

# Hallah's Choice

*By: Jo Clayton*

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From the Drytowns to Leigh Brackett Hamilton's Mars, mercenaries and assassins stride or skulk through exotic desert towns. They are violent and sinister, and, no doubt, each one of them has a history that we would wonder at—when we're not taking cover.

Hallah, Jo Clayton's protagonist, has a history more painful than most. Is she bent on revenge? Yes, but this is one assassin you can imagine singing a lullaby.

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## 1

### Into the web

Languorous late afternoon.

Heatwaves and a haze of yellow dust.

The Shiza'heyh of Yaanosin ride to the Betrothal Feast and Fealty Jubilee with their guards and dependents, their wives and daughters and their eldest sons, their equerries and orderlies and grooms, their harriers and farriers, their agents and their clerks, their stooges and their sycophants, their bath girls and bed-warmers, their tailors, their valets, their wardrobesters, their cooks and their cupbearers, their food tasters and wine tasters, their scullions and slaveys.

The Shiza'heyh Kihyayti'an rides to the Betrothal Feast and Fealty Jubilee with all this and his unmatched pair of matchless assassins.

Zisgade Neisser the Shadowsnake, unfeeling as the polished ivory blades he wears up each sleeve—he is a thin gray man, yellow with dust, riding at his master's side.

Hallah Myur, with no epithet allowed—such things are a foolishness she is content to live without—a thin gray woman riding near the tail of the procession, a little woman yellow with the rolling dust, dark eyes narrowed to cracks. Sweat runnels cut through the dust plastered on her brow, baring streaks of lined light brown skin. Wisps of hair straggle from under her loosely wound headbands. She rides easily, slumped in the saddle of a dust-yellowed gelding, a long-legged, rough-gaited, slab-sided beast with enough energy and humor left to white his eyes at clots in the dust and shy at skittering shadows.

She is tired, hot, and bored, with no end of boredom in sight. For the next week or so she'll be nothing more than an attendant, a body to dress up the Shiza'heyh's entourage. Katiang the Boar-rider and the other cursemen deal hardly

with folk who break the Curse Truce, with the hand and the one-behind who hires the hand. Even Shiza'heyh Kihyayti'an in his maddest moods would not chance bringing the Curse on his head.

She expects to sleep a lot. She detests crowds, is bored by tumblers, street mimes, magicians, and their like. She seldom gambles, doesn't trust luck, only skill. Clothes are to cover her body, food is for fueling it. She prefers the tablewipe she buys for herself in hedge taverns to the delicate vintages the Shiza'heyh provides for his favored hirelings. Beyond the highs of her work—which are fewer with every year that passes—her only real pleasure is a hard-fought game of stonechess. Since Atwarima is a busy riverport and the Jubilee/Betrothal should bring a flood of visitors from many realms, she hopes to locate an adequate opponent.

## 2

### The first shock

In the Bath of the Toyaytay GuestHouse Hallah Myur stripped and stretched, sucking in the steamy air. She shook her head, her hair tumbling loose, fine long hair kinking into frizzy curls. Her body was limber as a child's but terribly scarred, nodules of keloid with streaks of white and pink running through the soft brown skin where her breasts had been; her back was laced with whip marks.

She sat on damp sacking bound over the bench beside the tub and combed the tangles and dust from her hair, singing softly to herself, clicking her tongue at how gray she was getting. When she was finished, she set the comb aside, twisted her hair into a knot atop her head, and slid with a soft purr of pleasure into the water.

Clean and relaxed, she pulled on her second-best tunic and trousers, tied on the gray silk formveil that masked her face eye to chin, bound her hair with gray silk bands, covering it completely. She gathered her dusty riding gear, paid the attendant, left the Bath and strolled toward the rooms assigned to the Shiza'heyh Kihyayti'an's entourage, humming a song she'd picked up somewhere, enjoying the warmth of her body, the easy shift of her muscles.

Though sunset was still half an hour off, in that maze of corridors and galleries within the massive walls of the GuestHouse, alabaster lamps were already lit, and their painted oils spread perfume on the drafts that coiled about her shoulders. She turned a corner.

A man walked toward her; his face and shoulders leapt at her as he passed a lamp.

She stopped walking. Stopped breathing.

His eyes passed over her, dismissed her. Under the Curse Truce, assassin's fangs were pulled. She was nothing to interest him. Nothing.

His footsteps faded.

Shudder after shudder passed along her body; she hunched over, beat her fists against her thighs, sucked in air in sharp, broken gasps. Shell twenty years thick shattered in that instant, twenty years of discipline gone.

But twenty years do have weight and reach.

After a moment she straightened her back, quieted her breathing. Almost running, drowning in memory, she hurried for the small private cubicle assigned to her.

Rosalie Zivan, fourteen years of mischief, spoiled by a doting father, her mother dead three years ago birthing Garro Zivan's last son, the spring moon like laughter in her blood, slipped into the Home-wood of Roka Membruda to gather herbs for her Auntee Rosamunda's simples and specifics: Mutes' tongue, love-at-ease, moonspurge, sowthistle, hop-over, bruisewort, poorfolks pepper, bee thumb, sucklings tit, wet-a-bed, shut-your-ear, flickwhittle, whistling fleabane, smartberry, creeping ninny, wart-weed, stinking willy.

Delighted by the edge of danger in her solitary windings through the wood, she prowled along the deer paths and in the scattered glades, grubbing in the thick black earth under the trees and along the noisy creek, knife flickering through the greens, the tubers, the brambles, the grasses growing on the banks and in the water, filling the gather sack she carried slung over her shoulder.

She ended her search when she reached the rowan pool in the heart of the wood, where the water ran deep and silent through ancient twisted trees, a place fragrant with the eddying sweetness of night-blooming jasmine and the acrid bite of riveroak, a place where it seemed to her the dreefolk must dance on their dreadnights.

She eased the sack onto rowan roots, careful to keep it from the damp dark earth, stripped off her blouse, her skirt, and her camisole, hung them on a rowan tree, then slipped into the water. The moon was a hair past full and directly overhead, turning the water to tarnished silver. She sculled dreamily about, watching the clouds swim by.

A young man came from the trees, blond hair blowing in an aureole about a beautiful lean face. She knew him. She'd seen him in the village, Membruda's Youngest Son. They said his name was Traccoar. "Rowan flower," he said to her, his voice like a wind in the trees. "Come bless me."

When she reached her room, she paced back and forth, back and forth, wall to door, around the end of the bed and back, shivering with reaction. After she'd calmed enough so she could stay still awhile, she stripped off her clothes, braided her hair, tied the ends, and slipped into bed.

Sleep came hard, and when she did at last drop off, the dreams came back, the ones she thought she'd left with her name.

Rosalie Zivan lay with hands clenched into fists as Traccoar's body moved on hers, as he whispered that she was the loveliest, the most magical being he'd ever known. Most women, he told her between grunts and other noises, are greedy whores, selling themselves for money and power. You're different, he told her, you're like the earth, rich and powerful, warm and giving.

She was only fourteen, and virgin, but she knew lies when she heard them. She lay like a stone, gathering herself to run when he rolled off her, before he remembered that he had to kill her so she couldn't put a Hammar Curse on him—that was what they believed, those beasts in the Rokas.

The Hammar of clan Gyoker-Zivan had no curses, only wise women and fast-fingered men.

He groaned, rolled over, and lay panting beside her.

She scrambled up, ran around a rowan tree when he leapt to his feet and lunged for her. "Dirty pig," she shouted at him. "May you never get it up again." She ran into the shadows and left him stumbling clumsily after her, cursing her.

Hallah Myur stirred in her sleep, ground her teeth, and whined like an angry cat; her hands moved up her body to touch the places where her breasts had been. Tears gathered in her sleeping eyes and leaked from beneath her lids.

### 3

#### **The second shock**

The Oath Hall was a vast domed cavity with eight sides and hanging galleries above a forest of arches. The walls shimmered with color, patterned tiles in red, blue, green. The dome itself was white and gold; it rested on scrolled, open arches, the morning sunlight streaming through them, gilded with dancing dust motes. Polished gold stairs rose to a two-level dais at the western wall; a plain, heavy chair sat on the highest level, made from what rumor said was dragon bones—the Alayjiyah's Throne. In front of the dais was a square twenty feet wide of ivory tiles in a golden matrix. On the north side of that square were three backless ivory chairs with cushions of cloth of gold; on the south side of the square were three more—set there for the Six Shiza'heyh of Yaanosin.

Formveil hiding her impatience, Hallah Myur stood behind the Shiza'heyh Kihyayti'an, Zisgade Neisser the Shadowsnake at her left—which meant she was the favored one today. She wondered vaguely what Zisgade had done to annoy Kihyayti'an this time. Quick work, but he was always doing it, eating his feet. She didn't care about favor, it was just a job and a tedious one at that—standing around and posing, reminding Kihyayti'an's hopeful heirs of the sting in the tail of ambition. Her indifference jabbed at Zisgade; he'd do anything he could to make trouble for her. She wasn't worried; if she couldn't outthink that twynt, she deserved to go down. Besides, the Guild had uncomfortable ways of dealing with treachery.

Except... She shifted uneasily. Groensacker gets wasps in his cod when he thinks about me. Could be he's hoping I'll get so antsy with this stint, I'll walk out on it. Then he could fine me some serious gelt and mark me unreliable. Viper.

She watched Zisgade a moment. He stood with his hands clasped behind him, walking the muscles in his arms and torso, his tunic shivering with their twitch. She suppressed a yawn, fingered the stonebox in her pouch. Get on with it, blump! This is *boring*. Kihyayi'an had promised his assassins a free day once the rites were done, and she wanted a game, wanted it badly.

She glanced idly up at the northern gallery, which was filling with the guests come for the Betrothal. She scowled as she saw Traccoar standing on the edge of a cluster of men; their voices came down to her in a muted grumble, the words lost in the echoes.

!Maytre! he's gone to seed for sure. Look at the goat-son wag his tail and grin like a fool.

A newcomer pushed through them and stopped beside Traccoar, a tall, faded blonde whose hair had migrated from his head to a twin-tailed beard. Big brother, looks like. So Old Goatface is finally dead. Yes, of course. He would be. It's been more than twenty years, and he was older than the hills then. This one was... She dredged through memory. Ah yes, Ardamoar the Eldest.

Naked except for a leather clout and a pectoral of seh'ki claws threaded on strands of kihgut, their oiled bodies glistening in the sunlight streaming through the dome-arches, the Ghost Drummers came clattering in, hauling their tall drums on their backs.

They set the drums by the golden stairs, climbed on the stone stools, and began beating out a heart rhythm; the boombahms filled the chamber.

In the gallery, the clot of men was breaking apart as the guests sought their seats; behind them their dependents scurried about like startled waterbugs, negotiating places to stand.

As Ardamoar lowered his long bony body into a chair, a woman emerged from the throng and joined Traccoar, who was standing directly behind his brother.

Hair like new-minted copper.

Auntee Rosamunda's face on a long Lamenoar body.

Hallah swayed, clamped her teeth on her tongue.

Garro Zivan wept when Rosalie told him, warned her to say nothing to the other Hammar. With a little luck, he said, naught will come of this and we'll be as we were. That was how her father was, never a man to swallow bitters to keep a fever off. But as the Gyoker-Zivan Hammar moved their wagons across Membruda's

Range and the months slid past, her body swelled and there was no hiding what had been done to her.

Auntee Rosamunda read the Weed Milk for her, but wouldn't say what she saw there. She emptied the bowl, shook her head. We have to leave her behind, she told Garro Zivan. Membruda will burn the wagons if he learns his blood is here.

Rosalie Zivan lived peacefully in that small mountain village where her people left her, supporting herself and her child with the box of medicines Auntee Rosamunda left with her.

One evening when Spring was new and her daughter was eighteen months and seething with curiosity and energy, Rosalie sat in deepening twilight on the doorstep of her cottage, rubbing the papery skins off a heap of flickwhittle bulbs and watching Rowanny toddle about, investigating toads and hoppers and stones and anything that caught her roving mind.

When she heard the rattle of hooves, she set her abrading cloth aside and went to snatch her daughter from the road.

Membruda's youngest son, face contorted with a hatred close to madness, rode at her, whip raised.

His brothers rode round and round her, yelling curses at her.

Her daughter was torn from her arms and thrown aside.

Her clothes were ripped off, Membruda's youngest son raped her, rolled off her, shouted his triumph, he was a man again. Cursing her, calling her dirty beast, witch, demon, bloodsucking whore, he hacked off her breasts, tossed them to one of his brothers.

After that the brothers stood in a ring about her, kicking at her, lacerating her back with their cattle whips.

Rowanny wailed. Someone, not Traccoar, but it might as well have been, said, "Shut the brat up, knock her head against a tree or something."

A bone flute played three notes over and over, the drumsounds came faster, with brushes and slides and taps weaving a complex texture through the deep resonant bahbooms. The drummers' bodies dripped sweat; their heads bobbed, muscles in their shoulders, arms, legs danced with the music of their hands.

The cursemen stamped their bone-shod feet, shook their rattles, and clashed the antlers strapped to their heads, chanting in their secret tongue. Katiang Boar-rider danced in unbalanced spirals across and around the Ivory Floor, his thin wiry legs moving in and out of the musk censers hanging on bronze chains from the bone links of his girdle, never quite touching them; the streamers of blue-white smoke circled with him, mingled with smoke from the larger censer that sat atop the bronze cage he

wore on his head.

Hallah Myur swayed with the music, flexed her toes, and began a muscle walk along her body; she had to move or she'd scream.

Zisgade was watching her. His eyes were the brown-black of strong coffee; it was always easy to tell where he was looking. !Maytre! He's smelled something. Weasel-face. I must've made more noise than I...

The Alayjiyah came in, a little round man with a sour face and thin hair stiffened with gel and swirled to a point. He was mostly robes thick with gold thread and embroidered with diamonds—robes and will; he was a hard man and dangerous. He settled himself on the dragon-bone chair, clapped his little hands, and six slave girls brought in his daughter.

The Yih Ma'yin Sa'aetinn was a cloud of fine linen, layer on layer of the translucent fabric, only her hands and feet snowing. Her hands were heavy with rings, her feet were bare and elaborately jeweled.

Hallah sighed and set herself to endure a little longer, eyes on the floor, mind going round and round as she tried to sort out what she was going to do.

#### 4

### **Tangled in the web**

Hallah Myur ran.

In the streets around the Toyaytay Gardens where the Festival was well started, crowds were thick as clotted cream; there was noise and laughter, shouts, growls, clangs, music from dozens of players clashing and competing, smells of fried meats and hot bread, of candy and coffee, of perfumes and horse droppings and sweat, bright primal colors everywhere, flags and ribbons flapping from cords strung across the streets and between windows, the sequined and embroidered holiday costumes of the revelers.

She pushed impatiently through the revelers, passed into the alleys and winding ways of Atwarima's working quarters, then she ran and ran, words beating in her head to the beat of her feet. *Mem bru da's whore my Ro wan ny Mem bru da's whore my ba by Mem bru da's whore...*

She ran until her edginess was drained away, until even the words had faded and only the shift and play of her body was left. Ran until she was exhausted and gasping.

Hallah Myur leaned on a rope stretched between bitts and watched the river eddying below her. An aepha-gull dived past her, plunged into the dirty littered water, emerged with a long skinny fish flapping wildly in its talons.

“If that’s an omen, am I the fish or the gull?” She shrugged and went looking for a tavern and a game.

Hallah Myur walked into the Seven Spinners, stepped aside to clear the doorway, smiled behind the formveil at the familiar noises, the smoke and murk, the nosebite of homebrew. Two caravanners were armwrestling by the bar; a beamdancer gyrated to a tinny out-of-tune lute; a group of men and women sat around three tables pushed together, shouting at each other in a tongue she didn’t recognize.

A tall vigorous woman with masses of blue-black hair and large but shapely arms threaded through the busy tables and stopped in front of Hallah; her green eyes snapped with disfavor as she took in the assassin’s gray and the veil. “I’m Thonsane, and this is my House. If you’re on business, no-name, take it and yourself away.”

Hallah untied the strings, pulled the veil away, and tucked it down her shirt. “Not working,” she said. “It’d take a fool to break Truce, and I hope I’m not that.” She took the box from her pouch. “By your favor, I’m looking for a game. I am Ivory cusping Silver.”

Thonsane relaxed. “By whose favor, eh?”

“Hallah Myur, Mistress.”

“Hallah Myur, working or not, you’re apt to make my patrons nervous. I’ll tuck you in an alcove... mmm... over there, I think.”

Thonsane plowed through the crowd, grabbed a snoring caravanner by his collar and belt, hauled him to the door, and dropped him on the steps outside, came striding back, waving a Pot Girl to her. She watched with a judging eye as the girl cleaned off the table, fetched a lamp, filled it with redeye oil, and lighted the floating wick. As the light brightened in the alcove, she rubbed a forefinger beside her nose. “If I can’t scare you up a better, I’ll give you a game myself, awhile on, say half an hour or so should you care to wait that long. I’m new Ivory looking to better myself. Wine, ale, or shag?”

Hallah Myur straightened her legs, slid down in the seat, cuddling the glass on her stomach, sipping at the dark brown shag whenever the glow it threw round her subsided a little.

There was a noisy surge as a mob of seamen came in and pushed toward the bar. A gap opened in the crowd, and she saw Zisgade Neisser sitting on a bench near the door; he’d shed his grays and was wearing nondescript laborer’s clothing, his long hair was stuffed up under a knitted cap, though a ragged fringe was combed forward, sweeping across his eyes. Hallah looked quickly away, grinned down at the empty glass.



Another glass of shag and a pewter tankard in one hand, the other closed on the shoulder of a smallish man she urged along ahead of her, Thonsane came pushing through the crowd. The man's face was an assemblage of stains and bruises, wrinkles folded in on wrinkles, as if it has been lived in for several lifetimes, none of them easy, a hammered-thin, sun-faded, trouble-worn copy of her teacher.

Thonsane set the glass in front of Hallah, the pewter tankard across the table from her. "Aezel. Gold," she said. "Hallah Myur. Talk. Game or not, whatever's your choice." Shouting broke out across the room.

Muttering curses, Thonsane strode off, elbowing through the gathering spectators.

Aezel slid along the bench, gulped at the wine, set the tankard down. "Who taught you, Hallah Myur?" His voice was slow, soft, with an accent she couldn't place, a hint of a hit in the words.

She opened the chess box out into the chessboard, set aside the cubbies with the stones, said, "Tarammen tai Peli, who earned his Mastery in Klymmavar from Ruska tyan ta Marssa, who earned hers from Zongari of Prena, who earned his from Andan Jarna." She smiled, her second genuine smile since she'd come to Atwarima. "I can go on for another half hour with the pedigree. Tarammen tai made sure I knew it. For three years I had to recite the list for him before he'd lift a stone." She touched the board with her fingertips, moved it across the table so he could see it. "The names are graved in the ivory squares, there's his"— she reached across the table, touched the tip of her forefinger to the penultimate name, then slid her finger to the last—"and that's mine; he passed the set to me as a Death Gift."

Aezel touched the ancient wood and the yellowed ivory with gentle fingers. "A fine thing," he said, pleasure husking his soft voice. He pushed the board into the middle of the table so both could reach it without straining, then he sat back, laced his fingers across his hard little paunch and began a litany of his own Masterline.

When he finished, they set up the game and began.

At first she was too aware of the noise around her, of the other customers drifting over to watch, of Zisgade moving in, his coffee eyes boring into her, of the circling memories. But as the game went on, all that vanished and she saw nothing but the stones and their patterning. Twice before she'd tipped into a state where her stones moved in a wave that built and built, sweeping the other stones away before them, but she'd never felt it so strongly as now.

It was not a slow game; there were no long, labored pauses on either side. Aezel was her match and more, a Gold in truth, keeping pace with her, doing all he could to check the wave and turn it aside.

And he did it. Her wave beat against his wall and fell away.

She'd overwhelmed him almost everywhere, yet he managed to preserve a handful of stones and herd them into the rare and powerful pattern called the Gorfellay, the ultimate defense of an ultimate Master.

Hallah Myur rubbed at her back and sighed; she could go on playing, hoping to catch him in a mistake, but the mistake would most likely be hers. She lifted her hand, let it fall. "Draw?"

"Agreed." He went limp, yawned, lay back with his eyes closed, exhausted but content.

Hallah looked around. The watchers that had collected about the alcove were scattering, stretching, yawning, wandering toward the bar, talking avidly about the game. Zisgade was gone; no doubt he left when he saw the game was going to last awhile. Stone-chess gave him hives, he said; he hated the times when Kihyayti'an made him watch the play. She began tucking the stones into their cubbies. "Hah-hey," she said. "I loathe crowds."

"Ah." Aezel sucked up the last of his wine, raised a shaggy brow. When Hallah nodded, he summoned a Pot Girl to refill the tankard. When she'd gone, he tapped his thumbnail against the pewter in a monotonous clack clack clack clack...

Hallah Myur shuddered. "Stop that, will you?"

"You want something."

She scowled at him. His eyes had an odd shine to them, a fugitive green phosphor. "Another game," she said warily. "By your favor, gold Aezel."

"That's not it."

"I don't understand."

"I offer a trade, silver Hallah. What you want for what I need." His thumbnail tap tap tapped against the pewter.

She leaned forward, her eyes on the thumb then lifting to meet his. She said nothing, but it was clear enough that Curse Truce or not he was going to lose that thumb if he kept on.

He flattened his hand on the table. "Will you trade?"

"Swear faith."

"By Koaysithe, I..."

"No! Swear by Stone."

"Why not." He laid his hand palm down on the ancient chess box. "I swear by Stone and my Master's Grave, what I say is true, what I say I do." He took his

hand back, shifted his wrinkles in another smile. “Well, silver Hallah?”

“Why not.” Whatever she did, she was up to her neck in carrion with the crows coming at her. “I have a daughter.” To her annoyance, her eyes stung and her jaw started to tremble. She took a gulp of shag, set the glass down with a thump. “I lost her. Thought she was dead. She wasn’t even two yet. I saw her today. At the Swearing. I want to know if she’s happy... no... that’s not right... if she’s...” She rubbed her thumb along the heavy glass, but didn’t drink this time; things were ragged enough. “I need to know without... intruding... I need to know... because...” She wiped at her mouth with a shaking hand and finished in a rush. “Because how she is, that’s the fulcrum my future turns on, do you understand?”

“Yes.” He sipped at the wine, wrapped his hands around the tankard. “I can do that. I can show you your daughter’s state.”

“What’s the price?”

“You.”

“My soul?”

He laughed, a deep rumbling chuckle. His eyes flattened, and his hooky nose grew more prominent. “A shapeless drift of smoke? I want you. Hands and head.”

“There’s the Truce.”

“We know. That’s not it.”

“We?”

He lifted a hand, let it fall.

“Stone Oath binds you.” Hallah slid along the bench until she was near the end. “Only you.”

“I and we”—he waggled his hand—“same thing. Up to you. Yes or no?”

She was tired. That was bad. She got impatient and reckless when she was tired. Take it slow, she told herself. A step at a time. “One for one,” she said finally. “Find out for me how my daughter’s doing, and I’ll cede you one service—your call. We can go on from there.”

“Done.”

## 5

### **The last strands of the snare**

Thonsane appeared at the alcove, waited without a word until they slid from the booth, then led them up the stairs at the end of the bar and into what at first seemed an ordinary bedroom, perhaps a little cleaner than most, lit by a single candle

on a battered table beside the bed.

When Thonsane pulled the door shut, the room changed.

The candle vanished. Points of light exploded about the dark undefined space, expanded into fist-sized globes that swam and bobbed about, clustering and moving apart like fireflies on a summer evening.

The walls were gone; trees marched to infinity on every side, merging in the distance into a murmuring darkness. A stream appeared from near where the door had been, spread into a pool, narrowed again and meandered on to vanish under the trees. Rowan trees bent over the pool, dropping their blossoms onto the quiet water.

There was the smell of woodlands, of grass and leaves and damp earth, punctuated by sharp peaks of pine and oak.

Aezel crouched on a hummock of grass, a wide shallow drum on his hairy thighs; brown-brown brindle hair, stiff, straight, and thick covered him from just below his ribs to the split hooves where his boots had been. He tapped at the drum with nails like claws and drew an odd, whispery rattle from the parchment head.

Thonsane laughed; it was a wild, eerie sound, deep-throated, frightening, and disconcertingly infectious.

Hallah turned.

Like Aezel, Thonsane had shed her clothes. Her hair was loose, long black tresses shifting about her body as she moved. Wide curving horns spread from her temples, alabaster horns glowing like the crescent moon.

“Look into the pool and think of her,” Thonsane said, her voice a braiding of echoes.

Hallah shivered. They were showing her too much. She felt trapped. Stone Oath, that was her anchor, her one point of stability, and she clung to it as she took the two steps to reach the water. She was going to kneel, changed her mind, and squatted.

Something like a breeze brushed past her face and blew ripples on the pond, sending the rowan flowers scooting to the far bank. The water steadied, smoothed into a mirror.

She saw a bedroom with narrow windows set high in the walls and alabaster lamps sending out soft yellow light.

A woman was stretched out on a divan, propped up by pillows. She was sipping from a heavy, opaque glass, her face flushed, her coppery hair straggling loose from the elaborate braided crown she'd worn to the Oath Swearing. When the glass was empty, she fumbled among the pillows, pulled out a square bottle, and

filled it again, tilting the bottle and shaking it to get out the last drops. She gulped at the liquid, shuddered, coughed, went back to sipping.

A door opened and a girl came in, a tall, tender girl still on the child's side of puberty, with red-gold hair fairer than the woman's hanging down past her waist.

Hallah gasped, closed her hands into fists. Her daughter's daughter. !Maytre!

The girl stopped, clamped her wide mouth into a grim line as she saw Rowanna. "You promised," she said, her voice trembling, angry. "You said you wouldn't. He'll do it, you know he will. You want to get put out the door?"

Rowanna's hand started shaking, spilling the liquor on her hand. She set the glass on the table beside the divan, spilling more in the process. "You—" she cleared her throat, wiped her mouth—"you don't understand, Bree. Baby..." She started crying, held out her hand. "Baby, he's going to..." The girl didn't move, so she pulled her hand back, got clumsily to her feet, and stood swaying. "He's sold you, Briony."

"What?"

"He told me this morning. He dangled you on the ship, and the Vramheir took the bait. The Bridegroom." She laughed unsteadily. "Don't you think that's funny, Bree? All the way from the Pearl Isles to meet his bride, and he picks up a trinket for himself on the way."

The breeze blew again and broke the mirror.

A moment later the bedroom was back. Aezel was sitting on the bed looking tired and sleepy, Thonsane was standing with her arms folded, her back against the door. Hallah Myur got to her feet.

Aezel cleared his throat. "Was it enough?"

"Yes. What do you want from me?"

He smiled, the wrinkles of his face spreading and sliding back. "We can look into the Toyaytay if we're careful, but we can't get past the Curse." He shrugged, spread his hands. "And there's no one we could trust who's inside right now. We want you to carry something to the Yih Ma'yin Sa'aetinn."

"Is she apt to scream at shadows?"

"No. She has asked a question. She awaits an answer."

"Do you have a plan of the Toyaytay or must I jump blind?"

"We have. You'll see it."

I'm a fly in a spider's web, she thought, and I can see only a little of it. I don't

like this. Do I have a choice? No. “One for one,” she said aloud. “That was a joke, wasn’t it. !Maytre! I’m a fool. Let it be done. Hands and head. If you get my daughter out of there, and my daughter’s daughter, and swear to keep them safe and in comfort, I swear by Stone I will serve you till my life’s end.”

“And if we ask you to do something you don’t like?”

Hallah laughed. It was a hard unhappy sound. “Considering how I’ve earned my bread, there’s not much I find beyond me. Distasteful, yes, impossible no.” She moved impatiently, clasped her hands behind her. “I’m not a puppet to dance to your strings; if you want work done well, you’ll let me do it my way. Set me goals and turn me loose.”

“There might be complexities that can’t be explained, complexities that require a certain style of act.”

“Tchah! You couldn’t choose a needle to pry up a stone. Use me right and the job is done, wrong and I break and ruin the work.”

“Yes. I see. Speaking of ruin, you have a choice before you, Hallah Myur. Pay Membruda’s Son for what he’s done to you or bring your daughter out. You can’t do both.” He held up his hand to stop her protest. “We aren’t being arbitrary; it’s a matter of what we can do, not what we want.”

Hallah stared past him at the dull gray wall, shadows from the candle dancing on it. “Membruda’s son,” she said softly. “As a matter of abstract justice, the blat needs his throat cut.” She shook her head, wiped her hands down her sides. “He’s gas on the belly; one fart and he’s gone.” She managed a small smile. “My daughter’s more important. So. Show me the plan of the Toyaytay and let’s get started.”

## 6

### The first delivery

Feltsoled busks groping for a toehold, Hallah Myur wriggled backward through the small window over her cot. She found one of the cracks between the courses of stone she’d seen from the outside, worked the rest of her clear, and started moving cautiously along the wall.

Clouds were thickening across the face of the moon, and she could smell damp on the air; she spent a thought on hoping it wouldn’t rain until she got down, then concentrated on working around the nearest corner and up the turret wall. When she reached the roof, she rolled over the parapet and went swiftly along it, bent over to keep her head from showing, until she came to the lacy iron spires that marked the family gardens of the Alayjiyah.

She pulled on her leather palms, caught hold of the top crossbar, and swung over, then went cautiously down the wall, shifting from crevice to crevice, dropping

the last dozen feet into the soft loam of a flower bed. She scratched the earth over the marks of her busks, rearranged the flowers, then flowed along the wall until she reached a window.

“I mean no harm to anyone within,” she whispered before she touched it. “I am only a messenger.”

Say that to yourself and to the air, Aezel told her. Over and over. And believe it. And the Curse will slumber while you work.

A slide and wiggle of a thin blade took care of the catch; she eased the casement open and slipped inside. For several breaths she stood listening intently while her eyes adjusted to the increased darkness. No problem. Aezel was right. Once she was past the outer walls of the Toyaytay, there wasn't much security to worry about. Except the Curse. Always excepting the Curse. She crossed the room, a sewing room the plan called it, charging the blowpipe with black kumunda dust as she moved.

“I mean no harm,” she whispered to the dark. “I am only a messenger.”

She eased the door open a hair and pressed the bulb. A moment later she heard a muted thump. She nodded, pressed filters into her nostrils, and left the room.

She stepped over the last guard, tried the door.

Locked.

She ran her fingers around the latch, located the lock plate—and the key protruding from it. Key on the outside. !Maytre! Joyful betrothal, this. I begin to smell a pattern. She turned the key and eased the door open, slipped inside, collapsing the blowpipe and sliding it into a pocket.

The Yih Ma' yin's breathing came soft and steady from behind curtains yellowed by the glowcandles on the bedstead. Her busks soundless on the stone floor, Hallah hurried across the room, pushed aside the bed curtains, and bent over the sleeping girl.

The Yih Ma' yin had her father's nose, which was not a blessing, but she'd found the rest of her bones in another place; and while she wasn't pretty, Hallah suspected she was attractive enough when she was awake. She slept clenched in a knot. Stubborn, angry maiden, ready to run from a wedding she didn't want. Hallah pressed her palm over the girl's mouth, pinched her earlobe. “Wake up,” she whispered. “I'm sent by friends. You know who.”

The Yih Ma' yin's eyes snapped open, and she managed a nod, her head moving under Hallah's hand.

“Don't say anything, just listen.” Hallah took her hand away, peeled the

spelled khihy leaves from the small white pebble Aezel had given her. “Put this in your mouth and walk out. No one will follow you. The taste’s the guide. Sweet means you’re on trail, sour means you’ve strayed. It’ll take you where you want to go.” She set the pebble in the Yih Ma’yin’s hand, folded her fingers over it. “Count twenty after I’m gone. Safer for you that way, less chance guards or a curseman will light on you by accident. Oh yeah, here’s your door key.” The Yih Ma’yin’s eyes glinted as Hallah dropped it on the bed. “Lock the door and leave the key in it, maybe they’ll think you’re still inside.”

Hallah Myur left, pulling out the sections of the blowpipe as she went, chanting Aezel’s litany under her breath: I mean no harm, I am only a messenger. Around the litany she thought: It’s going to be one holy mess when they find her among the missing. !Maytre! And on my head. Weasel face’ll make sure of that.

A guard stood at the entrance to the GuestHouse, but a puff of kumunda dust sent him folding gently to the floor.

“I mean no harm, I am only a messenger.”

Hallah Myur hauled him up, propped him against the wall, his iron-bound batoule laid across his thighs. With a little luck, he’d wake confused and keep quiet about his lapse; guards who slept on duty got nine stripes from the kou and swelled like blowfish from the nettle soup the lash was soaked in. She’d seen it often enough. Kihyayti’an was fond of applying kou discipline to anyone who annoyed him.

She slipped inside, moved swiftly and silently through the maze of halls until she reached the suite where the Membrudas were staying. The lamps had burned low, some of them were out in this back-of-behind area of the GuestHouse, and there were no Toyaytay servants about. The guests out here were barely important enough to be invited; they certainly weren’t going to be cosseted at the Alayjiyah’s expense.

Her mouth twitched into a smile as she knelt and inspected the lock. Membruda’s Sons must be sore as snag teeth at treatment like this. “I mean no harm, I am only a messenger.” She inserted a pick into the lock and began feeling for the wards.

When she was in, she stood for a dozen breaths with her eyes closed to regain her nightsight, then went looking for her daughter and her daughter’s daughter.

## 7

### **The second delivery**

Briony lay curled up on a pallet in a cramped cubicle with three serving maids; she slept like a small neat kitten, her mouth opening and closing in tiny sucking movements, her hands kneading at the pallet.



Hallah edged past the maids and knelt beside the child. “I mean no harm, I am only a messenger.” Once again she peeled a pebble—a gray one striped with black—from its khihy leaves, then slipped it into Briony’s mouth, easing it under her tongue. “Come,” she murmured. “Come away, come away, baby.” She shivered as she took Briony’s hand. It was small and hot and a little sticky. She pushed away the things it made her feel and eased the spelled child onto her feet, led her out the door.

It will be as if they walk in their sleep, Aezel said; keep them calm, talk to them as you would a fractious horse, and they’ll follow wherever you lead. But be quick about it. These ca’o’in aren’t like the Yin Ma’-yin’s ca’o. They could trip alarms if the cursemen are awake enough. So hurry.

“Wait,” she murmured when she reached Membruda’s bedroom. “Wait until I call you, Briony.”

“I mean no harm, I am only a messenger.” She peeled the leaves from the last pebble, pushed it into her daughter’s mouth, wrinkling her nose at the stink of black rum. “Come,” she whispered. “Come away, baby. Follow and be free.”

She stepped back, watched Rowanna crawl clumsily from the bed. No clothes. !Maytre! It only needed that. “Stay, baby,” she said. “Stand there while I...”

Ardamoar grunted, mumbled, and groped about for Rowanna, not awake yet, but close...

Hallah ran on her toes around the bed, laid her sap neatly alongside his head, muttering, “I mean no harm, I am only a messenger.” He grunted again, went limp. Hastily she thrust her fingers under his jaw, relaxed as she felt the pulse beating strongly. “Wait. Be quiet. No need to fuss.” She darted around the bed again, heading for a chest by the door and almost tripped as her foot caught in a pool of cloth. She swept the thing up, shook it out. Bedrobe. Thick wool and dark. No wonder I didn’t notice it. !Maytre! it’s amateur time...

Rowanna was more than three spans taller than she, but she got the robe over her daughter’s head, her arms in the sleeves, and tugged her down so she could tie the lacings at the neck, her fingers faltering as memories fought to surface. She forced them down and finished the job. “I mean no harm,” she murmured again, “I am only a messenger. Good. You’ll do for now. Come, baby, come, follow me, come, sweetee, Mama’s going to take you home...”

There was tension in the air as she tolled the two through the hallways of the GuestHouse. The Curse was stirring, they were an irritant inside it. She hurried as much as she dared, murmured words flowing in a muted stream to draw the sleepers after her.

Yawning and scratching her head, a maid stepped into the hall just as Hallah came ghosting along. The girl gaped, started to yell, collapsed in a heap on the floor as Hallah used the sap again.

Witnesses everywhere! !Maytre's Nails! even when I was a greenling, I never laid a trail like this.

"As soon as you're out," Aezel had said, "go straight east through the Gardens until you reach the river. We'll be waiting for you there."

"Come, babies, come, steady now, step and step, one foot swings, the other follows, come babies come..." Hallah Myur had no magic in her, only dry precision and an obsession with detail, but it didn't take magic to smell the Curse or feel it seeking them. A long time ago, just after she'd started Guild training, she'd been trapped underground with a huge cave spider, white as death and blind. She'd never forgot the way it turned and turned on those hideous white legs, searching for her.

They moved through the heavy, oscillating shadow beneath the trees, shadow broken by the tall lamps set at intervals throughout the Garden. "Come along, babies," Hallah murmured. "Quiet and quick, come along, babies, come ah come..."

The pressure from the Curse grew stronger; the air was thick with the stink of threat. The bubble was close to popping. Any minute, something could happen...

Hallah Myur rounded a large thorny bush, whipped up the blowpipe, and puffed the black dust at the curseman before he got his bones lifted; in almost the same move, she flung a waxy breakstone at his middle. It caught him in the diaphragm, knocked the wind out of him, forced him to breathe in the dust.

The Curse twanged.

Hallah swore and dropped to her knees as a sudden gust of wind blew the cloud of dust back at her. She switched ends and scabbled for Rowanna, but she was too late. Her daughter got a whiff of dust and folded gracefully to the grass. Briony was off to one side and farther away; the backblow missed her.

The twanging increased enormously, the soundless sound hammered at Hallah. Briony trembled, blinked blind, blank eyes. She started away, hands groping before her.

The drums in the drum tower began sounding. Men were shouting; there was the clank of metal on metal.

"!Maytre!" Hallah ran after the girl, brought her back to Rowanna's limp body. "Stay there." She caught hold of Rowanna's wrists, hauled her up until she was sitting. Grunting and straining, she got her daughter over her shoulder and staggered to her feet. She bent her knees, straightened, bouncing her daughter on her shoulders, shifting the weight to a marginally better balance. "Come along, baby," she sang, and reached for the child's hand. "Come, baby, come with Mama and Gramma, come baby, come... gods, daughter, you weigh a ton, come, baby, come, easier to carry you last time we were together, come, baby, come, I wish, I don't know what I wish, come, baby, come, quiet and quick, sweet and saucy, come,

baby, come...”

The smell of the garden changed to the wild forest odors she remembered from the tavern bedroom. Grey-white forms flitted through the trees; elongated and eerie, they circled around her. She kept moving and tried to ignore them.

The drums grew muted, all sounds were muted, the trees turned translucent and insubstantial; she might have been moving through a dream.

Her knees hurt, her back hurt, she was straining for breath, sweat dripped into her eyes, and the dream went on and on; she didn't know how long, time was elsewhere.

Aezel stepped through the ring of shades. He lifted Rowanna from Hallah's shoulder, cradled her in his arms, her red hair like a fall of fire. He smiled. "It's only a few steps more."

## 8

### **Fly on a long leash**

The river flowed around the sandy spit, silent and powerful, black ink in the clouded moonlight. A single oak leaned out over the water, roots exposed, the earth washed away on the riverside. Rowanna lay on the sand; Briony stood beside her.

The moonwraiths wavered in the shadow of other trees, nervous pillars of mist, their features smudges of gray on curdled white.

Aezel and Thonsane stood together, hand in hand, spoke together. "Hallah Myur, you must be behind us. What comes is not for you."

Weary in body and mind, Hallah walked into the shadow of the oak. She lowered herself onto one of the roots, sat with her hands on her thighs, waiting for the thing to be finished.

Their braided voices riding on the rising/falling drone of the moonwraiths' *hum*, Aezel/Thonsane intoned, "You who walk the Dark Ways, I and I are the Opener of Doors, I and I call to you, O Sulkahayn, O Pathspinner. Open the GhostWay. I and I call to you. Show the DarkPath to this mother and child."

A knot of darkness deeper and blacker than the night expanded into a tall oval, and a path black on black shone without light.

Hallah shivered as Rowanna rose to her feet and with Briony turned to face the Door.

"The Way is open," Aezel/Thonsane sang. "Go into it."

Rowanna and Briony stepped into the dark and glided away.

Hallah watched, thumb rubbing nervously across her fingers; it seemed to her they took only a single step, then they were out the far side, standing on a mountain slope in early morning sunlight, looking down into a valley filled with springtime. A small neat village was tucked into a bend of a blue, bouncing river winding through the valley. Smoke rose from the chimneys, and children were bringing in cows for the morning milking.

A tall woman stepped from behind a tree, held out her hand to Rowanna, spoke. Hallah couldn't hear the words, but she could see Briony smiling.

The Dark Way closed.

The wraiths faded into the trees.

Thonsane left without speaking.

Aezel came to squat beside her. "Is it well-done, Hallah Myur?"

"I suppose. They'll be cared for?"

"Yes. Did you want to go with them?"

"No. What I am, I'm not ashamed of it, but..." She shook her head. "What now?"

"There's a ship waiting out there"—he nodded at the river—"it's sending a boat for you. It'll take you to a city called Gorjo Xil. Wait there till we call you to service."

She thought briefly about asking him why he and his had worked to bring war on this land—because it would be war when the Vramheir of the Pearl Isles found his bride had run out on him—but she was too tired to care. "The Guild will be hunting me."

"There's gold waiting on ship; use it to dig yourself a hole."

Wearily she shook her head. "No hole would be deep enough. It'll take them awhile to sort things out, so I should be safe for a month or two. After that, I'll have to keep moving."

"We'll work that out." He touched her arm, stood. "The boat's here. It's time to go. Farewell, silver Hallah. We'll play again."

"I'd like that, gold Aezel." She gathered herself, stood without touching the hand he held out, and walked down the sand to the boat with its dark oarsmen. Before she waded over to it, she turned, saluted him. "Farewell and take care," she called. "I will win one of those games. One day."