and walked off the main roads until we were well into a thicket that seemed safe enough. It was still chilly, but would warm up soon. I pulled my cloak tightly around me and eventually drifted off into something that passed for sleep.

I awoke late in the afternoon.

"We going to do it today, boss?"

"No. But if all goes well today, we 'II do it tomorrow."

"We're almost out of salted kethna."

“Good. I'm beginning to think I'd rather starve.”

Loiosh was right, however. I ate some of what was left and sneaked up to the edge of town. Yes, the Palace did seem to be completely unprotected. I could probably have gone in right then and done it if I'd known for certain where the King was. I crept a little closer, staying hidden behind a rotting, collapsed fruit stall that had been tossed aside some years before.

The sky had just begun to darken, and I decided this would be about the right time of day to do it; when there was enough light so I could still see, but when the approaching night would shield my escape. I consulted the notes I'd made about entry points and the layout of the Palace, and figured that today I'd make a test run: doing everything I could to try things out.

Getting inside was easy, since the kitchen staff didn't lock the service door, and there was no one in the kitchen after the evening meal. I listened for a long time before proceeding down the hall and into the narrow aperture below the stairs. It was nerve-racking waiting there, hearing footsteps and bits of the servants' conversation.

After half an hour I found the right time: when the king left his dining hall to go upstairs. I saw him walk by: a slinky-looking fellow, moderately old, with plastered down hair and bright green eyes. He was dressed fairly simply, in red and yellow robes, and bore no marks of office except a heavy chain around his neck engraved with one of the symbols I'd seen in his throne room, or audience chamber, or whatever it was. He was walking with a young fellow who carried a short spear over his shoulder. I could have taken them both, but one reason I'm still alive is that I'm always very careful when my own life is on the line.

They walked by, as I said, right in front of me, not able to see me in the dark stairwell. As they were walking up the stairs over my head, I tested my escape route back through the kitchen and out, around the Palace, and back to my hiding place.

“Well, how does it look, boss?”

“Everything seems fine, Loiosh. Tomorrow we do it.”

I spent the rest of the night memorizing landmarks in the dark so I could get as far away as possible, and, as the sky was just beginning to get light, I pulled my cloak around me and slept. Once upon a Dragaeran time, they say, there was a Seriolli smith who, at the request of the gods, built a chain of diamonds that was so long it went up past the top of the sky, and so strong the gods used it hold the sky up when they got tired of the job. One day one of the gods took a diamond as the wedding price for a mortal she had a hankering for, and all the other diamonds went flying about the heavens, and the gods have been holding the sky up ever since. They couldn't punish the goddess who did the deed, because if they did, the sky would fall, so instead they took it out on the smith, turning him into a chreotha to walk the woods and, well, you get the idea.

I mention this because it came to mind as I sat in the woods, trying to stay alert for anyone coming near me and considering that the only reason I was on that island was that my personal goddess had sent me there. It also occurred to me again that this would be the first time I'd ever killed someone outside the Organization.

Coming as it did just while I was going through the sort of moral crisis an assassin has no business having, I didn't like it much. It began to start bothering me that I was taking life for money. Why, I'm not sure.

Or maybe I am, now that I think about it, from the perspective of the other side of the ocean (metaphorically). I think everyone knows someone whose opinions especially matter to him. That is, there's this person whose image lives in the back of your head, and you sometimes find yourself saying, "Would he approve of this?" And if the answer is no, you get a kind of queasy feeling when you do it. In my case, it wasn't my wife, actually, although it hurt badly when, she, in the course of two years, went from a skilled assassin to a politico with a save-the-downtrodden complex as big as my ego. No, it was my paternal grandfather. I'd suspected for a long time that he didn't approve of assassination, but in a moment of weakness I'd made the mistake of asking him directly, and he'd told me, just as all the rest of this nonsense was going on, and all of a sudden I was unsure about things that had been basic up until then.

Where did this leave me? Hiding in a thicket on a strange island and figuring how to take the life of someone I didn't know, someone who wasn't in the Organization and subject to its laws, all because my goddess told me to. We humans believe that what a god tells you to do is, by definition, the right thing. Dragaerans have no such ideas. I was a human who'd been brought up in Dragaeran society, and it made for much discomfort.

I pulled a blade of grass and chewed it. The trees in front of me bent uniformly to the right, as if from years of wind. Their bark was smooth, an unusual effect, and there were no branches on the lower fifteen or twenty feet, after which they erupted like mushrooms, full of thick green leaves that whispered as the wind stirred them. Behind me were typical cloinburrs, about my height, bunched up like they were having a conversation, their reedy

bodies standing on those silly exposed roots as if they were about to turn and walk away. Cawti had a gown made of cloinburr thread. She'd pulled the thread herself, finding a whole grove in late summer, just when they were turning from pale green to crimson, so the gown, a sweeping, flowing thing, with white lace about the shoulder, starts as a mild green at the bottom and burns like fire where it meets at her throat. The first time I took her to Valabar's, she wore that gown with a white gem as the clasp. I spat out the blade of grass and found another as I waited for sunset, when I could walk down the streets unnoticed. When that time came, I still hesitated, undecided, until Loiosh, my companion and familiar, spoke into my mind from his perch on my right shoulder.

“Look, boss, are you really going to explain to Verra that you had a sudden attack of conscience, so she's going to have to find someone else to shine the bum?”

I started a small fire with the bark of the trees, which turned out to burn very well, and in it I destroyed the notes I'd made. I put the fire out and scattered the ashes, then I removed a dagger from under my left arm, tested the point and edge, and made my way into town.

There was the blood of a king on the back of my right hand as I stepped out of the Palace and ducked around behind it. The few moments after the assassination are the most dangerous time, and this whole job was flaky enough already that I very badly didn't want to make any mistakes. It was early evening and would be full dark in less than an hour. Even as it was, I didn't think I'd stand out very much. I ducked behind a large wooden frame that I'd picked out earlier, and I still didn't allow myself to break into a run. I

walked steadily toward the edge of town. I wrapped the knife, red with the King's blood, in a piece of cloth and stuck it in my cloak. Loioosh had stayed outside, above the Palace, and was still flying around nearby.

"Any pursuit?"

"None, boss. Quite a bit of excitement. They're looking around for you, but they don't seem very efficient."

"Good. Anyone looking at the ground? Any signs of spells or rituals?"

"No, and no. Nothing but a lot of running around and— wait. Someone's just come out and—yeah, he's sending people off in various directions. No one going the right way."

"How many toward the dock?"

"Four."

"All right. Come back."

A minute or two later he landed on my right shoulder.

"You hanging on to the knife, boss?"

"If they catch me, the knife won't matter. I don't want to leave it lying around, because they might have witches."

"The sea?"

"Right."

Once I was well away from the city, I began to jog. This was a part of the escape plan I wasn't too happy with, but I hadn't been able to come up with anything better. I try to stay in shape, but I carry several pounds of hardware around with me, not to mention a rapier in a sheath that reaches almost to the ground and is not designed to be run with. I jogged for a while, then walked quickly, then jogged some more. A small stream met up with me, and I splashed through it for a while, and when we said our good-byes

my feet were still dry; miracle provided by darrskin boots and chreotha oil.

All I had to do was get to the dock area before morning, grab one of the small boats, and sail it far enough out to sea that I could teleport. One of the interesting things was that I didn't know how far out that was, so if I was seen and pursued it could get tricky. As I figured it, though, I'd be there at least two hours before dawn. The trick was to get there well ahead of those who'd set out after me, and they were on the road.

If they beat me there, and I found the dock was guarded, I'd have to hide and wait for a chance.

“There's someone around, boss. Wait. More than one. Close. We'd better—”

Something knocked into me and I suddenly realized I was lying down on my back, and then I realized I couldn't move my left shoulder, and I started to hurt. There was a roundish rock next to me, which I deduced someone had thrown at me. I lay there, hurting, until Loiosh said, *“Boss. Here they come!”*

I usually have a pretty good memory for fights, because my grandfather trained me to remember all of our practice sessions so we could go over them later to discuss my mistakes, but this one is largely a blur. I remember feeling a certain cold precision as Loiosh flew into the face of a woman dressed in light clothing of a tan color, and I noted that I could forget her for a while. I think I was already standing by then. I don't remember getting to my feet, but I know I rolled around on the ground for a while first to avoid giving them a target.

Somewhere, way back, I noticed that drawing my sword hurt quite a bit, and I remember nicking a very tall thin woman on the wrist,

and poking a man in the kneecap, and spinning, and feeling dizzy. The short spear seemed to be the standard weapon, and one bald guy with amazing blue eyes, a potbelly, and great strong arms got lined up for a good thrust at my chest, which I parried easily. My automatic reaction was to nail him with a dagger, but when I tried to draw it with my left hand, nothing happened, so I slashed at his face, connected, and kept spinning.

There were three or four times when Loiosh told me to duck and I did. Loiosh and I had gotten good at this sort of thing. None of my attackers said much, except one called out, "Get the jhereg, he's warning him," and I remember being impressed that she'd figured it out. The whole fight, four of them against Loiosh and me, couldn't have lasted as long as it seemed to. Or maybe it did. I tried to keep moving so they'd get in each other's way, and that worked, and I finally got the potbellied guy a good one, straight through the heart, and he went down.

I don't know if he took my sword with him, or if I let go, but I think it was right after that I drew a dagger and dived at one of the spears. That time the man, wearing a broad leather belt from which a long horn was suspended, was too startled to keep his spear up. He backed up and fell, and I don't remember what happened next but I think I took him then and there, because later I found the dagger still in his neck.

I suspect I picked up his spear, because I remember throwing it and missing just as Loiosh told me to duck, and then there was a burning pain low in my back, to the right, and I thought, "I've had it." There was a scream behind me at almost the same moment and I mentally marked one up for Loiosh. I realized I was on my knees, and thought, "This won't do at all," as the tall woman charged

straight at me.

I don't know what happened to her, because the next clear memory I have is of lying on my back as the other woman, the one in tan, stood over me holding her spear, with Loiosh attached to the side of her face. She had a dazed look in her eyes. Jhereg poison isn't the most deadly I know of, but it will get the job done, and he was giving her a lot. She tried to nail me with her spear, but I rolled away, although I'm not certain how. She took a step to follow me, but then she just sort of sighed and collapsed.

I lay there, breathing very hard, and raised my head. The tall woman was crumpled against a tree, still breathing, but with her own spear sticking out of her abdomen. I have no idea how I managed that. Her eyes were open, and she was staring at me. She tried to speak, but blood came from her mouth. Presently her breathing stopped and a shudder ran through her body.

"We took 'em, Loiosh. All four of 'em. We took 'em."

"Yeah, boss. I know."

I crawled over to the remains of the nearest one, the woman Loiosh had killed, and ripped at her clothing until I had enough cloth to cover the wound on my back.

Getting at it hurt like—well, it hurt. I turned over and lay on it, hoping the pressure would stop the bleeding.

I got dizzy, but I didn't pass out, and after what must have been an hour I began the process of finding out if I could sit up. There were jhereg circling overhead, which might or might not lead someone to this place. Loiosh offered to get rid of them for me, but I didn't want him to leave. In any case, I needed to be away from there. I managed to stand, which was hard, and I didn't scream, which was harder. I took a few items from my pouch of witchcraft

supplies, such as kelsch leaves for energy, and a foul-tasting concoction made from moldy bread, and a powder made from kineera, oil of cloves, and comfrey. I wrapped this in more of my enemy's clothing, got it wet from my canteen, and managed to replace the cloth on my back with it. The bleeding had somehow stopped, but taking the cloth away started it again, and it hurt a lot. I took some more kineera, my last, and mixed it with oil of wormwood, more clove oil, corfina, and ground-up pine needles, got it all wet in more cloth from Loiosh's victim, and put this against my shoulder. I spat out the kelsch leaf, decided chewing another would probably kill me, and struggled to my feet. The cloth on my back slipped, so I had to place it again and fasten it with blue eyes' belt. I held the other one in place, gritted my teeth, and quickly, heh, plodded through the forest.

I must have made it a hundred yards before I got dizzy and had to sit down. After a few minutes I tried again and got maybe a little further. I sat there and caught up on my cursing, decided on another kelsch leaf, after all. It worked, I guess, because I think I made it most of a mile before I had to stop again.

“Loiosh, what direction are we going?”

“Still toward the docks, boss. I'd have told you if you were going wrong.”

“Oh. Good.”

I didn't say anything else, because even that seemed to drain me. I stumbled to my feet and resumed my brisk trudge. Every step was—but no, I don't want to think about it and you don't want to hear about it. We were less than three miles from the scene of the fight, perhaps five miles from the dock, when Loiosh said, *“There's someone up ahead, boss.”*

“Oh,” I said. “Can I die now?”

“No.”

I sighed. *“How far?”*

“About a hundred feet.”

I stopped where I was and pulled myself behind a large tree. *“Is there some reason why you just noticed him, Loiosh?”*

“I don't know. These people don't have much psychic energy. Maybe—he's gone.”

“I don't feel a teleport.”

“Got me, boss. He just—what's that?”

“That” was a sound, like a low droning, gradually building in pitch. We stood listening. Were there waves, pulses within it? I wasn't sure. The tree had odd, pale green bark, and it was smooth against my cheek. Yes, there were pulses within the droning, a delicate suggestion of rhythm.

“It's sort of hypnotic, boss.”

“Yes. Let's take a look.”

“Eh? Why? We don't want to be seen around here, do we?”

“If he's looking for me, we can't avoid him. If not—do you really think I'm going to be able to make it all the way to the shore? Not to mention operating a Verra-bedamned boat when I get there?”

“Oh. What are you going to do?”

“I don't know. Maybe kill him and steal whatever he has that's useful.”

“Do you think you 're up to killing him?”

“Maybe.”

He sat in a small dip in the fields, his legs drawn up under him, his back perfectly straight, yet he seemed relaxed. His eyes were open and looking more or less in our direction, but he didn't appear to

see us as we approached. I couldn't guess his House; he seemed as pale as a Tiassa, as thin and gangly as an Athyra, with the slanted eyes and pointed ears of a Dzur. His facial structure, high cheekbones and pointed chin, could have been Dragon, or perhaps Phoenix. His hair was light brown, appearing darker in contrast to his skin. He wore baggy pants of dark brown, sandals, and a sort of blue vest with fringes. A large black jewel hung on a chain around his neck. I didn't think he'd be allowed into the Battles Club unless he found some other footgear.

He held a strange, round device, perhaps two feet in diameter, under his left arm. *"It's a drum, boss. Notice the skin across it?"*

"Yes. Made out of shell, I think. I suspect he's harmless. We can ask for help, or we can kill him. Any other ideas?"

"Boss, I don't think you can take him in your condition."

"If I can catch him when he's not expecting it—"

The stranger stopped what he was doing, quite abruptly, and his eyes focused on us.

He looked down at the drum and adjusted one of the leather cords that were sewn onto the head and appeared stretched all the way around the drum. He tapped the head with a beater of some sort, creating a rich and surprisingly musical tone. He frowned and adjusted another strap, struck the head again, and seemed satisfied. I hadn't heard any difference between the two tones.

"Good afternoon," I managed.

He nodded and gave me a vague smile. He looked at Loiosh, then back at his drum.

He struck it again, very lightly, then louder.

"It sounds good," I ventured, my breath coming in gasps.

His eyes widened, but the expression seemed to mean something

other than surprise, I don't know what. He spoke for the first time, his voice quiet and pitched rather high.

“Are you from the mainland?”

“Yes. We're visiting.” He nodded. I looked around for something else to talk about while I figured out what to do. I said, “What do you call that thing?”

“On the island,” he said, “we call this a drum.”

“Good name for it,” I told him. Then I stumbled forward a few steps and collapsed.

I saw the tops of trees, swaying in a light wind. It smelled like morning, and I hurt everywhere.

“Boss?”

“Hey, chum. Where are we?”

“Still here. With that drummer guy. Can you eat again?”

“Drummer guy? Oh, right. I remember. What do you mean 'again'?”

“He's fed you three times since you collapsed. You don't remember?”

I thought about it, decided I didn't. *“How long have we been here?”*

“A little more than a day.”

“Oh. They haven't found us?”

“No one's come close.”

“Odd. I'd have thought I left a trail a nymph jhegaala could follow.”

“Maybe they haven't found the bodies.”

“That can't last long. We should move.”

I sat up slowly. The drummer looked at me, nodded, and went back to whatever it was he'd been doing when we got there. He said, “I

changed your dressing again.”

“Thanks. I'm in your debt.”

He went back to concentrating on his drum.

I tried to stand up, decided early on in the process that it was a mistake, and relaxed. I took a couple of deep breaths, letting tension out of my body. I wondered how long it would be until I could walk. Hours? Days? If it was days, I might as well roll over and die right now.

I discovered I was very thirsty and said so. He handed me a flask which turned out to contain odd-tasting water. He tapped his drum again. I lay back against the tree and rested, my ears straining for sounds of pursuit. After a while he put a kettle on the fire, and a bit after that we had a rather bland soup that was probably good for me. As we drank it, I said, “My name is Vlad.”

“Aibynn,” he said. “How did you come to be injured?”

“Some of your compatriots don't take to strangers. Provincialism. There's no help for it.”

He gave me a look I couldn't interpret, then he grinned. “We don't often see anyone from the mainland here, especially dwarfs.”

Dwarfs? “Special circumstances,” I said. “Couldn't be prevented. Why did you help me?”

“I've never seen anyone with a tame jhereg before.”

“*Tame?*”

“*Shut up, Loiosh.*”

To Aibynn I said, “I'm glad you were here, anyway.”

He nodded. “It's a good place to work. You aren't bothered much—what's that?”

I sighed. “Sounds like someone's coming,” I said.

He looked at me, his face blank. Then he said, “Do you think you

can climb a tree?”

I licked my lips. “Maybe.”

“You won't leave a trail that way.”

“If they see a trail leading here, and not away, won't they ask questions?”

“Probably.”

“Well?”

“I'll answer them.”

I studied him. “What do you think, Loiosh?”

“Sounds like the best chance we're going to get.”

“Yeah.”

I could, indeed, climb a tree. It hurt a lot, but other than that it wasn't difficult. I stopped when I heard sounds from below, and Loiosh gave me a warning simultaneously. I couldn't see the ground, which gave me good reason to hope they couldn't see me. There was no breeze, and the smoke from the fire was coming up into my face. As long as it didn't get strong enough to make me cough, that would also help keep me hidden.

“Good day be with you,” said someone male, with a voice like a grayswan in heat.

“And you,” said Aibynn. I could hear them very well. Then I could hear drumming.

“Excuse me—” said grayswan.

“What have you done?” asked Aibynn.

“I mean, for disturbing you.”

“Ah. You haven't disturbed me.”

More drumming. I wanted to laugh but held it in.

“We are looking for a stranger. A dwarf.”

The drumming stopped. “Try the mainland.”

Grayswan made a sound I couldn't interpret, and there were mutterings I couldn't make out from his companions. Then someone else, a woman whose voice was as low as a musk owl's call, said, "We are tracking him. How long have you been here?" "All my life," said Aibynn with a touch of sadness.

"Today, you idiot!" said Grayswan.

"At least," agreed my friend.

Someone else, a man with a voice that sounded like a man's voice, said, "His tracks lead to this spot. Have you seen him?"

"I might have missed him," said Aibynn. "I'm tuning my drum, you see, and it requires concentration."

Grayswan demanded, "You mean he could have walked right by you? Cril and Sandy, look around. See if you can find any tracks leaving." There came the sound of feet moving near the base of the tree. I remained very still, not even waving the smoke away from my face; it wasn't very thick, anyway.

Aibynn said, "This part of preparing the drum is very difficult. I must—"

Musk owl said, "You're Aibynn of Lowporch, aren't you?"

"Why, yes."

"I heard you drum at the Winter Festival. You're very good."

"Thank you."

"That's a new drum you're making?"

Grayswan: "We don't have time to—"

Aibynn: "Why, yes. This is the shell of the sweetclam. The head is made from the skin of a nyth, as big a one as you can find. The beater is made from the jawbone, wrapped in nythskin and cloth. To prepare the head, you make a fire of langwood, and season the fire with rednut shells, drownweeds, clove, dreamgrass, silkbuds,

the roots of the trapvine—”

Another voice, a man's I hadn't heard before, said, “Nothing. He must be around here somewhere.”

Aibynn said, “This one is almost done. I'm just tuning it. You can also change the pitch when you play it. This knob, you see, I hold in my left hand, and when I turn it this way the head becomes tighter and the tone rises. This way lowers the pitch.” He demonstrated.

“I see,” said musk owl.

Grayswan said, “Look, this dwarf has killed four of the King's guards, and we have every reason to think he—”

Aibynn continued demonstrating. The sound produced by the drum was a single smooth pulse, out of which rhythms began to emerge. I noticed an odd, sweet smell drifting up to me, probably from the treatment he had given the drumhead. The pulsing became more and more complex, and I began to hear beats within it, and I became more aware of the variations in tone. The sweet smell grew stronger. As he played, he said, “You have to play the drum for a few hours after it's seasoned, to allow the head to work into the shell.” His voice wove in and out of the pulses, the rhythms, sometimes riding high above them, sometimes supporting them from beneath, and I wondered idly if it was changing pitch and tone or if the drum was, and were those voices mixed in with it? “Then the straps must be moistened with an emulsion made from the sap of a teardrop elm . . . they will respond to long pulses and slow pulses ... so the rhythm emerges from the drum itself ... the Lecuda calls the dance, or the spell, which is really the same . . . some of the oldest drums sound the best because the shell itself begins to absorb the sound, so after many years ... the last time I

tried one of those, I had borrowed a drum. ...”

Loiosh said, “Boss, did he say dreamgrass? Boss?”

Then I felt like lying down, then I was falling, and felt like I was passing right through the branches without touching them. I heard someone say, “Look!” but I don't remember hitting the ground.

Lesson Four

HANDLING INTERROGATION

TO A DZURLORD, civilized means adhering to proper customs of dueling. To a Dragonlord, civilized means conforming to all the social niceties of mass mayhem. To a Yendi, civilized means making sure no one ever knows exactly what you're up to. In the land of my ancestors, civilized means never drinking a red wine at more than fifty-five or less than fifty degrees. The islands had their own notions of civilization, and I decided I liked them.

“We're civilized here, Jhereg,” said my interrogator, beneath brows you could have planted maize in. “We do not beat or torture our prisoners.”

Of all the responses that sprang to mind, I decided the quick nod would be safest. His mouth twitched, and I wondered if I'd get to know him well enough to know what that indicated.

“On the other hand,” he continued, “you can probably expect to be executed.”

On reflection, his brows weren't all that bushy; they just seemed that way because of his high, hairless forehead. He looked more like an Athyra than anything else, and acted a bit like one, too: cold, intellectual, and distant. “Executed for what?” I said.

He ignored this. We both knew for what, and if I didn't want to admit it, that was my concern. He said, “I am assuming that you are either a paid assassin or are fanatically loyal to some person, entity, or cause. It is possible that if you cooperate with us by revealing all of the circumstances which led you to take this action, you may live. Unlikely, but possible.” He spoke a lot like

Morrolan, a friend of mine you'll meet later.

I started in on another protestation of innocence but he gestured me to silence. "Think it over," he said, and stood up slowly. "We can give you some time to think, but not a great deal. I'll be back." He left me alone again.

Of what shall I tell you now? Time, place, or circumstance? Time, then. I'd been there three days, during which I'd been attended by various persons concerned about my health, and this was the first day I'd been able to walk the six or so steps to the slop bucket in the corner without leaning on the walls all the way. That was about the most I could do, but I was proud of it.

I could tell day from night because I could almost see the outside through a narrow window about eight feet up the brick wall. There were thick horizontal bars across the window, which I suspected had been added after the place was built—perhaps very recently, like three days ago. I noted it as a possible weakness. I didn't think the room had been originally designed to hold prisoners, but it worked. The door was very thick and, from what I could hear before it was opened, had an iron bar across it on the outside. There was a cot that was longer than it had to be, made of something soft that rustled in my ears whenever I moved. I had been given a tan-colored shapeless robe of some animal skin. I didn't know if it was their custom to remove clothing from prisoners, or if they had found so many weapons in my clothing that they'd deduced—correctly—that they'd never be able to find them all. I was also barefoot, which I've never liked, even as a kid. I got two meals a day. The first I'm still blurry on. The second was a fish stew that was completely flavorless—except for too much salt. The next was some sort of mush that tasted better than it looked,

but only a little. The one after that was a squid dish that a good cook could have done fine things with. The latest one, the remains of which were on a wooden plate on the floor next to me, involved boiled vegetables and a bit of fish with a loaf of coarse, dark bread. The bread was actually pretty good.

Twice now, I had tried small spells to heal myself, but nothing had happened. This was very odd. It was one thing if they had means to cut off my access to the Orb, but witchcraft is a matter of skill and one's innate psychic energy; I didn't see any way to cut someone off from that.

On the other hand, I remembered Loiosh commenting that people around here seemed to be psionically invisible to him, which also wasn't normal, and might be related. I had also tried a few times to reach Morrolan and Sethra, but got nowhere; I wasn't certain if that was a matter of distance or something else.

Loiosh hadn't been in touch with me the entire time. I very much wanted to know if he was all right. I had the feeling that if anything had happened to him I'd know, but I'd never been out of touch with him for this long before.

To take my mind off this, I went over the conversation I'd just had with the something-or-other of the Royal Guard. His remarks about them maybe letting me live could be discounted—I'd killed four of their citizens plus the King. But he might have been telling the truth about his definition of "civilized." Good news, if true; the last time I'd tried to hold up under torture I hadn't done so well. But the real puzzler was one of his first remarks. He'd walked in and stared down at me, given his title, and said, "We are holding you for the assassination of His King Haro Olithorvold. We want you to tell us why you killed him, for whom, where you came from

—”

I interrupted him with as credible an expression of innocent outrage as I could manage. He shook his head and said, “Don't try to deny it. Your accomplice has admitted his part in it.”

I said, “Oh. Well, that's different, then. If you've got my accomplice, what can I do? I confess to—what was it you said I did? And who was my accomplice?”

That was when he'd started in on being civilized, and now, lying there aching and worried about Loiosh, I wondered many things about my “accomplice.” It was obvious who they meant—the drummer I'd stumbled over, so to speak, in the woods.

When I'd become conscious again, and had figured out that I'd been knocked out by the smoke (he'd mentioned dreamgrass, after all), I'd assumed he'd done it deliberately. Now, though, I wondered.

It was still possible he had, but they simply didn't believe him. Or it could have been an accident, and he was just what he appeared to be. Or they could be playing some sort of deep game that hadn't made itself apparent yet.

Not that any of this mattered, since I couldn't do anything about any of the possibilities, but I was curious. I wasn't worried. They would most likely spend at least a day or two trying to get me to tell them who had hired me before they killed me. I considered telling them the truth, just to watch bushy-brows' face, but it would have been pointless. Besides, in my business you don't give out that information; it's part of the job.

But in a day or two I could regain my strength and attempt to escape. If I failed, they'd kill me. It was nothing to be worried about. Scared spitless, yes, but not worried.

I did not want to die, you see. I'd died before and hadn't liked it, and this time, if it happened, there'd be no chance for revivification. I'd heard stories of escapes from imprisonment, but, looking around, I just didn't see any way to manage it, and, damn it all, it hadn't been such a bad life I'd worked my way up from nothing to something and I wanted to see how things came out. I wanted to be around to watch for a while longer. I wanted to leave some changes behind me, to make things a bit different before I went on my way.

Different? Maybe even better, though that had never been high on my list before.

Maybe, if I got out of this, I'd do that. Are you listening, Verra? Can you hear me?

They've got me trapped and scared, so maybe it doesn't mean anything, but it would be nice if, before I died, I could think to myself that the world was a little better in some way for my having been here. Is that crazy, Demon Goddess? Is this what happened to Cawti, is this why I hardly recognize my wife anymore? I don't know how I'll feel if I get out of this, but I want to find out. Help me, Goddess. Get me out of here. Save my life.

But she'd said I couldn't reach her from here, so I would have to save myself, and that just didn't look likely.

I'd been thinking and dozing and hurting and recovering and sweating for a few more hours when another meal arrived—this time some dumplings with a sauce that meat had been waved at, accompanied by seaweed and more of the bread. I was going to have to escape soon for yet another reason: If I got tired of the bread, I'd have nothing to live for.

Scratch off another day, another visit from the local bone—

tightener, and another couple of meals. I was beginning to feel like I could maybe move if I had to. The pain from the wounds was almost gone, but I still hurt from where I'd bruised myself in the fall. I expect that I'd have broken bones if my fall hadn't been "cushioned" by tree limbs, which had given me teeth-loosening love pats all the way down. If I had broken a bone, chances are you'd have heard this story, if at all, from a completely different viewpoint. And the end would have been different, too. My questioner came back after letting me ponder for an entire two days, I suppose to see if I got nervous.

He sat down a few feet away from me. I might have tried to jump him if I'd been in better shape and had my weapons and knew more about the layout of the place and the position of the guards and if he hadn't looked like he was ready for it.

"Well?" he said, trying to look stern and I guess succeeding.

"I would like to confess," I said.

"Good."

"I would like to confess that I wish very much to have a large dish of kethna, cubed and stir-fried with peppers and onions, seasoned with lemon and the rinds of clubfruit, with—"

"You obviously think this is funny," he said.

I shook my head. "Food is never funny. The meals I've been getting are tragic."

I noticed his hands kept trying to form fists, and decided that he was becoming impatient with me. Either they were serious about not beating prisoners, or he was saving up something good. He said, "Do you want to die?"

"Well, no," I said. "But it's bound to happen sooner or later."

"We want to know who sent you."

“I was following a vision.”

He glared, then got up and walked out. I wondered what they'd throw at me next. I hoped it wasn't more seaweed.

I spent a few hours the next day remembering previous incarcerations. There had been one especially long one in the dungeons beneath the Imperial Palace, as part of the affair that had gained me my exalted position in the Jhereg and had first brought my friend Alieria to the attention of the Empress. That had been a few weeks, and the worst thing had been the boredom. I'd dealt with it mostly by exercising and devising a communication system with my fellow inmates with which we could exchange rude comments about our various guards. This time I was in no condition to exercise, and I didn't know where the other inmates, if any, were. I'd about decided that maybe some gentle isometrics wouldn't hurt too much when the door opened again.

“Aibynn,” I said. “Have you come to tend my poor afflicted body? Or minister to my spirit?”

He sat down on the other bunk, looking faintly surprised to see me.

“Hey,” he said. “I guess you aren't used to dreamgrass.”

“I was in a weakened state,” I said. “Try it on me again sometime.”

He nodded thoughtfully and said, “I didn't think you'd be alive. I thought they were going to, you know—” He made a chopping motion at the back of his neck.

“Probably are,” I said.

“Yeah. Me, too.” He leaned back, not seeming at all disturbed. I got the impression that he carried fatalism maybe a bit too far. Of course, it was quite possible that he was working for them. It was also possible that he wasn't, that he'd been put in here so we could have conversations for them to overhear. The level of subtlety was

about right for what I'd seen of these people.

I said, "Had any good meals?"

He considered this carefully. "Not really, no."

"Neither have I."

"I wouldn't mind—" He stopped, staring up at the window. I followed his gaze, but didn't see anything remarkable. I looked back at him.

"What is it?"

"There are bars on the window," he said

"Yes?"

"The room I was in didn't have a window."

"What about it?"

He picked up the wooden spoon from the remainder of my last meal, went up next to the window, and tapped one of the bars.

I said, "You think you can knock it loose?"

"Huh? Oh, no, nothing like that. But listen." He tapped it again. It gave out the usual sound of thick iron when struck by thick wood.

"Doesn't that sound great?"

I tried to decide if he was joking. "Ummm, I think it needs tuning," I said.

"That's true. I wonder if it would work to wrap a strip of cloth around part of it."

I sighed and settled back onto my bed, hoping they were, in fact, listening. A few hours later the door opened. A pair of guards held their short spears and looked like they knew how they functioned. My friend the Royal whatever was behind them. He nodded to me and said, "Please come with me."

I nodded to Aibynn and said, "Drum for me."

"I will," he said.

To bushy-brows I said, "I'm not certain I can walk very far."

"We can carry you if necessary."

"I'll try," I said. And I did. I was still a bit shaky on my feet, and my back hurt, but I could do it. I wobbled a bit more than I had to just on the principle that it couldn't hurt if they thought I was worse off than I was. We only went a few feet down the hall, though, to a room which had a pair of low backless stools and several windows. He took one of the stools, and I lowered myself onto the other, not enjoying it.

He said, "There has been considerable discussion about what to do with the two of you. Some are in favor of suspending the ancient laws against torture. Others think you should be publicly executed right away, which will prevent the riots that seem to be brewing." He paused there, to see if I had anything to say. Since I didn't think he'd want to hear about how my back felt, I stayed mute.

"At the moment His Majesty Corcor'n, the son of the man you killed, has everyone convinced to wait until we hear from the mainland. We expect them to deny having sent you, but we want to give them the option. If they do the expected, we will probably execute you. If you're curious, most people are in favor of stoning you to death, though some think you should be bound and thrown to the orca."

"I'm not really curious, I said.

He nodded. "While we're waiting, you still have the chance to tell us about it. We will also be telling your comrade the same thing. If he talks before you do, he will most likely be exiled. If you talk, he will die and you might be allowed to leave. At least you will be allowed to take poison, a far more pleasant death than either of the other two."

“You know that from personal experience?” I said.

He sighed. “You don't want to tell us about it? Who sent you? Why?”

“I just came here for the fishing,” I said.

He turned to the guards. “Return him to the cell and bring the other one.” They did this. I could have said something clever to Aibynn as we passed, but nothing came to mind. I'd have given quite a bit to be able to hear what went on between the two of them, but I still had no connection to the Orb, and witchcraft, as I've said, wasn't working. Maybe they were just sitting around playing s'yang stones long enough to make it look good. Or maybe they really believed he was helping me. Or maybe there was something else entirely going on that I was completely missing. It wouldn't be the first time.

They left us there for two more days, during which I learned the distinction between “popping” a beat and “rolling” a rhythm, between fish and animal skin heads, how to tell if there is a small crack in the jawbone one intends to use as a beater, and the training that goes into making a festival, or “hard-ground” or “groundy,” drummer; a ritual, or “crashing surf” or “surfy,” drummer; and a spiritual, or “deep water” or “watery,” drummer. Aibynn had studied all three, but preferred surfy drumming. I was less interested in all of this than I pretended to be, but it was the only entertainment around. I was interrogated twice more during this time, but you can probably fill in those conversations yourself. Conversation with Aibynn was more interesting than the interrogations, when he wasn't drumming, but he didn't say anything that helped me figure out if he was really working with

them or not.

At one point he made a passing reference to the gods. I considered the differences between Dragaeran attitudes toward the divine and Eastern attitudes, and said, "What are gods?"

"A god," he said, "is someone who isn't bound by natural laws, and who can morally commit an action which would be immoral for someone who wasn't a god."

"Sounds like you memorized that."

"I have a friend who's a philosopher."

"Does he have any philosophy on escaping from cells?"

"He says that if you escape, you are required to bring your cellmate with you. Unless you're a god," he added.

"Right," I said. "Does he have a philosophy about drumming?"

He gave me a curious look. "We've talked about it," he said.

"Sometimes, you know, when you're playing, you're in touch with something; there are things that flow through you, like you aren't playing at all, but something else is playing you. That's when it's best."

"Yeah," I agreed. "It's the same thing with assassination."

He pretended to laugh, but I don't think he really thought it was funny.

After he came back from his second session with the Royal Whootsidoo, I said, "What did he ask you about?"

"He wanted to know how many sounds I could get out of my drum."

"Ah," I said. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"How many?"

"Thirty-nine, using the head and the shell, both sides of the beater,

fingers, and muffling. And then there are variations.”

“I see. Well, now I know.”

“I wish I had my drum.”

“I suppose so.”

“Has it rained since you've been here? I didn't have a window at first.”

“I'm not sure. I don't think so.”

“Good. Rain would ruin the head.”

A little later he said, “Why did we kill the King?”

I said, “We?”

“Well, that's what they asked me.”

“Oh. He didn't like our drum.”

“Good reason.”

Silence fell, and, when we weren't talking, all I could think about was how badly I wanted to live, which got pretty depressing, so I said, “Those times you feel like you're in tune with something, do you think it might be a god?”

He shook his head. “No. It isn't anything like that. It's hard to describe.”

“Try,” I said, and he cooperated by keeping me distracted until I drifted off to sleep.

Early in the afternoon on the second day after Aibynn had joined me, I was listening to an impromptu concert on iron bar (tuned with pieces of a towel), wooden spoon, and porcelain mug, when I felt a faint twinge in the back of my head. I almost jerked upright, but I held myself still, relaxed, and concentrated on making the link stronger.

“*Hello?*”

“*Boss?*”

“Loiosh! Where are you?”

“I . . . coming . . . later . . . can't. . .” and it faded out. Then there was connection with someone else, so strong it was like someone shouting in my ear. *“Hello Vlad. I hope all is well with you.”* It only took me a moment to recognize the psychic 'voice.' I almost shouted aloud.

“Daymar!”

“Himself.”

“Where are you?”

“Castle Black. We've just finished dinner.”

“If you tell me about your dinner I'll fry you.”

“Quite. We understand from Loiosh that you're in something of a predicament.”

“I think the word predicament is awfully well chosen.”

“Yes. He says that sorcery doesn't work there.”

“Seems not to. How did he get there?”

“He flew, apparently.”

“Flew? By the Orb! How many miles is that?”

“I don't know. He does seem rather tired. But don't worry. We'll be by for you as soon as we can.”

“How soon is that? They're planning to execute me, you know.”

“Really? For what?”

“A misunderstanding involving royal prerogatives.”

“I don't understand.”

“Yes. Well, never mind. When can you get here?”

“Since we can't telep—” And the link broke. Daymar a noble of the House of the Hawk and a fellow who worked very hard at developing his psychic abilities, is capable of being arbitrary and unpredictable, but I didn't think he'd chop off a conversation in

midsentence.

Therefore something else had. Therefore, I was worried. I cursed and tried to reestablish the link, but got nothing. I kept trying until night had fallen and I had a head ache, but I got nothing except morbid thoughts. I fell asleep hoping for rescue and vaguely wondering if I dreamt it all. I woke up in the middle of the night with the half memory of a dream in which I was flying over the ocean, into a nasty wind, and my wings were very tired. I kept wanting to rest, and every time I did an orca with the face of a dragon would rise out of the water and snap at me.

If I'd've had half a minute to wake up, I would have figured out what the dream meant without any help, but I didn't have the half a minute, or any need for it.

“Boss! Wake up.” His voice in my head was very loud, and very welcome.

“Loioosh!”

“We're coming in, boss. Get ready. Is anyone with you?”

“No. I mean, yes. A friend. Well, maybe a friend. He might be an enemy. I don't—”

“That's what I like about working with you, boss: your precision.”

“Don't be a wiseacre. Who's with you?”

But there was no need for him to answer, because at that moment the wall next to me turned pale blue, twisted in on itself, and dissolved, and I was face-to-face with my wife, Cawti. I stood up as my roommate stirred. “You and how many Dragonlords?” I said.

“Two,” she said. “Why? Do you think we need more?”

She tossed me a dagger. I caught it hilt-first and said, “Thanks.”

“No problem.” She walked over to the door, played with it for a

while, and I heard the iron bar outside hit the floor. I looked a question at her.

“There may be things in the building you want,” she said,

“Spellbreaker, for example.”

“A point. Is, um, anyone still alive?”

“Probably.”

Enter Alieria: very short for a Dragaeran, angular face, green eyes. She gave me a courtesy.

I nodded.

“I found this.” She handed me a three-foot length of gold chain, which I took and wrapped around my wrist.

“Cawti had just mentioned it,” I said. “Thanks.”

My roommate, who didn't seem at all disturbed by these events, stood up. “Remember what we said about the philosophy of escaping from cells?”

Cawti looked at him, then back at me. I considered. He might really be just what he seemed, in which case I'd gotten him into a great deal of trouble for helping me. I glanced at the door to the cell. Alieria was now in the room, and there was no commotion to indicate anyone had noticed us escaping. Behind me was a roughly circular gap in the wall, eight feet in diameter, with nothing on the other side but island darkness, fresh with the smell of the ocean.

I said, “Okay, come on. But one thing. If you have any thoughts of betraying me—” I paused and held up the dagger. “In the Empire, we call this a knife.”

“Knife,” he said. “Got it.”

Loioosh flew in and landed on my shoulder. We stepped through the wall and out into the night.

Lesson Five

RETURNING HOME

CAWTI LED THE way, with Alera bringing up the rear. We slipped past the single row of structures that represented the city. I realized that I'd been right next to the Palace, and that we were copying almost exactly the route I'd taken after the assassination. We entered the woods outside of the town and stopped there long enough to listen for sounds of pursuit. There were none. My feet were not enjoying the woods. I considered sending Loiosh back to find my boots, but I didn't consider it very seriously. I glanced back at Aibynn, who was also bootless. It didn't seem to be bothering him.

"It's good to have friends," I remarked as we started walking again.

Cawti said, "Are you all right?"

"Mostly. We'll have to take it slow."

"Were you, um, questioned?"

"Not the way you mean it. But I've managed to damage myself a bit."

"It's well past the middle of the night already. We're going to have to hurry to be there by morning, not to mention losing the tide."

"I'm not sure I can hurry."

"What happened?"

"I'm too old to be climbing trees."

"I could have told you that."

"Yes."

"Do the best you can," she said.

"I will." My back already hurt, and now my hand started

throbbing. I said, "If we meet anyone drumming in the woods, let's not stop for conversation."

"You'll have to tell me about that," said Cawti. I heard Loiosh laughing inside my head. Aibynn, walking directly in front of me, either didn't hear the comment or chose to ignore it. Branches slapped against my face, just as they'd done last time. Last time I hadn't had Cawti and Alieria with me, so I had cause to be optimistic. On the other hand, the branches still stung. Cheap philosophy there, if you want it.

After an hour or so we stopped, as if by consensus, though no one said anything. I sat down with my back against a tree and said, "What's the plan?"

Alieria said, "We have a ship waiting for us in a cove a few miles from here."

"A ship? Can you drive one of those things?"

"It has a crew of Orca."

"Are you sure they'll be waiting for us?"

"Morrolan is there."

"Ah." And, "I'm flattered. Grateful, too."

Alieria smiled suddenly. "I enjoyed it," she said. Cawti didn't smile. After a few minutes' rest we stood up again. Loiosh left my shoulder to fly on ahead, and we made our way through the woods once more, now at a brisk walk. It was still very dark, but Alieria was making a small light that hung in the air a few paces ahead of us, bouncing in time to her steps.

As we walked, I said to Aibynn, "Is there anything we should be watching for?"

"Trees," he said. "Don't run into them. It hurts."

"Falling out of them isn't much fun, either, but I don't think that's a

real danger just at the moment.”

“Were you unconscious when you landed?”

“I expect so. I don't really remember anything about it. I was pretty much gone as I fell.”

“Too bad,” he said.

“Why?”

“The sound you made when you hit. It was a good one. A nice, deep thump. Resonance.”

I couldn't decide if I should laugh or cut his throat, so I said, “I'm glad you didn't tune me, anyway.”

I kept my eyes on the light, watching it bounce, and I wondered how Alieria had been able to produce it without sorcery to work with. For that matter, though—“Alieria?”

She turned her head without slowing down. “Yes, Vlad?”

“I was told sorcery doesn't work on this island.”

“Yes. I lost my link to the Orb about ten miles from shore.”

“Then how did you melt down that wall?”

“Pre-Empire sorcery.”

“Oh. The rough stuff.”

She agreed.

“Getting good, eh?”

She nodded.

“Isn't it illegal?”

She chuckled.

Cawti still hadn't said anything. About then Aibynn increased his speed and caught up with Alieria. “This way,” he said.

I said, “Why?” at just the same moment Alieria did.

“Just want to see something.”

“Loiosh, is anyone around?”

"I don't think so, boss. But you know I can't always tell with these guys."

"Eyeball it. Check out the way our friend is heading."

"Okay."

After a few minutes he said, *"Nothing I can see, boss. You're almost up to the clearing where they caught you."*

"Oh. That explains it, then."

"It does?"

We got there. The ashes in the fire were quite cold by now. Aibynn found his drum, looked it over, and nodded. If it had been destroyed, I'd have been convinced he was friendly to us. As it was, I still owed him something, but I had no way of knowing what sort of payment he deserved. Time would tell. He also hunted around some more, then gave a small sound of satisfaction and pulled a mass of fur from near the tree I'd fallen from. He shook it and put it on his head.

"What kind of animal was that?" I asked.

"A norska."

"Oh, yes, I see." It was dark brown and white, and still had the norska face in it, with the fangs showing. It didn't look nearly as absurd or disgusting as it ought to have.

We resumed our walk.

I allowed myself to feel cautiously optimistic; the entire army of Greenaere, if there was one, would have a hard time keeping Alera away from that boat, especially if Morrolan was on the other end.

"The sky is getting light in the east," said Alera.

"We're not going to make it," said Cawti.

"Tell me where the bay is," said Aibynn. "I can probably get us

there during flood tomorrow without being seen.”

“In the daylight?” I said.

He nodded.

Cawti said, “What do you mean, probably?”

“It depends which bay you mean. If it's Chottmon's Bay, there's too much open ground.”

We all studied him. “If Daymar were here,” said Alieria, “he could mind-probe him and—”

“If Daymar were here,” I said, “he'd still be back at the Palace studying the weave on the rugs while the army took potshots at his back.”

“Does he like rugs?” inquired Aibynn.

“All right,” said Alieria. “I'll inform Morrolan of the delay. The bay is marked by a high pinnacle, like a crown, on one side, and a stand of tall thin trees on the other. It is about a quarter of a mile across, and there is a small barren islet in the middle.”

“Dark Woman's Cove,” said Aibynn. “No problem.”

“Remember,” I said. “This is—”

“Yes. A knife.”

He set out in the lead. We moved slowly, but steadily, and didn't run into anyone looking for us. Aibynn appeared to wander aimlessly, hardly looking where he was going and never stopping to look around. I stayed right behind him, ready to stick a knife in his kidney at the first sign that he'd betrayed us. If he knew this, he didn't give any indication, and it was the middle of the afternoon when we saw the little bay, with a lonely ship sitting in the middle of it.

We waited in the woods that came right up to the beach while they sent a boat for us.

Cawti still had hardly spoken to me.

He stood on the prow of the ship, tall, aloof, Dragaeran, and dry. The Orca on the ship assisted us without any questions, and a few of them gave him dark looks. I suspect these had to do with Blackwand, sheathed at his side. No one wants to be that close to any Morganti weapon, and Blackwand was the kind of blade that survivors write dirges about.

He and Alera were cousins, both of the House of the Dragon, which meant they preferred a good battle to a good meal—practically my definition of madness. They were young as Dragaerans go, less than five hundred years old. I'd live out my entire life while they were both young, but no sense in dwelling on that. He wore the black and silver of the House of the Dragon with the emphasis on the black, she with the emphasis on the silver. She was short and quick; he was tall and just as quick. The three of us got acquainted one day in the Paths of the Dead. Well, that isn't strictly true, but never mind. There were things that made us friends in spite of differences in species, House, class, and how important we rated food, but never mind that, either.

He was there, waiting, when the boat with two undistinguished Orca brought us to the ship.

He gave Aibynn a curious glance, but didn't mention him. He gave a crisp order, and the ship swung a little, shook, turned, settled, and began to move. We sailed neatly away from the island, as if the escape had been no major feat at all. Which, I suppose, it really hadn't, my nerves to the contrary.

I watched the splotch that was Greenaere begin to grow smaller against the reddish horizon, and a tightness in my chest of which I hadn't been aware began to ease. I glanced at the crew, and was a

bit disappointed that they were strangers; for some reason I wouldn't have minded running into Yinta, or someone else from Chorba's Pride. On the other hand, I wasn't seasick, in spite of no longer having the charm I'd set out with.

Spray hit my face and stung my eyes as the sails above me snapped full, dragging the ship along. Morrolan stood next to me, Alieria next to him. Aibynn was near the front, the prow or the bow or whatever, doing something to his drum. Cawti was not in sight.

I said, "I owe you one, Morrolan."

He said, "I'm disturbed."

"About my owing you something?"

"Daymar said he couldn't maintain the contact with you."

"Yes. I wondered about that."

"I feel something on that island."

Alieria said, "There's a reason why our links to the Orb were severed. It wasn't the distance."

"It dislikes me," said Morrolan.

I said, "Huh?"

"He doesn't like it," said Alieria.

"Oh."

Morrolan shifted slightly, keeping his eyes on the island. His long fingers rubbed the large ruby on his silver shirt. I looked back. The island was almost invisible now.

Loiosh was on my shoulder. I said, "*Where's Rocza?*"

"She stayed home."

"Not the oceangoing type?"

"I guess not. She was worried about you, though."

"That's good to hear. You must have had quite a flight getting back to shore."

He didn't answer at once. Images came to mind that reminded me very much of a dream I'd just had. My imaginary wings still ached. He said, "*I was worried about you, boss.*"

"*Yeah. Me, too.*"

I left Morrolan and Alier there and walked around the deck until I found Cawti. She was studying the ocean ahead as I'd been watching behind. There was even more spray here; heavy droplets instead of a fine mist. Night was sneaking up behind day, ready to strike.

"You seem not to trust your friend," she said.

"I don't."

"Then why did you bring him along?"

"If they aren't playing some kind of game, then I owe him."

"I see. You always pay your debts, don't you, Vlad?"

"I detect a note of irony in your voice."

She gave me no answer.

"You rescued me," I said after a while.

"Did you doubt we would?"

"I didn't know you could. I didn't know Loiosh would be able to cross that much water."

"It must have been hard for you."

"Not as hard as—" I stopped, studied my fingernails, and said, "It wasn't that bad."

She nodded, still not looking at me.

I said, "I'm glad the revolution could spare you for a few days."

"Don't be snide."

I bit my lip. "I hadn't actually intended that the way it sounded."

She nodded again. There was a splash off to the left. Probably more orca, but I'd missed them. She spoke softly, so I could hardly

hear her over the creaking and wind.

“I watch the passing hours dress
Themselves in robes of twilight grey,
And sit here, pale and powerless
To halt the ending of the day.

“A bitter tale it seemed to me
Who thought my lesson fully learned
To open wounds I deemed to be
Unfairly dealt, not truly earned.

“But tomorrow we begin again
To open veins for words to say:
Enlightenment through common pain,
Dressed in robes of twilight grey.”

After an interval of tossing ship and breaking waves I said,
“Sounds Eastern.”

“It's mine.”

I looked at her. She didn't move. I said, “I didn't know you wrote poetry.”

“There's a great deal that—no. Sorry. It came to me a few nights ago, as I was sitting there, worried about you. Or maybe wondering if I should be more worried about you; I don't know which.”

“A bitter tale,” I agreed. “What does it mean?”
She shrugged. “How should I know?”

“You wrote it.”

“Yes. Well, if there was something buried in it that I was trying to say, I don't know what it is.”

“Let me know if you get any ideas.”

The corner of her mouth twitched.

I watched the ocean do its ocean stuff some more. Up and down, and across, going nowhere. That kind of thing.

“I'm trying,” said Cawti, “to think of something deep and philosophical to say about waves, but I'm not having any luck.”

“You'll find something.”

She shook her head. “No, but I ought to. About how they start somewhere, and keep coming closer, then they move you around and keep going, but we don't know what causes them, or where they come from, or, well, something like that.”

“Mmmm.”

“You made a lot of waves, didn't you, Vlad?”

“Are you speaking in general or in specific?”

“Both, I guess. No, in specific.”

“Do you mean the whole business of the last few months, with the Organization, and the Empire, and your friend Kelly?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, I guess I made a lot of waves. I didn't have much choice.”

“I suppose not.”

“I wonder what Herth is up to.”

“Word is, he's happily retired on what you gave him for South Adrilankha.”

“South Adrilankha,” I repeated. “The Easterners' ghetto.”

“Yes.”

“And now I'm the one who runs it.”

“Not all of it.”

“No. Just the illegal parts.”

“Going to clean it up?”

“Do I detect a note of irony in your voice?”

“A note? No. A symphony, perhaps.”

“You don't think I can, or you don't think I will?”

“I don't think you can.”

“Who's to stop me?”

After perhaps a minute she said, “What do you mean, clean it up? Just what illegal activities do you intend to continue?”

“The ones they want. I'll make sure the gambling is fair, that the warehouses are clean and the tags are treated well, that the loans are at reasonable rates, that—”

“How can gambling be fair for people who can't afford to gamble at all? How much does it help to give fair treatment to people who are selling their bodies? What is a reasonable loan rate to someone who has gone into debt because he lost everything at one of your tables, and how will you collect from those who can't pay?”

I shrugged. “It's going to go on, anyway. I'll be better than anyone else.”

“I think I've made my point.”

“I can't solve all the problems of the whole world. And neither can your friend Kelly, however much he thinks he can.”

“Have you been paying attention lately? Haven't you seen it?”

“Seen what? Parades of Teckla through the streets? People in parks shouting at each other about things they already agree with?

Posters that say—”

“And now there are Phoenix Guards watching them, Vlad. And I mean Phoenix Guards—not Teckla put into cloaks and given spears. That means they're scared, Vlad, and it means they don't

dare use conscripts. Do you think maybe they know something you don't? Three weeks ago, even two weeks ago, none of that was going on except in South Adrilankha. Now you even see some of it on Lower Kieron. At this rate, what's going to happen in another two weeks? Another two months?"

"In my opinion, not much."

"I'm aware that you think so. But perhaps—"

"No, I don't want to argue about your damned revolution."

She shrugged "You brought it up."

"Can we talk about us?"

"Yes," she said, but I found I didn't have anything clever to say after that.

The ship plunged, the waves broke around it, to re-form in our wake as if we'd never been. I wanted to say something deep and philosophical about that, but nothing came to mind.

"I'm going to get some sleep," I said. "If Aibynn starts drumming, throw him overboard." I shifted with the waves until I found the tiny ladder that led to the area below the deck. I found a place to stretch out, located a blanket, and let the ship rock me to sleep. It must have been about ten hours later that the same rocking woke me up. I stumbled up the ladder, banged my shoulder against something metal that some idiot had fastened to the wall (I think it was a hinge), scraped my shin when my feet slipped on the ladder, and made it onto the deck. Morrolan was still where I'd left him. The orange-red sky was hidden by low grey clouds, and the wind was vicious indeed.

Morrolan's cloak whipped about him in a frenzy of romantic appeal. I was still wearing the shapeless robe I'd been given while imprisoned, or I'd have been romantic, too. Sure. I made my way

along the railing until I was next to him.

“Rough sea,” I said, almost shouting above the roar of water and wind and creaking wood. He nodded. I looked around, suddenly thinking how flimsy the ship was. I said, “Anything unnatural about the weather?” He gave me a funny look. “Why do you ask?” “Tell you the truth, I don't know. Is there?” He shook his head. Loiosh landed on my shoulder. “*Think we 're in for a storm?*” I asked him.

“How should I know?”

“I thought animals had instincts about that kind of thing.”

“Heh.”

“What do you make of friend Aibynn?”

“I don't know, boss. He's funny.”

“Yeah.”

I checked the time through my link to the Orb, found out it was well before noon, but long past when I usually break my fast, and realized I was hungry. I started to ask Morrolan about food when it hit me. “I have my link to the Orb again.”

He nodded. Talkative son of a bitch.

“When did it happen?”

“During the night sometime.”

“Well, that's a relief.”

“Yes.”

“What about food?”

“There's bread and cheese and whitefruit and dried kethna below.”

“That'll do. Couldn't we just teleport home from here?”

“Go ahead. I'm in no hurry.”

“If we run into a storm—”

“I've decided that we won't.”

“Ah. Never mind, then.”

I went below again, found the food, and did appropriate things with it.

As the next day's dawn spilled an orangish tint on the sea to our right, the city of Adrilankha peered down from the Whitecrest Hills and spread her port and docks like a lap to receive us. The sailors gave us, and Morrolan in particular, ugly looks, because they knew he'd managed the winds that had brought us home so quickly, and Orca, I've learned, believe that if one conjures fair winds, nature will respond with a storm as soon as she can manage it. Perhaps they're right. But Adrilankha, staring down at us like a great white bird, the cliffs her wings and her head the great manor of the Lyorn Daro, Countess of Whitecrest, didn't seem to care. Neither did I, for that matter.

As we passed Beacon Rock, the crew raised a bucket of water from the sea and spilled it on the deck, a ritual I've always wondered about, since I'm told that Adrilankha is the only port at which it is performed. They went through it mechanically, then prepared ropes and did other sailor things that I understood no better than I had the last time I saw them.

But I wasn't really watching then. Alera was next to me, Morrolan next to her, with Aibynn on my other side, and Cawti a little further away. Loiosh was on my right shoulder. I wondered what was passing through their minds as the city grew before us, one building at a time: the Old Castle, where the Three Barons had practiced their strange magics during an Athyra reign a few cycles ago; Michaagu's, perhaps the best restaurant in the Empire except for Valabar's; the Wine Exchange, fat and brown, built of stone that plunged deep into the hill.

And behind them, the city. Or, rather, the cities, for we had each our own: Alieria and Morrolan, who didn't live there, knew the Imperial Palace and her surrounding Great Houses; a perpetually trimmed garden below the slopes of the Saddle Hills. Aibynn, perhaps, saw a place as strange and wild and unknown as his island was to me. Cawti would see South Adrilankha, the Easterners' ghetto, with her slums and her stench and her open-air markets and Easterners who walked always lightly, ready to run from the Phoenix Guards, or the occasional young Dzur adventurer, or damn near anyone else. I saw the city that held my special place along Lower Kieron Road, where the bitter of violence mixed with the sweet of luxury, and you walked with your eyes open, either to grab at a passing opportunity or to prevent yourself from becoming one.

These cities loomed before us, one and many, growing larger and more present as we watched; they took my eyes and held them as the dock lieutenant signaled to our ship with the black and yellow flags of safe harbor, and guided us in.

I was home, and I was afraid, and I didn't know why.

TWO

Business Considerations

Lesson Six

DEALING WITH MIDDLE MANAGEMENT I

“PEOPLE ARE STARTING to ask about you, Vlad,” said Kragar, two minutes before the door blew down in front of us.

I was three days back from Greenaere. Cawti was off seeing her old friend Kelly and his merry band of nut cases and I had returned to running my business and trying to clean up South Adrilankha without filing Surrender of Debts to the Empire. (This is a joke; the Empire would not accept Jhereg debts. Just thought I should clarify that.)

Progress on all fronts was nil. That is, Cawti and I kept trying to talk and it kept going around in circles. I still didn't have an office in South Adrilankha, and I had no reliable reports coming in. I had not heard from Verra. I didn't know what Aibynn thought of Adrilankha because he didn't talk much; in fact, he wasn't around much. I still wondered if he was a spy. I had explained the situation to Kragar, who had suggested getting Daymar to probe his mind. The idea made me uncomfortable, and I wasn't sure if it would even work. We were discussing various alternatives when Kragar suddenly said, “Never mind that. There are more pressing problems, anyway.”

“Like what?” I said, which is when he said, “People are starting to ask about you, Vlad.”

“What people?” I said.

“I don't know, but someone above you in the Organization.”

“What's he asking about?”

“About that group of Easterners and your relationship with them.”

“Kelly's people?”

“Yeah. Someone's afraid that you're involved with them.”

“Can you find out—what was that? Did you just hear something?”

“I think so.”

“Melestav, what's going on?”

“Commotion of some sort downstairs, boss. Should I check it out?”

“No, hang tight for now.”

“Okay. I'll let you know if—” He broke the connection, or it was broken for him. I caught a quick flash of pain, as if he'd been hit. I took a dagger into my right hand and held it out of sight below the desk. Then came a rumble, and Loiosh yelled into my mind, and the door blew down. There were six Jhereg standing in the doorway, all of them armed. Melestav hung limp between two of them. There was blood on his forehead. His eyes flickered open like a candle uncertain if it should ignite, but then they focused. He caught my eye, turned his head to the enforcers supporting him, taking a good hard look at each one, then he looked back at me. He made a weak attempt at a smile and said, “Someone here to see you, boss.”

I kept my hands under the desk as I studied the intruders. They had to assume I was armed, but there were more of them than there was of me. I was puzzled. I knew that they had not come in here specifically to kill me, because there were too many of them for that. On the other hand, I doubted their intentions were friendly.

One of them, a relatively short Jhereg with curly red hair and puffy eyes, said, “Bring your hands up where we can see them.”

I let another dagger fall into my left hand and said, “I’d just as soon not, thanks.”

He looked significantly at Melestav. I made a significant shrug. He said, “There’s someone who wants to see you.”

I said, “Tell him I don’t appreciate how he sends his invitations.”

Puff-eyes looked at me for a moment, then said, “We haven’t killed any of your people—yet. And the gentleman who wants to see you is in a hurry. It’s probably in your best interest to let me see your hands.” He sounded like he had something caught in his throat.

“All right,” I said, and brought my hands up. I was still holding the daggers. I think they hadn’t expected that.

Puff-eyes cleared his throat, which didn’t help. He said, “You want to put those down, or should we settle things right now?”

Six of them, one of me. All right. I deliberately turned and threw the daggers, one at a time, into the center of the wall target. Then I turned back to them, folded my hands, and said, “Now what?”

“Come with us,” he said, and nodded to a bony Jhereg who looked like he was made out of knotted rope. The latter made a few economical gestures with his hands, and I felt the teleport begin to take effect. I clenched my jaws against the nausea and wondered who could afford to casually hire a sorcerer who could teleport seven at once. Or maybe it wasn’t as casual as it seemed. Maybe—but it was too late for that kind of speculation.

Body and mind went through the sieve and emerged, more or less unchanged, in a part of town I knew, in front of a lapidary’s shop that I also knew. I said, “Toronnan.”

They didn’t bother to answer, but then I hadn’t really phrased it as a

question.

We made a parade into the shop where a fellow with the looks and in the dress of the House of the Chreotha did long-fingered things with thin silvery wire and a pair of curved pliers. I had it on good authority that this “Chreotha” had at least three kills on his record; he played his role, however, and didn't give us a glance as we went by.

My stomach, which always flops around when I teleport, was settling down enough for me to be annoyed that Loiosh had been too far away when the teleport went into effect. On the other hand, what could he do? We came to a door at the end of a hallway of tan-colored wood paneling, and one of my escort clapped.

“Come ahead,” came the muffled sound from inside, and he opened the door.

Toronnan was my boss, if you will. That is, my area was inside of his, and he got a cut of everything I made. In exchange for this, I was rarely bothered by anyone trying to push his way into my area, and I got the benefits of the Jhereg connection inside the Imperial Palace. His office was neither terribly impressive nor revealing. He didn't have a knife target like I did, he didn't have any psiprints of his family or scenes of gently sloping hillsides with happy Teckla working the fields. Just a bookcase with a few folders neatly tucked into it, a wooden desk with a smooth top and a neat array of quill pens on one side, blotter, paper, and well on the other, a tray of sweetmeats on the right corner, a pitcher of water with a half—full glass next to it, a brandy decanter with six glasses near the pitcher. There was one other chair, although there would have been room for several. There were no windows, but that was hardly surprising.

Thereg custom forbids assassination in or around one's home; it says nothing about one's workplace.

Toronnan himself was a small, nervous-looking man, with almost invisible eyebrows and thin lips. His demeanor might make one think of him as weak and harmless, which he wasn't. As I walked in he stood up and put a folder into the bookshelf next to him and motioned me to sit. I did, he did, and he nodded to my escort. They closed the door behind them. I liked it that he put whatever he was working on away; sometimes people like to show how powerful they are by ignoring you for a while. I said, "You know, you could have wheels installed on that chair, so you could scoot over to the bookcase and not have to stand up. That's how I do it. Saves time, you know."

He said, "No, this is about the only exercise I get these days." His voice was smooth, like a minstrel's, and deep. It always made me want to hear him sing.

"I understand," I said.

He kept his eyes fastened on mine. I was uncomfortably aware that my back was to the door. Normally this doesn't bother me because most of the time Loioh is there.

After a moment he shook his head. "How long has it been, Baronet? Three years that you've been working for me?"

"About that," I said.

He nodded. "You've been earning pretty good, and keeping your buttons polished, and not spilling anyone's wine. There were people in the Organization who were nervous about an Easterner trying to run a territory, but I told them, 'Give the lad a chance, see what he does,' and you've done all right."

This didn't seem to call for a response, so I waited.

“Of course,” he continued, “there’s been a bit of trouble from time to time, but as near as I can tell you haven’t started it. You haven’t been too greedy, and you haven’t let anyone push you around. The money’s been coming in, and your books have been balancing. I like that.”

He paused again; I waited again.

“But now,” he said, “I’m hearing things I don’t like so much. Any idea what I’ve been hearing?”

“You’ve heard that I use paper flowers on my dining table? It’s not true, boss. I—”

“Don’t try to be funny, all right? I’ve heard that you’ve been associating with a group of Easterners who want to bring about the next Teckla reign early, or who maybe want to just throw the whole Cycle out, or something on this order. I don’t care what the particulars are. But these people, their interests don’t coincide with ours. Do you understand this?”

I stared at the ceiling, trying to sort things out. The fact was, I didn’t really have anything to do with those people, except that my wife happened to be one of them.

But, on the other hand, I didn’t feel like explaining myself. I said, “To tell you the truth, I think these people are harmless nuts.”

“The Empire doesn’t think so,” he said. “And there are some people above me in the Organization who don’t think so, either. And there are some who want to know what you’re doing with them.”

I said, “I’ve just taken over Herth’s interest in South Adrilankha. Why don’t you relax for a while, see what the profits look like, and then decide?”

He shook his head. “We can’t do that. Word’s come down from our

Imperial contacts that, well, you don't need to know the details. We have to make sure that no one in our organization is involved with those people.”

“I see.”

“Can I have your assurance that you won't be involved with them in the future?”

He was staring at me hard. I almost felt threatened. I said, “Tell me something: Why is that every time I talk to someone who's high up in the Organization, you always sound the same? Do you go to some special school or something?”

“I wouldn't say I'm high up,” he said.

“Now you're just being modest. No, I take it back. The Demon doesn't sound like the rest of you.”

“How do we sound?”

“Oh, you know. The same sort of short sentences, like you want to get in all the facts and nothing more.”

“Does it work?”

“I guess so.”

“Well, there you are.”

“But if I ever get that high, am I going to sound like that, too? It worries me. I may have to change all my plans for the future.”

“Baronet, I know you're a real funny guy, okay? You don't have to prove it to me. And I know you're tough, too, so you don't have to prove that, either. But the people I'm dealing with on this aren't interested in a jongleur, and they're a lot tougher than you are. Are we clear on that?”

I nodded.

“Good. Now, can you give me any assurances about these Easterners?”

“I can tell you they don't like me. I don't like them, either. I don't have any plans to have anything to do with them. But I control that area now, and I'm going to run it as I see fit. If that brings me into contact with them, I can't tell you how I'll handle it until it comes up. That's the best I can do.”

He nodded slowly, looking at me. Then he said, “I'm not sure that's good enough.”

I matched his gaze. I was armed and he knew it, but I was in his office, in the one chair he had. If he had done half the things in his office that I'd done in mine, he could kill me without moving a muscle. But sometimes it's safer not to back down. I said, “It's the best I can do.”

A moment later he said, “All right. We'll leave it at that and see what happens. Leave the door open when you leave.” He stood up as I did and gave me a bow of courtesy.

As I was leaving the building, the sorcerer who'd brought me there offered to teleport me back. I declined. It was only a couple of miles.

“But my feet are already sore,” said Kragar.

The sorcerer jumped about twenty feet straight up. I managed not to, though it was close.

“How long have you been here?” he said.

Kragar looked puzzled and said, “You teleported me yourself; you should know.”

I said, “Sorry, it looks like a walk today,” and we left before the sorcerer could decide if he ought to do anything. When we were safely away, we let ourselves laugh good and hard.

It was well past midnight when Cawti returned. Rocza flew from her shoulder and greeted Loioosh, while Cawti threw her gloves at

the hall stand, flopped onto an end of the couch, pulled her boots off, wriggled her toes, stretched like a cat, and said, “You're up late.”

“Reading,” I said, holding up the heavy volume as evidence.

“What is it?”

“A collection of essays by survivors of Adron's Disaster and the early years of the Interregnum.”

“Any good?”

“Some of them are. Most of them don't have anything to do with the Adron's Disaster or the Interregnum, though.”

“Dragaerans are like that.”

“Yes,” I said. “Mostly they want to talk about the inevitability of cataclysm after a Great Cycle, or the Real True Ultimate Meaning of the rebirth of the Phoenix.”

“Sounds dull.”

“Is, for the most part. There are a few good ones. There's an Athyra named Broinn who says that it was the effort to use sorcery during the Interregnum, when it was almost impossible, that forced sorcerers to develop the skill that makes sorcery so powerful now.”

“Interesting. So he doesn't think the Orb was changed by going to the Halls of Judgment?”

I nodded. “It's sort of an attractive theory.”

“Yes, it is. Funny that it never crossed my mind.”

“Nor mine,” I said. “Seen our houseguest?”

“Not lately. He's probably all right.”

“I guess. He's not the type to get himself into trouble. I still wonder if he's a spy.”

“Do you care?”

“I care if he made a dupe of me. Other than that, no. I don't feel

any special loyalty to the Empire, if that's what you're asking.” She nodded and stretched again, arms over her head. Her hair, long and dark brown and curling just a bit at the end, was pleasantly disarrayed over her narrow face. Her warm eyes always seemed big for her face, and her dark complexion made it seem as if she was always half in shadow. I ached for her, but I was getting used to that.

Maybe I'd get used to not seeing the little tic of her lip before she made an ironic remark, or the way she'd stare at the ceiling with her head tilted, her brow creased, and her wrists crossed on her lap when she was really thinking hard about something.

Maybe I'd get used to that. Then again, maybe not.

She was looking at me, eyes big and inquiring, and I wondered if she guessed what I'd been thinking. I said, “Are your people up to anything that you can tell me about?”

Her expression didn't change. “Why?”

“I got called in today. The back room wants me to assure them I'm not cooperating with Kelly. I think something's going on with the Empire, and the Organization thinks something's going on in South Adrilankha.”

Her gaze didn't leave mine. “There's nothing going on that I can tell you about.”

“So you people are up to something.”

She stared at me vacantly, a look that meant she was pondering something, probably how much to tell me, and didn't want the reflections of her thoughts careening across her face. At last she said, “Not the way you mean it. Yes, we're organizing. We're building. You've probably seen things in your own area.”

“A few,” I said. “But I can't tell how serious it is, and I need to

know.”

“We think things are going to break soon. I can't give you details of—”

“How soon?”

“How soon what? An uprising? No, nothing like that. Vlad, do you realize how easy it is for the Empire to find out what we're doing?”

“Spies?”

“No, although that's possible, too. I mean that the spells for listening through walls are far more readily available to the Empire than the spells to counteract them are to us.”

“That's true, I guess.” I didn't say that I had trouble imagining the Empire being concerned enough about them to bother; that wouldn't have gone over well. On reflection, what with the Phoenix Guards all over the place, it might not be true, either.

“All right,” she continued. “That means that what we do can't really be secret. So it isn't. When we make plans, we assume the Empire could find out about them as they're made. So we don't hide anything. A question like 'How soon?' doesn't mean anything, because all we're doing is preparing. Who knows? Tomorrow? Next year?”

We're getting ready for it. Conditions there—”

“I know about conditions there.”

“Yes,” she said. “You do.”

I stared at her for a moment and tried to come up with something to say. I couldn't, so

I grunted, picked up my book, and pretended to read.

An hour or so later Aibynn clapped at the door and came in. He ducked his head like a Teckla, smiled shyly, and sat down. His drum was clutched under his arm, as was something that looked

like a rolled-up piece of paper.

“Been playing?” I asked him.

He nodded. “I found this,” he said, and unrolled the thing.

“Looks like a piece of leather,” I said.

“It is,” he said. “Calfskin.” He seemed unreasonably excited.

“Don't you have cows on the island? I'm sure I saw—”

“But look how thin it is.”

“Now that you mention it, it is pretty transparent. Are the cows different here?”

He shook his head impatiently, “It's the tanning and cutting. I've never seen calfskin this thin. It's as thin as fish skin, and warmer.”

“Warmer?”

“That's how they make those big drums sound so good.”

“What big drums?”

“The ones outside the Imperial Palace, that they play every day to announce the ceremonies and things.”

“I've never noticed them.”

“You haven't? They're huge, like this.” He stuck his arms way out.

“And they get about ten of them going at once and—”

“Now that you mention it, I have heard some of that, behind the homs, doing the Reckoning every day.”

“Is that what it's called? But now I know how they get the drums to sound that way. Calfskin. I'd never have believed it. They work better in the air here, too.”

“The air?”

“The air in the city is really dry. I haven't been able to make my drum sound right since I got here.”

This was the first time I'd ever heard anyone suggest that Adrilankha, a city pushed flat against the southern coast, was too

dry. “Oh,” I said.

“Why do they wear masks?”

“Who?”

“The drummers.”

“Oh. Hmm. I've never thought about it.”

He nodded and wandered off to the blue room. As he left, he was running his fingers across the piece of leather, still holding his drum under his arm.

I noticed Cawti looking at me, but I couldn't read her expression.

“Calfskin,” I told her. “They make the drums out of calfskin.”

“Nothing to it, when you know,” she said.

“Maybe that's our problem, though. Maybe the air here is too dry for us.”

She smiled gently. “I've suspected that for a long time.”

I nodded and settled back in my chair. Rocza landed on her arm and stared up at me quizzically. “Calfskin,” I told her. She flew off again.

I sat in the lower east parlor of Castle Black and looked at the Lord Morrolan. He didn't look so tall sitting down.

After a while he said, “What is it, Vlad?”

“I want to talk about revolution.”

He cocked his head and raised both eyebrows. “Please?”

“Revolution. Peasant uprising. Violence in the streets.”

“What about it?”

“Could it happen?”

“Certainly. It has before.”

“Successfully?”

“That depends upon the meaning you choose for success. There

have been rulers slain by their own peasants. During the War of the Barons there was a case where an entire county—I believe Longgrass—was turned into—”

“I mean more long-term success. Could the peasants take and hold power?”

“In the Empire?”

“Yes.”

“Impossible. Not until the Cycle points to the Teckla, in any case, which will be several thousand years from now. We'll both be safely dead by then.”

“You're quite certain?”

“That we'll be dead?”

“No, that it couldn't happen.”

“I'm certain. Why?”

“There's this group of revolutionaries that Cawti's gotten involved with.”

“Ah, yes. Sethra mentioned something about them a few weeks ago.”

“Sethra? How would she know?”

“Because she is Sethra.”

“Mmmm. What did she say?”

Morrolan paused, looking up at the ceiling as he remembered.

“Very little, actually.

She seemed to be concerned, but I don't know why.”

“Perhaps I should speak with her, then.”

“Perhaps. She will be coming here later this evening to discuss the war.”

I felt a frown settle around my lips. “What war?”

“Well, there isn't one yet. But surely you've heard the news.”

“No,” I said hesitantly. “What news?”

“An Imperial cargo vessel, the Song of Clouds, was rammed and sunk yesterday by raiders from Greenaere.”

“Greenaere,” I said, swallowing bile. “Oh.”

Lesson Seven

MATTERS OF STATE I

MORROLAN, ALIERA, AND I lunched in the small den, with an opening onto a balcony that looked down at the ground a mile below. I did not partake of the view.

Morrolan's cooks prepared a cold soup of duck with cinnamon, an assortment of chilled fruit, kethna with thyme and honey, various green vegetables with ginger and garlic, and wafers dipped in a strawberry glaze. As was his custom, he laid out several wines with the meal, rather than selecting one for each course. I had a dry white from the Tan Coast, and stayed with it for the whole meal, except for dessert, when I switched to what my grandfather would have called plum brandy, but the Dragaerans called plum wine.

The subject was war. Aliera's green eyes were bright as she speculated about landings on Greenaere, while Morrolan thoughtfully considered naval commissions. I kept trying to find out why it was happening. After shrugging off the question several times, Aliera said, "How can we know why they did it?"

"Well, hasn't there been any communication between the Empire and the island?"

"Perhaps," said Morrolan. "But we know nothing of it."

"You could ask Norathar—"

"There is no need," said Aliera. "She'll tell us as much as she can, when she can."

I glowered into my duck and tossed down more wine. I don't usually toss wine down; I tend to drink it in installments of two or three gulps at a time. Aliera, who holds her glass like she's holding

a bird, bottom two fingers properly under the stem, takes tiny lady-like sips at dinner, but when she's out in the field, as I happen to know, she'll slug it down like anyone else. Morrolan always holds the glass by the bowl, as if it were a stemless tumbler, and takes long, slow sips, his eyes looking across at his dinner partner, or the person with whom he is speaking. Now he was looking at me.

He replaced his glass, which contained something thick and purple, and said, "Why are you so interested?"

Aliera snorted before I had time to speak. "What do you think, cousin? He was just there, and everyone was after him. He wants to know if whatever he did caused this. I don't know why he should care, but that's what he's after."

I shrugged. Morrolan nodded slowly. "What did you do?"

"Nothing I can talk about."

"He probably killed someone," said Aliera.

Morrolan said, "Did you kill someone of sufficient importance to prompt anger at the Empire?"

"Let's change the subject," I said.

"As you wish," said Morrolan.

Ginger and cinnamon were the main scents of this meal. Loiosh sat on my left shoulder and received occasional scraps. He thought there was too much ginger in the vegetable dish. I told him that, in the first place, there was no such thing as too much ginger and, in the second, jhereg don't eat vegetables. He was saying something jhereg in the wild versus civilized jhereg when one of Morrolan's servants, an elderly woman who moved like a Seriolli water clock and had streaks of black in her grey hair, entered and announced, "Sethra Lavode."

We all stood. Sethra entered, bowed slightly, and seated herself

between Alieria and me. She always preferred to be announced without titles; part of her mystique, I guess, though I couldn't say if it was sincere or contrived. You haven't met her yet, so picture if you will a tall Dragaeran wearing a black blouse with big, puffy sleeves drawn tight around her wrists, black trousers tucked into calf-high black boots, a silver chain from which hung a pendant depicting a dragon's head with two yellow gems for eyes, and long silver dangling-things on her ears that glittered when she moved. She had the high, sharp cheekbones of a Dragonlord and the pointed Dzur hairline. Her eyes, which slanted upward as a Dzurlord's, were dark and set deep in her head, and looking into them one always felt the danger of being lost in the thousands of years of undead memory she held. Iceflame, blue hilt against the black, created echoes inside my mind. She was a vampire, a sorcerer, a warrior, and a statesman. Her powers were legendary. Sometimes I thought she was my friend.

"You are discussing the war, I presume?" she said.

"We have been," said Morrolan. "Have you news?"

"Yes. Greenaere has formed an alliance with Elde Island."

Alieria and Morrolan exchanged looks that I couldn't interpret, then Morrolan said, "That's rather surprising, considering their histories."

Sethra shook her head. "They haven't actually fought since before the Interregnum."

"Last time we fought Elde," said Alieria, "Greenaere was on our side."

"Yes," said Sethra. "And they lost half their fleet for their trouble."

"Fleet?" said Morrolan. "Then they have a navy?"

"They have many fishing boats, and most of them are capable of

long voyages. The fishermen become their navy when they need one.”

“Do they have a standing army?” asked Alieria.

“Not to speak of,” I said.

They both looked at me. When I didn't elaborate, Morrolan cleared his throat and said, “Elde does.”

“It seems strange,” I said, “that they think they can win against the Empire.”

“Perhaps,” said Alieria, “they're hoping it won't come to war.”

“In that case, they're stupid,” said Morrolan.

“Not necessarily,” said Alieria. “They haven't done so badly in the past. There have been nine wars with Elde, and—”

“Eleven,” said Sethra. “Twelve if you include the first invasion of Dragaerans, but I suppose we oughtn't to include that one.”

“However many,” said Alieria. “The Empire has never won decisively. If we had, they'd be part of us.”

Morrolan made a dismissing gesture. “They've always been hurt worse than we have.”

“Not always,” said Alieria. “They attacked during the Ash Mountain uprising, and we had to negotiate a peace. A common ancestor of ours was beheaded for that fiasco, Morrolan.”

“Ah, yes,” he said. “I remember. But other than that—”

“And during the fifteenth Issola reign, they attacked again and we had to sue for peace.”

“There was a war with the East at the time.” “All right, so as long as we're not distracted—”

“So,” interrupted Sethra. “Just what is going on in South Adrilankha, Vlad?” First Morrolan, then Alieria stopped and looked at me as the significance of what she'd said hit.

“Good question,” I said. “I've been wondering about that myself.” Among my enforcers and bodyguards was a guy called Sticks, named for his favorite weapon. I called him into my office and had him sit down. He did, his long legs stretched out in front of him, his demeanor relaxed. He always seemed relaxed. Even when he was in action, which I've seen close up during a recent incident I don't care to dwell on, he never seemed to be hurried or upset. I said to him, “You told me once that you used to work connecting musicians with inns that wanted music.” He nodded.

“Do you still have much connection with it?”

“Not really.”

“Do you know the others in the business?”

“Oh, yeah. There are eight or ten who keep it pretty well locked up.”

“Name some names.”

“Sure. There's a woman named Aisse. I wouldn't work with her, though.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “She never seems to know quite what she's doing. And when she does, she never lets the musicians know. Word is she lies a lot, especially when she screws up.”

“Okay. Who else?”

“There's a fellow named Phent who doesn't lie quite as much, but he's about as incompetent and he charges twice what everyone else does. He's got a lock on the low-life places. They suit him.”

“I might need him. Where can I find him?”

“Number fourteen Fishmonger Street.”

“Okay, who else?”

“There's Greenbough. He's not too bad when he isn't drunk. D'Rai

will keep you working, but she'll also get a hold on you and try to keep everything you play sounding the same. Most of the musicians I know don't like that.”

“Blood of the goddess, Sticks, isn't there anyone good in the business?”

“Not really. The best of the lot is an outfit run by three Easterners named Tomas, Oscar, and Ramon. They have South Adrilankha and a few of the better inns north of town.”

“How do I reach them?”

“About a mile and a half up Lower Kieron, behind the Wolves' Den, upstairs.”

“I know the place. Okay, thanks.”

“Mind if I ask why you're interested, boss?”

“I'd rather not say, at the moment.”

“All right. That all?”

“Yeah. Have Melestav send Kragar in.” As he shut the door, Kragar said, “Mind if I ask why you're interested, Vlad?”

I jumped, stared at him, and said, “Were you here the whole time?”

“I didn't know it was private.”

“It doesn't matter. I'm after a couple of things. One is to see if I can help Aibynn find work. The other is to get another source of information in South Adrilankha. Musicians hear almost as much gossip as whores.”

“Makes sense.”

“Since you've already got the information, why don't you go make contact with that group behind the Wolves' Den?”

“What, you want me to do something safe and easy for a change? Sure. What about this Aibynn? Will they need to hear him?”

“Maybe. I'll talk to him and send him by. But first see if they're

interested in making a little money on the side, without needing to know who's paying them.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“No. Anything here?”

“Tevyar got excited again.”

“Oh?”

“Some Iorich owed him money and started acting tough, and Tevyar tried to handle it on his own, got enthusiastic, and killed him. You know how he is.”

“Yes. He's an idiot. Revivifiable?”

“No. Crushed his head.”

“Double idiot. Is it likely to cause any trouble?”

“Not as far as I can tell. He didn't leave any traces.”

“That's a relief.”

“Should we do anything about it?”

I considered for a moment, then shook my head. “Not this time. Having to cover the loss ought to teach him something. If not ...”

“Right.”

Loiosh flew over to my shoulder from the coat rack. I scratched under his chin. “What about Kelly's people? Anything to report?” Kragar shifted in his chair and his normally expressionless face fought with itself for a moment, as if uncertain how to settle down.

“The Empire has begun conscription in South Adrilankha.”

“So soon?”

He nodded. “Only Easterners, too.”

“Interesting. Have Kelly's people done anything about it?”

“They had some sort of parade. About a thousand people, give or take.”

I whistled. “Anything happen?”

“No. It looked like they were going to send in press gangs, but they didn't.”

“With a thousand crazed Easterners, I'm not surprised.”

“There's supposed to be some sort of meeting or rally tomorrow evening.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Routine stuff. It's on your desk.”

“Fly, then, and let me know what happens.”

When he was gone, I looked at the scribbled notes he and Melestav had left. I okayed credit for a couple of good customers, agreed that we needed some new furnishings in one of my gambling places, refused a request for additional manpower at another, and made a few notes on my calendar for business meetings. None of which I really needed to attend. In fact, I wasn't really needed for much of any of this. Things had reached the point around the office where it would practically run itself. I suppose I could have been bothered by this, but actually I was pleased. I had worked very hard to get it to this point. The irony was that it came just when I had the additional problem of South Adrilankha to worry about, so I couldn't really enjoy it. It crossed my mind that I would probably never reach the point where I could just sit back and watch the money roll in, and only deal with major problems.

But, on the other hand, maybe if that ever happened, I'd have too much time on my hands.

Loiosh shifted on my shoulder and I scratched his chin.

Conscription in South Adrilankha. Why? Was war with Greanaere really imminent? Was the war scare an excuse to harass Easterners? If the war was real, had I caused it? If so, why had Verra sent me to shine the King? Well, that part was easy: because

she wanted the war.

Why?

I called out to her, just to see if she felt like responding, but she didn't. I wished I could ask her directly. I'd like to be able to find out what was going on in the strange, non-human mind of hers. I entertained sacrilegious thoughts for a while, but they got me nowhere, so instead I considered the war. If you looked at a map of the Empire, the notion of war with Greenaere would seem laughable—this huge monster of a landmass next to a little splotch shaped like a banana. It made no sense. They must know that. The Empire must know it. What was going on? Who was pushing whom, to try to do what? What sort of intrigues were being played out in the Imperial Palace? What sort of lunacies on Greenaere? What sort of machinations in the Halls of Judgment?

“You know, boss, it might not matter. You might be out of it, now that you've done what you were hired for.”

“Do you really think so?”

“No.”

“Neither do I.”

I spoke to Aibynn that evening while waiting for Cawti to come back home. I told him about that group behind the Wolves' Den. He nodded, his eyes focused on something else.

“Why don't you go in and see them?” I said.

“What? Oh. Yeah. I'll do that.”

The conversation faltered, and he went back to the blue room. I chewed my lip, wondering. Loioosh stopped chasing Rocza around the flat long enough to echo my own thoughts: *“What a strange fellow, boss.”*

“Indeed,” I said. *“But just strange, or does he have a game of*

some sort?"

Cawti hadn't come home when I went to sleep that night, and she still hadn't when I left the next morning. A year ago I'd have been frantic. Half a year ago I'd have attempted to reach her psionically. Things had changed.

When I got to the office, Melestav said, "Heard the news yet?" I sighed. "No. Do I need to be sitting down?"

"I'm not sure. Word is out that Greenaere has made an alliance with Elde Island."

"Ah. Yes. I knew that."

"How?"

"Never mind. Has anyone actually declared war?"

"I've heard that the Empire has declared war, that the island has declared war, that the island has apologized, claiming it was all a mistake, that Elde has come over to our side, that they have some great new magic that will destroy us all, that the Empire is surrendering and the islanders will be occupying the mainland, that ___"

"In other words, nothing official."

"Right."

"Okay, thanks."

I went into my office to consider. Presently Kragar arrived and said, "I spoke with Ramon and he went for it, Vlad. Jumped at it like a dzur after dinner." I frowned.

"Too eager?"

"I don't think so. I think they just need the money."

"All right. We can afford it, anyway. We'll need to set up someone to stay in touch with them, unless you want to do it yourself."

"No, thanks," he said. "I have enough to do as it is. I hardly have

enough time to—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. How about Sticks?”

He nodded. “That makes sense. I'll talk to him. Any suggestions for the information exchange?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, do you want it all going through Sticks, or through Sticks and me, or Sticks and you, or what?”

“Oh.” I considered. “Why don't we do the recognition symbol bit?”

“A ring or something?”

“Yeah. Go get a few rings made, and give me one, one to Sticks, and keep one yourself. And keep close track of what happens to them all.”

“All right, I'll talk to Sticks and take care of it this afternoon.”

“Good. Another thing: I want to know what happens at this big get-together they're supposed to be having today in South Adrilankha.”

“Okay.”

Within six hours my arrangements with the firm of Tomas, Oscar, and Ramon had paid off. First, they managed to find Aibynn a job with a musician of the House of the Issola who played Eastern instruments to accompany his singing of pre-Interregnum ballads. Second, they were the ones who, through Sticks, brought me word that most of Kelly's organization, including Cawti, had been arrested.

Lesson Eight

DEALING WITH MIDDLE MANAGEMENT II

ONE OF THE easiest and yet most effective offensive uses of sorcery involves simply grabbing as much energy from the Orb as you can handle without destroying yourself, channeling it through your body, and directing it at whomever or whatever you want to damage. The only defense is to grab as much energy as you can handle without destroying yourself and use it to block or deflect the attack.

It so happens that I've acquired a length of gold chain which, used properly, acts to interrupt any sort of spell sent against me, so I'm pretty safe from this kind of thing.

But once, in the middle of a battle I should never have been in, I was hit from behind.

It felt like I was burning from the inside, and for what seemed like minutes I could feel veins, arteries, and even my internal organs burning. Every muscle in my body contracted, and I felt the muscles in my thighs attempt to break both of my legs and almost succeed. A Dragon warrior who was standing about fifteen feet in front of me was struck by an arrow at about that same time, and I spent minutes watching him fall over. I smelled smoke, and saw that it was coming from under my shirt, and realized with a horrible sick feeling that the hair on my chest and on the backs of my arms was burning. I knew that my heart had stopped, and my eyeballs felt hot and itchy. All sound vanished from the world, and returned only very slowly, beginning with a horrible buzzing, as if I'd been stuck in a bee's nest. It amazed me that there was no pain,

and amazed me even more when I realized that my heart had started beating again. Even then it wasn't over, because for a while I couldn't stand up; efforts to move my legs only made them twitch. When, after several minutes, I was able to stand, I remember trying to pick up my sword and being unable to, because trying to take a step toward it led me off in a different direction, and efforts to extend my hand caused it to reach somewhere I had not intended. It was twenty or thirty minutes, I believe, before the effect wore off, during which time I was in the grip of a terror the like of which I'd never felt.

Since that time, the memory has come back at odd times, and always very strongly. It isn't like pain, which you don't really remember—the incident was burned, and I think I mean that literally, into my brain—so sometimes all the sensations wash over me, and I can't breathe and I wonder if I'm going to die.

This was one of those times.

The incident on Greenaere was the fourth time I'd been imprisoned. The first was the hardest, just because it was first, but none had been easy. By removing someone's freedom of movement, you remove some measure of his dignity, and the thought of this happening to Cawti, to the woman whose eyes crinkled when she grinned, and who threw her head back when she laughed so her dark, dark hair rippled across her shoulders, to the woman who had guarded my back, to the woman who—to the woman who didn't know if she loved me anymore, to the woman who was throwing away her happiness and mine for a pail full of slogans. It was almost more than I could stand.

“You all right, boss?” said Sticks, and I came back to an awareness of him, staring up at me and looking worried.

“After a fashion,” I said. “Get Kragar.” I leaned back in the chair and closed my eyes.

Presently I heard Kragar's voice. “What is it, Vlad?”

“Shut the door.”

The latch, Kragar's footsteps, his body settling into the chair, the rustle of Loiosh's wings, my own heartbeat. “Find me detailed plans of the dungeons of the Imperial Palace.”

“What?”

“They're below the Iorich Wing.”

“What's going on?”

“Cawti's been arrested.”

A break in the conversation stretching out to the horizon, infinite, timeless. “You can't be thinking of—”

“Get them.”

“Vlad—”

“Just do it.”

“No.”

I opened my eyes, sat up, and looked at him. “What?”

“I said no.”

I waited for him to continue. He said, “A few weeks ago you lost control and almost got yourself killed. If you lose control again you're on your own.”

“I haven't asked you—”

“But I'm not going to cut wood for your barge.”

I studied him carefully, my thoughts running quickly, although I don't recall the substance.

At last I said, “Get out.”

He left without another word.

* * *

I don't remember any nausea following the teleport to Castle Black, nor do I remember what Lady Teldra said in greeting when I came through the portals. I found Morrolan and Alera in the front room of the library, where the chairs are the most comfortable and he most enjoys sitting. It is the largest of the rooms, but has fewer books than the others, with more room for browsing, sitting, or pacing. Morrolan sat, Alera stood, I paced. "What is it, Vlad?" he said after I made a few trips past him. "Cawti's been arrested. I want your help in breaking her out." He marked his place with a thin strip of gold—inlaid ivory and set his book down. "I'm sorry she's been arrested," he said. "With what is she charged?"

"Conspiracy."

"Conspiracy to what?"

"It isn't specified."

"I see. Will you have wine?"

"No, thank you. Will you help?"

"What do you mean by breaking her out?"

"What does it sound like?"

"It sounds like what we did to get you off of Greenaere."

"Exactly."

"Why do you wish to do that?"

I stopped pacing long enough to look at his face, to see if this was some form of humor. I decided it wasn't. "She broke me out," I told him.

"It was the only way to free you."

"Well?"

"I would suggest, with the Empire, that we try other methods first. Her former partner is the Heir, after all."

I stopped. I hadn't thought of that. I allowed Morrolan to pour me some wine, which I drank and didn't taste.

Then I said, "Well?"

"Well what?" said Morrolan, but Alera understood and excused herself from the room. I sat down and waited. We didn't speak until Alera returned, perhaps ten minutes later.

"Norathar," she said, "will do what she can."

"What is that?" I asked.

"I hope enough."

"Had she known?"

"That Cawti was arrested? No. It seems there has been quite a bit of trouble in the Easterners' quarter, though, and that group she's in has been in the middle of it."

"I know."

"There are several such groups, actually, all over South Adrilankha, and the Empress is worried about the potential for destruction."

"Yes."

"But Norathar has some influence. We shall see."

"Yes."

I brooded for a while, staring at the floor between my feet, until Loioosh said, "Careful, boss," at the same time Alera said, "Who is 'she' and who is 'he'?"

"Eh?"

"You just said something about why did she want him dead."

"Oh. I didn't realize I was speaking aloud."

"You weren't exactly, but you were broadcasting your thoughts so strongly you might as well have been."

"I guess I'm distracted."

“Well, who is she?”

I shook my head and went back to brooding, being a little more careful this time.

Morrolan read, Alieria stroked a grey cat who had set up shop in the library. I finished the wine and refused a second glass.

“Tell me,” I said aloud, “where the gods come from.”

Morrolan and Alieria looked at me, then at each other. Morrolan cleared his throat and said, “It varies. Some are actually Jenoine who survived the creation of the Great Sea of Chaos. Others are servants of theirs who managed to adapt when it occurred and use its energy, either while it was happening or during the millennia that followed.”

“Some,” added Alieria, “are simply wizards who have become immortal, and acquired the power to exist on more than one plane at the same time.”

“Well, then,” I said, “how are they different from demons?”

“A matter of interpretation only,” said Morrolan. “Demons can be summoned and controlled, gods cannot.”

“Even by other gods?”

“Correct.”

“So if a god were to control another god, that god would become a demon?”

“That is correct. If we were to learn of it, we would begin to refer to that god as a demon.”

“It seems pretty arbitrary.”

“It is,” said Alieria. “But it's still significant. If a god is just a force with a personality, it makes a big difference whether it can be controlled, don't you think?”

“What about the Lords of Judgment?”

“What about them?”

“How do they get there?”

“War,” said Morrolan, “or bribery, or from friendship with other gods.”

“Why do they want to?”

“I don't know,” said Morrolan. “Do you, Alieria?”

She shook her head. “Why all the questions?”

“Something to talk about,” I lied.

“Do you wish to become a god?” asked Morrolan.

“Not particularly,” I said. “Do you?”

“No. I don't care for the responsibility.”

I snorted. “To whom are they responsible?”

“To themselves, to each other.”

“Your Demon Goddess doesn't seem particularly responsible.”

Alieria jerked upright, almost stood, and her hand almost went for Pathfinder. I drew back. “Sorry,” I said. “I didn't think you'd take it personally.”

She glowered at me for a moment, then shrugged, Morrolan looked at Alieria, then turned back to me and said, “She is responsible, though. She's unpredictable, and capricious, but she rewards loyalty, and she won't cause a servant to act in a way that will harm him.”

“What if she makes a mistake?”

He looked at me closely. “There's always that danger, of course.” I said no more, but considered what I'd been told. It still felt just a bit scandalous to be speaking of my patron goddess this way, as if she were a mutual acquaintance whose strengths and weaknesses of character we might bandy about for amusement. But if what they'd told me was true, then either she had some sort of plot going

which would, perhaps accidentally, make everything come out all right, or else something had screwed up at, let's say, a very high level.

Or Morrolan and Alieria were wrong, of course.

Lady Teldra appeared at the door and announced the Princess Norathar: Duchess of

Ninerocks, Countess of Haewind, et cetera, et cetera, and Dragon Heir to the Throne.

Not as tall as Morrolan, not as strong-looking as Sethra, yet she had a grace about her movements.

Ex-assassin was left out of the list, but as an assassin, she had worked with Cawti as part of one of the most sought-after teams of killers in the Jhereg, hard as that was to believe listening to either one of them now. I knew something about her skills as a fighter; she'd killed me once.

Norathar walked over to the tray of strong liquors, found a brownish one that she liked, and poured herself a tumbler full. She took a good third of it off the top and stood facing us. She said, "The Empress has given leave for the Lady Taltos to be released. The Lady Taltos has refused."

She sat down then and had some more of her drink. Loiosh, on my right shoulder, squeezed with his talons.

"Refused?" I said at last, in what I think was a steady voice.

"Yes," said Norathar. "She explained that she would wait with her companions until they were all free." I could now hear the strain of her voice, as she worked to speak clearly and calmly. She was a Dragonlord down to her toes, like Morrolan and Alieria, and in the time since she'd been made the Heir, she had changed, so these days she seemed more tightly controlled than either of them. But

now this control was frightening, as if it only barely held in check a rage that could destroy Castle Black.

I noticed all of this with the back of my mind, as I concentrated on keeping my own temper in check, at least until I could decide at whom it should be directed.

Then, suddenly, I realized who that should be, and I said, "Lord Morrolan, you have a room, high up in a tower, with many windows in it. I would like to visit that place."

He looked at me for a long moment before he said, "Yes. Go, Vlad, with my blessing."

Left out the door, down the hallway to the wide, black marble stairway leading to the Front Hall. Down the stairs, out of the Hall toward the South Wing, then up, jog past the lower dining room, past the southern guest rooms, up a half-flight, turn around, around, through a heavy door that opens to my command, since I work for Morrolan and helped set up the spells that guard it.

"Are you sure this is a good idea, boss?"

"Of course not. Don't ask stupid questions."

"Sorry."

A room all in black, lit by candles made from tallow from fat rendered from the hindquarters of a virgin with wicks made from the roots of the neverlost vine, whole scented with cradleberry, so the room smelled like the last dregs of a sweet wine just starting to turn to vinegar. Four of them were lit, and they danced to celebrate my arrival.

Artifacts of Morrolan's experiments in witchcraft littered small and large tables, and his stone altar, black against black, was just barely discernible at the far end. Here I had lain helpless while Morrolan battled a demon that had taken his own sword from him. Here I

had parlayed with spirits from my ancestral home for the release of the Necromancer's soul. Here I had battled with my own likeness, come to take me to that land from which none return.

But never mind, never mind. I stepped onto the narrow, metal stairway, which twisted around and brought me at last into the Tower of Windows, where I had once tortured a sorceress into releasing the spells that prevented Morrolan's revivification. That was pretty recent, and the taste of the experience was still in my mouth. But never mind that, either.

The surest way to achieve communion with Verra, the Demon Goddess, involves human sacrifice, which my grandfather had made me swear never to do. Yet I believe that if I had had the means at hand, I would have done so then. I looked about the tower, filled with windows which did not look upon the courtyard below, some of which did not look upon the world I knew, some of which did not look upon reality as I understood it. I tried to prepare my mind for what I was about to do.

I arbitrarily picked a window, a low wide one, and sat down before it. It looked out upon dense fog, swirling, through which I saw trees and tall shrubs, as well as quick movements that were probably small animals. I had no way of knowing if I was seeing my own world or some other, nor did it matter.

Loiosh settled onto my shoulder, and his mind merged more fully with my own. I went back to my earliest memories concerning the Demon Goddess, instructions from my grandfather in the proper rituals, tales of battles with other gods, especially Barlen, her enemy and lover. I remembered seeing her in the Paths of the Dead, her strange voice, and her multi-jointed fingers, and her eyes that seemed to see past me and into me at the same time. I

remembered her when she had commissioned me to kill the King of Greenaere; was it only days ago?

As I remembered, and let myself be filled by the awe of the Easterner and the respect of the Dragaeren, it occurred to me that blood sacrifice may be carried out in more than one way. I took my dagger and sliced open my left palm, hardly noticing the pain. “Verra!” I cried. “Demon Goddess of my ancestors! I come to you!” I scattered droplets of blood through the window.

They vanished into the fog, which swirled and lightened, until in a few short moments it was a pure featureless white. This, too, seemed to shift, until I saw once more the hallway through which I had walked, following mist and a black cat. There were a few drops of blood on the floor.

I stood and stepped through the window. Same hallway, same confusion of distance and dimension due to the featureless white. This time there was no black cat to guide me, however. I wondered which way to go, and I wondered, too, if it mattered. There was no window behind me. Loiosh shifted on my shoulder and said, “That way feels right, boss.” On reflection, it felt right to me, too, so I sheathed the dagger and began walking.

The mist never appeared, either, so perhaps that had been arranged for my benefit; the Demon Goddess seemed to me quite capable of theatrics. No mist, no cat, no sound, but the doors appeared much sooner than they had the last time. In a way, it would be oddest if that corridor really was just a corridor, of some fixed length, and it took however long to walk it depending on where one appeared. This time, standing before the doors, I studied the carvings a bit. At first glance, they seemed to be abstract designs, yet as I looked I began to pick out or imagine shapes: trees, a mountain, a pair of

wheels, what might have been a man with a hole in his chin, something else that might have been a fanciful four-legged beast with a tentacle where its nose ought to be and a pair of horns emerging from its mouth, perhaps an ocean below what I'd thought was a mountain but now seemed to be a stick supporting a circular blob.

I shook my head, looked again, and they were all abstract designs again. Who knows how much was there and how much I'd supplied?

For lack of anything else to do, I clapped at the doors and waited for one very, very long minute. I clapped once more and waited again. I still had my link to the Orb, and I thought of seeing if I could force or blow the doors open, but then I thought better of it.

“Good thinking, boss.”

“Shut up, Loiosh. Do you have any great ideas?”

“Yes. Strike it with your fists, like Easterners are supposed to.”

“And if there are defensive spells on it to destroy anyone who touches it?”

“Good point. There's always Spellbreaker.”

I nodded. That was an idea. I stood there like an idiot a little longer, then sighed and let the gold chain fall into my left hand. I swung it around, then stopped. *“Perhaps this isn't such a good idea.”*

“You have to do something, boss. If you're worried about protections, hit it with Spellbreaker. If not, either strike it or just see if it will push open.”

I considered for a while, then got mad at myself for standing there like an idiot. Before I could come to my senses, I whirled the chain around and lashed out at the door. It hit with a clank of metal

against wood which instantly died out. There were no sensations, I felt no sorcery, and, fortunately, Spellbreaker left no mark on the door.

I pushed the right-hand door, and it creaked a bit but barely moved. However, when it swung back, there was a gap between the two doors sufficient for my fingers. I pulled the door, which was as heavy as it seemed, and it slowly opened enough for me to slip inside.

As I walked forward, I saw the shimmer and sparkle in the air that I'd seen before at Verra's appearance and disappearance. It occurred to me that perhaps that was how it would look to an observer when I stepped through to her realm.

In the time it took to form those thoughts, she had arrived. Her eyes followed me as I approached her throne, and when I got near, the cat, whom I hadn't noticed against the folds of her white gown, jumped down and inspected me. Loiosh tensed on my shoulder.

"There's something about that cat, boss. ..."

"That wouldn't surprise me a bit, Loiosh."

I stopped at a convenient distance before her throne and waited to see if she would speak first. Just when I was deciding that she wouldn't, she said, "You're getting blood on my floor."

I looked down. Yes, indeed, my palm was still bleeding, and the blood was running down Spellbreaker, which still hung from my left hand, and was slowly splattering onto the white tiles. I turned my palm over, and Spellbreaker came to life, as it has done every now and then; before, to hold itself upright, like a yendi about to strike.

There was a tingling in my hand then that ran up my arm, and as I watched, the cut stopped bleeding and closed up, leaving a faint

pink scar. I hadn't known Spellbreaker could do that.

I carefully wrapped it around my left arm again and said, "Shall I scrub the floor for you?"

"Perhaps later."

I looked for traces of humor on her long, strange face, but didn't see any. I did, however, identify what made her face seem so odd: Her eyes were set too high. Not by much, you understand, but the bridge of her nose was ever so slightly lower on her forehead than on a human or a Dragaeran. The more I studied it, the stranger it seemed. I turned away from her.

"Why have you come here?" she said. Still looking away, I said, "To question you."

"Some might believe that presumptuous."

"Yeah, well, I'm just that kind of guy."

"Apparently. Ask, then."

I turned back to her. "Goddess, I asked before why you chose me to kill the King of Greenaere. Perhaps you answered me fully, perhaps not. Now I ask this: Why was it necessary that he die?" Her eyes caught mine and held them, and I trembled in spite of myself. If she was trying to intimidate me, she succeeded. If she was trying to convince me to withdraw the question, she failed. At last she said, "For the good of the people in the Empire, both Dragaerans and Easterners."

"Bully," I said. "Can you be more specific about that? So far, the results have been the death of the crew of a Dragaeran freighter and the arrest of several Easterners, including my wife."

"What?" she said, her eyebrows rising. I don't think I was really, truly frightened until then, until I realized that I had surprised her. That was when my stomach twisted itself into knots and my mouth

went dry.

“The organization of which my wife is a member—”

“What of them? Were they all arrested?”

“The leaders, at least. This Kelly, my wife, several others.”

“Why?”

How should I know? I suppose because they refused conscription, and—”

“Refused conscription? That fool. The whole point was—” She cut herself off abruptly.

“Was what?”

“It doesn't matter. I underestimated this man's arrogance.”

“Well, that's just great,” I said. “You underestimated—”

“Quiet,” she said, snapping the word out like an arrow past my ear.

“I must consider what to do to rectify my error.”

“Just what were you trying to do, anyway?”

She stared at me. “I do not choose to tell you at this time.”

I said, “It was all directed at Kelly's people in the first place, wasn't it?”

“Kelly, as I've said, is a fool.”

“Maybe, but judging by what happened before, he knows what he's doing.”

“Certainly he does, in a narrow field. He is a social scientist, if you will, and a very skilled one in certain ways. He studied—it doesn't matter.”

“Tell me.” I don't know what got into me that caused me to start interrogating her like a button-man who'd been sloughing off, but I did it.

Her mouth twitched. “Very well. During the Interregnum, when your people—Easterners—roamed over the Empire like jhereg on

a dragon's corpse—”

“*Yum.*”

“*Shut up.*”

“—many vaults were unearthed that had lain buried and forgotten for so long that you cannot conceive of the time. Some of these were records preserved by the House of the Lyorn, who have the skill to preserve things that ought to be allowed to crumble away. Or perhaps we should not blame them—it's been said that one cannot kill ideas.”

“What ideas were unearthed?”

“Many, my dear assassin. It was an amazing time growth, those four hundred and ninety-seven years of interregnum. Sorcery was all but impossible then, so that only most skilled could perform even the simplest spells. Conversely, this skill was passed on and retained, and taught to those whose interest ran in that direction. What was the result? Now, when the Orb is back, sorcery has grown so strong from the new skills that what was inconceivable before the Interregnum, and impossible during it, is now commonplace. Teleportation on such a level that some fear it will replace trade by ship and road. War magics so strong that some believe the individual fighter will soon become a thing of the past. Even resurrection of the dead has become possib—”

“What has this to do with Kelly?”

“Eh? My apologies, impatient Easterner. Things were discovered by your people, during that time, things that go all the way back to those who first discovered this world.”

“The Jenoine?”

“Before the Jenoine.”

“Who—?”

“It doesn't matter. But ideas that have been preserved far too long, and from another place, lay dormant until then. And even when they were unearthed, no one understood them for nearly two hundred years, until this Kelly—”

“Goddess, I don't understand.”

She sighed. “Kelly has his hands on the truth about the way a society works, about where the power is, and the cause of the injustice he sees. But it is truth for another time and another place. He has built an organization around these ideas, and because of their truth, his organization prospers. But the truth he has based his policies on, the fuel for this fire he is building, has no such strength in the Empire. Perhaps in ten thousand years, or a hundred thousand, but not now. And by proceeding as he has, he is setting up his people to be massacred. Do you understand? He is building a world of ideas with no foundation beneath them. When they collapse ...” Her voice trailed off.

“Why don't you tell him so?”

“I have. He doesn't believe me.”

“Why don't you kill him?”

“You don't kill ideas like that by killing the one who espouses them. As fertilizer aids the growth of the tree, so does blood—”

“So,” I said, “you decided to start a war, thinking they'd march off and forget their grievances so they could fight for their homeland? That doesn't—”

“Kelly,” she said, “is smarter than I thought he was, curse him. He's smart enough to destroy every Easterner, and most of the Teckla, in South Adrilankha.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Consider the matter,” she said.

“And what do you want me to do?”

“I'm sending you home at once. I need to consider this.” She gestured with her right hand, and I found myself, once more, before a window in Morrolan's tower. The window looked upon the face of the Demon Goddess, who stared at me and said, “Try to stay out of trouble, will you?”

The window faded to black.

Lesson Nine

MAKING FRIENDS I

Morrolan and Alieria were where I'd left them, Norathar had gone. I checked through the Orb and discovered that I'd been gone less than two hours, and most of that time had been taken up walking to and from the tower. I sat down and said, "I'll take that refill of wine now."

Morrolan poured it and said, "Well?"

"Well what?"

"What happened? I should judge that you have just had a moving experience of some sort."

"Yes. Well. I suppose. I haven't discovered anything that will help get Cawti out of the Imperial Dungeons."

Alieria shifted. "Did you see Verra?"

"Yes."

"What did she say, then?"

"Many things, Alieria. It doesn't matter."

Morrolan considered me, probably wondering whether he ought to push for more information. I guess he decided not to. Alieria was frowning.

"Well, then," said Alieria, after a moment. "We're back to planning another jailbreak. We've been doing quite a bit of that lately. I wonder if the Cards would have predicted it, had I thought to attempt a reading."

"I don't think a jailbreak is in order," I said.

Alieria turned her blue eyes on me. "Why not?"

"If Cawti won't accept an Imperial pardon, what makes you think

she'll accept being broken out by force?"

Aliera shrugged. "We'll have to get the whole batch of them, that's all."

I shook my head. "I don't think they'll go. I think they want to stay in prison until they're all released together."

"What makes you think so?"

"I've spoken to them. That's how they think."

"They're nuts," said Aliera.

"That's more true than you know," I said. "Or less."

"And so," said Morrolan, who had never looked happy about the notion of breaking into the Imperial Dungeons, "what do you suggest?"

"I'm not certain. I'll have to think about it. But I know what I'm going to do first: find out just what, by the blood on Verra's floor, is going on in South Adrilankha."

"Blood on Verra's floor?" said Morrolan. "I don't think I've heard that oath before."

"No," I said. "You probably haven't."

The next day was going to be short. That is, it was the day before the Festival of the New Year, so most people quit working around noon. I kept all of my people working, since Holy Days are some of our best times, but I gave them all bonuses. I had no idea if either of the people I needed to see was going to be working all day, some of the day, or not at all, so I awoke much earlier than usual. I broke my fast and spent some time throwing things for the jhereg to snatch out of the air and fight over.

"Loiosh, Rocza seems funny. Is she pregnant?"

"Huh? No, boss. At least, I don't think so. I mean, the way things work—"

“Never mind. What is it, then?”

“Well you know she's been a little closer to Cawti than I have, so, I mean—”

“Oh, I get it. All right.”

I slugged down my klava, dressed, collected Loioosh and Rocza, and headed out for my first errand. Aibynn was in the blue room but hadn't stirred. I envied him.

Kelly's group had moved twice since the last time I'd visited their headquarters, and this last place was a great deal different from the others. Up until now they'd met in a flat that two or three of them lived in, but they'd recently found an empty storefront not too far from one of the farmer's markets that appeared irregularly all over South Adrilankha. Whatever windows it once had were boarded up, either as a painfully inadequate defensive gesture or because they couldn't afford oiled paper or window glass. I stood there for a while and considered. As always when visiting the Easterners' part of town, I felt a slight relaxation of tension, but this time it was hardly noticeable as I studied the low, wood-frame building. It was pretty obvious, once you got near it, both for the banner hung across the front that read “Stop Press Gangs!” and for the troop of Phoenix Guards who stood across the street from it, silent and ominous, ignoring the dirty looks they got from passersby. As Cawti had said, they all seemed to be Dragonlords and Dzur. That is, they were professionals, not conscripted Teckla, which meant there'd be no reasoning with them, and they'd fight well.

But never mind that. I watched from down the street where I could keep an eye on both the Phoenix Guards and whoever went through the door of the storefront.

Eventually someone I recognized went in. I left my place, waved

cheerfully to the goldcloaks, and followed him in.

He greeted me with all the warmth I remembered from our previous encounters.

“You,” he said.

“My dear Paresh,” I told him. “How is it that they didn't arrest you, too? No, no, let me guess. They only hauled in the Easterners. Either they decided that a Dragaeran, even if a Teckla, doesn't deserve prison, or they decided that a Teckla, even if a Dragaeran, must be harmless. Am I right?”

“What do you want?”

“My wife back. How do you propose to get her out of prison?”

“We will be giving a demonstration of our strength tomorrow. We expect five thousand Easterners and Teckla, all of them committed to fighting until conscription stops and our friends are released. Many of them are determined to fight until the Empire itself is run by us, and for us. Do you have all that, or shall I repeat it?”

“I'll read it back to you: You aren't doing anything except shouting at each other about how mad you are and hoping the Empress laughs herself to death.”

“She didn't laugh much a few weeks ago, when she pulled the troops out of South Adrilankha.”

“They are, however, back.”

“For the moment. But if we have to shut down—”

“Shut down your mouth, Paresh. I came here to find out if you had any plans for getting my wife out of the Imperial Dungeons. It seems you don't. That's all I wanted to know. Good day.”

As I turned away, he said, “Baronet Taltos,” and put such scorn into my title that I almost dropped him right then and there. I didn't, but I did stop and turn back to face him. He said, “Consider

how your wife will react if you find some way to yendi her out of prison, while everyone else stays there. Think it over.”

I felt a sneer growing on my face, but I didn't give him the satisfaction of letting him see it. I walked out the door and headed back toward my own side of town, where everyone hated me for reasons I was more comfortable with.

All right, so I couldn't count on them. I hadn't really thought I could, but they deserved to be asked. Where did that leave me? Nowhere, probably. I stopped my walk long enough to make contact with Kragar. “Any news?”

“Those minstrels sure hear things, Vlad. They're better than the street tags. They play the court, and they listen, and they gossip. That was a great idea.”

“Save the praise, Kragar. Have we learned anything?”

“We sure have. The big arrest of Easterners was—urn, I'm not certain you 're going to like this.”

“Let's have it.”

“Okay. It was by request of and based on information supplied by the Imperial representative of House Jhereg.” I took a deep breath and, for no reason I'm aware of, my hands went through the automatic gestures that check to make sure my various concealed weapons are in their proper places.

“Okay, Kragar. Thanks. Anything else?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary.”

“I'll be in touch.”

I was wearing my usual cloak, but it was clean. The grey tunic I'd put on was in good shape, and my trousers, while not really suitable for court, weren't bad. My boots were a bit scuffed and dirty, so I stopped when I was back in Dragaeran country and had a

Teckla clean and polish, them, for which I tipped him well. Then, to keep them clean, I carefully teleported to the vicinity of the Imperial Palace.

I leaned against the nearest wall and counted passersby until my stomach felt well again, then made my way around to the path which led to the Jhereg Wing. There were two old men standing outside it pretending to be guards (who in his right mind would break into the Jhereg Wing?), to whom I nodded as I went by. Inside, a cheerful young man in grey and black was sitting behind a short oak table. He asked my business.

“Count Soffta,” I said.

“Have you an appointment, my lord?”

“Naturally.”

“Very well. That door, up the stairs, all the way to the back.”

“Quite.”

“A pleasant afternoon, my lord.”

“Yes.”

Every inch the nobleman, that's what I am. Heh. The cheerful young man's identical twin was sitting behind the table's identical twin. He asked my business. The table remained mute.

“Count Soffta,” I said.

“Have you an appointment, my lord?”

“No.”

“What name shall I give?”

“Baronet Taltos.”

There was a bit of a twinge to his eyebrows, as if maybe he'd heard the name, but that was all. “A moment, if you please” and he was silent for a few heartbeats. Then he said, “You may go in, my lord.”

“Thank you.”

There's a saying that goes, “Only Issola live in the Palace,” and it may be true. That is, if it were possible for a Jherog to look like an Issola, Soffta did. His build was a bit chest-heavy, his face was regular, with the narrow forehead and peaked crown, and his movements were smooth and slow, and seemed practiced. No, he didn't really look like an Issola, but about as close as a Jherog can come. His office had four comfortable-looking chairs and a view of the courtyard. Each chair had its own round, three-legged table on which the guest could set his drink, made from the bar at the far end of the room. All very nice and non-threatening, it was.

He motioned me to a seat. “Baronet Taltos,” he said. “A pleasure. Drink? I have some Fenarian wine.”

Issola. “That would be nice,” I said. I saw the bottle and realized he meant brandy.

“Clear and clean,” I said. The chair was as soft as it looked. Not very good for getting out of in a hurry. I wondered if that was deliberate, if I had designed the room, it would have been.

He poured me a drink, and the same thing for himself. I wondered if he really cared for it, at least served the right way, or if he was being polite. I'd probably never know.

It was Tuzviz, probably the most commonly available Fenarian brandy; good if not remarkable. At least I could tell there were peaches in its ancestry.

When we were both sitting and enjoying the fire on our tongues he said, “How may I serve you, Baronet?”

“The Empire has mistakenly arrested my wife while clearing out some Eastern rabble from South Adrilankha. I'd like to see about obtaining her release.”

He nodded sympathetically. "I see. Most unfortunate. Her name?"
"The Lady Cawti. Taltos of course. She's the Countess of, let me see ... Lostguard Cleft, I think."

"Yes. Bide a moment, enjoy the wine. I'll see what I can do."
"Very well."

He left the room. I got up and stared out the window. Off to the side I could just make out the vast hall of the Iorich Wing, beneath which were the dungeons. It was completely walled in, dark and solemn, with their banner flying above it and Dragonlords in the gold cloaks of the Phoenix Guards walking along the walls. No, on reflection, it would have been damn hard to break her out.

Directly below me was a rock garden in blue and white, and strips of neatly manicured lawn dotted with stunted trees. Directly in front of me, on a tall, lone flagpole, flew the banner of the House, stylized Jhereg, sinister, wings spread, claws outstretched, black on a field of grey. It filled me with no emotion whatsoever.

Presently Soffta returned and sat down behind his desk again. He was looking very grave indeed. "It seems," he said, "that someone has already intervened on behalf of the Lady Cawti, and she refused release. Do you know anything about this?"

"Mmmm," I said. "What would it take to procure her release in spite of her refusal?"

"Why, I'm not sure, Lord Taltos. Such a refusal is almost unheard of, and forcing a release, well, I imagine an order of the Empress would do it."

"No doubt, no doubt," I said. I stood up and strolled back over to the window, looked out of it. I paced a bit, and my pacing took me behind Soffta's chair. He let me get behind him, but I saw the tension in his neck muscles. Court representative or not, he was a

Jhereg, not an Issola. "A difficult situation," I said. "Perhaps there is nothing to be done."

"Perhaps not," he said, still not looking at me. "Although I'm certainly willing to help as much as I can."

"Good, good," I said. "Perhaps, then, you could tell me something." As I spoke, I placed my hand casually on his shoulder. There was tension there now, but he kept his hands relaxed, in plain sight on his desk. We were ten feet from the door. "Just out of curiosity, how long has it been since blood has been spilled here, in the Jhereg Wing?"

"Not since the Interregnum, Lord Taltos."

"It would be bad for the Organization interests to have any sort of violence take place here, wouldn't it?"

"Very bad. I hope you aren't suggesting any."

I leaned on his shoulder, very slightly. "I? No, no, not at all. I wouldn't think of such a thing. I was just making conversation."

"I see. What was it you wanted to know?"

"Who arranged to have those Easterners arrested?"

There was the faintest hint of a tightening of muscles, but no more.

"Why, the Empress, Baronet Taltos."

"At your request, Count Soffta. And I'm very anxious to learn which of my colleagues asked you to make the request."

"I believe you have been misinformed, Baronet Taltos."

"Have you heard of me, Count Soffta?"

My hand didn't leave his shoulder, but neither did it tighten, nor did I make any other movement. He said nothing for two or three heartbeats, then he said, "It may take me some time to find out, and I'm expecting a rather large number of visitors very soon."

"Yes, I imagine you are. But under the circumstances, I'm willing

to let it take as much time as necessary. I'm sure your visitors will understand.”

“It could be very expensive.”

“I'm prepared to pay. It is my wife, you know.”

“Yes. . . .”

“So the cost is irrelevant.”

“I guess it is.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you could gather the information?”

I could almost feel him weighing the odds, attempting to select the best thing to say, the best thing to do. “There may be repercussions —”

“I have absolutely no doubt that there will be. I accept them.”

“All of them?”

“Whatever may happen. But I hope your information is complete and accurate, or there could be consequences you don't foresee.”

“Yes. Toronnan.”

“I'm not surprised. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Very well. Will you do me the honor of accompanying me out to the street?”

“I should be glad to, Lord Taltos.”

“Then let us walk together.”

We did so, smiling, my hand resting gently on his back. When we reached the street, I made certain there was no one nearby and composed my mind for a teleport. I let Spellbreaker fall into my left hand, just in case. “Count Soffta, I wish to thank you for your help.”

“The fruits of your inquiry will be my reward, Baronet Taltos.”

“No doubt. One thing, though.”

“Yes.”

“The Tuzviz you served me. It was quite good, but it is brandy, not wine. You should remember that.”

“Thank you, Lord Taltos. I shall.”

I released him and let the teleport take effect.

An unusual sight, not explained by the celebrations prepared for the next couple of days, greeted me when I walked into my office: Sticks was there, holding his clubs lightly, as if tossing them around, and next to him, looking quite out of place in his bright island clothing and norska hat, was Aibynn. They were speaking quietly about something arcane, Aibynn pointing to the clubs, and Sticks gesturing with them.

Perhaps they were comparing the arts of battery and drumming. On reflection, that isn't that strange an idea: Both require relaxation and tension in the right degree, speed and suppleness, and good understanding of timing, control of the body, and concentration of the mind. Interesting notion.

But at the time I wasn't thinking about that. I said, “Aibynn, what are you doing here?”

He spoke, as always, slowly, as if he were constantly being distracted by the ultimate rhythms of the universe. “To say thanks for lining up that job for me.”

“Oh. Think nothing of it. It's going well, I take it.”

“Well? We've played one night together and we've be summoned to play for the Empress tomorrow.”

“For the Imperial New Year's celebration?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Odd time to call it New Year, though. On the island, the year begins in the winter.”

“Spring makes more sense, doesn't it?”

He shrugged.

“In any case,” I went on, “the New Year is a big deal at the Palace. I'm very impre— hmmm.”

“What is it?”

“Eh? Nothing.” It had suddenly occurred to me that I had slain his King, and here he was about to appear before my Empress. If he were, in fact, an assassin himself, I had just set her up as elegantly as if I'd planned it. I briefly considered whether to do anything about it, then decided that it was none of my business. It may be that if he was an assassin I'd have to clear out before they traced the connection between Aibynn and me, but other than that, so what?

I congratulated him again and went past into my office, asking Melestav to send Kragar in. I forced myself to concentrate on the door, and so I noticed him when he entered. He took one look at me and said, “Who's the target?”

“Toronnan.”

“Himself, eh? Is he after us, or are we after him? Not that it really matters.”

“Neither one, exactly. Kelly's bunch were arrested by his orders. I want to find out what he's after.”

“Sounds good. How?”

“Buy someone in his organization, of course.”

“Oh, sure. Just like that.”

“If it was easy, Kragar, I'd do it myself.”

He blinked. “It's nice to hear you say that out loud after all this time of—”

“Kill it.”

“Speaking of.”

“Hmmm?”

“We going to shine him?”

“I hope not. I've done too much of that. Any more, and people are going to start getting nervous—people I don't want to make nervous. Besides, I have my hands full with South Adrilankha right now; I don't need more territory.”

He nodded. “That's what I've been thinking. Okay, I'll see if anyone is for sale in his organization.” He got up, stopped, and said, “Do you think he might have bought someone in ours?”

“No way to know,” I said. “It's a possibility. But I'm not going to start getting paranoid about it.”

“I guess not.”

“Oh, bring me a full set of weapons. It's about that time.”

“Okay. Back soon.” He left, looking unusually thoughtful.

A couple of hours later, as I was finishing up the process of changing weapons,

Melestav walked into my office.

“Message by courier, boss.”

“Oh, really? Someone's being formal. Did he let you chop for it?”

“Yeah. Here it is.”

I inspected the single folded and sealed sheet and learned nothing interesting. I didn't recognize the seal, but I don't think there are more than three or four seals would recognize. I'm not certain I'd know my own. I opened it, read, and considered.

“What is it, boss?”

“What? Oh. The gentleman who invited me over a few days ago wants to see me again, but he's not in as much of a hurry.”

“Toronnan?”

“That's the guy.”

“Think it's a setup?”

“Hard to say. He wants me to name the time and place today or tomorrow. It would be hard to rig that.”

“Okay, Vlad,” said Kragar. “Do you want me to up protection?”

“Damn right.”

“Good. I'll take care of it. Where?”

“I'm still thinking about it. I'll tell Melestav when I decide.”

He left to make arrangements.

“What do you think it is, boss?”

“I don't know. I hope it's not the beginning of another war; I don't think I could handle it.”

“You and me both.”

“Maybe I should get out of this business, Loioosh.”

“Maybe you should.”

He fell silent and I considered. Maybe I should get cutout of the whole thing. Killing people for money, earning a living from Teckla and fools, maybe I'd had enough.

Maybe I could—

Could what? What would I do? I tried to imagine myself living like Morrolan or Alieria, safe on a piece of land somewhere watching the Teckla work the fields—or not watching as the case may be. Sitting around, indulging whatever vague curiosities came my way. No, I couldn't see it. Perhaps my existence was pointless in any grand scheme of things, but it kept me entertained.

Yes, but was that sufficient justification for all the things I had to do, just to stay alive and in business? Well, why did I feel the need to justify myself in the first place? In part, I guessed, because of Cawti. She'd been just where I knew I didn't want to be, idle and frustrated, and she'd handled it by getting involved with a bunch of

crazies with a noble cause. What else? Well, there was my grandfather, whom I respected more than I respected anyone else. He knew what I did and, when I asked him, had given me his opinion on it. More fool me for asking.

But this was silly. Perhaps, later, I could decide if I wanted to change the way I lived, but right now my wife was in prison and I had just stirred up a school of orca by oh-so-gently threatening the Organization representative in the Imperial Palace, someone who ought to be left alone if anyone should. No, the Organization wasn't about to let one lone Easterner get away with anything like that. I was going to have either figure out a way to pacify them or figure out a way to escape. Maybe I'd relocate to Greenaere and learn to drum.

Or not.

“Melestav.”

“Yeah, boss?”

“Find out where Aibynn is playing tonight and send a courier to Toronnan. Tell him we 'll meet him there at the eighth hour.”

“Okay, boss.”

“And put the word out that we might get hit soon.”

“Again?”

“I guess it's just one of those years.”

“I guess so, boss.”

Lesson Ten

MAKING FRIENDS II

The Loquacious Madman is on Czigarel Street near Undauntra, in a district with very little Organization activity. I arrived two or three minutes early with Sticks and an enforcer we called Glowbug. Kragar had said he'd be there, too, but I didn't notice him. It is unlikely, however, that I would have noticed Sethra Lavode in that crowd.

The festivities were already beginning. There were trails of cold fire traveling along all the walls; bouncing globes throughout the room, changing colors as they swirled; and ribbon trails hanging from the ceiling.

The crowd was mostly Teckla, all decked out like the bouncing globes in reds and yellows and blues, and merchants and artisans proudly wearing whatever they worked in, and brazenly flaunting their lovers, but here and there you could see the masked aristocracy of the House of the Tiassa or the Lyorn, adding a gentle touch of light blue or brown, and inserting whatever particular flavor of loud troublemaking or quiet drunkenness pleased them the most.

Which is not to say the place was crowded—yet. It's a big place, and things were just starting to get going. It was loud, but not deafening. Either a very good or a very strange time and place to have a business meeting.

Toronnan arrived less than two minutes after I did, preceded (as was I, by the way) by a couple of toughs who checked the place over for any sign of this being a setup. It isn't easy to tell that sort

of thing, even when there isn't a celebration going on, but it can be done. You have to look at everyone in the place, especially the waiters, and note how each one carries himself, where he is placed, and if he seems to be carrying any concealed weapons, or looks familiar, or doesn't seem to fit in.

I had done that a few times, and the one time it really had been a setup, for a guy named Welok, I had almost missed it that one of the cooks wasn't using his knife the way a real cook would—instead of gripping it between thumb and forefinger on the blade with the pommel resting on the heel of his hand, he was gripping the pommel like a knife-fighter. I mentioned this to Kragar, with whom I was working, who looked closely and realized that he knew the guy. The meeting was called off, and three months later I was hired by Welok to kill an enforcer named Kynn who worked for Rolaan—the man who'd called the meeting.

But I digress. I hadn't set up anything and neither had Toronnan. Indeed—this was a very bad situation to kill someone in, because the large and unpredictable crowd is likely to surprise you, and assassins hate surprises. He sat facing me, his back to the door. I started to signal a waiter over, but he didn't let me. “This won't take that long,” he said.

I kept my face expressionless. It is a major break in protocol to set up a business dinner and not eat. I wasn't certain what it indicated, but it wasn't good. I settled back in the chair and said, “Go ahead, then.”

“This has gone up to the Council. You have powerful friends there, but I don't think they can help you this time.”

“I'm still listening.”

“We're sorry your wife got involved in this, but business is

business.”

“I’m still listening.”

He nodded. “I was up before the Council today. They asked if you could be shined without a fight. I said not unless they could find Mario. That doesn't mean they aren't going to try, but you probably have a reprieve. Do you understand?”

“Not quite. Keep talking.”

“We just had a big mess between you and this Herth character, and before that you had an altercation with some teckla that ended up with the Empire stepping in, and in between was a big, bloody mess in the Hills between Be'er and Fyrnaan.”

“I heard about that. I wasn't involved.”

“That's not the point. The Organization has been calling way too much attention to itself and the Council is tired of it. That's the only thing that's keeping you alive.”

“I take it I've offended someone.”

“You've offended everyone, idiot. You don't go around threatening the Organization representative in the Imperial Palace. Can you understand that?”

“Threaten? I?”

“Don't play stupid, Whiskers. I'm telling you to lay off. I'm telling you—”

“Why did you arrange to have those Easterners arrested?”

“You don't ask me questions, Whiskers. I ask you questions, you answer them, then I tell you things and you do them. That is the nature of our relationship. Can you grasp that, or do I need to illustrate it?”

“Why did you arrange to have those Easterners arrested?”

A sneer began to appear on his face but he put it away. “Is there

some reason I should answer you?”

“I’ll kill you if you don’t.”

“You’d never make it out of here alive.”

“I know.”

He stared at me. At last he said, “You’re lying.”

I shook my head. “No. I don’t lie. I’m cultivating a reputation for honesty so I can blow it when something big comes along. This ain’t it.”

He snorted. “Just how much bigger a thing do you want?”

“Wait and see.”

His teeth worked inside his mouth. Then he said, “Orders came from the Council. I don’t know who it was.”

“You could probably make a good guess if you put your mind to it.”

We matched stares, then he said, “My boss. Boralinoi.”

“Boralinoi,” I repeated slowly. “That would make sense. My area is your area is his area, and I now own South Adrilankha, so he’s responsible.”

“That’s right. And if you think you can mess with him—”

I shook my head. “I want my wife back, Lord Toronnan. That’s what it all comes down to, okay? There’s no way I’m going to let her rot in the Imperial Dungeons, so you’d better figure out a way to help me, or stay out of my way, or try your best to put me down, because I’m going to be moving.”

He stood up. “I’ll remember that, Lord Taltos. I will remember it.”

After he was gone, I moved to the other side of the table, so I could watch the musicians, who were just setting up. It took me a while to find a waiter, but I finally succeeded and ordered pasta with peppers and sausage. He seemed surprised that I actually

wanted to eat; I suppose most people were just drinking. And then when he started to leave, Kragar called him back and ordered one of the same, which puzzled him even more although he tried not to show it.

“What happened?” he said.

“I seem to have made another enemy.”

“Oh? Toronnan?”

“No. The Jhereg.”

Kragar cocked his head to the side. “Tell me something, Vlad: Why do I keep sticking with you?”

“I don't know. Maybe you aren't. Maybe you're setting up to knife me.”

“Don't start getting paranoid now.”

“Well, if you aren't setting up to knife me, maybe you should be. This would be the right time.”

He stared at me very hard, no sign of banter on his face. “You'd better give me the details,” he said.

I did so, starting with my interview with Soffta, up to the conversation with Toronnan. The food arrived in the middle of it and, as I was concluding, the musicians started up. I was surprised at how well the crowd quieted down, but I was pretty sure they'd make up for it later. I hoped to be gone by then.

The food was edible, the wine quite dry but good. The singer was good. Aibynn stayed pretty much in the background so I didn't notice him too much, though I might have if I'd known anything about music. I did note the dreamy smile on his face, which reminded me of how my grandfather looked when in the middle of a spell. For all I know I look the same way.

Eventually they stopped, and Aibynn came over and introduced his

partner, a relatively short Tiassa named Thoddi. We discussed inanities for a while, then they played some more. Kragar said, “What's the plan?”

“I think I'm going to have to find this Boralinoi.”

“That could be dangerous.”

“Probably. Find out where he works.”

“What? Now?”

“Now. I'll wait here.”

“Look, Vlad, aside from the obvious stupidities of barging in to see this guy without setting things up, how do you know Toronnan hasn't just sent a team over here to shine you when you leave?”

“Let him try,” I said. “Just let him try.”

“Vlad—”

“Do it. Find out where he is. I'll wait here.”

He sighed. “Okay. I'll see you soon.”

My enjoyment of the music was dampened just a little by a need to keep an eye on the door, but not too much, because there were Loioosh, Sticks, and Glowbug. Presently Kragar got hold of me again and told me where to find Boralinoi when he was working.

“He isn't there now, Vlad. You'll have to wait until tomorrow.”

“I guess.”

“Why don't you think the whole thing over, then ? Maybe you—”

“Thanks, Kragar. I'll see you tomorrow.”

The crowd was just making it impossible to listen to the music when they stopped, and announced that they were finished and someone else would be playing next, which surprised me. I threw an Imperial into the jar, paid for the food and drink, and walked back home with Aibynn. We didn't speak for a while, then I

ventured, “You sounded pretty good.”

“Yeah,” he said. “That was a good one. Did you notice those fake seventy-twos I was throwing into the seventeens?”

“Uh, well, no, not really.”

He nodded. “They weren't really seventy-twos, because you have to punch the one, the six-seven-eight, the ten, and the sixteen-seventeen of every measure, but it kind of works if you pretend every third measure is . . .” He went on, with me nodding and making interested sounds. Sticks, who was in front, fell back a bit to listen and the two of them got into a discussion of arcane matters beyond the likes of me. I still wondered who Aibynn really was, and what he was doing here, and if he was going to assassinate the Empress.

Not that I cared.

“What do you care about, boss?” said Loiosh as we walked up the stairs to my flat.

“Getting Cawti out of prison.”

“And then?”

“Don't ask difficult questions, Loiosh.”

I asked Sticks and Glowbug if they wanted some wine before they took off. Glowbug didn't, but Sticks knows the kind of wine I keep around the house, so he was right behind me when I went through the door.

What impressed me the most, I think, was how quickly Toronnan had moved. It was, what, half an hour, maybe, since I'd left him. The assassin was waiting just inside the door of the flat, and neither Loiosh nor I had any inkling. But Sticks, as I said, was right behind me, and when the dagger came slicing toward the back of my neck, he acted, pushing me sideways and forward into

the room. I rolled and came up in time to see Sticks holding his clubs, connecting with the guy's head, very hard. The guy went down. I felt a burn along my neck, touched my hand, and found blood. I hoped his blade hadn't been poisoned. I discovered I was trembling.

“Good work,” I told Sticks. His only answer was to slump to the floor. It was only then that I noticed the stiletto that had gone completely through his throat and out the back of his neck. Aibynn came into the room then and knelt next to Sticks, whose eyes were open and glassy. Loioosh landed on my shoulder and nuzzled my ear. I inspected the corpse of my enforcer and saw that his backbone had been neatly severed. What you call in the business a lucky shot.

* * *

An hour or so later the bodies were gone, and Kragar was sitting in the living room with me while I gradually stopped trembling.

“Right in my house, Kragar,” I said for about the ninth time.

“I know, boss,” he said.

“You don't do that.”

Aibynn was in his room, drumming, he said, to pull himself back together. Kragar said, “I know why they did, though.”

“What do you mean?”

“Remember a few weeks ago? Didn't you go busting into someone's house to get information from him?”

I took a very deep breath. “Yes,” I said.

“There you have it. You broke the rules, they broke the rules. That's how it works, Vlad.”

“I should have known.”

“Yeah.”

Not more than a month before, Sticks had refused an offer for my head. His refusal had made him a target, and I'd saved his life, just as he'd saved mine before. And for what?

"I don't think you should stay here, Vlad."

"I'm not going to, Kragar. Thanks. I'm all right now."

"I'll wait until you leave, if you don't mind."

"Yeah, okay."

I suggested to Aibynn that this might not be a safe place to stay tonight. He said, "No problem. I have a friend I can stay with."

"Good. I'll see you sometime."

Kragar escorted me down the stairs and left me when it looked safe.

"Where are we going, boss?"

"An inn I know, on the other side of town."

"Why there?"

"It's across the street from where Boralinoi works."

"Ah. What about Toronnan? He was the one who—"

"Fuck Toronnan. Fuck revenge. I'm getting Cawti back."

It was a good three-hour walk, but I think it did me good.

I was up early the next morning, waiting just outside the inn where I'd spent the night.

I stood in the shadow of the doorway, waiting. Rocza flew around looking harmless and terrorizing all the local, city-bred jhereg while Loioosh waited with me. I had six good hours of sleep inside of me, followed by three cups of klava and crumb-bread with goat cheese. A sharp, steady wind came up the hill from my left, smacking me in the face and giving rise to reflections on the passing away of the old and the unfathomable nature of the new. Not a bad day to kill, not a bad day to die, if either came to pass.

While I didn't know what Boralinoi looked like, I had no trouble spotting him by the two enforcers who preceded him, the one on either side, and the two who followed him. They were good, too. I idly went through possibilities for nailing him as he walked down the street, and came to the conclusion that I'd have to bribe at least two, perhaps three of those enforcers to have a reasonable chance. They really were attending to business, and I had to do some fast shifting to avoid being spotted.

Boralinoi was dressed expensive and walked like he knew it. I thought he'd look good in court, with his perfect black curly hair, rings on all his fingers, and delicate precise steps. He looked like he was probably perfumed, and doubtless had a scent-cloth next to his collar, lest he meet with someone whose breath he didn't like. He went into the leather shop that housed his offices in back. I gathered Rocza to my other shoulder and followed him in. I've always loved the smell of fresh leather, though here it was a bit overpowering, I suppose due to the admixture of scents of various oils and unguents used by this mysterious trade. In the front part of the store hung vests and jerkins, and when I slipped past to the back, there was an old Vallista laboriously pushing a heavy needle thick thread into the seam of what looked like a leather flagon. Why anyone would wish to drink from a leather flagon, I don't know.

Before he noticed me, I got past him and was facing a stairway leading up. At its top were two Jhereg who didn't look friendly. They studied me and seemed to be wondering if they should challenge me or just drop me where I stood. I reached the top alive and said, "Vlad Taltos to see Lord Boralinoi."

The shorter of the two said, "Appointment?"

“No.”

“Wait there, then.”

“Yes.”

He concentrated for a moment, nodded as if to himself, and said, “What do you want to see him about?” He had a voice like a metal file; it set my teeth on edge.

“It’s a personal matter.”

“So make a sacrifice.”

“Whom do you suggest?”

He smiled a little. I wondered if he kept his teeth crooked on purpose, just for the effect. He concentrated again, then said once more, “Wait.”

After a minute or two of standing there regarding the toughs who were regarding me, he said, “Go on in, the boss will give you five minutes.”

“Oh, happy day,” I said, and went past them.

There were five more in the next room, one at a desk and four lounging around. I knew them all for killers at once. The one at the desk nodded to me, the others looked me over much the way I look over a game hen before I loosen its skin to fill it with mushrooms, garlic, and tarragon.

There were three doors. I pointed to the middle one, asked a question with my eyebrows, received a nod, and went through. His desk was big, and he sat behind it like he belonged there. There were two Jhereg in the room with him, one quiet looking wisp of a man with a pinched in face and a dimple who was either an accountant or a sorcerer, and another tough, this one with the cold look of someone who would kill anyone, anytime, for any reason at all. When I came in he shifted his shoulders and an a hand down

his chin, in a gesture I recognized as checking to make sure the surprises under his cloak were all in place and ready. I automatically ran a hand through my hair and adjusted the clasp of my cloak. All of mine were set.

There were no windows in the room, and, so far as I could tell from a quick glance, no other exits. I'd give odds that there was a hidden door somewhere, because that's how these people work, but I couldn't find it. Loiosh shifted uncomfortably on my shoulder; he didn't like the lack of an escape route, either. Rocza, on my other shoulder, picked up some of his nervousness. Boralinoi's eyes rested on each of the jhereg in turn, then he looked at me.

"I've heard of you, Lord Taltos," he said.

"And I, you, Your Lordship."

"You wanted to speak to me. Go ahead."

"It's a private matter, Your Lordship."

Without taking his eyes from me, he said, "Cor, N'vaan, don't speak of this to anyone."

That was the best I was going to get, then. I said, "I'm coming to you for advice about my marriage, Your Lordship."

"Sorry. I'm not married."

"A shame, Your Lordship. Marriage is bliss, you know. But I believe Your Lordship might be able to help me, anyway."

He took a scent-cloth from his collar and waved it in front of his face, dabbed it against the corners of his mouth, crumpled it up in his hand, and leaned back in the chair. "You're talking about the woman who's been working with those troublemakers in South Adrilankha."

"She's the only wife I have, Your Lordship. I'd sure hate to lose her."

“Why do you come to me?”

“It was by your orders that those people were arrested. I would think you could have one released.”

“What makes you think I arranged it?”

“A dream I had last night, Your Lordship. We Easterners always believe our dreams.”

“I see.” He leaned forward and stared at me. “Listen to me, Baronet Taltos, so I don't have to repeat myself. Those troublemakers are making trouble, and not just in South Adrilankha. The trouble they're making affects what happens in the rest of the city and beyond its borders. We've already had noticeable cuts in our profit in several areas, traced directly to Teckla getting too smart for themselves. If a thing like that happens on its own, so be it; I wouldn't interfere. But it isn't happening on its own, these people are making it happen. And who's right in front of making it happen?”

Your wife, Taltos. A Jhereg. The Empire has come to us, through our representative, and complained. They've denied petitions of ours because of the trouble stirred up by this Jhereg Easterner wife of yours. We can't have that.

“Yes, I got them arrested. I'll even tell you how, Taltos. I had a sorcerer of mine blow up a watchstation in South Adrilankha, and leave messages all over it that looked like they'd done it. Does that shock you? It shouldn't. They needed to be put away, and I've put them away. If I haven't done it thoroughly enough, then I'll go back and do it again.

“I'm sorry it's your wife who's involved, Lord Taltos, I really am. But that's just your hard luck. Let her out? She was the one I most needed to get. So live with it. Go out and find someone else. If I

have my way, she'll rot in the Imperial Dungeons until the Great Sea of Chaos floods the Empire. That's all I have to say. Happy New Year."

"Easy, boss."

"I know, Loiosh. I'm trying. Keep Rocza under control, will you?"
I didn't say anything for a moment, trying to check my temper, and to keep the effort off my face. Then I spoke slowly and carefully, to make sure there was no mistake.

"So you arranged for my wife to be arrested by the Empire?"

"Yes"

"That is, my wife in particular?"

"Yes."

I looked him up and down once, and said, "You know, I believe I'm going to mess you up."

"No, you're not," he said, and concentrated very briefly. 'The door behind me opened, and, as I turned my head, five of them came through. They were all of them holding daggers; no doubt they'd been waiting for this. I turned back and saw that Borolino had pushed his chair back and the two who'd been standing there stepped between him and me. The tough one drew a shortsword. There was an awful stillness, as if the time between heartbeats had stretched across an ocean of movement, holding the world exactly as it was for just one instant that took forever.

"You're right," I said at last. "I'm going to kill you." Interestingly enough, if there'd been fewer of them I might not have gotten out of there. But the room wasn't really big enough for all of them to work together, as long as I got the jump; and I did.

Loiosh let me see what was behind me well enough for me to throw a pair of daggers into the stomachs of the two directly

behind me, which slowed them down a great deal, and at the same time Rocza flew at the most dangerous of them, the sorcerer. I spun away throwing a handful of darts randomly in the general direction of the three between me and the door, then pivoted away from whatever those behind me might be up to. I was through the door before they could recover. Loiosh went flying down the hall to find out what was up ahead while I turned back to the door. I had just time to draw my rapier, which is sometimes a handicap against the huge Dragaeran longswords, but worked very nicely indeed against the Jhereg with the dagger who charged out at me. I cut his knife hand and scored his neck in two quick movements of the wrist that would have made my grandfather proud, then backed up a few steps.

I took a throwing knife into my left hand as Rocza flew out the door and past me to help Loiosh in case he was in trouble. Verra, my goddess, what a team we were that day! The tough one with the shortsword appeared in the door and took my knife directly in his chest. He didn't go down, which was ideal, since he blocked the door quite effectively. Loiosh gave me the all-clear for the next room, and I was through it and down the stairs.

I'm not much of a sorcerer, but it doesn't take much of a sorcerer to fuse a door shut, and the few seconds that gained me made all the difference.

“Two toughs in here waiting for you, boss. We're distracting them, but—yikes!”

“You all right, Loiosh?”

“Near miss, boss.”

“Tell me when.”

“Wait . . . wait. . . .” I took Spellbreaker into my left hand, wishing

I'd had a third hand to hold some darts. “*Now!*” and I charged through the door, point-first.

Loiosh and Rocza had, indeed, distracted them, and the point of my rapier through a throat distracted one of them more. The other, slashing desperately at Rocza, concentrated on me and gestured, but Spellbreaker, spinning wildly, handily stopped whatever it was. I slashed in his general direction just to give him something to think about, then I was through the door. Loiosh and Rocza beat him out of it, I shut it, did my little fusing thing again, and ran like hell down the stairs.

The leatherworker seemed to be just a leatherworker, because his only reaction to seeing me appear with a blooded sword was to squawk and cower, and then I was in the street, across the street, behind a building.

“We’re teleporting, folks.”

“What if they trace it?”

“Watch me.” And I put forth my power and appeared in the courtyard of Castle Black, where a guest is always safe, as I've good reason to know. I didn't throw up, but the aftereffect of the teleport had me on my knees and the world spinning. Seeing the ground a mile below didn't help, either, but knowing I was safe, if only for a moment, more than made up for the discomfort.

After a time, I got to my feet and headed for the great double doors, my knees vibrating like Aibynn's drum.

Lesson Eleven

MATTERS OF STATE II

LADY TELDRA DIRECTED me to the third-floor study in the South Wing, where I found Morrolan closeted with Daymar, whom I mentioned earlier. Daymar was thin and angular, with the sharp nose, chin, and jawline of the House of the Hawk, softened by a broad forehead and wide-set eyes. Loiosh flew over to greet Morrolan. Rocza, oddly enough, flew over to Daymar, whom she had never met, and stayed on his shoulder for the entire conversation.

Morrolan and Daymar were hunched over a table. Between them was something that looked to be a large black jewel. They were poking at it and staring at it as if it were a small animal and they wanted to see if it was alive. I went over to the table myself, and it took them a few moments to notice me. Then Daymar looked up and said, “Oh, hello, Vlad.”

“Good morning. What is that?”

“That,” said Morrolan, “is black Phoenix stone.”

“Never heard of it,” I said.

“It is similar to gold Phoenix stone,” said Daymar helpfully.

“Yes,” I said— “Only black instead of gold.”

“Right,” said Daymar, not noticing my sarcasm.

“What is gold Phoenix stone?”

“Well,” said Daymar, “once we discovered the black, we started digging around in Morrolan's library and found a few references to it.”

“Morrolan,” I said, “would you care to enlighten me?”

“Do you recall,” said Morrolan, “the difficulty we had with psionic contact on the island?”

“Yes. Daymar was cut off, as I recall.”

He looked up from scratching Rocza's chin. “Not cut off “ he said.

“I collapsed from the effort of maintaining contact.”

I stared at him. “You?”

“I.”

“My goodness.”

“Yes.”

Morrolan said, “The only place Phoenix stone occurs is on the eastern and southern coast of Greenaere. Essentially, no psychic activity can pass through the effect of the stone, and the concentration around the island is sufficient to make it unreachable.”

“Then why could Loiosh and I communicate?”

“Exactly,” said Morrolan. “That is, indeed, the question. The only idea I've been able to come up with is that the connection between witch and familiar is fundamentally different from psionic communication. But how it is different, I don't know. I'd been planning to reach you, but since you are here, perhaps you'd be willing to assist us in a few experiments to determine exactly that.”

“I'm not sure I like this, boss.”

“You and me both, Loiosh.” To Morrolan I said, “This may not be the best time.”

His eyebrows focused on me. “Why? Has something happened?”

“Oh, nothing. Another close brush with death, but what's one more of those?”

For a moment he looked puzzled, trying to work out where the irony was, then he said, “Would you like some wine?”

“Love some. I'll help myself.” I did so.

Morrolan said, “Tell me about it, Vlad.”

“Jhereg troubles.”

“Again?”

“Still.”

“I see.”

Daymar said, “Can I help?”

“No. Thanks.”

“Say, boss, doesn't Aibynn have one of those things hanging around his neck?”

“Come to think of it, yes.”

“So that's why I could never spot him.”

“Or anyone else on Greenaere, probably. Yeah.”

I turned back to Morrolan. “Where did you find this?”

A little Morrolan smile flitted across one side of his face.

“Exploring,” he said.

“Where?”

“In the Imperial Dungeons.”

My heart started hammering. I said, “Cawti—”

“She's fine. We didn't actually speak much, but I saw her—”

“How did you—?”

“I was visiting the Palace, and I got lost, and about thirty Imperials got lost as well, and there I was.”

My hands were getting tired where I was gripping the chair. I relaxed them. “Did you speak at all?”

“I said hello, she looked surprised and nodded to me, by which time my guide was too nervous about the whole thing to keep me there. But I kept noticing these crystals about the place, so I acquired one on my way out.”

“But she seems well?”

“Yes. She seemed quite, um, spirited.”

“Did—damn. Wait a moment.” I grumbled, debated ignoring whoever it was, decided there was too much happening right now and let my mental barriers down. “Who is it?”

“Me, boss. Where are you? I can hardly maintain contact”

“Just a moment, Melestav.” I moved to the far side of the room, well away from the crystal. “Is that better?”

“Some.”

“Okay. What is it? Can it wait?”

“Another messenger, boss.” There was something odd in his tone. I said, “Not from Toronnan this time?”

“No, boss. From the Empress. She wants to see you. Tomorrow.”

“The Empress?”

“Yeah.”

“Tomorrow?”

“That's what I said.”

“Tomorrow is New Year's day.”

“I know.”

“All right. I'll talk to you later.” I turned to Morrolan. “Can you think of any reason why the Empress would want to see me on New Year's Day?”

He cocked his head to the side. “Do you sing?”

“No.”

“In that case, it must be something important.”

“Oh, grand,” I said. “I can hardly wait.”

“In the meantime,” said Morrolan, “I just want to try a couple of things. I assure you there is no risk.”

“What the hell, boss? The worst that can happen is that it 'll kill us,

and then we don't have to worry about what the Empress is going to do.”

“A point,” I said, and told Morrolan to go ahead.

The next day was the first day of the Month of the Phoenix, in the Year of the Dzur, during the Phase of the Yendi, in the Reign of the Phoenix, Cycle of the Phoenix, Cycle of the Dragon, which is why most of us say the year 244 after the Interregnum.

I was off to the Imperial Palace. Happy New Year.

If you're sitting on the edge of your chair waiting to hear what the Imperial Palace was like, you're in for a disappointment; I don't remember. It was big and impressive and was built by people who know how to do things big and impressive, and that's all I remember. I was there just past noon, all dressed up in my Jhereg colors, with my boots brightly polished, my cloak freshly cleaned, and a jerkin that fairly glittered. I had found my pendant of office and put it around my neck; just about the first time I'd worn it since I'd inherited it. I had thought for a long time about leaving Loiosh behind, and he'd politely refrained from the conversation, but in the end I couldn't bring myself to do it, so he sat proudly on my right shoulder. Rocza, who had been left behind, wasn't very happy about it, but there are limits to how much of an outrage I wanted to be the first time I officially appeared before the Empress.

Appear before the Empress.

I was a Jhereg, the scum of society, and an Easterner, the scum of the world. She sat with the Orb revolving about her head, in the center of the Empire, and at her command was all the power of the Great Sea of Chaos, as well as all the military might of the Seventeen Houses. She had survived Adron's Disaster, and braved

the Paths of the Dead, rebuilding, almost overnight, an Empire that had fallen to ruin.

Now she wanted to see me, and you think I was in shape to take notes on architecture?

I'd seen her once before, but that was in the Iorich Wing, when I'd been questioned concerning the death of a high noble of the House of the Jherég. It seems that a minor boss in the Organization, a certain Taishatinin or something, had bought himself a Dukedom in the House and then proceeded to get himself killed. I can't imagine why he wanted it except perhaps to feed his self-esteem, but there it was; he was a Duke, and when a Duke is murdered, the Empire investigates.

And somehow my name came up, and, after spending a couple of weeks in the Imperial Dungeons, I was ordered to testify "Under the Orb," with the Empress there to observe, and all these peers of House Jherég who had no power at all in the running of the Organization. I was asked things like, "When did you last see him alive?" and I'd say, "Oh, I don't know; he was always pretty dead," and they'd rebuke me sternly.

They asked my opinion as to who killed him and I said that I believed he had killed himself. The Orb showed that I was telling the truth, and I was; messing with me the way he'd been doing was like asking to die. The only time the Orb caught me lying was when I made some remark about how overwhelmed I was to be speaking before such an august assembly.

I remember catching a glimpse or two of the Empress, seated behind me to my left, and wondering what she thought of the whole thing. I thought she was pretty for a Dragaeran, but I don't remember any of the details, except for her eyes, which were gold.

This time I noticed a little more. After a vague period of feeling as if I were being handed from one polite functionary to another, and in which I gave my name and titles more times than I had in the last year put together, I was allowed into the Imperial throne room, and then I heard my name, stepped forward, and became aware of myself and my surroundings for the first time that day. Globes and candles were lit, and the place was full of aristocrats, all in a festive mood, or pretending to be in a festive mood. I was aware of her, too. She wore a gown that was the color of her eyes and hair, and her face was heart-shaped, her brows high and fine. I stood before her in the Hall of the Phoenix. Her throne was carved of onyx and traced with gold in the representations of all Seventeen Houses. I instinctively looked for the Jhereg, and saw part of a wing near her right hand. I also discerned unobtrusive black cushions on the throne and didn't know whether to be amused or not.

The seneschal announced me and I stepped forward, giving her the best courtesy I knew how to give. Loiosh had to adjust himself to keep from falling off, but did so, I think, fairly gracefully.

“We give you welcome, Baronet Taltos,” she said. Her voice was just a voice; I mean, I don't know what I expected, but I was surprised when she sounded like someone you'd meet at the market pricing coriander.

“Thank you, Your Majesty. I ask only to serve you.”

“Indeed, Baronet?” She seemed amused. “I suspect the Orb would detect a falsehood there. You are usually more careful in your evasions.”

She remembered.

“It is a pleasure not to have to dissemble before Your Majesty,” I

said. "I prefer to lie directly."

She chuckled, which didn't surprise me. What did surprise me was the lack of scandalized murmuring from the faceless courtiers behind me. Perhaps they knew their Empress. She said, "We must speak together. Please wait."

"I am at your service, Majesty."

As I'd been coached, I stepped backward seventeen steps, and then to the side. I wondered if watching an hour or so of Imperial business would be boring or if it would be interesting. In fact, it was startling, because I had momentarily forgotten the festivities, and the first thing I noticed was Aibynn holding his drum to the side and speaking with the singer I recognized, and someone I didn't know who was holding an instrument similar to the Eastern Hej'du.

I went over and said hello. Aibynn seemed faintly surprised to see me, but also distracted. Thoddi was more gregarious, and introduced me to the other musician, an Athyra whose name was Dav-Hoel.

"So, there are three of you now," I remarked to Thoddi.

"Actually there should be four of us, but Andler refused to play before the Empress."

"Refused?"

"He's an Iorich, and he's upset about, you know, the conscription in South Adrilankha, and the Phoenix Guards, and that kind of thing."

"I don't want to hear about it," I said. Thoddi nodded as if he understood, which I doubted. "Anyway," I said, "good luck." Shortly after that, they were called on. Thoddi began to sing some old tavern song about making candles, full of innuendo and bad rhymes, but I watched Aibynn. He had the same dreamy smile as

always, as if he were hearing something you couldn't hear, or seeing something through his half-shut eyes that you couldn't see. Or knew something you didn't know. Such as, for instance, that he was about to assassinate the Empress.

"He's going to do it, Loiosh."

"I think you're right, boss."

"I don't want to be here."

"Can you think of any way to leave?"

"Well, no."

"What do we do?"

"You come up with a plan. I'm fresh out." I watched with a horrified fascination as Aibynn began to move, the drum cradled against his left side. He spun in place for a while, then began to dance out and back as the singing died and they just played. Was he moving closer to the Empress? I tore my eyes away from him and saw her having a low-voiced discussion with a lady of the House of the Tiassa. The Empress smiled, and though she spoke with the Tiassa, her eyes were on the musicians. She had a good smile. I wondered if it was true, the tavern gossip about a lover who was an Easterner.

Aibynn was, yes, closer now. If he had concealed a knife, or a dart, or a blowgun, he could hardly miss, and no one was near him. I began to move forward. I glanced back at the Empress, and she was looking at me now. I stopped where I was, unable to move, my heart thundering. She smiled at me, just a little, and almost imperceptibly shook her head. What was she thinking? Did she think that *I . . . ?*

The song ended on a roll of the drum and a clatter of the lant-like instrument Thoddi played, and the musicians bowed. Aibynn

returned to the side, and they started another song, an instrumental piece I didn't know. I stepped backward, shaking and confused. What had just happened? What had almost happened? How much had I imagined?

Dav-Hoel's instrument teased the melody the same way Aibynn's drum was teasing the rhythm. On the other hand, I wished they'd just play the song, but everyone else seemed very impressed, and the Empress looked positively excited. I've never been very knowledgeable about music.

After that they did a silly song about snuff, then an instrumental they introduced as the Madman's Dance, and then Loiosh said, "*Boss, wake up! The Empress!*"

"*Huh ? Oh.*" She was gesturing to me, still looking amused. I came forward, bowed once more, and she said, "Come with me." "Yes, Your Majesty."

She stood, stretched quite unselfconsciously, threw a purse to the musicians, and went behind the throne through a curtained doorway. I followed, feeling self-conscious enough to make up for both of us. She turned back to me and nodded that I was to catch up to her. I did, and the four of us, the Empress Zerika, the Orb, Loiosh, and I, walked together in silence. Was it stranger for her to be walking with a Jhereg, a jhereg, or an Easterner? On the other hand, if it was true that she had a human lover—

She caught me staring at her and I turned away, feeling myself blushing.

"You were thinking improper thoughts about your Empress?" she said in a voice that sounded more amused than offended.

"Just speculating on rumors, Your Majesty."

"Ah. About an Eastern lover?"

“Urn, yeah.”

“It's true,” she said. “His name is Laszlo. He isn't my lover because he is an Easterner, nor despite it. He is my lover because I love him, and he is an Easterner because that is the house in which his soul resides.”

I licked my lips. “How can you read my thoughts without my familiar catching you at it?”

She laughed, just a little. “By watching your face, and by guessing. I've gotten pretty good at it.”

“That's all?”

“It is often enough. For example, I saw you try to foil an attempt on my life that was not going to take place. Had you forgotten the Orb, which protects the life of the Emperor?”

I blushed once more. I had forgotten. To cover, I said, “It hasn't always worked.”

“You,” she said, “are not Mario. And neither is your friend from Greenaere.”

“Then I imagined the whole thing?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

“You were not troubling to keep your worries from your countenance, and you are an assassin.”

“Who, me?”

“Yes,” she said, “you.”

There was nothing to say to that, so I said nothing. We went around a corner and through more plain white halls. She said, “For some reason, I do my best thinking when walking right here.”

“Like a Tiassa”, I said without thinking.

“What?”

“Excuse me, Your Majesty. Something I heard somewhere: Tiassa think walking, Dragons think standing, Lyorn think sitting, and Dzur think afterward.”

She chuckled. “And when do you think, good Jhereg?”

“All the time, Your Majesty. I can't seem to help it.”

“Ah. I know the feeling.” We walked some more. She seemed very casual with me, but there was the Orb, circling her head slowly as we walked, and changing color occasionally; from the murky brown a few moments ago to a calm blue. I wondered if she was deliberately trying to confuse me.

“You are a very unusual man, Baronet Vladimir Taltos,” she said suddenly. “You bring someone you think might be an assassin into the Empire and allow him to appear before me, and yet you were ready to act to protect me when you thought he might really do something.”

“How did you know he is from Greenaere?”

“I suspected it when I found him psychically blank. I checked with the Orb, and there are memories recorded of the sort of clothes he wears and the type of drum he plays.”

“I see. Your Majesty, why did you summon me?”

“To see what you looked like. Oh, I remembered you faintly, from your skillful dancing around the truth during a certain murder inquiry. But I wanted to know a little better the man who threatened his own House representative right on the Palace grounds, and whose wife is best friends with my Heir.”

I chuckled at that, remembering the nature of that friendship.

“Yes,” she said, smiling. “I know all about it.”

“How?”

She shook her head. “Norathar has told me nothing. But I am, after

all, the Empress. I suspect I have a better spy network even than you do, Lord Taltos.”

Ouch. “I wouldn't doubt it, Your Majesty.” What didn't she know? Did she know, for example, that I was the one who had started the war with Greenaere? Probably not, or I'd be in the cell next to Cawti. “Is this how you usually spend the New Year's festivities, Your Majesty?”

“It is when we are threatened with war, and simultaneously with rebellion. I worry about these things, Baronet and decisions must be made—such as if I am to step down and let the House of the Dragon take the Orb. I will spend today seeing everyone who I think may have a role to play in all of this.”

“What makes you think I will have a role to play in war and rebellion, Your Majesty?”

“I could give several answers to that, but the short one is when I searched the Orb for names, yours was one that emerged. I don't know why. Can you tell me?”

“No,” I said, keeping careful control of my features.

“Cannot, or will not?”

“Will not, Your Majesty.”

“Very well,” she said, and I breathed again. I said, “Will there be war, Your Majesty?”

“Yes.”

“I'm sorry to hear it.”

“As am I. The alliance of Greenaere and Elde will be a difficult one to defeat. It is all but impossible to effect a landing in either place, whereas we have too many miles of coastline to protect. In the end, we may have to crush them with numbers, and that will be costly, in lives and everything else.”

“What do they want, Your Majesty?”

“I don't know. They don't seem to want anything. Perhaps there is a madman behind it. Or a god.”

We went around another turn, again to the left, and there was a slight rise to the floor.

“Where are we now, Your Majesty?”

“Do you know, I'm not exactly certain. This is a route I walk often, but I've never known exactly where it goes. There are no doors or other paths that I've found or heard of. I sometimes wonder if it was put here just for this purpose.”

“Then I suppose it would be pretty useless during the reign of a Dragon, Lyorn, or Dzur.”

She chuckled. “I suppose it would.”

The walk straightened out. “Your Majesty, why is my wife in your dungeons?”

She sighed. “First, let us be accurate. They are not dungeons. Dungeons are dank cells where Duke Curse-Me-Not keeps merchants he can't justify executing but whose goods he likes more than the prices. The Lady Cawti of Taltos, Countess of Lostguard Cleft and Environs, resides in the Imperial prison on suspicion of conspiring against the Orb.”

I bit my lip. “Noted, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Now, as to why she is there: because she wants to be. There was a petition to release her, it was granted, she refused.”

“I know about that, Your Majesty. The Lady Norathar made this petition. What did she say upon refusing?”

“She didn't specifically say she wanted to stay, but she wouldn't sign the document we required for her release.”

“Document? What sort of document, Your Majesty?”

“One that said she would not engage in any activities; contrary to the interests of the Empire.”

“Ah. That would account for it.” The Empress didn't say anything. I said, “But, Your Majesty, why was she arrested in the first place?”

“I'm wondering,” she said slowly, “how much you know, and how much I should tell you.”

“I know that it was my own House that made the petition. But why was it granted?” In other words, since when did a Phoenix Empress care a teckla's squeal about the business workings of House Jhereg?

She said, “You seem to think I am at liberty to ignore whatever requests I wish to.”

“In a word, Your Majesty, yes. You are Empress.”

“That is true, Baronet Taltos, I am Empress.” She, frowned, and seemed to be thinking. The floor began to slope up and I began to feel fatigued. She said, “Being Empress has meant many things throughout our long, long history. Its meaning changes with each Cycle, with each House whose turn it is to rule, with each Emperor or Empress who sets the Orb spinning about his or her head. Now, at the dawn of the second Great Cycle, all of those with a bent toward history are looking back, studying how it is we have arrived at this pass, and this gives us the chance to see where we are.

“The Emperor, Baronet Taltos, has never, in all our long history, ruled the Empire, save now and again, for a few moments only, such as Korotta the Sixth between the destruction of the Barons of the North and the arrival of the Embassy of Duke Tinaan.”

“I know only a little of these things, Your Majesty.”

“Never mind. I'm getting at something. The peasants grow the food, the nobility distribute it, the craftsmen make the goods, the merchants distribute them. The Emperor sits apart and watches all that goes on to see that nothing disrupts this flow, and to fend off the disasters that our world tries to throw at us from time to time—disasters you can hardly conceive of. I assure you, for example, that stories of the ground shaking and fire spitting forth from it and winds that carried people off during the Interregnum are not myths, but things that would happen were it not for the Orb. “But the Emperor sits and waits and studies and watches the Empire for those occasions when something, if not checked, might bring disaster. When such a thing does occur, he has three tools at his disposal. Do you know what they are?”

“I can guess at two of them,” I said. “The Orb and the Warlord.”

“You are correct, Baronet. The third is subtler. I refer to the mechanism of Imperium, through the Imperial Guards, the Justicers, the scryers, sorcerers, messengers, and spies.

“Those,” she continued, “are the weapons I have at hand with which to make certain that wheat from the north gets south as needed, and iron from the west turns into swords needed in the east. I do not rule, I regulate, if I give an order, it will be obeyed. But no Emperor, with the Orb or without, can tell if every Vallista mine operator is making honest reports and sending every ton of ore where he says he is.”

“Then who does rule, Your Majesty?”

“When there is famine in the north, the fishermen in the south rule. When the mines and forges in the west are producing, the transport barons rule. When the Easterners are threatening our borders, the armies in the east rule Do you mean politically? Even that isn't as

simple as you think. At the beginning of our history, no one ruled. Later it was each House, through its Heir, which ruled each House. Then it became the nobles of all the Houses. For a brief time, at the end of the last Cycle, the Emperor did, indeed, rule, but that was short-lived, and he was brought down by assassination, conspiracy, and his own foolishness. Now, I think, more and more it is the merchants, especially the caravaneers who control the flow of food and supplies from one side of the Empire to the other. In the future, I suspect it will be the wizards, who are every day able to do things they could not do before.”

“And you? What do you do?”

“I watch the markets, I watch the mines, I watch the fields, I watch the Dukes and the Counts, I guard against disasters, I cajole each House toward the direction I need, I— what is that look on your face for, Baronet?”

“Each House?” I repeated. “Each House?”

“Yes, Baronet, each House. You didn't know the Jhereg fits into this scheme? But it must; otherwise why would it be tolerated? The Jhereg feed off the Teckla. By doing so, they keep the Teckla happy by supplying them with those things that brighten their existence. I don't mean the peasants, I mean the Teckla who live in the cities and do the menial work none of the rest of us are willing to do. That is the prey of your House, Baronet, for if they become unhappy, the city loses efficiency, and the nobility begins to complain, and the delicate balance of our society is threatened.” The slant of the floor was back down now; I decided my legs would probably survive.

“And these people,” I said, “are threatening the Jhereg, and so they must be removed. Is that it?”

“Your House thinks so, Lord Taltos.”

“Then you don't really believe they are a threat to the Empire?” She smiled. “No, not directly. But if the Teckla become unhappy, well, so will others. If there were no war looming over us, perhaps it wouldn't matter. But we may require more efficiency than ever, and to have our largest city disrupted, just at this moment, could have terrible consequences for the Empire.”

I thought about a story I'd once been told by a Teckla, and almost said that if the Teckla were so damn happy, why didn't she just go become one, but I was afraid she might take it the way I meant it. So I said, “Is one Jherereg Easterner likely to make that much of a difference?”

“Will it matter to your House, Baronet?”

“I don't know, Your Majesty. But it won't matter to them as much as it will matter to me.”

We passed through a curtain and were once more in the throne room. I heard the strings of Thoddi's instrument, the wail of Dav-Hoel's, and the clacking drone of Aibynn's drum. The courtiers bowed, and it was as if they were bowing to me, which was pretty funny. The Empress pointed to a woman in the colors of the House of the Iorich. The woman approached as Zerika sat herself in the throne. I backed away.

“I hereby order and require the release of and full freedom for the Countess of Lostguard Cleft and Environs,” she said, and I damn near cried.

Lesson Twelve

BASIC SURVIVAL SKILLS

Two STONY-FACED DRAGONS, each wearing the gold cloak of the Phoenix and a headband bearing an Iorich, delivered Cawti to the steps of the Iorich Wing of the Imperial Palace, a half hour's walk from where I had left the Empress. When they first appeared, each holding one of her arms, I almost put them down right there, but Loiosh spoke to me sharply. They released her on the bottom step, backed up, bowed to her once, turned together, and walked up again without a backward glance.

I stood three feet from her, looking in vain for signs of what she'd been through. Her eyes were clear and sharp, her expression grim, but she appeared unharmed. She stood for a moment, then her eyes focused on me. "Vlad," she said. "Are you responsible for this?" She held up her right hand, which contained a rolled-up parchment.

"I guess so," I said. "What's that? A pardon?"

"A release. It says we concede your innocence and don't do it again."

"At least you're out."

"I could have been out before, if I'd wanted to be."

"I'd say I'm sorry, but I'm not." She smiled and nodded, being more understanding than I'd expected.

"Perhaps it's for the best."

I shrugged. "I thought so, when you broke me out."

"Hardly the same thing," she said.

"Maybe not. How was it?"

“Tedious.”

“I'm glad it wasn't worse than that. Would you like to come home?”

“Yes. Very much. I'd like to bathe, and eat something hot, and then —”

I waited. “And then what?” I asked after a moment.

“And then back to work.”

“Ah. Of course. Shall we walk, or be sick?”

She considered. “Do you know, before the Interregnum, when teleportation was more difficult, there were Teckla who earned their livelihood driving people around the city behind horses and donkeys. Or sometimes they used only their feet, pulling small coaches. They wore harnesses like they were horses or donkeys themselves “

“I don't like horses. What are donkeys?”

“I'm not certain. A variety of horse, I think.”

“Then I don't like them, either. You've been reading history, I see.”

“Yes. Sorcery has changed our whole world and is still changing it.”

“It has indeed.”

“Let us walk.”

“Very well.”

And we did.

I found some dried black mushrooms, poured boiling water over them, and let them soak. After about twenty minutes I cut them up with scallions, leeks, a little dill, various sorts of peppers, and thin strips of kethna. I quick-fried the whole thing with garlic and ginger while Cawti sat on the kitchen chair, watching me cook. Neither of us spoke until the food was done. We had it over some

pasta my grandfather had made. I had a few strawberries that were still good, so I put them in apalaczinta with a paste made from finely ground rednuts, cinnamon, sugar, and a bit of lime juice. We had that with a rare strawberry liqueur Kiera had given me, having found it in a liquor store she was visiting after hours.

“How,” I said, “can you stay away from a man who can cook like this?”

“Rigid self-control,” she said. “Ah.”

I poured us each some more liqueur and set the plates on the floor for the jhereg. I leaned the chair back, sipped, and studied Cawti. Despite her bantering tone, there was no light of humor in her eyes. There hadn't been for some time. I said, “What would I have to do to keep you?”

She looked at the table. “I don't know, Vladimir. I'm not sure there's anything, anymore. I've changed.”

“I know. Do you like what you've become?”

“I'm not certain. Whatever it is, it hasn't finished happening yet. I don't know if we can change together.”

“You know I'm willing to try almost anything.”

“Almost?”

“Almost.”

“What won't you do?”

“Ask me and we'll see.”

She shook her head. “I don't know. I just don't know.” This was another conversation we'd had before, with variations and embellishments. I went into the other room, next to the window so I could hear the street musicians outside. I had thrown them a bag of coins now and again, so they often played right below the window; it was one of the things I liked about the place. I threw

them a bag of coins and listened for a while. I remembered how it felt to walk down the streets with her, feeling her shoulder touch mine. It had made me feel taller, somehow. I remembered meals at Valabar's, and klava in a little place where made sculpture from empty cups and the sugar bowl. I made myself stop remembering, and just listened to the music.

A little later Aibynn returned, his drum carefully wrapped in thick, soft cloth. He set it against the wall and sat down.

“How did it go in court today?”

“Great” he said. “The Empress wants us back.”

“Congratulations.”

“What were you doing there?”

“Recovering my wife.”

“Oh “ He looked over at her, sitting on the longchair and reading her paper. “Good thing you got her.”

She smiled at him, stood up, and said, “I believe I will bathe now.”

“Mind if I watch?” I said.

She turned the smile toward me. “Yes,” she said, and walked into the bathroom. I heard the sound of wood being put into the stove and of water being put on to boil.

Aibynn began playing his drum, so I couldn't hear the rustle of fabric and the splashing, which was just as well, I suppose. His fingers were a blur, the beater was another. The drum hummed, then moaned, then sang, with pops and clicks emerging as if they were part of the room. I fell into it and managed not to think for a while.

Maybe I should learn to drum.

An hour later she came out in her red robe, Fenarian embroidery around the bottom, tied with a white cloth. The combination

enhanced her dark eyes. She sat down again in the longchair. I spoke over the low moan of Aibynn's drum. "Are you going back to South Adrilankha tomorrow?"

"Yes as long as I'm out, I'm going to work to force the Empire to release Kelly and the rest of our people."

"Do you think you can?"

"I don't see any other option."

I thought about the Empress, about being bound in cords of necessity, and said, "Do you know what they say about cornering a dzur?"

"Yes, I do. What do they say about killing thousands of people in a war that isn't any of our business? What do they say about incarcerating us in their dungeons? What do they say about starving us into submission? What do they say about their Phoenix Guards beating and killing us?"

"A point," I said.

"I'll be gone all day tomorrow."

"Yes, I suppose you will."

"Good night, Vlad."

"Good night, Cawti."

She went into the bedroom. I moved over to the longchair and sat down on the soft darrskin, stretched over a hardwood frame. It was still warm where she'd sat in it.

Aibynn stopped playing, looked at me, expressed a wish that I'd sleep without dreaming, then put his drum down and went into the blue room. I stared out at the night through the window and felt the warm breeze that smelled just a little of the sea.

Loiosh and Rocza flew over and sat on my lap. I scratched their respective chins, and presently I fell asleep.

I had a dream I don't really remember, which is almost the same as not dreaming. I think the growing light in the room and the voice in my head were both worked into it. The ugly taste in my mouth was not. I hate talking to people, even psionically, before I've had a chance to rinse my mouth out. *"Who is it?"*

"It's your trusty and true assistant."

"Joy. What is it, Kragar?"

"Glowbug just got offered six thousand for looking the other way while some nice fellow sends you on to your next life."

"Six thousand? Just for looking the other way? Verra. I've come up in the world."

I get the impression that he was tempted."

"He 'd be stupid if he wasn't. Why didn't he take it?"

"He thinks you're lucky. On the other hand, he's worried."

"Sensible guy. Let me wake up and and I'll get back to you."

"Okay."

I rinsed out my mouth and gave myself a quick wash.

"I think we're in trouble this time, Loiosh."

"It's a lot of money, boss. Someone's bound to go for it."

"Yep."

I started water for my morning klava and checked on the other occupants of the house. Cawti was gone, Aibynn was still sleeping. I put a log into the stove and used sorcery to light it, then set a couple of my rolls in it, got out butter and some ginger preserves. I poured the water over the ground klava, took the rolls out, prepared them, dumped heavy cream and honey in the klava, sat down, ate, drank, and thought.

Someone with the resources Boralinoi had could get me, eventually. Sooner or later, someone on my staff would give. Hell,

with the kind of money he was throwing around, I might have sold out one of my own bosses at one time. Personal loyalty only gets you so far in this business; cash gets you further. There were three ways I could think of to prevent him from buying someone off and setting me up. The first, to kill Boralinoi before he could get to me, was a fine idea but impractical; it would take two or three days, at least, to even get all the information on him that I would need. For the second, outbidding him I just didn't have the resources. That left the third, which would have several potential repercussions that needed serious consideration. I had another roll.

I took my time eating and thinking. When I was done, I put the plate into the bucket drew some more water and got sticky stuff off my face and hands.

“Kragar. Kragar. Kragar.”

“Who is it?”

“Master Mustache himself. When can you have everyone in the office?”

“What does 'everyone' mean this time, Vlad?”

“All my enforcers, Melestav, you.”

“Is it urgent enough that they should break off whatever they're doing?”

“Might as well. There isn't any time of day or night when some of them won't be busy doing something.”

“I guess. How 'bout an hour?”

“I'll see you then.”

“Want an escort?”

“No. Just make sure there's no one around the office who might want to do me injury.”

“Okay, boss. We 'll be there in an hour.”

I finished dressing, made certain of all of my concealed weaponry, and collected both Loiosh and Rocza. Aibynn was up by then, but I was pretty distracted so we didn't converse much. I send Loiosh outside first to make sure the street was clear, then carefully teleported to a spot within a quick dash of my office, but that held possibilities for other escapes if that route was blocked. It turned out to be unnecessary; except for the usual wave of nausea, the teleport was uneventful. I ducked inside the psychedelics shop that was a front for the gambling room that was a front for my office, and there I waited until I felt a little better. I went back and into my office.

They were there, twelve enforcers, Kragar, and Melestav. We were crammed into the area outside of my office and Kragar's, in front of Melestav's desk. I sat on the edge of his desk and considered the fourteen killers here assembled. Glowbug squatted against the wall, looking intense. Melestav, whose desk I'd usurped, stood near me protectively, looking at the others as if he wasn't quite sure I was safe, which was possible. There was Chimov, in the middle, waiting patiently. And the others. Sticks would have grabbed a chair in front, and his long legs would have stretched out to the side, his arms folded and he would have been looking curious and ironic.

An anger began to build up inside me but I had no time for it now; I concentrated on those who were there. These were the men who kept my business going, who, just by existing, prevented Jhereg with hungry eyes from creeping into my area or trying to push me around. These were the men who took turns guarding my back when I'd walk around my area, and inspecting meeting places to make certain everything was safe. If I couldn't count on them, I

might as well kill myself.

For the first time, as I studied them studying me, it seemed odd that there were no women among them. It has been Jhereg custom, as long as the Organization has existed that most of the women were sorcerers, and worked in what was referred to as the Left Hand of the Jhereg, or, informally, the Bitch Patrol. When they didn't refer to us as the Right Hand of the Jhereg, they had many colorful names for us that I see no need to go into. The two organizations cooperate, but there is no love lost between them. Once, many years before, I'd been told by an Oracle that my own left hand would bring me to the brink of ruin, and I'd wondered if the Oracle referred to the Left Hand of the Jhereg.

But I digress.

“First of all,” I said, “let me tell you what's going on, as far as I can tell. The gentleman who's after my head this time is much bigger than anyone who's been after it before. He has the resources to offer six thousand to anyone who will just move aside and let me get it, not to mention what he's willing to pay to the man with the knife. On the other hand, the last thing he wants is a war, so I don't think he's going to be going after any of you directly.

This,” I went on, “leaves each of you with several voices. You can, of course, sell me out. Pretty tempting this time. I hope to make it less so in a moment. Two, you can continue business as usual and hope I can come out on top yet again, unlikely as that seems. Or, third, you can get out while you're still alive. That is what I wish to discourage.”

I paused and looked about the room once more. No change in any expression, and— where was Kragar? Oh, there. Good. “This entire affair will run its course, I think, in a very few days. At the

end of that time, if I win, you will all be doing at least as well as you do now, maybe better. If I lose, of course, things won't look so good.

“None of you will be protecting me, because I will not be going around with any protection.” That caused a few eyes to widen. “In fact, I will not be going around at all. I will be hiding, and Kragar will run things, though I'll be in touch with him. This will remove the temptation to sell me out, because you won't be able to do so. It will remove the danger that you'll be taken down in an attempt on me, because, if there is such an attempt, you won't be there. This will begin at once, at the end of this meeting.

“So all I'm asking, gentlemen, is that you keep working for a few days and see how it all shakes out. I think the potential gains are worth the risks. Any questions?”

There were none. “Fair enough. Let Kragar know if you want out. That's all.” I stood and walked into my office, moving abruptly just in case someone had been bought off and thought he could get out alive in the confusion. I sat behind my desk, feeling as if all my senses were sharpened, so I noticed Kragar as he came in. I said, “Well?”

“They're all sticking.”

“Good. What do you think of the whole thing?”

“Nice of you to warn me in advance about my new responsibilities, Vlad.”

“What new responsibilities? It's nothing more than you've been doing for most of the last year, anyway.”

“I guess. Do you know where you're going?”

“I'm not certain. Probably Castle Black. We both know how hard it is to dig someone out of there.”

“And we both know it can be done.”

“True, true. I'm still thinking about it.”

He nodded and looked thoughtful. “As far as I can tell, they're all taking it pretty well.”

“That's good. Guess what your next set of orders is?” He sighed.

“Find out everything there is to know about dear Lord Boralinoi. And you want it yesterday.”

“Good guess.”

“It's lucky I started work on it yesterday, or it might have taken longer.”

“You mean you've got it?”

“No, but I've started. Another day or two and I should have it.”

“Good. Hurry.”

“I know.”

“Any news of the war?”

“You have better sources than I do. Last I heard they were getting the fleet together in Northport. There's lots of activity at the harbor, in any case.”

“But no new disasters?”

“A couple more freighters sunk, and there's a rumor of a convoy being attacked by some ships from Elde, but I don't know if it's true.” I nodded.

“How about South Adrilankha?” He looked uncomfortable. “Not good, Vlad. While you were off having tea with the Empress, there were some nasty skirmishes between press gangs and Easterners. Word is two Phoenix Guards were killed and another eleven or so injured.”

“And Easterners?”

“No idea. Thing is, it's spreading. Nothing around here, yet, but

there have been signs of trouble on the docks and in Little Deathgate.”

“What sort of trouble?”

“Placards going up, Teckla banding together and throwing things at Phoenix Guards. One or two barricades went up in Little Deathgate, but they didn't last long.”

“Anyone hurt?”

“Not yet.”

“That's something. What's the issue? Conscription?”

“No. Kelly's arrest.”

“By the Phoenix!”

“That's what the word is.”

I shook my head, wondering if I really knew half as much about this city as I thought I did. It was like there were invisible forces running through the streets, forces that controlled our lives and directed our actions, leaving us as helpless as a slave or an Empress. Things were happening that I couldn't understand, couldn't control, and might not survive. And whatever those things were, Cawti was right in the middle of them.

“I think I'd better be going, Kragar. I've just thought of an errand that won't wait.”

“All right. Give the old man my regards.”

“I will.”

“And be careful, Vlad. Just because I can guess where you're going doesn't mean Boralinoi's people can, but it doesn't mean they can't, either.”

“I'll be careful, Kragar. And good luck with your new job.”

He snorted. “I'll need it,” he said.

I followed him out, still thinking about Sticks. Something occurred

to me, and I stopped and asked Melestav to find the names of the freighters that had gone down. It was unlikely Chorba's Pride was one, and I couldn't do anything about it, anyway, but I wanted to know. And I guess, somehow, I'd have felt better knowing that Trice and Yinta were still alive. He agreed to do so, and I sent Loioosh and Rocza out ahead of me, to make sure it was safe to go outside.

There was a thump behind me, and at first it didn't register that anything was wrong.

Then I saw Melestav facedown on the floor and I moved away, drew a dagger, and looked around. I didn't see anything. Loioosh came back and landed on my shoulder, also looking anxiously around. I was not attacked.

Then I noticed that Melestav had a dagger in his hand and realized from his position what he'd been up to. It was only after that that I noticed Kragar, standing above my secretary's body.

"Shit," I said.

Kragar nodded. "You were set up perfectly, Vlad."

"But he didn't notice you."

I started shaking and cursing at the same time. That had been as close as I'd ever come. I looked down at his body. He had not only saved my life more than once, he had died doing it, and now this.

Now he'd tried to shine me, and for what? Money? Power?

If you want to push it back, he'd tried to shine me because I'd had to go and threaten the Imperial representative, and then threaten someone on the Jhereg Council. I couldn't blame anyone but myself for this. I kept staring at the body until Kragar said,

"No point in standing around here, Vlad. I'll take care of things. Get somewhere safe."

I did so without another word.

The bells in my grandfather's shop went tinga-ling as I pushed aside the rug that he used as a door. "Come in, Vladimir. Tea?" "Thank you, Noish-pa." I kissed his cheek and said hello to his familiar, a short-haired white cat named Ambrus. The tea had a distinct lemon tang and was very good. My grandfather's hands shook, just a little, as he poured. I sat in a canvas chair in his front room while Loiosh and Rocza, after greeting Noish-pa, settled down next to Ambrus for conversation on subjects I could only guess at. Where are your thoughts, Vladimir?"

"Noish-pa, what are they doing around here? I mean, the Empire, and these rebels."

"What are they doing? You come to an old man like me for this?" But he smiled with his few remaining yellowed teeth and settled back a little. "All right. The elves want to go to war, for what reason they do not tell me. They want sailors for their ships, so they pull in young men and women for it. They send in gangs who grab people and take them, without even saying farewell to the family, and bring them to the ships, which sail away. Everyone is upset, some throw things at the elves who want to take them. Now, these forradalomartok, they say that the war is a, what is the word? Urugy."

"Pretext?"

"Yes, a pretext, to bring in soldiers. The forradalomartok organize against this, and everyone says, 'Yes, yes, we fight,' and then they arrest this Kelly and now everyone says, 'Let him go or we will wreck your city.'"

"But it all happened so fast."

"That is how these things happen, Vladimir. You see all your

peasants smile and look sleepy and they say, 'Oh, this is our lot in life,' and then something happens and they all say, 'We will die to keep them from doing this to our children.' All in a night it can happen, Vladimir.”

“I guess so. But I'm frightened, Noish-pa. For them, and for Cawti.”

“Yes, she still walks with these people. You are right to fear.”

“Can they win?”

“Vladimir, why do you ask me? If soldiers come into my shop, I will show them how old I am. But I will not go looking for them, and so I know nothing of such things. Perhaps, yes, they can win. Perhaps the soldiers will crush them. Perhaps both at once. I don't know.”

“I have to decide what to do, Noish-pa.”

“Yes, Vladimir. But there is little help I can give you.”

We sipped tea for a while. I said, “I don't know, maybe it's good to have this problem. It means I don't have to worry about what's going to happen afterward.”

He didn't smile. “It is right not to worry now. But is it possible for you?”

“No” I said. I stared at my hands. “I know you don't approve of what I do. The trouble is, I'm not sure I approve of it anymore.”

“As I told you once before, Vladimir, killing people for money is no way for a man to earn a living.”

“But Noish-pa, I hate them so much. I learned that I used to be one, and I thought that had changed things, but it hasn't. I still hate them. Every time I come to see you, and smell the garbage in the streets, and see people who have lost their sight, or who have diseases that could be cured by the simplest sorcery, or don't know

how to write their own names, I just hate them. It doesn't make me want to fix everything, like Cawti; it just makes me want to kill them.”

“Have you no friends, Vladimir?”

“Hmm? Well, yes, certainly. What has that to do with it?”

“Who are your friends?”

“Well, there's—oh. I see. Yes, they're all Dragaerans. But they're different.”

“Are they?”

“I don't know, Noish-pa. I really don't. I know what you're saying, but why do I still feel this hate?”

“Hate is part of life, Vladimir. If you cannot hate, you cannot love. And if you hate these elves, then that is what you feel and you cannot deny it. But more foolish than this hate of elves you have never met is to let it rule you. That is no way to live.”

“I know that, but I—” I broke off as Amrus jumped into Noish-pa's lap, mewling furiously. Noish-pa frowned and listened.

“What's wrong?” I said.

“Be still, Vladimir. I don't know.”

Loiosh returned to my shoulder. Noish-pa got up and walked into the front of the shop. I was about to follow him when he returned, holding a sheet of white parchment. He took a quill pen from an inkwell, and with a few quick slashes drew a sideways rectangle. He dipped the pen again, not blotting it at all, and made sloppy signs in the corners. I didn't recognize the symbols.

“What is this?”

“Not now, Vladimir. Take this.” He handed me a small silver dagger. “Cut your left palm.” I did so, making a cut right next to the tiny white scar I'd made only two days before. It bled nicely.

“Collect some blood in your right hand.” I did that, too. “Scatter it onto the paper.” He held the paper about three feet in front of me. I tossed the blood onto it, making an interesting pattern of red dots. Then he threw me a clean cloth to bind my hand up. I did, concentrating a little to stop the blood and begin the healing. I wished, not for the first time, that I'd troubled to learn basic sorcerous healing.

Noish-pa studied the red dots on the parchment and said, “There is a man outside, near the door. He is waiting for you to come out so he can kill you.”

“Oh. Is that all? All right.”

“You know how to find the back door.”

“Yes, but Loiosh will be taking it. We'll handle this our way.”

He looked at me through filmy eyes. “All right, Vladimir. But don't be distracted by shadows. Concentrate always on the target.”

“I will,” I said. I stood and drew my rapier. “I know how to make the shadows vanish.”

Lesson Thirteen

ADVANCED SURVIVAL SKILLS

“Okay, Loiosh. You know what to do.”

“What about Rocza?”

“She can wait with me, just in case.”

We went into the back room, past the kitchen, and I let Loiosh out, then returned and stood waiting near the doorway, blade in hand. Rocza landed on my shoulder. She was heavier than Loiosh, but I was getting used to her.

“I don't see him yet, boss.”

“No hurry, chum. Lots of places to hide out there the way things are packed togeth—”

“Got him!”

“Let me see. Hmmm. Don't recognize him.”

“How should we play it?”

“Has he seen you?”

“No.”

“Okay. Out the door, three steps, I'll take a left so we can get him away from the shop. I'll let him catch up a bit, you hit him when he starts to move, and I'll join you.”

“Got it.”

I put my sword away since I wouldn't be using it at once and kissed my grandfather good-bye. He suggested once more that I be careful, and I allowed as to how I would. I walked through the doorway, made a show of looking around, then headed to my left.

“He's following.”

“Okay.”

I scouted the area, looking for a place with enough people, but not too many. After about two hundred yards I found it. I slowed down, checked for an escape route or two, and finally stopped in front of a fruit stand and picked up an orange. I dug around in my purse for a coin. *“Here he comes, boss.”*

I paid for the orange, took my dagger from my belt, cut the orange in half, and palmed the blade while looking like I'd put it away. I started sucking on a half.

“He's behind you, walking between a pair of humans. They aren't with him, so don't worry. He's getting close. He's got a weapon out . . . now!”

I turned and threw the orange at him. At the same time, Loiosh struck at his knife hand and Rocza left my shoulder to attack his face with her talons. His knife hit the dirt of the street as he backed away. Loiosh got him turned around and I put my dagger in the middle of his back all the way to the hilt. He screamed and fell to his knees. I took another dagger out, grabbed his chin, slit his throat, and dropped the knife. Since he was now unable to scream, some local did it for him, and quite well, too.

I walked around the side of the fruit stall, careful not to make eye contact with anyone, and slipped between two buildings, where Loiosh and Rocza joined me. We zigzagged our way past a couple more streets, then went into a tavern, where I found water to clean orange and blood from my hands. I hate it when my hands are sticky.

We emerged into South Adrilankha midday, with gaggles of young men leaning against buildings surveying passersby, and tradesmen out in front of their shops eating. The standard meal seemed to be long loaves of bread which they dipped into something in a

wooden bowl, while holding a bottle between their knees. As I relaxed a bit, since there seemed no sign of pursuit, I began to get the feeling that all was not normal here, but I couldn't for the life of me figure out how.

"Can you figure out what it is, Loiosh?"

"I'm not sure, boss. It's subtle."

I continued walking, heading generally toward the area where Kelly's people had their headquarters. I noticed a group of a dozen or so Easterners, men and women, trotting past me. On their faces was a strange mixture of determination, confidence, and fear.

No, not fear, maybe nervousness. Two of them had homemade pikes, one had a large kitchen knife, the others were unarmed. I wondered where they were going. For some reason, my heart beat faster. It seemed to fit in with whatever else I was unconsciously noticing.

"They're waiting for something, boss. It's like everyone smells that something is going to happen."

"I think you're right, Loiosh. I wonder." Not far from the new headquarters was a small park, shaped like a diamond with an arc cut out of one side.

It was called the Exodus, which had something to do with the arrival of masses of Easterners to Adrilankha during the Interregnum. There were a few clumps of half-starved trees, a pond full of water and algae, and unkempt grass and weeds with several paths cutting across them. I crossed the Exodus on a path that took me near the small rise by the arc. I stopped there for a while and watched.

There was a pack of about two dozen boys and girls, most of them nine to eleven years old, who were industriously turning trees into

spears. They had a pile of perhaps fifty already, and the work was neatly divided up: Some cut down the saplings, others trimmed and shortened them, another group removed the bark, while others smoothed polished them, and yet another group put points on them. They were all filthy, but most of them seemed to be enjoying themselves.

There were a few who seemed grimly intent on their jobs, as if they considered themselves to be involved in matters of high importance, and some, especially the ones cutting up the logs, just seemed tired.

I watched them for a while as the significance washed over me. It wasn't so much that they were making weapons, it was the systematic way in which they were going about it. Someone had put them up to this and explained exactly what to do. Yes. Someone.

I started walking again, faster now, but I didn't make it to the headquarters. I was still half a mile away when I came upon a guard station. There was no one there wearing the gold cloak, however; instead there were a score of men and women, mostly Easterners, but I picked out a few Teckla as well, all armed, and all wearing yellow headbands. They stood outside the guardhouse, smiling and saluting everyone who came by.

They scowled at my Jhereg colors, but were willing to talk to me. I said, "What does the headband mean?"

"It means," said a willowy human woman of middle years, "that we are protectors. We have taken control."

"Of what?" I said.

"Of this part of the city."

"Can you tell me what happened?"

“Press gangs,” she said, as if that explained everything.

“I don't understand.”

“You will, Jhereg. You'd best move along now.”

It was either that or start killing Easterners. I moved along.

“I don't like this, boss. We should get out of here.”

“Not yet, Loiosh.”

A breeze came up, and brought with it a smell that I couldn't place. I'd smelled it before; the associations were not pleasant. But what was it?

“Horses, boss.”

“That's it. Where?”

“Left here. Not far.”

It wasn't far. Just around a curve in the street, and there were more of the brutes than I'd ever seen at one place since the Eastern horse-army at the Wall of Baritt's Tomb. But this time, instead of being ridden, they were attached to large carts—six or seven carts, I think—and the carts were being loaded with boxes. I recognized them as the sort of farmers transports that regularly came into South Adrilankha with deliveries, and left while it was still morning. What was most unusual was how many of them there were.

I approached, and asked one of the workmen what was going on. He, too, sneered at my colors, but said, “We have control of South Adrilankha; now we are issuing proclamations for the rest of the city.”

“Proclamations? Let me see one.” He shrugged and pulled a piece of paper out of the box. It was neatly set in printer's type, and said, in distinctly unimaginative language, that the Easterners and Teckla of South Adrilankha were refusing to admit press gangs

into the city, and were demanding the release of their imprisoned leaders, and were rising as one to take the government from the hands of tyrants, and so on and so on.

It was there, as these wagons began to drive off, that I began to get a sense of unreality—a sense that became stronger as I wandered off and saw, lying unattended and ignored in the street, the body of a Dragaeran, dead from many wounds, wearing the gold cloak of the Phoenix Guards.

A long time later, in the cottage of an Eastern family where I spent a night, I found Maria Parachezk's little pamphlet "Grey Hole in the City," a description of those few days in Adrilankha. As I read it, I lived it again; but more than that, I found myself nodding and saying, "Yes, that's true," and, "I remember that," as she described the pikemen's stand at Smallmarket, the Guardsmen walking twenty abreast down the Avenue of the Moneylenders, the burning of the grain exchange, and other events that I actually witnessed. If you find the pamphlet, read it, and, if you like, insert here descriptions of any event that catches your imagination. Because until I read it, I didn't really remember any of those things.

I remember laughs and screams, fading into each other as if they were part of a single musical composition, although they were long hours apart. I remember the smell of the burning grain, and looking down at my hands to see the ashes there. I remember standing in an alley, out of the way of a marching battalion of Phoenix Guards, tapping a broken axe handle against the wall of a boardinghouse. There was blood on the axe handle, but I don't know how I acquired the thing, much less if I was the one to blood it.

Maria Parachezk, whoever she is, was able to make sense out of

the whole thing, put events in order and connect them logically. I wasn't then, so I'm not going to pretend to now. Apparently the insurgents, Easterners and Teckla, were actually winning until late in the second day of the rebellion, the third of the new year, when the sailors on the Whitecrest withdrew their support of the rebels and allowed the landing of the Fourth Seaguard, who broke the siege at the Imperial Palace. But, from where I was, I never saw any difference between winning and losing, right up until the end, when the Orca came through the streets, mowing down everyone they saw. I didn't even find out until afterward that the Imperial Palace had been attacked twice and was under siege for nine hours. I remember that, at one point, I became aware that I'd been in South Adrilankha for an entire day, and I remember the early evening of that day, when it seemed that the whole city was screaming, but, as I go through my memories like a cedar chest I've lost something in, I don't think that I saw anything more than sporadic fighting even at the worst. There'd be silence, a few people running, then the sound of metal on metal or metal on wood, screams, the horrible smell of burnt human flesh, so like and so unlike the smell of cooking meat. Did I actually strike a blow for "my people"? I don't remember. I've asked Loiosh, but he remembers even less; only that he kept asking me to go home and I kept saying not yet. I know that I tried to make contact with Cawti several times, but she wasn't receiving. For some reason, it was only when the massacre started—and even then I wasn't conscious of it as a massacre—that I remembered my grandfather. I walked quickly through the streets, only dimly aware that I was hurrying past the bodies of Easterners, men, women, and children. I am grateful that I can bring to mind so little of what I must have seen.

I know that I skidded on something and almost fell, and only later did I realize that it was blood, flowing from the lacerated body of an old woman who was still moving.

I came across some fighting, but mostly I skirted it. At one point I ran into a patrol of four Dragaerans wearing the gold cloaks. I stopped, they stopped. They saw I was an Easterner, and they saw I was a Jhereg, and I guess that puzzled them. They didn't know what to do with me. I was not then holding a weapon, but they looked at the two jhereg on my shoulders and the rapier at my side. I said, "Well?" and they shrugged and moved on.

I saw the fires while I was still a mile or more from my grandfather's shop. I began to run. The first thing I noticed when I got there was that the house across the street from his shop was burning, as was the little grocer's next to it. As I got close enough to smell burning vegetables, I saw that Noish-pa's shop was still standing, and I began to feel relief. Then I saw that the entire front was missing, and my heart sank.

I came up to it, and the first thing I saw was the bodies of three Phoenix Guards.

There was no doubt who had killed them each bore a single small wound right over the place where a Dragaeran or a human keeps his heart. I dashed into the shop, and when I saw him, calmly cleaning his blade, I almost cried with relief.

He looked up and said, "You should leave, Vladimir."

"Eh?"

"You should leave here. At once."

"Why?"

"Quickly, Vladimir. Please."

I looked back at the bodies, looked at my grandfather, and said,

“One got away, huh?”

He shrugged. “I’ve never been able to kill women. This is a weakness we have from being human.”

“You’re lucky she wasn’t a sorcerer,” I said.

“Perhaps. But there is little time. You must leave at once.”

“If you’ll come with me.”

He shook his head. “I have nowhere to go. They will find you.”

I chewed my lip. “There may be a place,” I said. “Bide.”

“Morrolan. Funny-talking Dragonlord. Dragaeran witch. Wielder of Blackwand. Morrolan. Morrolan. ...”

“Who is— Vlad?”

“Himself.”

“Where are you? Are you all right? The whole city—”

“I know. I’m in the thick of it, but I’m all right. I request sanctuary, Lord Morrolan. For myself and for my grandfather.”

“Your grandfather? What happened?”

“Phoenix Guards tried to burn his shop down. He prevented them from doing so.”

“I see.”

“Where are you now?”

“The Imperial Palace, but I’ll be leaving soon.”

“What are you doing there?”

“I was preparing to defend the Empress, if necessary. But the siege was broken.”

“Siege?”

“Your Easterners, Vlad”

“Oh. Who’s with you?”

“Aliera, Sethra.”

“Sethra? That must have made quite a stir.”

He chuckled. *“I wish you could have seen it. What about you? Is everything all right?”*

“Yes, as far as the rebellion goes, but I've got Jhereg troubles. That's why I need sanctuary.”

“I seem to recall another Jhereg—”

“Yeah, me, too. But we're in a hurry, Morrolan. There may be some goldcloaks coming back, and—”

“Very well, Vlad. You revive sanctuary for at least seventeen days. Probably forever. And your grandfather as well, of course. I'll inform Teldra.”

“Thanks. See you soon.”

I turned to Noish-pa and said, “It's settled. We can stay at Castle Black.” He frowned.

“What is that?”

“A floating castle, Noish-pa. It's really quite comfortable. You'll like Morrolan, He—”

“He is an elf?”

“Yes, but—”

“No. I will remain here.”

I smiled. “Very well. I know I can't make you leave.”

“Good.”

I went over and sat down in one of his chairs. He frowned and said, “Vladimir, you should go now.”

“No.”

“What?”

“If you stay, so do I. You can't make me leave, either.”

“They will return in force.”

“Indeed. And with sorcerers. But I know some tricks.”

“Vladimir—”

“Both of us or neither, Noish-pa.”

He looked me in the eye, then a bit of a smile came over his face.

“Very well, Vladimir. Bring me to the elf castle.”

“Be prepared to be sick, Noish-pa.”

“Why?”

“Teleport spells do that to humans. I don't know why.”

“All right, then.” He picked up Ambrus, his familiar, and took one last glance around the shop. “Let us leave at once, then.”

I put one arm around my grandfather's shoulders and concentrated on the courtyard of Castle Black. When the image was clear, I drew on the power, shaped it, and felt the familiar twist in my bowels. South Adrilankha vanished, and the walls of the courtyard appeared in reality to match the picture in my mind.

Noish-pa looked queasy, but otherwise all right. I watched his face as he slowly recovered, even more slowly than I did, and became aware of the size of the courtyard, of the ground below us, and then of the symbols on the walls and the huge double doors some forty paces in front of us.

“How can this elf know the Art?” he asked.

“He's very unusual for a Dragaeran,” I said.

When he was able to, we walked together up to the doors, which opened before us.

Noish-pa looked at me but didn't comment. Lady Teldra gave us a courtesy and said, “Lord Vladimir, we are so relieved that you are safe, and delighted that you will be staying with us. And you, sir, your grandson has spoken so much and so highly of you that we were nearly afraid to hope for the honor of your presence here someday. We are delighted that you have come, though sorry for the hardship that forced the journey on you. Please be welcome. I

am Teldra.”

She is, after all, of the House of the Issola.

He stared at her, his mouth opening and closing, and then his face lit up in a big grin and he said, “I like you,” and, for the first time, I think I saw Lady Teldra actually touched.

She showed us in. “The Lord Morrolan requested that you await him in the library,” she said. “If you would follow me?”

Noish-pa seemed awed by the display of Castle Black as we made our way down the marble halls and up the wide stairways. Ambrus looked around as well, as if he were memorizing an escape route. I could almost see Noish-pa making notes to himself to study various of the sculpture paintings, and psiprints we passed. Lady Teldra would have been willing to stop and let him examine them then, and would gladly have told all their histories and given brief biographies of the artists, but I badly wanted to sit down.

Morrolan's library is actually quite a complex of rooms, so it was helpful to have her show us which one. It says something either about him or about Dragaerans in general that his books were arranged neither by subject nor title, but, primarily, by the House of the author. We awaited him in the largest room, which was, quite naturally, filled with books written by Dragonlords.

We had hardly gotten seated, and Lady Teldra was just pouring the wine, when he entered. We both stood and bowed, but he motioned us to sit. He bowed deeply to my grandfather, rising in time for Loiosh to land on his shoulder. Rocza flew over to Ambrus, who hissed at her, and then allowed herself to be licked, which startled me.

We all sat down again, and Lady Teldra poured us all wine, giving the first glass to my grandfather. I said “On behalf of my

grandfather, Morrolan, thank you. We—”

“Never mind that,” he said. “Of course you're welcome here as long as you want to stay. But do you know about Cawti?”

I stopped with the glass halfway to my lips carefully set it down, and said, “Tell me.”

“She's been arrested again. This time under direct orders from the Empress. The charge is treason against the empire. Vlad, she's facing execution.”

Lesson Fourteen

FUNDAMENTALS OF BETRAYAL

I felt my grandfather's eyes on me, but I didn't look at him. I said, "Has a trial been set?"

"No. Zerika says she's going to wait until the troubles are over."

"Troubles? Was that her word for it?"

"Yes."

"I see. Has Norathar done anything?"

"Not yet. She's been directing troops. She says—"

"Directing troops? In the city?"

"No, she's putting together an invasion force for Greenaere."

"Oh. That's a relief, anyway."

"Why?"

I shook my head. It would be too hard to explain. "How much have you heard about what's going on?"

He shrugged. "Disorders. I was at the Imperial Palace during the second attack, and throughout the siege, so I mostly know about activities there, but I heard at least some of the rest. Zerika says things should be under control by tomorrow morning."

"Under control," I repeated. I looked at Noish-pa, but this time he was looking away."

"Yes" continued Morrolan. "Sethra has established order in—"

"Sethra Lavode?"

"Sethra the Younger."

"How did she end up in command?"

"The brigadier of the Phoenix Guards resigned yesterday over some dispute with the Empress. I don't know the details."

“Maybe he didn't like the idea of slaughtering thousands of helpless Easterners.”

“Helpless? Vlad, weren't you listening? There were attacks on the Imperial Palace. They laid siege to it. They actually threatened the Empress—”

“Oh, come now. She could have teleported out anytime she wanted to.”

“That isn't the point, Vlad. Threatening the sanctity of—”

“Can we change the subject?”

“You asked,” he said stiffly.

“Yeah. Sorry.” Loiosh flew back to my shoulder and nuzzled my ear. I said, “What about the war?”

“Are you sure you want to hear about it?”

“I'm trying to figure out how to get Cawti out of there. The first thing I need to know is what's going on with the Empress, so I can decide how to try to influence her. Does that make sense?”

He seemed startled; I guess that sort of thinking wasn't what he expected of me. Then he said, “Very well. The Empire is still trying to put together an invasion fleet to attack the Greenaere and Elde alliance”

“Trying?”

He looked grim. “A task force sailing from Adrilankha Northport in preparation for an attack on Greenaere was itself attacked by several alliance warships, and three of them were sunk. I don't know how big they were, or how many were lost, or—why are you smiling?”

Why was I smiling?

I took a sip of wine without tasting it. I had never particularly cared about the Empire one way or the other; that is, it was there, I

lived in it and ignored it. Even the onset of war hadn't inspired any particular feelings in the sense of who I hoped would win the conflict. But now, I realized, I wanted the Empire to be hurt. Very much I wanted them to be hurt. I would love it if the Empire was tumbled, inconceivable as that was. I wanted to see the Orb rolling, broken, on the ground. I wanted to see the mighty Palace, with all its pillars of silver, and its walls cut of black marble, rooms in which ten Eastern families could live, burned to the ground.

I remembered only flashes of the last two days in South Adrilankha, but there were looks on faces that I knew I'd remember as long as I lived, and if the only way to ease the pain was the destruction of the Empire, then that's what I wanted. In a life governed by hatreds, this hatred was a new one. Maybe it was what Cawti had felt all along. Maybe now I could understand her. I tossed aside dreams of the Empire fallen; such dreams would not win my wife's release. In fact, the best would be if I could find a way to...

If I could . . .

"Nothing," I said. "I think I know how to save Cawti, though."

My grandfather looked at me sharply. Morrolan said, "Oh?"

"Do you think you'd be willing to help? I will also need Alier's help, and, I think, Sethra's. And possibly Daymar's."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'll explain when we're all together. Say, this evening—I should warn you, it will be dangerous."

He gave me a look of contempt. I'd only said it to annoy him anyway. "I will help you," said Morrolan.

"Thank you" I said.

My grandfather spoke for the first time. He said, "Vladimir, will you travel again through the fairy-land?"

"Excuse me?"

"Travel through the fairy-land, the way we did to come here."

"Oh Yes, I expect so."

He nodded thoughtfully and spoke to Morrolan. "I see that you practice the Art."

"Yes," said Morrolan. "I am a witch."

"Have you devices I might use? All of mine are lost."

"Certainly," said Morrolan. "I'll have Teldra bring you to my workshop."

"Thank you," said my grandfather.

Morrolan nodded and said, "Alieria is here. Shall I make contact with Sethra and Daymar?"

"Yes," I said. "Let's get started."

A few minutes later he reported that everyone would be assembled for dinner that evening, which gave me several hours to kill. I realized that I was desperately tired and asked Lady Teldra to show me to a room. I gave my grandfather a kiss, bowed to Morrolan, and stumbled to the chambers I'd been assigned.

Before I fell asleep, I got hold of Kragar and said, "*What's the news from Jherag center?*"

"You are, Vlad."

"Do tell."

"Three more offers, all refused. Whether they'd have been refused if anyone knew where you were, I don't know."

"Okay. Do you have the information I wanted?"

"Yes, indeed. And someone knows I'm collecting it. "

"Oh"

"I was offered twenty thousand to convince you to collect it in person."

"Twenty thousand? Why didn't you take it?"

"I didn't think I could talk you into coming for it without getting you suspicious."

"Hmmm. You're probably right. Can you send it by messenger to Castle Black?"

"Easy."

"Good. Any, um, disturbances in the area?"

"Not to speak of. Everything pretty much passed us by. We were lucky."

"Yes," I said. Lucky. Images came bubbling up like Teckla to a feast, but I shoved them back down. No, now was not the time for thinking about that. Maybe there'd never be a time for thinking about that, but now I was tired.

"How are things on your end?" said Kragar.

"Working their way toward resolution."

"Good. Keep me informed."

"I will. Have the messenger ask them to wake me when he gets here."

"Okay. See you later, Vlad."

"Don't count on it, Kragar." Before he could ask what I meant by that, I was asleep.

Kragar's messenger was too quick for me to get enough sleep, but the two or so hours I got, along with the klava supplied by Lady Teldra when she woke me, put me in good enough shape for the moment. I sat up in bed, sipped klava, and studied the sheaf of documents giving all the significant details of Boralinoi's life and personal habits. He was another of the Council members who got

there by being in the right place when Zerika returned with the Orb ending the Interregnum. He was considered good at arranging compromises between rivals, but he was not, himself, a compromiser. He'd done a few very nasty things to secure his position, and since then his reputation had protected him. There had been no known attempts on his life, and his habits didn't indicate that he was terribly worried about such things. On the other hand, he knew I was after him, so it could be tough. On yet a third hand, he had a mistress, so it could be pretty easy. Given a couple of weeks to set it up, it should be no problem. But, of course, I didn't have a couple of weeks to set it up. I wouldn't have an Organization in a couple of weeks. Still, it might be possible to do it more quickly. I could do what they'd done to me, set up outside his mistress's flat and wait for him to emerge. Not very professional, not the kind of sure thing I liked, but it might work.

I shook my head. The business with Cawti was more urgent, but I had a handle on that. It bothered me that it might not get Cawti released even if it worked, and it bothered me that if things went bad, the business with Boralinoi would remain unfinished. And I owed that son of a bitch one. I considered the matter and kept considering it as I dressed, then put it out of my mind. One thing at a time.

The front dining room, with its huge glass windows overlooking the courtyard, blackwood chairs and table, and hanging brass lamps, was just big enough for Morrolan, Alieria, Sethra, Daymar, Noish-pa, and me. Daymar was on his best behavior; that is, he sat in his chair, between Morrolan and Sethra, instead of floating cross-legged as was his wont. My grandfather was clearly

uncomfortable; I doubt he had been so close to so many Dragaerans ever in his life, but he did his best to pretend he was at ease. When he tasted the Bazian pepper stew, he smiled in amazement and no longer had to pretend. Morrolan smiled at him.

“Your grandson gave my cook the recipe,” he said.

“I hope he left nothing out,” said Noish-pa.

Aliera nibbled daintily and said, “What's the plan, then? My cousin”—she indicated Morrolan, perhaps for Noish-pa's benefit—“said it would be exciting.”

“Yes,” I said. “We're going to end the war.”

“That will be pleasant,” said Daymar

“You aren't in it, I'm afraid.” “Oh?”

“Except, of course, for getting us there.”

“Where?”

“Greenaere.”

“You wish to journey to Greenaere?” said Morrolan “Explain.”

“The Phoenix Stones prevent psionic communication and they prevent sorcery. Daymar was able to temporarily punch through the one, and I suspect that with Sethra's help he could punch through the other long enough to get us in. Perhaps even to get us out again after.”

“After what?”

“After we have forced a truce on them.”

“How?”

“Leave that to me. Your job is to keep me alive long enough to get the truce into our hands.”

There was considerable silence at this point, then Morrolan said, “Several things need to be discussed, I think.”

“Go on.”

“In the first place, I do not perform assassinations.”

“No problem, I do. If you want to kill someone, you are welcome to challenge him to single combat, if that somehow pleases you more.”

“Then you admit you are going to assassinate this King?”

“No. But neither do I deny it.”

“Hmmm. In the second place, we cannot be sure Daymar and Sethra can succeed. The Empire has tried several times to break through and failed. What makes you think this time we can succeed?”

“Several things,” I said. “First, we now know about the Phoenix Stones. Second, we know that Daymar has succeeded once already, in a limited way. Third, we have Sethra Lavode.” She smiled and dipped her head by way of acknowledgment.

“It sounds chancy,” said Morrolan.

I said, “Sethra?”

“It's worth a try,” she said. “Just how well do you know Greenaere?”

“I have a spot marked well enough to teleport to, if that's what you mean.”

“I don't know if that will be good enough. We're going to need a solid, detailed image of the place, memories of all five senses.”

“Hmmm. I've got an idea for that. Let me think about it.”

“Very well,” said Sethra.

I said, “What next?”

Morrolan spoke up again. “How do you know that, if we succeed, the Empire will, in fact, release Cawti?”

I shrugged. “I don't. I'm working on that. I have some ideas. If they don't pan out, perhaps we'll scrap the whole plan. I'll know by

noon tomorrow.”

“It seems to me,” said Morrolan, “that you are doing a great deal of hoping here. You hope we will be able to break through the Phoenix Stones. You hope you can force a treaty out of Greenaere. You hope we will be able to escape again. You hope the Empress will be sufficiently grateful to you to free Cawti.”

“You've expressed it quite well.”

I waited for about two breaths, then: “Count me in,” said Morrolan.

“Sounds like fun,” said Alieria.

Sethra nodded and Daymar shrugged. Noish-pa looked at me steadily for a moment, then resumed eating. I wondered what he was thinking. Perhaps he was remembering how I'd said I hated Dragaerans, and now, when I was in trouble, whom did I go running to for help? A good point, that. I'd known them a long time, and we'd been through so much together. I just never thought of them as Dragaerans; they were friends. How could I—

“When are we going to do it?” said Morrolan.

I asked Sethra, “How much time will you and Daymar need to prepare?”

“At least until tomorrow. We won't know until we start looking at the problem.”

“All right. Tentatively, tomorrow afternoon. If you aren't ready by then, we'll see. In the meantime, I need to run home and get somebody.”

“Who?”

“You'll meet him. He's a drummer.”

“From Greenaere?” said Sethra.

“Yep.”

“Think he'll help?”

“If he's a spy, which I think is possible, he'll be glad to. If he isn't, he might not.”

“If he's a spy—”

“It won't matter for what I'm trying to do.”

“Very well, then,” said Morrolan, and called for dessert, which involved fresh berries of some kind and a sweet cream sauce. It arrived, and I ate it, but I don't remember how it tasted. After dinner I made sure my grandfather was settled in as well as possible, studied Kragar's notes a bit more, then walked out to the courtyard of Castle Black.

“Loiosh, you and Rocza stay real alert.”

“I know, boss. I'm not happy about this at all. They were waiting for you once—”

“I know. How's your lady doing?”

Rocza shifted on my right shoulder and nuzzled me a little. I got my mind fixed on a place across the street from my flat and teleported there. Loiosh and Rocza left my shoulder as we arrived and buzzed about.

“No one here, boss.”

“My compliments to Rocza. She's learning the business, I think.”

“She's got a good teacher. You okay?”

“I didn't lose my dinner, anyway. Give me a minute and stay alert.”

“Check.”

When I felt better I walked up to the flat. I was in luck: Aibynn was there, and there were no assassins.

“Hey, how you doing?”

“Not bad. How'd you like to help me out?”

“Doing what?”

“Ending the war.”

“That sounds fine. What do I have to do?”

“Come with me, and let someone read your mind while you remember everything you can about that spot on Greenaere where we met.”

“I could do that.”

“You'll have to take your pendant off while you do it.”

“What? Oh, this?” He fingered the Phoenix Stone around his neck, then shrugged.

“That's fine.”

“Good. Come with me.”

“Just a minute.”

He collected his drum and stood next to me. I took a look around the flat, wondering if I'd ever see it again, then we teleported right from there, because I still didn't feel very safe.

Aibynn stared around Castle Black in amazement. “Where are we?”

“The home of Morrolan e'Drien, House of the Dragon.”

“Nice place.”

“Yeah.”

Lady Teldra greeted him like an old friend; he grinned from ear to ear. I went back up to the library and performed introductions. He was pleasant, and either didn't know or didn't care who Sethra Lavode was, not to mention Alieria and Morrolan. They were polite to him, and then Lady Teldra showed him to a room. I found my own room and slept for about fourteen hours.

Late the next morning I saw Morrolan in his workshop, where he was showing Noish-pa around. I found myself fascinated by the

door that led to the tower that held the windows. Morrolan caught me staring at it, but asked no questions. Instead he mentioned something else: "I've had an official emissary from House Jhereg."
"Oh?"

"I've been asked to surrender you."

"Ah. Are you going to?"

He snorted. "What did you do to them, Vlad?"

"Actually, nothing. It's what they think I'm going to do."

"What is that?"

"Kill someone important."

"Are you?"

"Only if we escape Greenaere successfully. First things first, you know."

"Of course. What about the Empire?"

"I'm going to see to that in a few moments."

"Can I help?"

"Perhaps. Can you arrange for the Empress to see me?"

"Certainly. When?"

"Now."

He stared at me and his mouth worked for a moment. Then he concentrated, and was silent for about two minutes. It was interesting trying to piece together the conversation from the expressions that crossed Morrolan's face. He shook his head twice, shrugged once, and once his face twisted up into an expression I couldn't fathom. At last he opened his eyes and said, "She is expecting you."

"Excellent. Can you arrange a teleport?"

"In the courtyard."

"Thank you."

I took a last look at the door to the tower, smiled at Noish-pa, who was already absorbed in work of some sort, and made the long hike, down and around and up an through to the library. I gave Lady Teldra a big smile which left her a bit puzzled, I think, then I went out into the courtyard where one of Morrolan's sorcerers greeted me respectfully and sent me to the square outside the Imperial Palace that is reserved for those arriving via teleportation. My stomach had settled down by the time I entered the Palace proper, but I hardly noticed it in any case, my mind was racing so. I was led through hallways and past terraces and inconspicuous guard locations, and at last out into the throne room, with its massive seventeen-sided dome and windows of colored glass. As I approached, I noticed Count Soffta among the courtiers, and I gave him a big smile. His brows came together, but other than that he betrayed no expression.

I bowed to Her Majesty, my heart thumping with excitement, my brain pounding with ideas.

“I greet you, Baronet Taltos.”

“And I, you, Your Majesty. Care to take a walk?”

Her eyes widened, and that time I heard the courtiers gasp But she said “Very well. Come with me.” And she led the way behind her throne.

The walls were still white and featureless, but this time in my excitement, I nearly outpaced her. For some reason, I no longer had such awe of her as I'd had before; whether it was the state of my mind, or the events of the past few days, or a combination, I don't know.

She said.” Are you here to plead for your wife, or to reprimand your Empress for her actions among the Easterners?”

“Both, Your Majesty.”

“Neither will move me, Baronet. I'm sorry, because in all honesty I like you. But to threaten the Empire is unforgivable, which is my only answer to both entreaties.”

“Your Majesty, I have, on the one hand, a proposal, and, on the other, information.”

She glanced sideways at me, appearing both amused and curious.

“Proceed,” she said.

“Allow me, Your Majesty, to begin with some questions. May I?”

“You may.”

“Do you know why the citizens rebelled?”

“There were many reasons, Baronet. The press gangs a necessary evil in time of war. The measures, the justified measures, taken against the irresponsible violence in which they engaged. Certain regrettable conditions under which they live.”

“Yes,” I said. “Let us consider the irresponsible violence. Would the massacres—and I use the word advisedly, Your Majesty, for that's what they were—would the massacres have been necessary had the citizens not engaged in what you called the 'irresponsible violence'?”

She considered. “Probably not,” she said.

“Well, then, suppose it was not the citizens who destroyed the watchstation in South Adrilankha, and I suspect committed several similar acts, but was instead a certain Jhereg, who wanted these Easterners suppressed.”

She stopped in her tracks and stared at me. “You have evidence of this?”

“His own words that he'd done it.”

“Will you swear to this?”

“Under the Orb.”

She resumed walking. “I see.” I gave her time to consider things further. After a bit she said, “Are you aware that, if you do so swear, by the law, you must do so publicly?”

“Yes.”

“So the Organiza—excuse me—your friends and your House will know that you have betrayed this person?”

“Yes.”

“And you are prepared to do so?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“When we return to the throne room, Your Majesty.”

“Very well. I must say that, moving as this is, and as angry it makes me, it does not free your wife from the responsibility for leading rebellion.”

“That, Your Majesty, is where my proposal fits in.”

“Let's hear it, then.”

“Your Majesty, I will, personally, bring about a peace with Elde and Greenaere, at no cost to the Empire and at no risk to you, if you will release my wife.”

Once more, she stopped and stared at me. She resumed walking.

“What makes you think you can do this?”

“I have an idea of what they want, and why they began the war, and I think I can fix it.”

“Tell me.”

“No, Your Majesty.”

And again the sidelong look, followed by a low laugh. “Can you convince her to stop stirring up trouble in South Adrilankha, not to mention the rest of the city, or the rest of country?”

“Probably not,” I said.

She nodded and chewed on her lower lip—a most non-Imperial gesture. Then she said, “Very well, my lord Jhereg. Yes, if you can do what you say, I will release your wife.”

“And her friends?”

She shrugged. “I can hardly release one without releasing them all. Yes, if you can publicly swear, under the Orb, that the violence was deliberately caused by a Jhereg, and if you personally conclude a peace with Greenaere and Elde Island that costs us nothing, I will release your wife and her associates.”

“Good. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She stopped yet a third time and touched my shoulder. Above her, the Orb went white. She saw me looking at it and said, “What I am saying now is not being remembered”

“Oh.”

Lord Taltos, do you know the Organization will kill you if you betray them?”

“Perhaps,” I said. “They will certainly try.”

She shook her head. The Orb resumed its pinkish hue and the Empress led the way back to the throne room where she announced a declaration under the Orb.

The court watched. The Orb floated over my head, and prepared, however it did so, to determine truth or falsehood. I phrased my accusation very carefully, so there could be no question of the truth, or of the guilt. All the time I spoke, my eyes were on Count Soffta, who was trying very hard to keep any expression from his face.

And I was smiling.

THREE

Aesthetic Considerations

Lesson Fifteen

BASIC IMPROVISATION

I RETURNED TO Castle Black and considered consequences. My life was worth rather less than the small change in my purse, and if things went as I more than half expected them to, I would only have the satisfaction of cheating the Organization of the pleasure of killing me themselves. I indulged myself in a few minutes of soul-searching as I returned to my chambers to rest for a while.

This was nothing like the fatalism that comes upon certain Lyorn who take too long a view of life, and it wasn't really the suicidal madness that had taken me for a short time after I'd been broken under torture. It was more that things had lined themselves up so that I had fewer and fewer options, so the one remaining had to be the right thing to do.

Which brought up the next question: When had I suddenly become enamored of doing the right thing, rather than the practical thing? Was it on the streets of South Adrilankha? Was it in my grandfather's shop, when he said, so simply and quietly, that what I did was wrong?

Was it when I finally realized, once and for all, that the woman I'd married was gone forever, and that, whoever she had become, she had no use for me as I was? Or was it that I was finally faced with

a problem that couldn't be solved by killing the right person; could only be solved, in fact, by performing a service to the Empire that I hated? That, I suddenly realized, was what had happened to Cawti: She had transferred her hate from Dragaerans to the Empire. There are fools who pretend that one can get through life without hating, or that the emotion itself is somehow wrong, but I've never had that problem. But sometimes your own hate can fool you as much as your own love, with results that are just as disastrous. It had been silly, at best, to think that I hated Dragaerans when all of my close friends were of the race. Cawti's hatred of the Empire, which I now shared in my own way, was perhaps more reasonable, but ultimately frustrating. Noish-pa was right: Hatred is inevitable; allowing it to control your actions is foolish.

I didn't know where that left me now, and I admitted, as I stared at the ceiling and hid my thoughts from Loioosh, that none of it mattered, anyway. By surrendering to "right" as opposed to "practical," I had changed irrevocably. But once you allow yourself to recognize necessity, you find two things: One, you find your options so restricted that the only course of action is obvious, and, two, that a great sense of freedom comes with the decision. By this time tomorrow, Vlad Taltos, Jhereg and assassin, would be dead, one way or the other. I made certain all of my documents were correct and decided that the time allotted for self-indulgent soul-searching had expired. But I fervently hoped that I would have a chance to give my Demon Goddess a piece of my mind before all was said and done.

* * *

It was early afternoon when I was summoned to Morrolan's lower workshop, the place set aside for his exponents with sorcery. I was

much calmer, and beginning to be nervous. Make that frightened. I picked up Aibynn on the way. Sethra, Daymar, and Morrolan were there, staring at the black stone and speaking together. They looked up when I came in and Sethra said, “Here, Vlad, catch,” and tossed me the stone. “Now, speak to me psionically.” I attempted to do so, and it was like it was back on the island; no one was home. I shrugged. “Now,” she said, “watch.” She gestured with one hand, and my rapier began rising out of its sheath. She stopped, it slid back in. “Well?” I said.

“The stone has no effect on sorcery whatsoever.”

“All right. But then—”

She held up a hand. “Now, if you please, set Spellbreaker spinning.”

“Eh? All right.” I let the chain fall into my left hand, wondering what she was after. It was very cool in my hand, and alive like a Morganti weapon was alive, yet different. I did as she'd said. When it was going good, spinning between Sethra and me, she gestured again. This time, nothing happened, except perhaps the faintest tingling running up my arm.

“Well?” I said. “We knew Spellbreaker interfered with sorcery. That's why I gave it the name.”

“Yes. And so does whatever else is on the island. Does the similarity strike you?”

“Yes. What's your point?”

“There is more to that chain than I know,” she said. “But I think we are able to determine one thing now. It is not, in fact, made of gold. It is made of gold Phoenix stone.”

“Is that what you call it?” put in Aibynn, who'd been so quiet I'd forgotten he was there.

“What do you call it?” asked Morrolan, in all innocence.

“In my land,” said Aibynn, “we call it a rock.”

I said hastily, “I'm not really surprised that breaker isn't just gold; I've never seen gold as hard as the links of this chain.”

“Yes. Black disables psionic activity, gold prevents the working of sorcery.”

I studied Spellbreaker. “It certainly looks like metal,” I said. “And feels like it.”

“As I said, there's more to that chain than I understand.”

“Well, all right. Now, do you know how to use this information to get past it to the island?”

“Possibly. Set Spellbreaker spinning again.” I did so. She looked at Daymar, nodded, and gestured. Once again, the sword began to rise from its sheath, only very slowly.

She stopped, it returned.

“Looks good,” I said. “How?”

“How did Alieria break through the wall the last time you were on the island?”

“Pre-Empire sorcery,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Can you control it well enough to teleport with it? I'd understood such fine control was impossible, which is why the Orb was invented in the first place.”

“Yes and no,” said Sethra. “I can create a disturbance in the field set up by the Phoenix Stone, which allows Daymar to direct his energy through the gold stone, ignoring the black, which allows me to channel mine through the black, ignoring the gold. It isn't easy,” she added.

“It is similar,” added Morrolan, “to the way you and Loiosh

communicate. It isn't exactly psionically, it's more—”

“Never mind the details,” I said, “as long as it will work.”

“It should,” said Sethra. “As long as we can get a solid enough image of the place.”

She looked at Aibynn. He stared back, looking innocent.

“All right,” I said. “Sethra, what about getting us back?”

“Daymar will have to try to break through to you.”

“All right, when?”

“Let's talk about it.”

We decided that they would give us a couple of hours, and after that, Daymar would attempt to reach me psionically every half hour until we said we were ready to return.

Sethra said, “You know, don't you, that it is much more difficult to teleport something to you than from you?”

“Yeah,” I said. “But I trust you.”

“As you say.”

“Then we can proceed.”

“Yes,” she said. “Are you ready?”

“I was born ready.”

“Then let us call Alera and be about it.”

Alera arrived almost at once. She was wearing the black and silver battle garb of a Dragonlord. She was barely taller than I, which was quite short for a Dragaeran. It used to bother her, I guess, since she was in the habit of wearing long gowns and levitating rather than walking, but she had recently stopped doing this. I thought that I'd ask her why at some future date, then realized there probably wouldn't be some future date for me. I shivered. At her side was a shortsword called Pathfinder, which was one of the Seventeen Great Weapons, though I knew little

about it beyond that.

That it was Morganti was sufficient information for most people, myself included.

Morrolan, as always, wore black. At his side was Blackwand, about which the less said the better. Sethra had us stand in a triangle, with me at the V, Morrolan in front of me to the right, Alieria in front to my left. Loiosh was on my right shoulder, Rocza on my left. Rocza seemed a bit jumpy; Loiosh as cool as steel. Sethra said, "Put an arm on Morrolan's shoulder, and one on—hello, Master Taltos."

I looked up and saw my grandfather ambling his way toward me. For a moment I was afraid he was going to insist on coming along, but he only wanted to slip an amulet over my head and kiss my cheek.

"What is it?"

"It should prevent you from feeling discomfort while you journey in the elflands."

It took me a moment to translate that, then I said, "You mean I won't get sick anymore when I teleport? Noish-pa, my life is complete."

"No," he said. "It is not complete until you have given me a great-grandchild. Don't forget that."

I looked into his eyes for just a moment, then kissed his cheek. "I won't." He stepped back until he was next to Aibynn, who was next to Daymar and Sethra. I put my hands on Alieria's and Morrolan's shoulders and said, "All right, Sethra and Daymar. Cast off."

"Concentrate on the location, Aibynn. Do you have one in mind?"

"Yes."

“Very well. Concentrate on it, and open your mind to me—oh, take that thing off.”

“Oh, yeah. Okay.”

“Now, think about it. Remember every detail you can, what it feels like—excellent. You're good at this. I think we're ready, Vlad.”

“Do it, then,” I said, hoping Aibynn wasn't sending us back into a cell, or into the sea or something. I wished I could trust him a little more. I felt Daymar's powerful psychic presence, as if he were tiptoeing around in my forebrain. Then there was what I can only describe as a psychic twist. Imagine, if you will, that your thoughts are neatly rolling waves in a pond, and someone comes along and throws a boulder into the middle of it. I could no longer form coherent thoughts, and my perceptions became hopelessly muddled. I remember feeling as if Castle Black were loose inside my head, and I was desperately trying to tie it down against a storm, while simultaneously realizing how absurd that was. More went on then, a great deal more, but there is no way I can reconstruct it, or even remember most of the images the spell created. The next thing I can recall clearly, and I have no idea how long we stood there before it happened, was being covered in a bright blue light that took us all in and then resolved itself to a spear of light that went off in some impossible direction, taking us with it.

There was no nausea. There wasn't even any sensation of movement. We stood in a grove below a tree from which I'd fallen not many days before. I wanted to open a bottle of wine, more for Noish-pa's amulet having worked than the success of the teleport spell, but I had none handy in any case.

Morrolan said, “What's the plan, Vlad?”

Plan? I was supposed to have a plan? “Follow me,” I said, and, *“Loiosh, do you remember the way?”*

“I think so, boss. Bear a little to the left.”

We set off. It was oddly peaceful walking through the woods, I guess because of the lack of background psychic activity, the kind that's always there but you never notice. Soon I forgot that anyone was with me except Loiosh, whom I could feel as a cool hand on the brow of my thoughts, and way in the background, faint echoes of Rocza, who was just recovering from panic induced by the teleport. I realized for the first time how strange this must be for her, and how hard it was for her to appear calm in the face of these strange sorceries, for which none of her life had prepared her.

Loiosh had chosen well.

“Thanks, boss.”

“Think nothing of it, Loiosh.”

“Now, what is it you've been hiding from me all day?”

“Wait and see.”

We came to the place where I'd fought my first four pursuers, and I didn't take the time to see if there were any signs of the struggle. Loiosh led me; I led Morrolan and Alieria, and in about an hour and a half we were outside the village. It was early evening. There was no one in sight.

“Where is everybody, boss?”

“Probably on ships preparing to attack the Dragaeran navy.”

“Oh.”

“Let's eat,” I said aloud, and we took out the food that had been packed for us by Morrolan's cook. I had dried winneasaurus and some good bread. I took my time eating, so it was nearly full dark by the time we were done.

“Now what?” said Morrolan.

I looked at their dim faces, Morrolan e'Drien and Alieria e'Kieron, watching me patiently and expectantly. I said, “Now I lead us to the place that passes for a palace and negotiate as appropriate, and get out.”

“In other words,” said Alieria, “we're just going to improvise.”

“You got it.”

“Good plan,” said Morrolan dryly.

“Thanks. It's one of my best.”

I led the way, with Morrolan and Alieria behind me. Quite a sight we must have looked as we walked up the wide shallow steps to the small, pillared building that housed the government of Greenaere.

We flung the door open in front of two sleepy-looking guards, neither of them in uniform, both holding the short, feathered spears I remembered too well. They stopped looking sleepy almost at once. The three of us could have put the two of them down without working up a sweat, but I held my arm up for them to wait.

The guards stared at us. We stared back. I said, “Take me to your —”

“Who are you?” croaked one of them at last.

“Unofficial envoys from the Dragaeran Empire. We wish to open negotiations with—”

“I know you,” said the other. “You're the one who—”

“Now, now,” I said. “The past is past,” and I smiled into his face. Behind me, I felt the troops prepare for battle. There is something reassuring about having Morrolan with Blackwand and Alieria with Pathfinder ready to jump to your defense. The guards looked very nervous—not without reason.

“We would like to see the King,” I said. There was no one else in sight down the narrow corridor; they really hadn't considered the possibility of an attack.

“I— I'll see if he, that is, I'll find out—”

“Excellent. Do that.”

He swallowed and backed up a couple of steps. I followed, Morrolan and Alieria behind me, forcing the other guard backward, too.

“No, you wait here.”

“Not a chance,” I said cheerfully.

He stopped. “I can't let you past.”

“You can't stop us,” I said reasonably.

“I'll raise the alarm.”

“Do so.”

He turned and yelled, “Help! Invaders!” at the top of his lungs. For some reason, I still didn't want to cut them down, so I just led us past them. As we went by I patted the one who'd recognized me on the shoulder. They both looked rather pitiful, and the other one actually drew steel as we went by. Morrolan and Alieria drew as well then, and I heard the fellow make sounds of awe under his breath. Yes it still possible to feel a Morganti weapon here on the island, Phoenix Stone notwithstanding. I expected Morrolan was noting that to study when he got back.

“This way” I said and directed us into the throne room.

There were two more guards, a pale man with an odd white streak in his dark hair and a hook-nosed woman. They had apparently heard the warnings, because they stood with their spears out and pointed at us. To the right of the throne was an old woman with grey hair and deep eyes, and on the left were two men. One

seemed quite old and rather unkempt. The other was the bushy-browed interrogator I knew so well. He was armed only with a knife at his belt, the old man was unarmed. The King, who looked like he couldn't be more than two or three hundred (in a human that would be eighteen or nineteen, I suppose), stared at us in a mixture of fear and amazement. I recognized him, too; he'd been walking next to the King I'd assassinated, just as I'd suspected then. How long ago was that? It felt like years.

I led us up to the throne, stopping just out of range of those spears, and said, "Your Majesty King Corcor'n, we wish you a pleasant evening. Um, excuse me, is 'Your Majesty' the proper form of address?"

He swallowed twice and said, "It will do."

I said, "My name is Vladimir Taltos. My friends are called Morrolan e'Drien and Alieria e'Kieron. We've come to discuss peace."

The two guards with the spears looked very unhappy and kept glancing at the two Great Weapons. Well, hardly surprising. I said, "Perhaps, my friends, we should sheathe our weapons." They did so.

The King said, in a raspy whisper, "How did you get here?"

"Sorcery, Your Majesty."

"But—"

"Oh, yes, I know. We've solved that problem."

"Impossible."

I shrugged. "In that case, we're not here, and you can safely ignore us. I should tell you, Your Majesty, that we came here in order to kill you and as many important advisors and chiefs as we could find. We changed minds when we saw how poorly protected you

were.”

“Messengers have gone out,” he said. “Troops will be arriving in moments.”

“In that case,” I said, “it would be well if we had our business concluded before they arrive. Otherwise, well, things could get ugly.”

His mouth worked in anger and fear. The grey-haired woman leaned over to him and started to say something. I gave silent orders to Loiosh and Rocza. They left my shoulders and flew to the two guards. As puppets controlled by a single string, the guards winced, began to panic, caught themselves, and held still as the jhereg landed on their shoulders. I was very impressed with the guards; they trembled, but didn't move. I smiled.

The King said, “You assassinated—”

“Yes,” I said. “I did. And you will never know the reason. But you have sunk several of our ships, killing hundreds of our citizens. How many lives is a King worth, Your Majesty? We are willing to call the score even if you are.”

“He was my father.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Sorry,” he said scornfully.

“Yes. I am. For reasons I can no more explain than I can explain why I did it. But what's done is done. Your father was given a good blood price, Your Majesty; the crews of—how many ships? Your Majesty, we want to end it. Can you—?”

At that moment there was the sound of tramping feet. I broke off my speech, but didn't turn around.

“How many, Loiosh?”

“About twenty, boss.”

“Alier, Morrolan, watch them.”

“We're already doing it, Vlad,” said Morrolan. I think it bothered him to appear to be taking orders from me. Tough. At that moment I heard Daymar's voice in the back of my mind. I let the contact occur and said, *“All is well. Check back later.”* The contact faded. There were, indeed, a good number of them, but we were between them and the King.

Moreover, each of the two guards who stood between us had a poisonous jhereg on his shoulder. I said, “You must decide, Your Majesty. Unless, that is, you would like us to slaughter your troops for you first, and then continue the negotiations?”

“How do you know,” he said at last, “that I will hold to an agreement made under these circumstances?”

“I don't,” I said. “Furthermore, you are most welcome to break it. If you do, of course, we will be back. Perhaps with a few thousand troops.”

He turned to the old woman at his side and they spoke together quietly.

“Loiosh, what are they saying?”

“She says Elde has no objection to peace if he can get a guarantee that—”

“Very well,” said the King. “I agree. The ships we've sunk will be the indemnity for the damage done to us. We—bide a moment.”

He spoke quietly to the two men on the other side of the throne.

“Loiosh?”

“I can't hear them, boss.”

“All right. The old woman must be the ambassador or something from Elde Island. Perhaps the others are advisors of some sort.”

We waited while they spoke together, then the King nodded and

said, "But we require two things. First, assurances that no reprisals will be taken either against us or against our ally. Second, we want the assassin and his accomplice returned to us for punishment."

I turned to glance at Morrolan and Alier. Alier was still watching the armed men at the back of the room; Morrolan turned his head toward me and silently mouthed the word "assassin," with a lift to his eyebrows. I smile and turned back to the King.

"As to your first condition," I said, "I give you my word. Isn't that sufficient?"

"No," said the King.

"You aren't really in much of a position to bargain."

"Maybe," he said, apparently beginning to recover now that he had troops handy. "But maybe it isn't all that easy for you to break through here. Maybe you cannot send troops to invade us. Maybe it was only a fluke that allowed the three of you to arrive here this way. Maybe you didn't break through the way you claim you did, but sneaked past our ships in a vessel of your own."

"Maybe," I agreed.

"But do you think we could slip past you in your own waters? And do you want to chance it?"

"If you do not meet the conditions, yes."

"What sort of guarantees do you want?"

"The word of your Empress."

I said, "We are unofficial envoys. I cannot speak for her."

"We will write out a treaty that specifies the conditions. The Empress may sign it and return it to me, or not. We will allow a single small ship, bearing your Empire's standard, to land to return the document. We will cease our attacks for three days, which will give time to sign and return it. I warn you that, during those three

days, our preparations for war, and the preparations of our ally, will continue.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “As to the second condition, it is impossible.”

He looked at me, then spoke quietly to his advisors. The one I recognized kept glancing at me. The King looked up and said, “In that case, you may signal the slaughter to begin, for we will not allow you and your accomplice to go unpunished.”

“Your Majesty, have your scribe prepare the document while I consider this matter. We may be able to work something out.”

“Very well.” The old man at his left hand, it seemed was the scribe. He left for a moment, and returned with pen, blotter, ink, and parchment, and began writing.

I said, “May I approach you, Your Majesty?”

The two guards in front of him tensed, but he said “Very well.”

“Vlad, what are you doing?” asked Morrolan.

“Bide a moment,” I said.

I spoke to the King quietly for a few minutes, with the advisor, the emissary, and bushy-brows listening in.

Loiosh said, “*Boss, you—*”

“*Shut up.*”

“*But—*”

“*Shut up.*”

The King looked at me closely, then at the advisor, who nodded. Bushy-brows also nodded. The emissary said, “It is no concern of ours, Your Majesty.”

The King said, “Very well. So be it,” and the scribe continued writing. I backed up. Loiosh and Rocza returned to my shoulders, and the two guards relaxed.

Aliera said, “Vlad, what did you just do?”

“Worked a compromise,” I said. “I’ll explain when we’re back home.”

While the scribe was working, I felt Daymar’s contact once more.

“Five minutes,” I told him. “We’re almost done.”

“I’ll have Seth—“ His pseudo-voice faded away in midsentence.

The scribe finished, the King signed it. I took it, read it, nodded, rolled it up, and handed it to Morrolan, who at once started unrolling it.

“No,” I said. “Read it at home.”

“Why?”

“We have to leave now.”

And, indeed, at that moment I felt Daymar’s presence again.

“Okay,” I told him.

“Take us home.”

The spell came on very slowly; so slowly I was afraid for a moment it wasn’t going to work. But a reddish glow began to surround us. It became stronger, and I felt it begin to grab and take hold, and I felt the beginnings of the disorientation I’d felt before. It was no difficulty at all to take a step to my left so I was out of range of its effects. I saw Morrolan and Aliera slowly fade, not realizing, yet, that I had been left behind.

The King was staring in amazement at the evidence that sorcery had invaded his realm. I brought his attention back to me by saying, “So, Your Majesty, just out of curiosity what are the island customs as regards execution of regicides?”

Lesson Sixteen

DEALING WITH UPPER MANAGEMENT I

THEY CAME AND took hold of my arms, others took my rapier, my belt dagger, and my cloak, leaving me with only about nine weapons, and those they'd no doubt get to later. The King said, "It has never happened before, so we have no custom. We shall not be cruel."

"Thanks," I said. "I appreciate that."

"I will stand by my agreement, but tell me now: Is it true that Aibynn of Lowporch was not your accomplice?"

"It's true. Until you demanded he be turned over to you, I suspected he was a spy of yours. He helped me, however, so I feel a certain loyalty to him."

"Why did you conceal our agreement from your friends?"

"They wouldn't have allowed it."

"Then perhaps they will try to rescue you."

"I'm sure they will. I think you should get it done quickly, before they have time."

He whispered to the advisor, who nodded and scurried off. "Soon," he said, "we will have enough troops to—"

"To die," I told him. "You don't know what you're dealing with. Have you ever heard of a weapon the Serioli call Magical-Wand-for-Creating-Death-in-the-Form-of-a-Black-Sword? We call it Blackwand, and my friend Morrolan wields it. How about Dagger-Shaped-Bearer-of-Fire-That-Bums-Like-Ice? Sethra Lavode of Dzur Mountain carries that. And then there's Artifact-in-Sword-Form-That-Searches-for-the-True-Path. We call it

Pathfinder, and Alera e'Kieron carries it. Your Majesty, you are making a mistake if you think you can bring in enough troops to keep them from rescuing me if I'm still alive when they get here.”

He stared. “Is it your Empress who makes you so loyal that you will sacrifice your life for her? Or is it the Empire?”

“Neither,” I said. “They are holding my wife captive, and I hope to win her release.”

“Captive? For what?”

“Leading a rebellion”

He stared, then began to smile, and then he laughed. “So, you sacrifice your life in the interests of the Empire that is holding your wife captive for trying to overthrow it? And you do this to win her release, so she can try to overthrow it again?”

“Something like that.” I didn't think it was all that funny.

“Is that why you murdered my father in the first place?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“Look, Your Majesty, my friends will probably be back as soon as they've figured out what happened. It will take them a while to perform the spell again, but I don't know how long a while that will be. If I'm still alive when they get here, things will get very bloody very fast. And, to be honest, I'm not enjoying standing around very much. Why don't we just get this over with?”

“My dear assassin,” said the King. “We intend to execute you. We are not about to just cut you down on the spot.”

“Then you're a fool,” I snapped.

“Do you really think they can be back so quickly?”

“Probably not, but I have no way of knowing. Right now, they're probably arguing with each other about that very issue. By now

they've already decided to do it, and are figuring out if they remember the place well enough. They are not just standing around; I know them.”

He nodded. “What about those—those beasts of yours.”

“They won't hurt you.”

“You think not? Boss, I'm going to kill anyone who tries to touch you.”

“You will not.”

“How are you going to stop me?”

“Loiosh, this is for Cawti.”

“Yeah? So?”

I cleared my throat. “Excuse me, Your Majesty, but there's a bit of a problem here, after all. Give me a moment to work this out.”

“With those beasts?”

“They, um, they're friends, Your Majesty, and they don't want anyone harming me. Give me a moment to speak with them.”

He shook his head. “How does someone like you inspire such loyalty?”

“Damned if I know,” I said. “Basic integrity, I guess.”

He cocked his head to the side. “You speak lightly, but perhaps it is true. You were hired, were you not? You kill for gold?” I shrugged.

“If I paid you enough, would you kill the man who hired you?”

I thought about attempting to assassinate Verra and laughed. “Not likely in this case, I'm afraid.”

“A shame,” he said. “Because you are nothing more than a tool, and I would rather have the wielder of the tool. Yes, I will kill you, and your poisonous friends as well, if necessary, and I will hold with the bargain I made. But I would much rather know who gave the order, so I can strike him down instead. Come. I offer you your

life. Will you tell me?"

Was I supposed to tell him it was a god? Would he believe me? What would he do if he did? It was laughable.

I said, "Sorry, the rules don't permit it. Let's get this done, shall we? Here, hand me that pouch of mine." No one moved. "Oh, come now," I said, "if I'd been planning to kill you, I would have done so when I had all the odds on my side."

The King nodded, and they released me and handed me the pouch, still watching me closely. I removed a couple of powders and set them on the floor.

"Boss, that's not fair."

"Neither is life, chum."

"There," I said aloud. "Mix those powders together equally, dissolve them in water. If anyone is bit by one of my friends that will make sure they take no worse effect than a bit of illness. It's what I used while training them. I assume you have someone who doesn't mind a bite or two?"

The King turned to bushy-brows. "Let it be done, then."

My old interrogator nodded and said, "By what means?"

"Send for an axe, and let his head be struck off."

"You know," I said, "that you'll get blood all over the floor."

"It can be cleaned," said the King. Then, "Don't you even care?"

I looked at his young face, and wondered how close he had been to the King his father, whom I had killed. I wondered once more about Verra, who had set all this in motion, and I regretted that I wouldn't have a chance to tell her about it in detail.

"What's the difference?" I said. "Sure, I care. When has that changed anything?"

They sent for an axe, and while they were waiting for it about forty

more island warriors arrived. Then the axe came, and once more they took my arms. The two holding me glanced nervously at the jherog, and at the vials of powder on the floor.

“Boss, you can't just let them—”

“Watch me.”

I looked at the axe. It was a very ugly thing that was intended for chopping down trees, not people. I hoped they'd be able to strike off my head without too many tries—it isn't as easy as you might think. I winced. “I hope it's sharp,” I said.

“It is sharp,” said the King.

Bushy-brows took the axe, but just as he turned toward me, before they could put me into the proper position, there began a faint blue glow in the room. It grew brighter as we watched.

“Took too long,” I said.

“Prepare to attack,” said the King.

I wondered if I should help keep my friends from being slaughtered or try to talk them out of saving me. I still hadn't decided when Alieria was suddenly there, Pathfinder naked in her hand, and, of all people, Aibynn, drum in hand, looking innocent and foolish.

“Attack!” cried the King.

“Wait!” cried Alieria.

Somehow, her voice stopped them, and everyone stood there, the air filled with naked swords and the awful power of the Great Weapon, and as they stood I became aware of someone else, on the floor, right at Alieria's feet. When I saw who it was, bound and gagged, I almost started laughing.

“What is this?” cried the King.

“I am Alieria e'Kieron of the House of the Dragon. I will have

words with you, or slaughter. Will you let me speak?"

If they'd been able to send all three of them, or even any two, the issue would never have been in doubt. As it was, with Alera unable to use sorcery, it could get ugly. If they attacked her, there would be a great deal of death, and I realized that, promise or not, I could not stand there and let them kill her. I still had a few weapons on me, and there was my familiar, as well.

"Loiosh, get ready. You and Rocza. If they start—"

"We're ready, boss."

The King was standing now in front of his raised throne, and he looked at me, back at the almost-conflict, and said, "Say what you have to say."

"I offer you a trade," she said, sheathing her blade. "Give us the assassin, and we will give you the man who hired him. What say you?"

The King stood. "Indeed? I'd just been saying ... remove his gag. I want to hear what he has to say for himself."

They stood him up and did this, and you would not want to hear the things he called me. It was positively shameful. I kept my face impassive. The King interrupted him at last and said, "You need not hate the one you paid for evil you were too cowardly to commit yourself. He never gave your name."

He drew himself up as well as he could, with feet and hands still bound, and said, "I deny having anything to do with this or any other assassination."

The King tapped his front teeth with his fingernails and said to Alera, "How am I to know this is the guilty one?"

She bowed, came forward, and handed him two large yellow parchments that had been getting crushed in her belt. One I

recognized from the parchment as the treaty the King had just signed. The other—

“It bears your Imperial seal,” he said. “I recognize it. And is signed by Zerika herself.” He nodded. “That will do.” He turned to Boralinoi. “Why did you want my father killed?” he demanded.

“I did not. It is all a lie. I never—”

“Kill him,” said the King.

“I’ll do it,” I said.

“What?” said the King.

“Well,” I said, “you heard what he said about me.”

The King looked at me, then smiled. “Very well do it. Give him the axe.”

I wanted to laugh aloud, but held it in check. I said “I don’t know much about axes. May I use a knife?”

Boralinoi screamed his rage and began tugging furiously at the bonds and cursing me and everything else in sight. I still wanted to laugh. The King nodded. I took a knife from a sheath between my shoulder blades as the forced Boralinoi to his knees.

“Hold his head steady,” I said, and two of them came forward to do this. He never stopped screeching his rage until they held his jaws shut.

Sometimes, over the course of my life, I’ve felt regret for killing someone. Other times, not. I said quite clearly “Sorry, boss, a job’s a job,” and put my blade neatly into his left eye. He screamed, convulsed, twitched, and died. I stared down at his body and was not displeased.

I looked at the King and wondered idly what would happen next.

“*Let’s go boss,*” said Loiosh. I still hadn’t quite accepted that I was going to get out of this. Alieria caught my eye and motioned me to

her.

Bushy-brows said, “Your Majesty—”

“Yes,” said the King. He turned toward Alieria. “You may go. The others will be staying.”

Alieria stared at him. “Is that how you keep your word?”

“I never gave my word,” said the King. “Even by implication.”

“I'm beginning to take a dislike to you,” I said.

He ignored me. “Go. You have your peace. I'll take the assassins.”

I thought the idea that, after all of this, I was going to die here after all was rather silly. So did Alieria, apparently, for she drew Pathfinder and the sensation of it filled the room. That was enough of a distraction to give me time to grab Spellbreaker, my cloak, and my rapier swung it around so the sheath went flying in the the direction of the King. One of the guards bravely stepped in front of it and went down clutching at his chest— I'll tell you about my sheath sometime.

I stepped over to Alieria and we stood back-to-back waiting for them to charge. This would have been a perfect time for Sethra and Daymar to have come through. Alieria whispered, “It's going to be a while yet; they're exhausted.”

“Great,” I said.

“Attack,” said the King.

“The door,” I said.

Alieria led the way with Pathfinder, followed by Aibynn while I guarded their back and sides, jabbing wildly with my rapier and swinging just as wildly with my cloak I think the cloak did more damage than my sword but Pathfinder, well, there were screams. Loiosh and Rocza flew into everyone's face and added to the confusion.

Let's just say we reached the door and leave it at that all right? Once there, there were a few more of them in the hall, but they seemed less inclined to tangle with Pathfinder than the others had been, and then we were outside.

“Now what?” said Alieria.

“Run,” I suggested.

“Where?”

“Follow me,” said Aibynn.

“Just a moment,” said Alieria. She pointed her weapon at the door and muttered something under her breath while making arcane gestures with her free hand. The door collapsed, burying a few guards with it and leaving three of them between the door and us. They looked at the door, looked at Pathfinder, looked at each other.

“Well?” I said.

They said nothing. We took off, following pretty much the same route I'd taken before.

“What was that?” asked Aibynn.

“Pre-Empire sorcery,” I said.

“What's that?”

“Pretty effective,” I said. I looked back. The three guards had decided to help dig their friends out of the rubble of the ruins of the front hall rather than to follow us. Wise.

We kept our speed up until we were rather deep in the forest, then we paused to catch our breath.

“Thanks, Alieria.”

“Think nothing of it. I hope I didn't upset a plan.”

“You did. That's why I said thank you. How did you acquire Boralinoi?”

“Courtesy of the Empress.”

“Does she know he isn't really guilty?”

“He's guilty. Maybe not of killing the King, but he's guilty.”

“Is that what the Empress said?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I'll be damned. How did you get here so fast?”

“Sethra. Daymar. Aibynn. The Orb.”

“The Orb?”

“Yes.”

“I see.” I turned to Aibynn. “How did you happen to come along?”

He shrugged. “I thought I might be able to help you get out.”

“How?”

“Well, I could drum.”

I looked at him. “*Loiosh, do you trust him?*”

“*I don't know.*”

“*Yeah. Me neither. This could still be—*”

“*I know.*”

Rocza fluttered off my shoulder and landed on Aibynn's. He seemed startled, but handled it gracefully enough.

“*She trusts him, boss.*”

I looked at Aibynn, then looked at Rocza. I sighed “Drum away,” I said.

“Let's sit down,” said Aibynn.

We did so.

He began to drum.

Lesson Seventeen

DEALING WITH UPPER MANAGEMENT II

I STUDIED THE white hallway and said, “Either the Imperial Palace or—”

“It’s not the Imperial Palace,” said Alera.

Aibynn was still sitting down. He seemed rather drained and tired. He stopped drumming and smiled wanly.

“How,” I said, “did this happen?”

“Ask him,” said Alera, indicating Aibynn.

“Well?” I said.

“Sometimes,” he said, “when you drum, you . . . it’s hard to describe. You reach places. Didn’t you feel it?”

“No,” I said quickly, just as Alera was saying “Yes.”

“*Boss—*”

“Well, okay, maybe,” I amended. “But why this place?”

“It was what you two were both thinking about.” That was true; I’d been thinking how pleasant it would be to give Verra a piece of my mind, but why would Alera have been thinking about it?

I said, “Why you?” at just the same moment she said it to me. I shrugged, turned to Aibynn, and said, “So all this time, you’ve really been nothing more than a drummer?”

For the first time, he seemed really surprised. “You mean you didn’t believe me?”

“Let’s just say I wondered.”

Alera stood up and said, “Let’s go.”

She seemed to know her way, so I followed her. It was only a short walk, this time, until we reached the doors which were standing

open. There was no cat this time. I thought I saw something or someone disappear behind the throne, but I wasn't sure. In any case, the goddess was there.

She said, "Hello, Alieria, Vlad."

"Hello, Mother," said Alieria.

Mother?

"Who is your friend, and what brings you here?"

"His name is Aibynn," said Alieria. "He brought us here to save our lives."

Mother?

"I see. Shall I send you back, then, or is there something I can do for you?"

Mother?

"Send us back, Mother. We—"

"Excuse me," I said. "Do you mean that literally?"

"Mean what?" said Alieria.

"You're calling her 'Mother.'"

"Oh, yes. Why? You didn't know?"

"You never told me."

"You never asked, Vlad."

"Of all the—never mind. Goddess, if you'd be kind enough to send them back, I would have words with you that they don't need to hear."

Alieria stared at me. "I don't like your tone."

I started to snap at her, but the goddess said, "It's all right, Alieria. He has some cause."

She looked unhappy, but said, "Very well."

"We can't take long," said the Demon Goddess, "or you'll be late for your appointment."

“Appointment?”

“With the Empress.”

“I have an appointment with the Empress?”

“Yes. Morrolan has the message waiting for you, but I may as well tell you myself.”

I licked my lips. “In that case,” I told Aibynn, “I’ll meet you outside the Imperial Wing of the Palace.”

“All right,” he said, still appearing exhausted.

The goddess said, “You interest me, drummer. Perhaps, sometime, you’d care to play for me.”

“Sure.”

I could have warned him that accepting work from the Demon Goddess didn’t always work out the way one would like, but I thought it might be tactless. Alera walked up and kissed Verra on the cheek. Verra smiled maternally. It was very strange. Alera stepped back and nodded; she and Aibynn vanished.

I was about to start in on the goddess when a small girl emerged from behind the throne. I caught myself and said, “Hello, Devera.”

“’Lo, Uncle Vlad.”

“Why were you hiding?”

“I can’t let Mama see me yet.”

“Why not?”

“It might upset things.”

“Oh. So she”—I indicated the Demon Goddess—“is your grandmother?”

Devera smiled and crawled up into her lap.

“Boss, is it just me, or is this really weird?”

“It’s both of us.”

Verra said, “I’m sorry all of this had to happen.”

“You bloody well should be.”

“I did help save your life.”

“Yeah. People have been doing that a lot. Thanks, I suppose.”

“Is there something you want to say to me?”

“Yes, Goddess, there is. You've gone a good way toward messing up my life, and, what's more, manipulated events such that, through my actions, hundreds of people have died. I don't care what your motivations were; I don't, want to have anything more to do with you. Okay?”

Devera looked unhappy, but didn't say anything. Verra said, “I understand, Vlad. But I won't hold you to that. You don't even know who you are yet. You're beginning another life now. Wait until you know what sort of life it is before you make decisions like that.”

I started to say something more, but Devera climbed down from her lap, came up to me, took my hand squeezed. “Don't be mad, Uncle Vlad, she meant well.”

“I—” I stopped and looked down at her. I shook my head.

“Come,” said Verra, “they await you at the Imperial Palace.”

“For what?”

“You'll see. And I think we'll meet again, Vlad Taltos, however you feel about it at the moment.” The room swirled and went away before I could speak again.

Life, thy name is irony, or something like that.

“And by his own actions, at risk of his life...” The voice of the seneschal rolled like thunder through the court. My eyes were down, and my thoughts were filled with two conflicting desires: First, I wanted to turn around and see how Count Soffta was taking the whole thing. Second, I very badly wanted to throw my head

back and laugh aloud. "... which would certainly have cost the lives of thousands of Imperial citizens ..."

Loiosh, of course, wasn't helping any. He sat on my shoulder, looking around, nuzzling Rocza, and generally carrying on as if he were personally being honored, and saying things like, "*Do they really take this stuff seriously, boss?*"

"... all the lands around Lake Szurke, within the Duchy of Eastmans watch, for a distance ..."

They had even given me a pillow for my knee; a pillow with a stylized Jhereg in grey against a black background. In keeping my eyes to the ground I kept seeing pieces of embroidered wing and head, and this made it harder than ever to keep a straight face.

"... all rights and privileges pertaining to this rank, to be granted to all descendants and heirs of his body, for as long as the Empire ..."

I wondered how Cawti would react, were she here. Probably not very well, knowing how she felt about the Empire. Perhaps what I missed most about the new Cawti was that she seemed to have lost her sense of humor. And for what? The words of the Demon Goddess came back to me, and for a moment, bitterness overwhelmed irony.

"... crest with the Imperial Phoenix above of the symbol of House Jhereg ..." His voice almost faltered there, but didn't. Had an Imperial title ever before been granted a Jhereg? Certainly, none had ever been granted an Easterner. My sense of humor returned.

"... crest shall be entered into the Imperial Registry for all time, and may not be removed save by unanimous vote of the Council of Heirs and the Emperor ..."

Just what I needed. I bit my lip. I was becoming anxious for this to end, because when it was over, I'd meet my wife once more.

Would I have to say something at the end of the ceremony? No, a deep bow would do.

“... shall be known as Count Szurke, and shall have the right of high and low justice upon his lands, and bear responsibility for . . .”

I wondered if this would make the Jhereg any slower to go after my head. Considering that I just implicated a Council member before the Empire, and then played a part in his murder, it wasn't very likely. How soon would they move? Soon.

Very soon. If I was going to save my life, which I really should do after all the work Alera and others had gone through to preserve it, I couldn't waste any time.

“... stand now, before the Empress and the Heirs of the court, and receive ...”

I had that rarest of positions, an Imperial title, which was worth exactly nothing. I wondered if the Empress saw the humor in it. The ceremony came to an end at last.

As soon as was decent, I got out of there, intending to back to the lorch Wing. But as I was leaving the Imperial Wing, I found Aibynn, his drum at his feet, watching passersby and tapping out rhythms with coins on the marble railing against the wide stairway that led down into the antechamber.

“Here in the Empire,” I said, “we call that a banister.”

“Where are you going?” he said.

“Now? To meet my wife. After that, well, I'd like a favor from you.”

“What's that?”

“The Phoenix Stone you carry; I want it.”

He frowned, then said, “All right. It's still at that castle. You can

just take it.”

“Are you sure you won't need it?”

He shrugged.

“Your mind is made up, isn't it, boss?”

“Yeah.”

“Thanks, Aibynn.”

“You're welcome. What's that you're wearing?”

“This? I wear it so I don't get sick when—”

“No, that.”

“Oh. It represents an Imperial title. It doesn't really mean anything. Want it? In exchange for the one you're giving me?”

“No, thanks. Where are you going?”

I shook my head. “It doesn't matter. What about you? You can't go back home.”

“Not now, anyway. That's all right. I like it here. The drumming is much more primitive.”

Primitive? I chuckled, thinking of some musicians I'd met who'd have hated to be told that. “Whatever,” I said. “Maybe I'll run into you again.”

“Yes.”

“And Aibynn ...”

“Yes?”

“I think you were wrong about the gods.”

“Oh?”

“I think when a god does something reprehensible, it's still reprehensible.”

“Then what is a god?”

“I don't know.”

“Maybe you can find out.”

“Yes.” I said. “Maybe I can. Maybe I will. Thanks.”

He nodded an acknowledgment and went back to playing the banister. I walked around to the lorch Wing, and found that I'd have to wait an hour or so while they finished the paperwork involved in releasing Cawti. That was all right; I had things to do. I walked away from the Palace, and, still taking delight in the lack of nausea, I teleported.

“You can't do this to me,” said Kragar.

“I just did,” I told him.

“I won't last five minutes.”

“You've already lasted longer than that, and this isn't the first time.”

“That was temporary. Vlad, I became a Jhereg because I couldn't be a Dragon. I was born a Dragon, you know that. And I'd try to give an order in battle, and no one would notice. I can't—”

“People change, Kragar. You've already changed.”

“But—”

“Think of the money.”

He stopped. “A point,” he admitted.

“You also have the loyalty of everyone who works here. They know you and they trust you. Besides, what choice do I have? How much is the Organization offering for my head right now?” He told me, and I was impressed in spite of myself. “The rumor is,” he added, “that they want it Morganti.”

“That would make sense,” I said evenly, though I shuddered as I spoke. I looked around the office. It was still filled with all of my things—target on the wall, coatrack where Loiosh and Rocza were perched, dark rings on the desk from where I habitually put my klava cup, the wheeled swivel chair I'd had specially designed, and

more. It was more like home than home was.

“Will it ever be possible for you to come back?”

“Maybe. But even if it is, I'm not certain I'm ever going to want to. And what if I do? We can work something out, or I can start over somewhere else.”

He sighed. “It's going to be hard to work around here without Melestav.”

“Yeah. And Sticks.”

We were silent for a few moments, out of respect for the dead. I still couldn't hate Melestav, and Sticks had meant a lot to me. I hate it when friends die.

Kragar said, “Will I be able to reach you?”

“No.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don't know. I've been east, the sea is south. That leaves north and west. Probably one of those directions.”

He considered carefully. Then he said, “What are you going to do about South Adrilankha?”

“You don't have to worry about it,” I said. “I'm making other arrangements for that territory.”

“Well, that's something, anyway.”

I took another look around the office. So much of my life had filled that room. Loiosh flew over to Kragar, nuzzled his ear for a moment, and landed on my right shoulder.

Rocza landed on my left. I stood up. “Oh, and Kragar, say goodbye to Kiera the Thief for me. Tell her I still owe her. On the other hand, I expect she can find me when she wants to.”

“I'll tell her,” said Kragar.

“Thanks. Good luck.” I teleported.

It was like rehearsing a play; as if the director had said, “Do the bit over where you meet on the steps of the Iorich Wing, only this time make it more intense.” This time she put her arms around me and held me like she meant it. I put my arms around her and wondered why I wasn't reacting more strongly. Loiosh and Rocza kept careful watch around us.

“Tell me about it,” she said.

Standing there, alone on the deserted steps as the slow, thorough evening tucked itself into the corners of the Palace, I did. I told her everything, and as I did, I wondered at the calm voice of this speaker, relating the tale of revolution, assassination, and intrigue as if he had no part in it. What is he feeling now? I wondered. I wished they'd found someone for the part more able to convey emotion. Or perhaps that was the effect desired by the director, if not the playwright.

When I finished, she pulled back and stared at me. “They'll kill you,” she said.

“I don't think so.”

“What will stop them?”

“I have a plan.”

“Tell me.”

“First you tell me—are you coming back to me?”

She didn't look away, as I'd expected. Instead she studied me carefully, as one studies a stranger whose mood and meaning one is trying to read from his face. She didn't say anything, which I think was an answer. But I put it into words. “Too much has happened. Too much murder, too much change. Whatever we had, we don't have it. Can we create something else? I don't know. But you're going one way and I'm going another. For now, that is.”

Her eyes were so big. “You're going away, aren't you—”

“Yes.”

“Are you ever coming back?” She asked it with a odd, detached air, as if she wasn't certain how much she cared, or was afraid she cared too much, or afraid she cared too little.

“I don't know,” I said.

She nodded. “When are you leaving?”

“Right away.”

“I'm sorry things have worked out this way.”

“Me, too.”

“You've left the business to Kragar?”

“Most of it. Except for South Adrilankha.”

“What are you doing with that?”

I thought about the courtyard of Castle Black, until the image was strong and clear. I strengthened my connection to the Orb, drew energy, and began the teleport. “All Organization interests in South Adrilankha are yours,” I said. “My people will be seeing you in the morning. Enjoy,” I added, and I was gone.

Aliera and I sat alone in the library of Castle Black, waiting for Sethra and Morrolan to join us. This place, like my office, held more than a few memories. I'd sat here with my friends—yes, they were certainly that—and held war councils, consoled each other, and celebrated. Much wine had flowed in this room along with tears and laughter, as well as promises of aid and threats of dismemberment; many of these things within minutes of each other I noticed that Aliera was looking at me. “I met your daughter,” I said.

“What daughter?”

“You'll find out.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Ask your mother. Time does funny things around her, I guess.” She didn't answer directly. “I'll miss you,” she said.

“I might be back; who knows?”

“The Jhereg carries a grudge.”

“Don't I know it. But still—”

“What will you do?”

“I don't know. I want to be alone for a while.”

“I can't imagine that.”

“Me wanting to be alone? I suppose you're right. I'll have Loiosh and Rocza, anyway.”

“Still—”

“Yeah. I'll probably find some place with 'people around. Probably Dragaerans, so I can go back to hating them in general and loving them in particular. But right now, I don't want to see anyone.”

“I understand,” she said.

“I owe you a lot.”

“I owe you my life,” she said.

“And I owe you mine, several times. I sometimes wish I could remember that previous life, back in the beginning.”

“Sethra could arrange that,” said Alera.

“Not now.”

“It might help you come to terms with who you are.”

“I'll find my own way.”

“Yes. You always do.”

Morrolan and Sethra joined us before I could ask how she meant that. I said, “This is good-bye, for a while.”

“So I had gathered,” said Morrolan. “I wish you well on your travels. I shall watch over your grandfather for you.”

“Thanks.”

Sethra said, “I expect we will meet again, in this life or the next.”
“The next,” I said. “One way or another, it will be a different life.”
“Yes,” said Sethra. “You’re right. I took my leave without another word.

Last of all I spoke with my grandfather. “You look well,” he said.
“Thanks.”

For the first time in my adult life, I was looking like an Easterner, not a Jhereg. I still had the same cloak, but it was now dyed green. I wore loose darrskin boots, green pants, and a light blue tunic.

“It’s necessary, under the circumstances,” I said.

“What circumstances are these, Vladimir?”

I explained what had happened, what I was doing about it, and what I thought he should do. He shook his head. “To be a ruler, Vladimir, even of a small place, it is a skill that I have not.”

“Noish-pa, you don’t have to rule. You don’t have to do anything. There are about a hundred families of Teckla there, and a few Easterners, and they’ve been getting on quite well without anyone ruling them. You need not change anything. A stipend from the Empire goes with the title, and it is sufficient for you to live on. All you have to do is go to Lake Szurke and live in the manor, or castle, or whatever it is. If the peasants come to you with problems, I have no doubt you can suggest solutions, but they probably won’t. You can continue your work there with no one to bother you. Where else will you go? And it is just west of Pepperfields, which is in the mountains west of Fenario, so you will be close to our homeland. What could be better?”

He frowned, and at last he nodded. “But what about you?” he said.

“I don’t know. I am running for my life now. If things change, and

I feel it safe to return, I will.”

“And your wife?”

“That's over,” I said.

“Is it?”

I tried to meet his eyes, but couldn't. “For now, it is. Maybe later, maybe after time has passed, but not now.”

“I threw the sands last night, Vladimir. For the first time in twenty years, I threw the sands and asked what would become of me. I felt the power, and I read the symbols, and they said I would live to hold a great-grandchild in my arms. Do you think the sands were wrong?”

“I don't know,” I said. “I hope they were not. But if you are to see a grandchild, I must be alive to conceive one.”

He nodded. “Very well, Vladimir. Do what you must. I will go to this place, and I will live there, so you will know where to find me when you can.”

“When I can,” I said. “When I can.”

EPILOGUE

THERE WAS A place I remembered well, that meant nothing to anyone else, but a great deal to me. It was engraved forever in my memory, from the isolated patches of bright blue safeweed among the tall grasses to the bent oak that loomed over the clearing as if to keep it safe from predators above; from the thorns of the wild winesage to the even slope of the wallbush, pointing away from the nearest water.

Though barely more than a child when I'd been there before, I knew it; it had etched itself into my memory with a fine detail that I usually saved for the locations of hidden weapons on enemies or the daily habits of targets. Nature, in all its varied beauties and horrors, had hitherto been lost on me, save for this place. Perhaps now that would change.

Somewhere to my left came the sniggering laugh of a chreotha, spitting out its weaving to trap a norska or a squirrel. A bring-me-home, growing from the oak, whipped back and forth in the chilly breeze like a lazy whip: woohsnap, woohsnap.

A daythief, somewhere above me, sobbed in counterpoint to the chreotha. The breeze made the hair on the back of my neck stand up, and I shivered pleasantly. It was just time for lilacs to loom; they were plentiful here and the scent mixed well with the blossoming of a stonefruit tree that hid itself behind the wallbush, outside the clearing.

It came to mind that it was spring, and that I'd never had much cause to notice the seasons before.

If my life as an assassin had a beginning, perhaps it was here, where I'd found the egg that would grow to become my familiar. If

my life as an assassin had an end, it would be here as well. If it turned out to be only an interruption, well, so be it.

Loiosh and Rocza were quiet. Save for them, I was alone.

Adrilankha was far away, and there were no cities for miles in any direction.

Alone.

Except for the two jhereg, no one was here to see me, or to speak with me, and the Phoenix Stone guarded my thoughts from any who would seek me that way. I had rendered myself invisible to sorcery. The hardware I carried, dozens of knives, darts, and other nasty things, seemed absurd here. I had no doubt that, as time went on, I'd gradually diminish their number, perhaps to nothing. On my back I carried what clothing I'd need for the changing of the seasons, a spare pair of boots, and a few odds and ends that might come in useful.

Just the three of us now.

It would be easy to give in to self-pity, but I would only have been lying to myself. It was a time of change, a time of growth, as exciting, in its own way, as the moment just before the target would walk up to the spot I'd selected for his execution.

What would happen? Who would I become? Would the Jhereg find a way to track me down? Would love, somehow, emerge from the ashes to which we'd reduced it? Or even spring up elsewhere, unexpected?

I felt a smile on my face, and didn't try to second-guess it.

I began walking west.

About the Author

Steven Brust was born on November 23, 1955, after which his parents gave up on the notion of having children. He used to tend bar, drive an ice-cream truck, wash dishes, cook food, and program computers, which ought to be enough jobs to prove a point of some sort. He has four children, named Corwin, Alieria, Carolyn, and Toni, which ought to be enough children to prove a point of some sort. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota, along with a dog named Miska the Couchman, a cat named Shadow, and a dove named Astarte, which ought to be enough pets to prove a point of some sort. When he isn't writing, he plays drums and writes songs for a rock 'n' roll band called Cats Laughing that also includes novelist Emma Bull, along with Adam Stemple, who arranges music for children's books and whose mother is writer Jane Yolen, which ought to give it enough fantasy connections to prove a point of some sort. If you'd like more information about Cats Laughing, send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to:

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If you'd like more information about Mr. Brust, feel free to make it up.