

The Inheritance

Robin Hobb

IT WAS IN MY GRANDMOTHER'S jewel box. I found it after she died. Perhaps jewel box is too fine a name to give to the plain wooden cask that held so little. There was a silver ring with the stone long prised from the setting, sold to pay family debts no doubt. I wondered why she had not sold it whole. There were two necklaces, one of garnets and another of polished jasper. At the bottom, wrapped in layer upon layer of linen, was the pendant.

It was a lovely carving of a woman's face. She looked aristocratic, yet merry, and I recognized in her features some of my own. I wondered which of my female ancestors she was, and why someone had taken such care to make so delicate a carving from such an ugly piece of wood. It was grey and checked with age, and weighed unnaturally heavy in my hand as I examined it. The chain it was fixed to was fine silver, however. I thought it might be worn alone if the pendant could be removed. I heard a footstep in the hall outside her bedroom, and hastily slipped the chain about my neck. The cameo hung heavy between my breasts, concealed by my blouse.

My cousin Tetlia stood suddenly in the doorway. 'What do you have there?' she demanded.

‘Nothing,’ I told her, and hastily set the box back on Grandmother’s chest.

She swept into the room and snatched it up, opened it and dumped the necklaces into her hand. ‘Nice,’ she said, holding up the jasper one. My heart sank, for I had liked it best of the three. ‘I’m eldest of the grand-daughters,’ she pointed out smugly, and slipped it over her head. She weighed the garnets in her hand. ‘And my sister Coreth comes next. This is for her.’ Her lips twisted in a smile as she tossed me the despoiled ring. ‘For you, Cerise. Not much of an inheritance, but she did feed and clothe you for the last two years, and kept you in a house that long ago should have come to my father. That is more than she ever did for my sister and me.’

‘I lived here with her. I looked after her. When her hands twisted so that she couldn’t use them anymore, I bathed her and dressed her and fed her...’ My hidden anger pushed the words stiffly out.

Tetlia waved my words away contemptuously. ‘And we all warned you that you’d get nothing for it. She burned through her own family fortune when she was a girl, Cerise. Everyone knows that if my grandfather had not married her, she’d have starved in the streets. And my father has been good enough to let her live out her life in a house that should have come to him when his father died. Now she’s gone, and the house and land revert to my father. That’s life.’ She tossed the plundered casket onto my grandmother’s stripped bed and left the room.

‘I loved her,’ I said quietly into the stillness. Rage burned bright in me for an instant. It was an old family dispute. Her father was the son of Grandfather’s first wife, and the rightful heir to all, as they so constantly reminded me. It counted for nothing with them that my grandmother had raised their father as if he were her own child. It scalded me that Tetlia would claim my grandmother as kin for the sake of being entitled to her jewellery, but deny that I had any right to share the family wealth. For a second I clutched that anger to me. Then, as if I could feel my grandmother’s gentle hand on my shoulder, I let the

strength of my just wrath leak away from me. 'Useless to argue,' I told myself. In my grandmother's looking-glass I saw the same defeated resignation I had so often seen in her eyes. 'It's not worth fighting for,' she had told me so often. 'Scandal and strife serve no purpose. Let it go, Cerise. Let it go.' I looked at the gaping ring in my hand, and then slipped it onto my finger. It fit as if made for me. Somehow, it seemed an appropriate inheritance.

I left the room and went to my own chamber to pack. It did not take long. I had one set of clothes besides my own, and her old Trader's robe of soft saffron. I hesitated before I put it in my rucksack. I had never seen her wear it. Once I had asked her about that only unused garment in her chest. She had shaken her head. 'I don't know why I kept it. It has nothing to do with my life any more. In Bingtown, Trader families wear them when they go to the Traders' Council to vote on Trader matters. Saffron was my family's colour, the Lantis family. But I gave all that up years ago.'

I fingered the soft wool. It was cut in an archaic style, but the wool would be warm, I told myself. Besides, I had no intention of leaving it for my cousins. Now that my grandmother was dead, her little house on the seacliffs and the sheep pastures behind it would go to my uncle. And I, the sole daughter of her daughter, would have to make my own way in the world. My uncle had scowled at me when I had told him last night that I had nowhere to go, and asked his leave to stay on for a week.

He replied heavily, 'The old woman was dying for two years, Cerise. If, in two years, you couldn't make a plan for your future, you won't do it in a week. We need this house, and it's lawfully mine. I'm sorry, but you'll have to go.'

So I went, but not far. Hetta, the shepherd's wife took me in for the night. They were as angry with my uncle as I was, for he had already announced to them that he was raising their rent. In all the years that they had been my grandmother's tenants, she had never raised their rent. Hetta was older than I, but that had never kept us

from being good friends. She had two small children and was big with her third. She was glad to offer me a bed by the fire and a hot supper in exchange for help with her chores, 'for as long as you want.' I tidied the house as we talked, while she was relieved to sit down, put her feet up and put the last stitches into a quilt. I showed her both my ring and my pendant and chain. She exclaimed at the sight of the pendant and pushed it away from her.

'The chain will bring you some coin, and maybe the empty ring. But that pendant is an evil thing. I'd get rid of it if I were you. Throw it in the sea. It's wizardwood, the stuff a liveship is made from. I wouldn't wear it next to my skin for the world.'

I picked up the pendant and looked at it more closely. In the candlelight, I could see faint colours on it, as if it had once been painted but had faded. The grain of the wood seemed finer, the features of the face more distinct than I recalled. 'Why is it evil?' I demanded of Hetta. 'Liveships aren't evil. Their figureheads come to life and talk and guide the boat on its way. They're magic, but I've never heard them called evil.'

Hetta shook her head stubbornly. 'It's Rain Wild magic, and all know no good ever came down the Rain Wild River. A lot of folk say that that's where the Blood Plague came from. Leave magic like that to those Trader folk who are born to it. It's not for you and me. It's bound to bring you bad luck, Cerise, same as it brought your grandmother. Get rid of it.'

'She came from Trader stock,' I reply stoutly. 'Maybe that's how it came to Grandma. Maybe she inherited from the days when we were Traders.'

Hetta pursed her mouth in disapproval as I put the chain back around my neck. I heard Hetta's husband at the door and hastily slipped the pendant inside my shirt again. I'd always liked Hetta, but her husband made me edgy.

Tonight was no exception. He grinned to see me there, and grinned broader when Hetta said she'd invited me to stay the night.

'You're always welcome here, Cerise, for as long as you want to stay. There's many a wifely chore that Hetta hasn't been able to do for a time. You could take them on for room and board here.'

I smiled stiffly as I shook my head. 'Thank you all the same, but I think I need to find a future for myself. I think I'll go to Bingtown and see what work I can find there.'

'Bingtown!' Hetta was horrified. 'That den of vice? Stay in the country, girl, where folks have hearts. No one will treat you well in the city.'

'Stay,' her husband urged me. His eyes decided me as he declared, 'Live here, and I'll treat you just like one of my own.'

And that night, he was as good as his word. As I slept on the hearth, I heard the scuff of his big bare feet as he came into the room. His children slept in the loft, and Hetta in their small bedchamber. In the past, he had done no more than stroke my buttock as I passed him, or casually brush my breast with the back of his hand as he reached past me, as if it were an accident. But I had never slept the night in his cottage. I smelled his sweat as he hunkered down beside me. 'Cerise?' he whispered in the darkness. I kept my eyes shut and pretended to be asleep. My heart was hammering as I felt him lift the corner of the blanket Hetta had given me. His big hand came to rest on the angle of my neck. I gritted my teeth but could do no more than that. Useless to resist. Hetta and the children might wake, and then what would I say? I tried to be as stoic as my long-enduring grandmother. Let him touch me. If I refused to wake, surely he would leave me alone.

'Cerise, honey;' he whispered again, inching his fingers along my flesh.

'Faithless man!' a whisper answered him. Every muscle in my body tightened, for it seemed to come from my own throat. 'Touch me, and I'll rake your face with scratches that Hetta won't ignore.'

He jerked his hand back from me as if scalded, so startled that he sat down hard on the floor behind me. I lay still, frozen in silent terror.

‘And that’s how you’d pay back my hospitality, is it? Go to Bingtown, then, you little baggage. There the men will take what they want of you, and not offer you a roof nor a bed in exchange for it.’

I said nothing, fearing his words were true. I heard him get to his feet and then shuffle back to his marriage bed. I lay still and sleepless the rest of the night, trying to pretend that I had said those words. The pendant lay against my skin like cold toad; I feared to touch it to remove it.

I left the next morning, though Hetta near wept as she urged me to stay. All my possessions still made a light load. Bingtown was only two days away by foot, but even so, I’d only been there twice in my life. Both times, I had gone with my parents. My father had carried me sometimes on his shoulder, and my mother had cooked food for us at night. But they were both long gone. Now I walked the road alone, and my heart pounded fearfully at the sight of every passing traveller. Even when I was alone, fear rode with me, dangling from the necklace about my neck.

That night I left the road, to unroll my blanket in the lee of some rocks. There were no trees for shelter, no friendly nearby stream, only a hillside of lichen-sided boulders and scrubby brush. Hetta had given me a little sack of meal-cakes to last me on my way. I was too frightened of thieves to build a fire that might draw them, so as the westering sun stole the colours from the day, I huddled in my blanket and nibbled on one of my meal-cakes.

‘A fine beginning to my new life,’ I muttered when the last dry crumbs of the cake were gone.

‘No worse than what other women of your line have faced,’ whispered a voice. It came from my shirtfront. In an instant, I had snatched off chain and pendant and flung it from me. It caught on a bush and hung there, silver chain glinting in the last of the sunset. The dangling pendant came to rest facing me. Even in the fading light, I could see that it had taken on lifelike colours. It raised tiny eyebrows at me in disdain. ‘It’s a foolish choice you’re making, girl,’ it warned me.

‘Throw me away, and you throw away your inheritance. Just as your grandmother did.’ Frightened as I was, the small voice was so like my grandmother’s that I could not ignore it. ‘What are you?’ I demanded.

‘Oh, come,’ the pendant exclaimed in disdain. ‘I am exactly what you see and know me to be. Let us not waste time on foolishness.’

‘You were grey and still when I took you from Grandmother’s jewellery box.’

‘She had not worn me for many a year. She put me aside, just as she put aside the rest of her life. But you have revived me. You are young and your anma rushes strong as your blood through your veins.’

The pendant had a tiny voice, and despite my fear, I drew closer to hear its words. The eyes that met mine held kindly amusement. A smile bent the mouth. ‘What are you afraid of?’ she demanded. ‘For generations I have been in your family, passed down from mother to daughter. With me comes all the wisdom of your line. You were wise enough to steal me. Are you so foolish that you will fear your fortune now that it is in your hands?’

‘You’re magic,’ I said. ‘You’re alive.’

‘I am. And so are you, if you would bother to find it in yourself. It’s part of your inheritance, and if you are wise, it will be the first part you reclaim.’

‘My inheritance?’ I asked quietly.

The little eyes narrowed. ‘What goes with the empty ring that you wear: that is your inheritance. As you have donned both it and me, I suggest that you reclaim all that went with it. All that your grandmother Aubretia possessed before she chose to set us aside and live quietly.’

It was growing darker. Strange as may be, the little carved face seemed like a companion in the night. I took up the pendant and held the carved face closer to my own so I could see it. ‘Tell me,’ I begged. ‘For all the years that I lived with my grandmother and cared for her, I know little of her past.’

‘Well.’ The small dark eyes, so like my own, flitted about consideringly. ‘Where shall I begin? Tell me what you do know of her.’

I cast my mind back. ‘She told me little. Mostly I have guessed. I think that when she was very small, her family was wealthy. She often warned me against trusting handsome young men. While I lived with her, she would not permit anyone to court me. So I think that-’

‘You think that her heart was broken when she was young. And you are correct. Aubretia did grow up in a family that had substance if not real wealth. Her father died when she was young. The Lantis family had little wealth save their name but her mother was wise, and set aside an inheritance for her youngest daughter. It was her intention that her child need never marry for wealth, only for love. I told them I did not see why the two could not go hand in hand, but they both dismissed it as a jest. When your great-grandmother was on her deathbed, she passed me to her daughter. And she left this world in peace, knowing she has passed on both worldly wealth and a secret counsellor to Aubretia.’

I tugged my blanket closer around my shoulders and leaned back against the largest rock. It still held some small heat from the day. I drew my knees up and set the pendant upon them to listen to her tale. Night crept closer around us.

‘For a time, she lived wisely and well. Then she met a young man, a lovely young man. He was new to Bingtown, come to the great trading city to make his fortune. Howarth was a younger son, with no fortune to his name but rich in ambition. Aubretia would have married him a day after she met him, but he would not take her so. ‘When I have made a fortune of my own, then I will claim you as a bride. I will not have folk say I wed you for your money.’ And so Howarth courted her with bouquets of simple wayside flowers, and sat in her house before her fire and told her daily of how hard he struggled to wrest out a living as a clerk in a mercantile. He often scoffed at the fellow who owned the store where he worked, for he said the man had no imagination in his dealings, and that he might easily be twice as

successful if he had but a bit of daring and imagination. Howarth planned that as soon as he had money enough to finance it, he would go on a trading journey to far Jamaillia, and bring back fine goods such as all Bingtown would clamour to buy. On his dreams were your grandmother's dreams founded.

'But her dreams and his were a long time in coming true. Your grandmother's lover saved his coins, true, but Howarth no sooner had one to stack upon two than he had to spend it for new boots or a winter cloak. Your grandmother despaired that he would ever wed her. She begged him to marry her, saying she did not care if he was penniless, that with his job her inheritance would be sufficient for them both. But again he refused, saying he would not wed until he had built a fortune of his own.'

The pendant fell silent for a time, the small face gone pensive. I waited.

The small face pursed its lips in disapproval. 'Then Aubretia had an idea. I warned her against it. In vain, I tried to persuade her to let this young man go his own way, but she would not listen. She went to Howarth and offered him money. He could take her money off to Jamaillia to buy the trade goods that would make them both wealthy. Half of whatever profits they made would be his, and then they could be married. He quickly agreed. Far too quickly for my liking.

'Howarth took her money and sailed away. Months passed, and Aubretia pined, but I was relieved, knowing that even though her money was gone, he was gone with it. She still had enough left to get on with, and now perhaps was wiser. But just when she began to put memories of him aside, he returned. He wore fine clothes and brought gifts with him, perfumes and silk, but little else. Most of the coin, he told her, had been spent to court trading partners in that distant city. All was in readiness, now, and as soon as he had worked hard and saved a bit of money, he could go south and make their fortune.' My heart sank in me. I thought of my gentle grandmother and the unspoken sorrows that had seemed to live behind her eyes. 'She believed him?' I murmured.

‘Of course. And she persuaded him to take more of her money and set out again immediately. Aubretia kept back only the tidy little house she lived in, some family jewels, and enough to support herself until he returned. When over a year passed with no word from him, she admitted to me she had been a fool. More, she admitted it to her friends and they aided her, not only with money but with introductions to suitable young men. But she swore her love would not be easily won again. She lived quietly and simply and alone.’

‘Until she met my grandfather?’ I guessed.

The charm scowled at me. ‘Your grandfather was a hard-handed, flinty-hearted man. He married your grandmother solely to have someone to tend to his squalling son and keep his house in order after his first wife died of his ill treatment. She married him solely to have a place to rest her head at night. But he does not come into this story. Not yet.’

Ignoring my shocked silence, the pendant spoke on. ‘One cold wet evening, who should come and knock at her door but her wayward suitor. I thought surely Aubretia would drive him away, but she welcomed him in and unquestioningly embraced him. Howarth wept, telling her that all had gone awry for him, and that he had been too ashamed to come home and face her, but finally his heart could stand to be parted from her no longer. He had come back, to beg her forgiveness.’ The little face gave a disdainful snort. ‘And she believed him.’

‘But you did not?’

‘I believed he had spent all her money, that it was not his heart that had brought him back, but his greed. She told him it mattered nothing to her, that all would be well if he would but marry her. Side by side they could toil and still make a good, if simple life for themselves. She still had her house and some family jewellery and somehow they would manage.’

I closed my eyes, pitying my grandmother that she could love so much and so blindly.

'I warned her. Her friends warned her, saying that if she listened to that rogue again, they would disown her. But Aubretia cared nothing for anyone but him. And he, speaking so nobly, said he would not let her family think her a fool. Howarth would not marry her while he was penniless. A fortune was still within his grasp. If only he had enough money, he could recoup his losses and go on.'

'How could that be?' I demanded.

'An excellent question. One that your grandmother never asked, or at least not directly. He implied all sorts of things. That a bribe to a tariff official would free up a seized shipment, that if he were seen to be successful, others would lend him the money to complete some transaction. He spoke so skillfully and knowingly of how one must have money and spend money in order to make money.'

A terrible sadness welled up in me. How often had I heard my mother lament our poor circumstances and wish for better days, only to have Grandmother say, 'But it is hopeless, my dear. One must have money in order to make money.'

'She went to her grave believing that was so' I said.

The pendant was silent for a moment. Then it gave a tiny sigh. 'I feared as much. For of course you have guessed the rest of the story. Aubretia sold all she had and gave him the money to redeem his fortune. When she dared to ask to go with him, he said that her passage south would cost too much, and the hardships would be too much for her to endure. That ring you wear once held an emerald, flawless and deep green. Even that he took. Howarth pried the stone out of the setting himself, saying he would sell the stone in Jamailia only if he had to, but that he hoped to bring it back and restore it to her hand. He promised her that, no matter how he fared, he would come back within a year. She watched him sail from the Bingtown docks. Then she went to her oldest friend and confessed her situation. She threw herself on her mercy. Well, they had been friends since girlhood. Despite her threats, she took your grandmother in, and gave her a bed to sleep in and a place at the table. Aubretia was, after all, still a Lantis and a

Trader. It was expected that she would find a way to make her way in the world, and eventually make a suitable match. There is a saying in Bingtown. 'Money does not make a Trader, it is the Trader that makes the money.' Her friends hoped she had learned her lesson.

Yet it was hard for them to be patient with her, for she did little except moon after her absent lover. A year went by and then another. All of us told her both man and fortune were gone, and she should make a fresh start for herself. Aubretia insisted she would wait, that Howarth would come back from her.' The carved face pursed its lips in ancient disappointment. 'She waited. And that was all she did.'

'Did Howarth ever come back?' I asked in a whisper. The pendant's small face twisted in disgust. 'Oh, yes. He returned. Some three years later, he came back to Bingtown, but it was months before your grandmother knew of it. She recognized him one day as he strolled through the Market with his fine foreign wife at his side. A servant walked behind them, carrying a parasol to shade them. A nurse carried their little son. And his pale, plump Jamaillian wife wore the Lantis emerald at her throat.'

'What did she do?' I whispered.

The pendant's small voice grew heavy with an old weariness. I sensed it was a memory often pondered but still painfully fresh. 'She stood and stared. She could not believe her eyes. And then a cry of purest disbelief broke out of her. At the sound, he turned. Howarth recognized her, and yet he turned aside from her. She shrieked his name, demanding to know why he had abandoned her. In the streets of Bingtown, before Traders and common merchants, she wailed like a madwoman and tore out her hair. She fell to her knees and begged him to come back to her, wailing that she could not live without him. But Howarth only took his wife's arm and hurried her way, whispering something to her about "that poor mad woman." '

The pendant fell silent.

'Then what happened?' I demanded. My heart was beating strangely fast. 'Did she go to him and confront him and his wife,

denounce how he had taken her fortune, demand the return of her emerald?’

In a trembling whisper, the pendant confided, ‘No.’

‘Why?’ Pain hushed my voice. I recalled my grandmother’s resigned eyes and feared I already knew the answer.

‘I do not know. I will never understand it. Her friends urged her to confront him, to bring a complaint against them. When she spoke with them, she was strong. But whenever she was alone and set pen to paper, she lost her resolve. Weeping, she would confess to me that she loved him still. She would spin tales that he had been drugged or was bewitched by the woman. Her hands would shake and she would wonder aloud what she herself lacked, what was wrong with her that the Jamaillian woman could steal Howarth from her. Never, ever did she see him for the scoundrel and the cheat that he was. I could not make her see that the man she loved had never existed; that she persisted in loving an idealized image of Howarth, that the real man was worthy only of her contempt. She would sit down, pen in hand, to denounce him. But always, her accusing letters somehow changed into pleas to him to come back to her. The worst was the night that she went by darkness to his door. She sought entry there, like a beggar, pleading with a servant to let her in so she might speak privately with the master of the house. The servant turned her aside with disdain, and she, Aubretia Lantis of the Bingtown Traders, crept away weeping and shamed. I think that night broke her. The next evening she packed the few possessions that remained her own, and we left Bingtown, walking away in the dimness while her friends were at dinner. She did not even bid them goodbye. She felt she had lost all standing with them and could never be seen as anything but a fool.’

I felt ill, dizzy with the dirty little story. It twisted my memories of the gentle old woman I had tended for the last two years. I had believed her contained and stoic. I had deemed it strength, that she had endured my grandfather’s harsh ways, and tolerated the disrespect of

her step-son. Now it seemed something else. The implacable little voice went on.

‘She left Bingtown. Just walked away. She said she did not care what became of her, just so long as she could escape everyone telling her she should confront Howarth. She came to the countryside, and floundered through work as an inn-maid until she married a man she did not love, to tend his son and bear him a daughter. Shortly after your mother was born, she set me aside, for I was the final reminder of the life she had abandoned.’ The tiny face pressed its lips together in a flat line. ‘I begged her to listen to me, even as she wrapped me in linen. I could not stand to see her raise her daughter in submission to her brutish father and that loutish boy of his. She should have her birthright, I said. I told her it was not too late to go back and reclaim her inheritance. But she muffled my voice and shut me away.’

I thought of all the years the pendant had waited in the box. ‘Why did you tell me this?’ I asked it in a low voice.

For the first time, a question seemed to give the pendant pause. It lifted its brows as if amazed I did not know. ‘Because she lives on in me, as do all the women of your line who have worn me. And I would see things set right. I would see you regain what is rightfully yours.’

Rightfully mine. The concept seemed almost foreign. It frightened me. ‘But how? I have no proof, I do not know him, if Howarth still lives and -’

‘Hush. I will guide you. You have the empty ring on your hand and me at your throat. You need no more than this.’

My head so whirled with stories, I do not know how I slept that night. But I woke, still clutching the wizardwood pendant in my hand. Stiff in every joint, I rose, and donned the silver necklace and made my way to Bingtown.

In the next few weeks, the pendant became my guide. My ears swiftly became attuned to its soft whisper. The advice it gave me was difficult to follow, and yet when I listened to it, I found that my life progressed. In Bingtown, I sought and found a position caring for an

elderly Trader woman. The food at Trader Redof's table was better than any I had ever eaten before, and the cast-off garments of her granddaughter were the finest clothing I had ever worn. My years of caring for my grandmother served me in good stead. I became a willing ear for any gossip Trader Redof wished to share, and despite all the difficulties of escorting such an old woman in Bingtown, I saw to it that she visited her friends often.

Tending to her, I soon came to know well the bustling trade city. Supporting her elbow and carrying her foot-cushion, I moved invisibly amongst Bingtown society. I saw the power of the Bingtown Traders, power based not solely on wealth, but on heritage. I marvelled at all my grandmother had abandoned, all that might have been my mother's life. From marvelling at it, I grew to hunger for it. I changed my country manners to mimic hers, and flattened the twang of my speech. Schooled by my pendant in the evening, I changed how I carried myself in public and how I dressed my hair. I took on the mannerisms of a Bingtown woman, where women who were Traders for their families held as much power as their male counterparts. Seeing all that my grandmother had surrendered made my hatred of Howarth grow. I longed to seek him out and confront him. Yet month after month passed, and still the pendant bid me bide my time in patience.

My yearnings for vengeance surprised me. My grandmother and mother had both schooled me in selfeffacing resignation. I had thought it the lot of all women. Only in Bingtown did I come to see that a woman might live alone and manage her own life. I looked back on how Tetlia had robbed me of my grandmother's necklaces, and could not recall why I had not challenged her. I recalled the liberties Hetta's husband had attempted on me, and wondered why I had not vigorously resisted him. My old self in the countryside faded to a young woman whose docility was as incomprehensible to me as my grandmother's fatalistic surrender of her life.

I listened to my pendant. I never spoke Howarth's name aloud nor asked after him and his family. I was a devoted servant, well nigh

invisible. Twice, other families tried to hire me away but I kept my place. And finally, one day as I hovered near my mistress's chair at a tea, I heard his name mentioned, in connection with some other tattle about a Jamaillian family that had moved to Bingtown and was putting on airs. 'A page from Howarth's book,' someone said with a sniff, and I knew then that he still lived and that my grandmother's scandal was still recalled by these old women. I listened as they chewed through that old tale, and gained tidings not only that Howarth still lived, but that knowing Traders in Bingtown still regarded him with disdain.

That night, in my small chamber off my mistress's room, I consulted with my pendant. 'Are we ready now to take revenge? To confront Howarth and demand that he return all he stole from my grandmother?'

The small lips pursed as if tasting wine that had gone to vinegar. It gave a tiny sigh. 'I suppose it is time you saw the man. In some ways, that could be the culmination of your education.' The little eyes narrowed and glittered speculatively. 'When we go, you will take the empty ring. Let me pick the day, however. And on that day, you must do and say exactly what I tell you to. In this, you must trust me, or all will be for naught.'

Twice every forty days, my mistress granted me a half-day to myself. My pendant chose a day for me. It was one my mistress was loath to grant me, for it was a day of celebration in Bingtown, but I persuaded her to allow it, promising her that I would return early to help her with her evening preparations. It was the anniversary of the Traders arriving at Bingtown Bay. In the evening, there would be parties and dinners hosted by the wealthier Traders. But earlier in the day, the whole city would celebrate. There would be speeches and dancing in the centre of the Great Market, food and drink would flow free to all, and the streets would be thronged with folk of all persuasions. Although the evening festivities were reserved for Traders and their families only, all the folk of Bingtown would join in the municipal celebration. From all the gossip I had heard, I knew it was a day when more recent arrivals to

Bingtown courted the Old Trader families. Those who did not share Trader blood would seek to make more secure their social alliances with the powerful Traders. Howarth and his family would certainly be there.

That morning, I brought my mistress her breakfast tray. I laid out her clothing and left her dressing maid to attend her. In my tiny chamber, I bathed and dressed as carefully as if it were my wedding day. At my pendant's bidding, the hoarded coins I had earned had gone for enamelled pins and a choker of lace. I swept my hair high and secured it. When I slipped into my mistress's room to steal a glance in her mirror, I stared at my reflection. My mistress, setting down her teacup, opened her eyes wider at sight of me. 'You remind me of someone,' she said sleepily. She sat up in her bed, regarding me more closely. As if I were her daughter, she commanded me to turn before her, and then to turn my face to the light. 'Paint your lips with my carmine,' she instructed me suddenly. 'And touch your eyes with black.' When I had done so, she inspected me critically. 'You'll do,' she observed. 'There's Bingtown in your bloodline, my little country wren,' she added with satisfaction. 'So I've been telling those old biddies I call my friends. Off you go, to whomever you've chosen to captivate. He won't stand a chance before those eyes.'

Her words heartened me as much as the approving murmur from my pendant. I returned to my room, to don my final layer of courage. The saffron wool of my grandmother's Trader robe was soft against my skin. It fitted as if made for me. My determination swelled as I set out through the morning streets of the city I had made mine. The bustle of commerce no longer daunted me, nor did I look aside from the approving glance a Trader's son sent my way. Like me, he wore his Trader's robe today. The garment proclaimed me his equal, and by his glance, I could tell he accepted me as that. I held my head higher. I made my way confidently into the heart of the city. Occasionally, an older Trader would regard me with a puzzled stare. I knew it had been years since anyone had worn the saffron Trader robes of the Lantis family. I smiled at their puzzlement and strode on. The festive crowds

grew denser yet it seemed they parted for me. The music drew me, as did the savoury aromas that floated on the morning air.

I reached the great circle of the Market. Today, the centre had been cleared. Music was playing, and sailors and shopgirls were already dancing in the morning sun. On the edges of the circle, pavilions had been raised, and people of social note welcomed their friends and business associates. The grandest ones belonged to Bingtown Trader families and bore their colours, but the tents of the wealthy merchants of lesser bloodlines competed to draw the eye. The sides of the pavilions had been roped open to reveal carpets and expensive furniture. Trader families welcomed one another with tables of dainty foods in these temporary dwellings, competing in opulence and comfort. No expense had been spared for this single day of celebration. I walked a slow circuit of these, listening to the murmur of my pendant as it peeked through the lacy choker that concealed it.

‘Those are the Hardesty colours - well, they seem to have prospered in the last generation. And that tasselled one would be the Beckerts: they were always given to show. Wait. Stop here.’

I halted, and I swear I felt a vibration of tension from the pendant. The pavilion before us was pitched almost in line with those of the Bingtown Traders’ tents, as if to claim near-equal status. Whereas the Trader pavilions bore the simple colours of each of the old Bingtown families, the newcomers’ tents were striped or particoloured. The pavilion before me was white and green. The family was arrayed within as if for a portrait; parents and grown children sat about a table heavy with a rich morning repast. Two young men in the robes of Bingtown Traders were guests there. From a separate, higher table, on tall chairs almost like thrones, an elderly couple looked down benevolently on their family. The matriarch was a small plump woman. Her thinning white hair was carefully coiffed and rings adorned her pale little hands. The emerald at her throat seemed to burn with a green fire. Beside her sat a handsome old man, as elegantly dressed and groomed. As I looked at him, I felt the pendant share my glance. From it, I felt a sudden wave of

hatred greater than any I had ever known. Mingled with it was fury, and outrage that he and the wife he had bought with Aubretia's money had both outlived her in luxury and grace. Hardship and privation, I now saw, had cut short my grandmother's life. Not just wealth and respect, but life itself he had stolen from her.

'But for your betrayal, Howarth, Aubretia Lantis would still be alive!'

The words rang out from my throat. I scarce recognized my own voice. All about me, the festivities faltered. Conversation in the adjoining pavilions ceased. All eyes were turned towards the scene I had abruptly created. My heart near stopped in my chest, but I found myself going on without it, stepping forward without conscious volition, shouting words whose source was not myself. 'I bring you word of her death. Poverty and privation shortened her life, but it was your betrayal of her heart that killed her, Howarth. Aubretia Lantis was my grandmother. I give to you now the last bit of wealth that you were unable to strip from her: this ring, as empty as your promise. Keep it, along with all else you swindled from her.' I pulled the silver circle from my hand and threw the empty setting with a skill not my own. It sparkled as it flew through the air, and it landed squarely in Howarth's empty glass, setting it ringing in the silence that followed my words. The old man's eyes stood out from his face, and a vein pulsed wildly on his brow. I suspected he thought he saw a ghost, come back to waken old scandal just when his reputation most needed to be sound. I looked aside from him to his wife. She was scarlet with humiliation. 'Study it well, Howarth's wife,' I bade her disdainfully. 'Would not the Lantis emerald you wear about your neck fit well in its setting? Believe what you have denied to yourself all these years; a dead woman's wealth bought you. Know that you married a liar and an upstart; know that your whole family is founded on his betrayal of a Bingtown Trader.' I rounded disdainfully on the two young Trader men who sat at his table. The young women beside them, obviously Howarth's daughters, stared at me in white-faced horror. 'Consider well what you join your names

to, Traders' sons,' I told them. 'It is the Lantis wealth you are marrying, stripped of the Lantis name.'

Howarth had found his tongue. The dapper old man now looked drawn and pale. He pointed a shaking finger at me but spoke to his wife in the pitched voice of the near-deaf. 'She can prove nothing! Nothing! The money Aubretia gave me, she gave me for love of me. She cannot legally force me to return it.'

His wife's jaw dropped open. I thought she would faint from mortification. I let the silence gather, then floated my words upon it. 'And with those words, you admit a guilt and a shame greater than anything I could wish to prove. Keep the wealth, Howarth. Choke on it. You have dirtied it, and I have no need of anything you have touched.'

I turned on my heel then and walked away. A stunned silence hung behind me like a curtain, one that was suddenly rent by the wind of a thousand tongues flapping. Like a stirred beehive, all of the great Market circle hummed and buzzed. The scandal that Howarth thought he had left behind him would now mark his declining years.

'Nor will his daughters wed Traders' sons. His wife would do best to sweep them back to Jamailia and marry them off where she can, for after this, they will never mount into Bingtown society,' my pendant whispered to me in savage joy. 'You have done it, my dear. You have done us all proud with your success.'

I made no reply, but cut my way through the crowds, ignoring the comments and stares that followed me. My steady walk slowly cooled the angry flush from my cheeks and calmed the thundering of my heart. I had found my way down to the Bingtown docks where the cool wind off the water swept the heat from my face. I pondered the words I had said and what I had done. At the time it had seemed so perfectly fulfilling. Now I wondered at it.

'But what did I accomplish?' I lifted the pendant from my neck and looked at the tiny face. 'I thought I was doing all this to regain my inheritance. I thought I would force him to give up the wealth he had

stolen from my grandmother. Instead, I walked away with nothing. Not even an empty ring remains to me. Only you.'

'Only me,' the pendant agreed. 'And your name. Taken back out of the dust and raised to pride once more. It is what your grandmother abandoned, and what I wished you to reclaim. Not money or jewels, but the rightful self-worth of a Lantis. You are a Bingtown Trader now, by resolution as well as by right. Perhaps you will work as a servant by day, but what you earn will be your own. And when the Bingtown Council meets, you will wield your rightful vote.' The little face smiled up at me. The warmth in the small voice was a family's love. 'And that, girl, is your inheritance.'