

Blood and Verse by John Meaney

AND RAIN. I'm not going to forget this rain.
Now I'm in love. Not wholly good news.
For the woman I've fallen in love with...
My father. I will honour your memory.
...is not the one I'm meant to kill.

Silver rain hisses on the dark wooden dock. Ocean swirls, in all directions. Swollen, dark purple-grey skies hang overhead, their sombreness broken by twin arcs of white points: the sunlets which ring this world.

I stand beneath dripping ceramic eaves, watching. Twelve of Quinvère's tiny suns are visible—thirteen, if I lean outwards, over the waves—above the boundless seas which define this place.

No skimmers are visible amid the falling rain.

She's gone...

For a moment, our eyes met: minutes ago, or was it years? Perhaps twenty SY old, lithe with clear ivory skin and cropped hair, she stood straight-backed, and her stare was as helplessly lost as my own. Then she shook herself, walked out onto the dock, and climbed on board the public skimmer which had brought me here. Striding forward with athletic grace, she called to the driver, then took the controls, span the long skimmer into open ocean, and—in a burst of flying spume—straightened her course and red-planed the speed.

Did she look back, as waves churned and the skimmer diminished with distance and the misty rain?

None so blind as a love-struck poet.

My first commission, and already I'm smitten with the wrong person. It does not render the task impossible. But artistic difficulty just leaped upwards by several orders of magnitude.

For the beauty of my target's death must become transcendent.

The hotel's convex carapace is midnight blue, steady upon the waves. Behind

me, the entrance glows: a warm, welcoming orange light. Time to go in. I wipe rain from my face, pull my sodden cloak around me, snap my fingers at the mesodrone which bears my luggage. It rises above the walkway's glistening slats, and floats inside ahead of me.

But I can't resist one last sweeping glance at the endless sea and rain.

Will I grow used to this?

For the rainfall has lasted ten thousand years. I don't expect it will stop anytime soon.

Inside, a wizened old man, hunched behind a black quickglass desk, nods in welcome. Orange highlights glint upon the obsidian teardrop implanted in his forehead: jewellery, or something more? A velvet skullcap sits on his bald scalp.

"May I take your details?" His voice is surprisingly sonorous, couched in the local twenty-tone Lingshua dialect. "If I may, sir..."

I hold up my hand, wondering why my tu-ring hasn't done its job. With a *tsk* sound which might mean anything, the old man shakes head.

"Our omninterface isn't translating. Please respond verbally."

I look around, but there's nothing special to be seen: just ornate woodwork and ceramic. Orange glowglobes. A small black floating mesodrone which appears to be engaged in earnest machine communication with my own. No other visible devices.

"Go ahead." My voice sounds strange, though I've been practising Lingshua for nearly a Standard Year, subjective. "What do you need to know?"

"Your name?"

I pause, considering a lie, then: "Andrei v'Danshin KaDonnel."

"Age?"

Why the Hades should he need to know that? But I'll obey the local mores where I can.

"Twenty SY."

I wonder if I'm the only person here who knows that Standard Years are

based on ancient Terra's rotation period. From what I know of the local education system—

“—and designation?” Another question.

“I'm sorry?”

“Your world of origin, young sir, and societal designation.”

I could hide the truth.

It is allowed, among the rules—it just lacks elegance. This first time, for this first death, everything should be perfect. And, this far from the Core Worlds, no one will understand—

“My homeworld is Calazzo IV, and I am of the Mazhin a'Stansa Corisma.” I pause, then translate my oath-family's name: “House of the Crimson Stanza.”

The old man's eyes widen.

He knows.

Closing his eyes, the old man seems to shrink inwards, as though dreaming of lost childhood ... or immersing himself deep in communication.

Then he is back in the moment.

“The machine”—he beckons the black mesodrone—”will show you to your suite. Ask it for anything you require. We break our fast at oh-eight-hundred.”

“My thanks.”

“You are”—with a small bow—”most welcome, honoured guest.”

But his body language declares otherwise: it is more than old age which stiffens his shoulders. I smile with genuine warmth; he looks a little puzzled.

Then I turn and follow the drone, which is already gliding down the polished-wood corridor, leading me to my room.

I'm offworld!

And truly an adult now. Or almost.

As soon as You die, my royal target, my beautiful obsession, whom I will adore though I cannot truly love thee—

For with every poem, in every worthwhile piece of art, it is the tortured beginning which brings pain and confusion to the one who calls it forth. The rest is discipline.

And willingness to pay the price.

Here's the image: a grey-blue world, crowned with twin equatorial rings of miniature suns; the occasional ripple above either pole where hidden singularities refract the starlight; the distant glow of a hyperon star which was Quinvère's original, natural sun.

Twin diamond-studded crown

'Gainst boundless velvet round,

Where silent night holds promise of

Soft target's mewling sound...

Too soon. The verse will come in its own time.

And there's another image, overlaying my picture of Quinvère from far orbit. Clear-complexioned, her face, with her hair cut very short. Eyes: dark, intense. Her shoulders look strong; she moves like an athlete. And that wordless look which passes between us ... before she steps from the dock into the skimmer, takes control, is gone.

I don't even know your name.

But we'll meet again.

I'm sure of it.

It's another world!

I'm sitting in half-lotus, on a soft blue mattress upon a lustrous wooden bed—no lev-cots or gel-pallets here. The bed is carved (or force-grown) from the same golden timber as the room itself. Offworld! Far from home, carrying out my first commissioned work, in a place where everything is subtly different—the gravity, the pure air's tang—and minute details rush upon me, crowd my senses.

I could send myself to sleep, but why bother? Perhaps I can explore a little.

So I snap my fingers at my drone, point downwards in the Stay Here gesture. Rolling to my feet, I check the blades secreted in my tunic, grab a cloak, wave the external doorshimmer from existence, and step outside.

The sea at night enthrals. Amid the black waves, unexpected ripples of phosphorescence shine as a magical reminder that worlds are filled with life. The soft susurrations of night-rain and rolling sea are hypnotic; I could stand here forever. But Quinvère's nights are transient black-cloud polarised-light phenomena—that's what happens when you have two rings, each of twenty seven miniature suns: you take nights when you can get them—and already the sky is brightening, touching the waves with mint-green highlights.

As the faux-night ends, I regard the veranda-like boardwalk on which I'm standing. It runs beneath the carapace-eaves, encircles the hotel. Waves lap at the shining wooden slats. Doorshimmers, here and there, lead to guestrooms like my own.

I could slip inside and use my blades—

It would be inelegant and clumsy to leave each room crimson-spattered, but I'm almost tempted. Just a desire to teach people a lesson, to let them know they should be more careful. The doorshimmers may be kirlian-locked to their occupants, but my tu-ring's resonance can de-tune such fields, and it is the least of my infiltration tools.

“Ah, well.”

I talk to myself too much. Many poets do. Not a phenomenon to be analysed closely.

And we know love at first sight.

I will see her again. Inevitably, if she is my true love, the twin soul whom Destiny created in entangled Heaven.

It just makes the Poem harder.

True pathos occurs when the loved one is the target ... but it's too late for that. And, too, my favourite Verse Master, Guido del'Karinzo, always considered that adversity produced my best results.

I hope so.

Pulling my cloak around myself, I go inside.

I'm late for breakfast, though I've been up for hours. It's 08:37 by the local (twenty-seven hour) clock; there are no free breakfast nooks. Each nook is in fact a circular well, sunk in the richly polished floor; inside each one is an embroidery-padded bench-seat, encircling a round table.

At the nearest, a pale-faced lady sits. Her cowl is of ivory edged with golden pearls; her pantaloonsuit is shiny silk, silver and gold. Strings of ruby beads hang necklace-like in catenary curves from sleeves and bodice. She nods to me, waves me to her table.

"Thank you, my lady." I give my most courteous bow.

I'm not sure how you're supposed to lower yourself onto the sunken seat. I look around for guidance, but everyone's happily in place, chatting and eating. With an inward mental shrug, I vault lightly into the circular well, drop back and sit.

"Well"—with a raised elegant eyebrow—"that's quite an entrance."

"Um, thanks."

Behind her, a serving-girl appears (though I expected a drone or simply to ask the house system) and saves me further embarrassment. I make my selection from the dishes I recognize, and sit back to wait.

"You're even less local"—the lady pauses, sips tea from a porcelain bowl—"than I am. An offworlder?"

"That's right, ma'am."

I'd hoped my Lingshua was perfectly accented. Obviously, that's not the case.

"When did you arrive?"

"At TangleDrop 137, two days ago." The tangledrop station was in far orbit: that's where I gained my outsider's view of Quinvère and her orbiting sunlets. "The shuttle took me to the airpad." A richly appointed stopover and conference-centre, floating inside the atmosphere, above the clouds. "And yesterday I took a dropbug down."

She reaches across the table, and places her hand on mine.

“You must be lonely.”

“Um—”

I *am* lonely.

Mother...

For I will never see her again.

Picture her now: in her favourite salon, tinkering with crystal microsculpture while soft insistent tarantismo music plays ... But *now* is relative. If I leave here this instant, two centuries will have passed upon Calazzo by the time I return.

And as for Father—Viktor e’ Skelvin KaDonnel, a finer Blood Poet than I could ever hope to be—I can picture him, also. In his usual steel-chased tunic, standing over Mother, his beloved Aylishah, stroking his grey-streaked beard as he watches her work.

Stay with her, Father.

Because he might take another commission, leave home as I have done. There would be a chance, however small, that we could meet again upon Calazzo IV. For honour’s sake, Mother would not try to stop him, however much she might weep in private. From their courtship’s initial, delicate days, poets’ wives grow accustomed to the possibility of virtual widowhood, likely to fall upon them at any moment, should their husbands depart on far journeys, effectively forever.

“—around the city?”

“Um...” I drag my attention back to my surroundings. To the press of the lady’s hand upon my own. “I beg your pardon, ma’am.”

She sits back, releasing me.

“I’ll give you the full city tour,” she promises. “On my personal skimmer.”

You know what they mean by ‘city’ here?

Look out of the hotel, you’ll see nothing but sea and misty rain. Twenty minutes by skimmer: that’s how you get to the nearest buildings. But they’re classed as neighbours, and this loose extended confederation is termed Sherkalian City. Hardly my idea of urban dwelling.

“That’s very kind,” I say.

Which she seems to take as acceptance, though I don’t mean it that way at all. How does one say no to those who are deaf to nuance?

“My name is Elaina.” Musical voice. Turquoise eyes—though a little opaque with age—hold a certain promise. “And yours, my handsome young man?”

But I’m in love.

“Andrei,” I say. “Andrei v’ Danshin KaDonnel, ma’am.”

“And politely spoken, too.”

The serving-girl arrives, accompanied by a lev-tray which she gestures into place. Dark-blue bowls: fruit, rice. Fragrant tea.

“Thank you.” I bow as well as I can from my seated position.

The serving-girl smiles as she backs away.

“Charming.” Elaina sounds peeved. “There’s no need—”

She stops.

No need to be polite to servants, she was going to say. Smiling, though, she asks instead: “How many lightyears have you travelled, Andrei?”

“All and none.” A quotation from a Lingshuan ballad. “No distance at all.”

Or time, I remind myself.

Her eyes widen.

“You don’t mean—?”

With a nod: “I untangled.”

For a long moment, she can think of nothing to say.

Who am I, she must be wondering, to have been implanted thus before birth? Nervous system wired with tanglethreads, able to make the instantaneous—but one-way—no-time trip to anywhere. To be reconstituted in any tangledrop station in the galaxy.

“I—”

Growing pale, her skin.

She could not have guessed. Ordinary lightspeed vessels use tangledrop stations, too—but purely as orbiting way-stations for passengers who disembark on their own two feet. Those passengers are few enough in number; fewer still, are those whose quantum-entangled selves are rebuilt inside the great attocompilers, while their original selves decohere into messy chaos.

“Where did you say you’re from?”

“My homeworld is Calazzo IV.”

Her skin is bone-white now. Even her lips are bloodless.

“This is a civilised society, Blood Poet.” She is shaking, with fear or rage. “Your kind’s not welcome here.”

Entangled particles can belong to many pairs simultaneously: hence the overlapping connections of the galaxy-wide topology, so that tangledrop stations orbit all the civilised worlds. Each journey is instantaneous and irreversible.

Once my commission is done, I can choose to remain here—for life (if that is safe)—or to voyage home at lightspeed. There, perhaps, I will undergo years-long resetting, involving weekly boring sojourns in the House tanglewomb, until I am tangle-enabled once more, and ready for a second commission.

At least I could catch up on my reading.

But Mother, if not Father as well, will be two centuries dead by the time I set foot upon Calazzo’s soil.

It’s not as though I wasn’t warned. Scant comfort.

I’m in my room, alone, trembling with delayed anger at the woman’s presumption and dismissal.

Is there no honour on this world?

Local mores. Ha! Ignorance, more like.

There are Great Houses devoted to the Tao San'Veerso, the Way of Blood and Verse, in every kingdom of Calazzo IV. Each House is honoured and respected, even venerated. Saint Alphonse of the Scimitar belonged to my own House, which has endured for ten millennia, and will be there still when I return.

Parochial bumpkins...

I could slay them all; but that goes against every tenet of artistry I have ever learned.

The large, pretty girl behind the quickglass desk is dressed in white and crimson—my House's livery colours: a good omen. Her open smile is welcoming.

No one's warned her about me.

Because no one here could be a worthy subject for my work?

Perhaps they'll leave me alone, just long enough.

"Excuse me, please," I say. "Does the hotel have skimmers for rent?"

"Oh, sorry. They're all gone." She stares: a lased-in her-eyes-only display. "But we've some pogos left."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Po—Oh, skimmerettes." Frowning, she adds: "You need a sense of balance to use one."

This morning, in my room before breakfast, I ran for an hour upon my folded travelling-cloak. In that configuration, its smartfibres slide in laminar flow, allowing me cardio conditioning while deadening the sound. Afterwards, I stretched for half an hour. Then I drew poignards, fistblades and needles, to enact the Ballad of Cut and Fade in all its subtle glory. It's one of my House's premier fighting poems, whose penetrating words and vivid mind-frames re-circuit the nervous system with devastating artistic strength. Wielding imaginary death with finesse and style, I sang its major verses, raising Zen Neuronal Coding to the level of high art and warrior honour.

"My balance is ... reasonable," I tell the girl.

"Well, then." Her smile dimples her face. "Around the back, take any one you like."

“Thanks. Is there anything special to see right now? Any interesting events taking place?”

She gestures a holomap of Sherkalian City into being.

“The Travelling Fayre’s in Convenors’ Hall”—she indicates a tiny green hemisphere on the map—“for the next two ninedays. That’s about all.”

So you don’t know who I am.

“I’ll make sure I see it. Thanks again.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Outside, the waves are a little rougher than last ‘night’, yet the rainfall is gentle, a fine silver mist. In the distance, small low shapes, buildings, are just visible against the waves.

Around the back, where the boardwalk curves inwards, seven skimmerettes—pogos—are bobbing in a row. Each has a thick octagonal base, little more than a metre wide, with a dark shiny covering. From it, a stubby pillar rises, with a saddle on the top. Two pedals provide control. They look precarious—more than I expected—but I’ve ridden jesters’ unicycles around the corridors at home. I’ll keep my balance.

The one I pick has a nacreous base, dark-blue and black, matching the hotel’s roof-carapace. The pogo bobs beneath me, then thrums into life, rising centimetres above the waves.

The locals don’t know about the Royal visit.

Judging by the hotel-girl’s ignorance, that is.

So no one will expect me to carry out my commission right here.

It’s appalling, that the locals don’t hold the Way of Blood and Verse in highest honour. Yet that may not be a bad thing: their grief upon the Queen’s sudden, unexpected death will form a vital part of my poem’s denouement. And for now, let me embrace anonymity—

Water churns, and I let out a whoop as the pogo shoots forwards, splashing rain and sea-spray in all directions.

Grey-swept, cloud-cloaked

With saltspraywind upon my face:

Dark its glow, on aqua plane a carapace.

Rain's silver lace. While overhead, beyond dour sky,

Dark-soaked, peer jewel suns arranged in space

By Ancient Ones of unknown race...

My words are throwaway: mere thumbnail background-sketches, preparation for the work to come. I need local colour.

Convenors' Hall comes into view.

The structure is like the hotel's, but on a larger scale, with a lustrous dark-green carapace that is speckled with black and indigo. The dark, polished wooden substructure is rock-steady atop the waves.

White spume rushes beneath me as I take my pogo through an arcing approach. At the jetty's end, churning waves, I stop. Someone throws a mag-line, and I make it fast.

"Not bad for a stranger."

It is the young woman: more beautiful, even, than I had realized. Her voice is clear, her stance relaxed, commanding. Her gaze holds mine.

"My thanks."

Inadequate words. The poetry which flows between us is non-verbal, as old as Terra's seas. I vault upwards to the jetty, but in that moment I break the visual trance, and she is already turning away.

"If you'll excuse me—"

She starts to wander back. To the right, abutting the jetty, floats a large vessel with wooden decks. The crew—bare-armed, bearded men and tough-looking women—wave at the woman with whom I'm in love.

A scorpion-tail crane lifts a full net from the boat's open hold.

"Hey, Shera. Gonna give us a hand?"

Shera. So that's her name.

“*I thought* you couldn’t manage alone.” She, Shera, glances back at me, then reaches out to guide the net down onto the jetty’s polished planks. “Where would you be without me?”

One of the fishermen, a shaven-headed man with heavy earrings, says: “Adrift on the cold grey ocean, today and forever, my love.” It sounds like a song-fragment, and good-natured laughter ripples among the crew.

But it is their catch which draws me.

New life—

The entire net is wriggling, with an amazing variety of lifeforms trapped inside. Are they all Terra-muties, cloned and tailored? Or are there indigenous native species among them? Scarlet triple-winged fish; black/white/silver wriggling dart-shapes; tendrils which—

“*Look out!*”

I whip my hand back, but the flailing sting-mouth just catches me.

Acid burn...

“Bloody fool!” Shera sounds furious. “Never stand close to a snapper. Not without protection.”

The shaven-headed fisherman leaps onto the jetty, grabs hold of my wrist, and turns my hand over. Scales and blood glisten across my palm.

“No toxin.” He looks up at me. “Or your skin would’ve blistered already, pal.”

“That’s good then.”

“Yeah. I’ve never seen anyone”—he spits into the ocean, grins—”move so fast. Most folk would’ve lost their hand.”

While he speaks, two other crew-members reach into the net with long stun-lances, and I gather the danger has passed.

“How hurt is he?” Shera addresses the fisherman, not me.

“Just a little blood, is all.”

“Good.” She stares at me. “You were lucky.”

“Yes. Your name is Shera? I am lucky, Shera.”

“Hmm.” A faint smile touches her mouth. “You still need to clean that wound, Master Lucky.”

“Momento...”

I walk back a ways, beyond the boat’s stern, and reach out above the waves to squeeze my offering—seven drops: no more, no less—into the ocean which reminds me of the endless Tao.

“In blood, as Life

With flood-speed blessed,

To mingle flows in Fate’s fine race

At laughing Death’s behest.”

Shera’s watching me, with one eyebrow raised.

“Is that a prayer?”

“Kind of,” I answer. “That sort of thing.”

“Here.” She fumbles at her jumpsuit’s belt, and pulls out a small block of cleangel. “Use this.”

“Thank. My name’s Andrei.”

Shera smiles quietly, as though this pleases her.

I apply the gel, and breathe in sharply—the stuff has no anaesthetic: do they think pain must accompany all healing?—and her smile broadens.

“Hurts, doesn’t it?”

“No,” I answer truthfully, for I have just made the pain go away.

“Really?”

Shera’s jumpsuit is plain grey, with a high collar: functional, so different from the lady, Elaina, with whom I shared breakfast. And Shera’s limber grace, to me, is

far more powerful and enthralling than the most carefully conceived cosmetic artifice. Her fingernails are cut short, for work.

“You’re visiting the Fayre?” She nods towards Convenors’ Hall.

“I thought I might.”

“It’s worth a look.”

“You don’t work on the boat”—I gesture at the crew, who are discussing something among themselves—“with your friends.”

“No. I’m a ... civil servant. Taking the day off.”

“On vacation?”

“I’ve a report to write.” Looking out across rain-swept ocean, waves reflected in her eyes, she adds: “But I can do it later.”

The crew have come to some decision, and—as I look over Shera’s shoulder—it seems they want to talk to her. I nod in their direction.

“Shera?” says the shaven-headed crewman. “We’re headed for Whirlpool Dell. Need to pick up a load.”

“You offering me a ride, Linkan?”

“Yeah. And your friend, if he wants to come.”

“His name is Andrei.” There’s mischief in her eyes when she looks at me. “Want to see a floating forest?”

Among Quinvère’s Floating Forests. That’s a title with promise.

“I’d love to.”

“Good.”

Cold peach, the skies glimmer, as the clouds part for a time. The rainfall lessens, grows insubstantial: a silvery mist which looks about to die away.

“It won’t.” Shera, on the deck beside me, appears to read my mind. “Dry spells are localized. In any one spot, they occur about once every ten millennia.”

“The suns must have an effect.”

Already the clouds are beginning to close in again.

“Oh, yes. I like them.” She looks up, staring directly at the orbs. Translucent polygons drift across the surface of her eyes. “Reminders that life’s a mystery.”

Her eye-protection is corneal smartgel—to the same specification as my own, I’d say.

Interesting.

“What do you know of the Ancient Ones?” I ask.

“No more than offworlders.”

The rain is growing heavier now. I pull up my cloak’s hood, more interested in watching Shera than the twin arcs of sunlets across the sky. Behind her, around us, the crew are busy with small tasks. The boat rides the waves easily, though the sea is growing choppy.

“Why did they do it? Or when?” I mean the Ancient Ones. “After the original sun condensed to a hyperon star?”

“No one knows.” Shera shrugs. “The Ancient Ones boiled away, is what the old tales say. Primordial icecaps melted, and the elder lifeforms sublimated. Whatever that means.”

“Sounds like—”

“There’s your forest now.”

“God’s Blood!” The oath is involuntary. “Will you look at that.”

Twisted trees, with orange-brown bark, stretch across the ocean for many kilometres. They bob easily, changing configuration to match the ocean’s swell, forming a child’s tangled puzzle that is perfectly adapted to this place.

“It’s beautiful.”

Shera nods, and lightly touches my arm.

“Yes, it is.”

It's a natural gymnasium, too. Our climbing journey is punctuated by clicks and squeaks of the ever-moving forest. We squeeze through tangled openings, haul ourselves onto branches, run lightly up the broader limbs. The distinction between trunk and branch becomes academic: we're following a maze of twisted wood.

The crewmembers are several clicks behind us now, out of sight, harvesting selected portions of the wood. One of the rough-looking women is an aquabotanist with a global reputation; their work is carefully directed so that the forest replenishes itself.

"This way."

Shera's breathing no more heavily than I. We're both enjoying this ... but the point is, I've spent at least two hours working out, hard, every single day since I was ten SY old.

"Don't worry." I dodge a branch, squeeze through an opening. "I'm right behind you."

By the time we reach the tall tree's pinnacle, we're fairly glowing with the effort. It is time to sit down, and stare out across the ocean.

"You're fit enough." Shera passes over an electrolyte-replacement tablet from her belt.

"That makes two of us. Thanks."

Exotic fruit flavours burst on my tongue.

For a long time we sit there, side by side on our high swaying perch, simply watching: ocean and sky; the rain and clouds; twin rows of suns. Beneath us, the forest moves and adjusts like a single breathing, living being.

A flash of silver glints beneath the waters, far off to my right.

"What was that?"

"Not a fish. An outrider." Shera double-blinks her corneal smartgel. "A Shoal City scout."

Shoal Cities featured in my briefing: great ellipsoid bubble-cities that float forever beneath the surface, following submerged ocean currents or routes of their own devising. They are closed societies, for the most part. Few offworlders are allowed inside, and those under strict supervision.

A Blood Poet requires creative solitude.

“You’re intending to visit a Shoal City?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Good,” she says softly.

I’d rather stay near you.

But I know Queen Rhiannon’s visit is only days away. She’ll be surfacing inside Sherkalian City boundaries, though the locals appear not to know of this.

Then, at that moment, will my poem reach its natural, triumphant conclusion.

“Sixteen bits per second,” Verse Master del’Karinzo once said in a tutorial, “is the total information flow into the conscious mind. Gestalten-rich bits, to be sure, but a millionth of the perceptions flowing into the human organism.

“For a poet, particularly a Blood Poet” —with an ironic smile— “it makes for interesting challenges, and opportunities.”

I climb downwards, following Shera’s every practised move.

We’ve spoken few words, she and I, yet a lifetime’s worth of interchange has already taken place. And then, as she goes first over a broken branch, turns back, and reaches out to help me—

Electric, that touch.

There is more power in the one-second contact of her hand than in every erotic encounter of my life combined into one moment. We stare, almost stricken, at each other. Then Shera smiles, and we continue our descent.

After we’ve boarded, the boat edges away from the floating forest. Lase-cut tree-limbs half-fill the hold. The crew chat among themselves, leaving us alone (for courtesy comes naturally among their kind) as we head back towards Convenors’ Hall. Shera and I stand on the afterdeck, saying nothing, but tightly holding hands: communicating more than this poor poet’s words could ever say.

A flash beneath the waves—“Fish,” says Shera, with a quick smile—and then it is gone.

It makes me wonder, though, that sign of submerged life ... about the hidden complexities of the local situation. Who commissioned my work? A slighted lover?

Another kingdom? A jealous/wronged/ambitious courtier?

The House Officers excluded such information from my briefing. My poem, deliberately innocent of the past, is to celebrate the manner of Queen Rhiannon's death. Vindictiveness, the petty motives of revenge ... they're for poor satirists to deal with. My commission is a just one, approved by the House Ethics Committee, and that's all I need to know.

"Look." Shera points. "The Fayre's begun."

We're approaching Convenors' Hall. Bright columns of holoflame twist and blaze beneath its eaves.

"Have you time to watch it with me?"

"Oh, yes." She gives my hand a squeeze. "We need to eat dinner, don't you think?"

"I'm starving."

"Afterwards, I will have to go home, and do some reading."

"Where's home?" There's so much we haven't talked about.

Pointing, Shera says: "The Apprentice Hostel, over that way. A temporary room, is all."

Through the rainfall, it's impossible to make out the building. It must lie beyond the hotel, and even that's not visible from here.

"I can stay here," she adds, "for another two hours."

The boat impinges against the jetty, softly as a kiss.

"Good."

The crew are smiling as we take our leave, but they make no smart remarks. They are boisterous or quiet by turns, these people of the sea; and they have a sensitivity which would not be out of place among poets.

This is an insight which I must remember. It will inform each verse which describes Quinvère's people, and the boat-crews in particular, as they react to their Queen's unexpected death.

"Look." Shera takes my arm. "There's room over there."

We sit facing each other at a long trestle-table, among a noisy group of diners. The other tables are full, and it takes a while for the overworked serving-girls to take our order. Neither Shera nor I mind the delay.

There are jugglers and acrobats, performing around the hall's periphery, while the diners eat in the centre, marvelling at their balletic expertise. Shera and I hold hands across the table, watching. My own training keeps me as limber as most professional gymnasts, but these people can execute moves which are beyond me.

See: the placement of balance for a one-hand handspring, twisting the torso thus—I'm making small twitches, kinaesthetically memorizing the movement, and I realize suddenly that Shera is doing the same.

“Look.”

There's a flamboyant trick which takes two people: opposing somersaults between each other's legs.

Shera: “Some day—”

Me: “—we'll try that.”

We smile.

The main course arrives, and we work our way through it. The performance continues, but I'm more interested in conversation. Afterwards, when Shera excuses herself for a few minutes, the hall seems to dim, the polished dishes to lose their lustre, and the other peoples' conversation to degenerate into noisy graceless gabble.

Then she returns, making her way among the tables, and the world seems real again.

“You look at me like a drowning man who sees a lifeline.” She smiles, but it is no joke, and I feel the truth of it.

“I *am* drowning.”

After a moment, she nods. Then, with utmost seriousness: “So am I.”

Dessert is served. There is no need for us to speak, as we pick at the fruit bowls and stare at each other. No need for words at all.

Then flames without heat lance through the air above our heads: a holo, announcing a new performer's entrance.

“Wait and see,” says Shera. “The magician was here last night. He's good.”

I'm predisposed to approve, if she does, so I sit back and watch the slender man make his way into the hall. The gymnasts and jugglers have all gone; he holds the stage alone, throwing small objects into the air and keeping them moving.

He *is* good: the most skilful conjurer I have ever seen.

I laugh, along with everyone else, as he stumbles and everything falls as if by accident, thumping the floor in a one-two, one-two-three rhythm: the opening notes of the national anthem. Then he begins to work through the first conjuring routines, mixing things up and dropping balls or silken kerchiefs—with a shrug, and a self-deprecating “Oops”—while the audience giggles. His comic timing is perfect ... and each failed illusion somehow resolves itself—through masterful sleight of hand—into a trick far better than the one he claimed to be attempting.

Wait, now...

After a while, I find myself growing very still and watchful. My perceptions of the surrounding hall attenuate to nothingness. I focus hard: upon the magician's deft hands.

Exploding animals which become floating paper streamers; a juggled arc of balls which disappear, one by one, even as they're moving; steel cards and artificial blossoms produced from nowhere. All delivered with a mock seriousness which belies his skill.

If it *is* skill, and not something more.

By the Tao ... Can this be?

Shera touches the back of my hand, and I force myself to nod and smile.

But the magician removes his voluminous cloak, hat and tunic; he's almost bare above the waist now, with only a thin decorative strap around his chest and shoulders. No rings, no bracelets. He holds his hands outstretched, making scarcely a move of misdirection, while objects manifest themselves or disappear at his command.

And none of them are holos. My corneal smartgel, once triple-blinked, reveals the IR radiation. My hearing, tympani reconfigured at my internal command, detects the sounds of movement through the air. Every object is as solid as I am.

Yet disappears at the magician's whim.

“I said he was good,” Shera whispers. “Didn't I?”

I agree, but cannot speak.

The magician is walking towards our table.

Afterwards, I'm not quite sure what has occurred. Everyone around me is laughing, except for Shera. There's a tiny frown between her dark eyebrows. And I'm standing at the edge of the hall, alongside the magician.

I've been in a trance, for the audience's amusement.

Keep composure.

"Thank you." I bow to the magician. "I hope I entertained everyone."

"You were masterful," he says, amid general laughter.

"By the way"—he's still almost nude above the waist, standing with arms outstretched—"why don't you pick a card? Just in your mind, I mean. Any card will do."

For a man of my profession—even one who hasn't carried out his first commission—there's only one card which will do.

"Have you chosen?"

"I have."

There's a heptagonal steel card between his fingertips. It wasn't there a second ago.

"Is this the one?"

This trick is not much of a crowd-pleaser. They don't know which card I chose ... and surely the magician recognizes that deficiency. But I say nothing. Instead, despite all self-control, my hand trembles slightly as I take the card and turn it over, knowing in advance which one it will be.

The Ace of Swords.

He knows who I am.

I turn to give him back his card—

Shera's eyes widen.

—but he is gone.

God's Blood...

A stunned silence fills the hall.

All of them, the whole audience, were staring at him, and now he's not here. Disappeared. Impossibly gone.

Then everyone bursts into thunderous, rapturous applause, and I return to my seat smiling, as though I am the one who has performed the trick. An amazing day.

I slip the steel card into my tunic pocket, and take Shera's hands in mine, while our neighbouring spectators hoot and catcall, and the warm air throbs with cheers, and eager demands for an encore which does not appear.

Here, an entanglement

(Not quantum-paired):

Hearts bound in resonance—

Two souls are shared.

Back in my room, I am thinking: not of my commission, nor the world in which I find myself, but of its most important inhabitant.

Shera. You are my twin soul.

It was Verse Master del'Karinzo who told me this: only poor, dumb folk do not believe in love at first sight. They remain blind to experience, bypassed by Destiny because they did not seize their day.

And that's most people, he added, with his voice full of pity, not cynicism.

One thing bothers me: the skimmer which took Shera back to the hostel.

There were two men already on board. One was dressed in deep purple, the other in blue so dark it was almost black: jumpsuits tailored identically to Shera's own. Both men were fit-looking and alert. As they arrived, Shera leaped down lightly from the jetty, and they stepped back to make room for her. One of them gave me a piercing look as the other took control, span the skimmer away, and headed for the Apprentice Hall at foam-churning speed.

No ... There are *two* things to cause me disquiet.

I wave a mirrorfield into existence.

Now try.

My hands become a blur as I whip through my passes. Blades wink into and out of sight; I spin and whirl as diamond blades and long, thin poignards stab empty air, then disappear once more into my tunic's hidden folds. Again and again, I repeat my deadly sleight of hand, my assassin's conjurations, until I fling all of the blades into the air at once, all twenty two of them...

Fast.

...and spin around, catching them, plucking blades from the air as the whole ensemble drops floorwards. I secret them all inside my tunic, save the last ... as I fumble the catch, miss, and the poignard drops point-first into the floorboard. It stands there, quivering.

I snatch it upwards and cause it, too, to disappear.

That's my magic.

For in my House, we learn dagger, needle and sword before we learn to fight empty-handed. "*The hand is an extension of the blade,*" Weapons Master Gryasin always said. "*Not the other way around.*"

We use the same techniques, drill the same movements, with weapons and without, to form an economy of style. We learn the subtle ways of misdirection: sleight of hand allowing us to slip a blade or a poison needle inside a victim in plain view, while onlookers see nothing. It is the art of killing with covert finesse. And we, masters of illusion, know our peers of conjuration when we see them.

And when we don't.

For the magician who performed tonight drew objects straight from the void, then returned them to nothingness; and I know of neither science nor magic which is capable of that.

Lying on the bed, I try meditative techniques to still my thoughts.

O Queen beneath the sea, about to die,

Whose palace weeps for thee (and so do I)...

Our Fate conjoined will see your Royal blood

and something-something-*something* ocean's flood...

Sleep falls upon me like a waterfall, saves me from my doggerel, and I drown.

Wood-sky-wood. The feel of deck-slats passing beneath my back. There is something liberating about this: rolling breakfalls performed outdoors. It is an acceptance of nature, the antithesis of tightly strung adults who are afraid to fall.

I roll to my feet, warm-up almost over ... and stop.

Far out, among the waves, I perceive a tiny speck. Blinking my corneal smartgel to maximum zoom, I confirm my intuition: it's Shera, swimming with long repetitive strokes, deeply into the movement. Extrapolating her route, I'd say she's swimming from the Apprentice Hostel to Convenors' Hall, and neither building is visible to the unaided eye from here. Not through the silvery rainfall.

I go back inside my room, fold my cloak to serve as a running-pad, and begin my hour-long run to nowhere. As I run, I see visions in my mind's eye—featuring the two watchful men aboard that skimmer—which I can't dispel.

Afterwards, I perform my stretching outside, and see Shera swimming back the other way. I want to call out, but don't: her exercise is spiritual discipline, an austere ritual which is not to be disturbed.

Why did I have to meet you now, under these circumstances?

Instead, I go back through the doorshimmer, find my blades, and fight imaginary opponents over and over until salt sweat blinds me, and the room begins to spin.

I've grown used to the pogo. It carries me from building to building, letting me explore as a true tourist should. There are amusement arcades and weapon shops (where I take care not to linger, despite enormous curiosity); drama-crystal stores and garment boutiques; places to eat, to drink, to meditate or pray.

And, between four buildings, all within easy swimming distance of each other, lies a children's Aqua Park, where polarization fields keep shimmering water sculpted into slides and climbing-frames, into fanciful transparent castles and dragons, while squealing kids chase each other, radiating innocent energy.

I sit inside a small café, leaning on a wooden table, and admire the net-strung glowglobes which colour-shift in time to near-subliminal wood-pipe music. I sip at the chocolate-laden mixture they've served me. And I admire, too, the expertise of the man who's trying to observe me without my spotting him.

The cut of his jumpsuit is familiar.

I pay the café's owner—his thanks are expressed in a guttural Lingshuan dialect I barely understand—then go outside to reclaim my pogo. I jump onto the saddle, and direct it into motion.

No one follows, as I head across the waves to Convenors' Hall.

There's another watcher stationed at the Hall. I spot him immediately, as I mag-tag the pogo against the jetty. Yet he's not waiting for me in particular: his gaze sweeps over me, and continues.

General observation duty, then.

Shoulders relaxed, thinking myself into a tourist's innocent, inquisitive state of mind, I walk whistling past stalls and tiny booths overlooking the water, then nip inside to the central hall. My instincts guide me to the dressing-rooms, where acrobats are already limbering up for the performance.

A small misshapen dwarf slips from his stool.

"Is there anyone in charge?" I ask him.

"That'll be me." Waving a strong, pudgy hand, "Owner of this sorry troupe."

A dancer, stretched out in splits with her cheek pressed against the floor, grins up at him. "You love us really, boss."

"Ha. Given half a chance, darlin'."

I can't help smiling.

"So, what can I do for you, young sir?" The dwarf's ugly face exudes presence, and I'm sure he has no trouble in charming the ladies into bed. "We don't give refunds, autographs, or personal tuition. If you know what I mean."

"Um ... The magician who performs after you folk." I clear my throat. "Could I speak to him, please?"

"Well"—the dwarf rubs his large nose, and for a moment I think he's going to

pick it, but then he stops—”he’s not one of us, strictly speaking—”

“He’s gone.” The dancer shifts position on the floor. “Lit out last night. His stuff’s disappeared.”

“Damn.”

“Sorry, friend.”

I bow then, and thank them for their time.

Threading my way back through the hall, I see that the observer is paying more attention to me now. I’m not sure what to make of this: I’m moving by instinct, not strictly according to my training.

But on the pogo’s saddle, when I reach the jetty, lies a small piece of flotsam, or possibly jetsam, whose provenance I recognize. When I look back, I briefly see the dwarf’s crooked face grinning from an open window. Then he is gone.

It’s a piece of wood from the floating forest.

Nothing is carved on it. No substances impregnate it. But the shard is a message nonetheless, and I kick the pogo into motion.

Shera...

Waves churn beneath me.

I spin the skimmerette around in a full circle, trying to catch sight of the observer, but failing. Then I press the right pedal, max the speed, and take a long arcing route away from the hall.

Shera. So beautiful.

—with an officer of the Royal Bodyguard?

Twin necklaces, are the small white sunlets across grey skies. Steel, now, are the waves beneath me. Rain is a constant force against my face.

I’m taking a deceptive tack, eventually to end up at the floating forest, and I can use the extra time to think. I kick outlandish theories back and forth in my mind, but I keep coming back to the one which makes sense. She’s an athlete, trained and watchful, and there are others like her—all strangers in Sherkalian City. And this is with the Royal Visitation about to occur, although the locals do not know of it.

A single conclusion stands.

She positions herself between me and the subject of my verse.

For a Blood Poet, only one solution can exist.

It stretches wide and confusingly, the floating forest, but eventually I spot the small cove we made fast in yesterday. Once there, I tag the pogo in place by looping its magline around a branch, then climb along a broader limb and into the thick of the forest.

Now, a decision. Do I wait in place? Or do I retrace yesterday's route, and find the tall tree which Shera and I climbed together?

I search inside for intuition, find nothing tangible. In the end, I shrug my shoulders, and set off along a different path: the direction in which the crew went yesterday, to gather the particular wood they needed.

The Tragedy of Whirlpool Dell. It makes a nice title. Let's hope today does not live up to such dark expectations.

Climbing, clambering...

It is much longer than I expected, this maze-journey of twisted limbs, of curling trunks and spreading branches, but eventually I come out into the open. I'm hanging off a branch high up in a natural amphitheatre. Below me lies a circular gap in the forest, some two hundred metres wide, that holds shining, grey, swirling water. There is no foaming turbulence, yet water spirals endlessly downwards into a central dip, pulling the surface below its natural level. It looks less chaotic yet far, far stronger than I expected.

The eponymous whirlpool calls to me, with more than the force of rotating water.

I climb down towards the surface.

I'm out on a limb ... above the torrent. Quite why I'm here, it would be hard to say. But I sit down anyway—the bark feels smooth beneath me—and dangle my feet above the water.

“Do you like it here?” The voice is soft, almost a whisper upon the rainy

breeze.

“I think so. Aesthetically speaking.”

He’s sitting beside me on the limb, the magician, although I did not hear him approach.

“A work of art?” Looking up at the sky, he adds: “And if so, is it a good one?”

I squint, eyes almost shut, all the better to regard the twin rows of suns above the clouds.

“The Ancient Ones,” I murmur. “Whoever they were, created magnificence.”

“Even so.” He nods, looks downwards, and I think he is pleased. He repeats: “Even so...”

Neither sea nor rain has made me cold, but I shiver nonetheless. “You’re performing no tricks tonight, magician?”

“Maybe.” There’s amusement in his glance, his voice. “Maybe not.”

A hood half-covers his shaven head, and his robe is dark and voluminous. It could hold numerous trick pockets and holoprojectors, but his illusions require no such devices.

I look up at the sky.

“If I go home,” I say, musing, “it will be by lightspeed vessel. They can make the shift instantaneously, you know, by massless resonance.”

“Ah.” As if I am revealing a great mystery to him. “And how does that work?”

“A shift of vibration into Calabi-Yau space,” is all I can tell him. “Moving energy into the unseen dimensions of spacetime. It transforms every particle in the ship to a massless state, which can only exist by travelling at lightspeed. And so it does.”

“Until it reaches its destination.”

I use his own words: “Even so.”

“And what other use do you make,” he asks, “of these hidden spaces beneath the universe?”

“Me personally? Or the human race?”

“Either or both, whichever you prefer.”

“Um ... No other use, either way.”

“Hmm.”

“There are other uses”—I’m guessing—“which we haven’t found yet.”

“Really? Such as?”

“Such as plucking forth playing-cards at will.”

He chuckles then, and I follow suit.

“There, you see?” The magician laughs hard, then coughs and begins to choke. “Four billion years of evolution, and it hasn’t gone to waste.”

I pat him on the back.

“Thank you.” He wheezes, then regains his breath. “I love your race. You bring such unexpectedness into my life.”

For a moment, I can only regard the whirlpool beneath my feet, not knowing what else to say. Then, “You personally?” I ask. “Or all the Elder Race?”

Smiling: “Neither one, my young, ephemeral friend.”

What does he mean?

“Just some of you, then. The ones who are left.” I work my way through the puzzle of his words. “A few individuals.”

“The ones who maintain an interest”—he waves his hand: a gesture which takes in sea and sky and forest, and the physical world in general—“in all of this.”

“While the others have moved on to better things.”

“Hmm.” For a moment, there is a darkness in his eyes beyond imagining. “More abstract, more abstruse. But *not* necessarily better, young Andrei.”

I don’t ask how he knows my name. I’ve a feeling there’s not much—not anything—I can hide from him.

Nor do I want to know *his* name, if he has one. Call it superstition, but there’s

a link between humans and the demons they've invoked, in every mythology I've read ... so let's just leave it there.

"Why—?" I stop.

He's removing a slender twig-like branch—how, I don't know—from the main limb, and braiding it into a loop. He places it on his head like a garland, or a crown.

"Why what?"

I know for a fact that the boat-crew used lase-cutters to get the wood. (They are the only folk who are licensed to carry energy-weapons here. Every building has smartscan enabled, to detect violations. Yet another reason for Blood Poets to prefer the blade.)

But the tough, iron-hard wood came apart in his hands—

It dawns on me, then, that the magician—I might as well continue to think of him that way—can kill me with a thought or a gesture.

"You say"—and I can hear the quaver in my so-called trained voice—"that you take an interest. Does that extend to petty human affairs?"

"Well." Pursing his lips: "It depends on what you mean by petty."

I swallow, look down into the water.

"The death of a ruler, perhaps."

There's another chuckle, but this time I have no inclination to join in.

"Well put, my young friend. Most often, the answer would be no."

"That means—"

"Queen Rhiannon is also a friend of mine. In a way."

I stare at him.

"She comes to see you?"

A smile. "She dreams of me, and thus I visit her."

"I don't—"

“You understand enough.”

There’s a finality to his words. I understand mainly that there is no point in arguing.

Why hasn’t he destroyed me already?

“Is this a test?” I ask.

“Why? Do you want a certificate?”

There’s nothing to say to that. After a moment, I get up slowly—awkwardly—to stand on the limb.

“I think it’s time for me to go.”

“Ah, time.”

“A pervasive phenomenon. I’m sure you remember it.”

Bravado, bravura. If I’m going to die anyway, it might as well be as a smart Alec.

“What if I said”—the magician is standing too, though I did not see him rise: he sat, now he stands—“there’s an energy you don’t recognize, which flits around in loops, and always at lightspeed?”

“Dark matter, you mean? Quintessence? Ancient tales—”

“But with a mass, which if you know your history, is how it was—Well, anyway. You see so little of the world which is truly there.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“Not even a tiny bit.”

The whirlpool swirls beneath me, while all around, the forest creaks ominously, continuously, in a way I did not recognize until just now. Even the wind, trapped and buffeted within the twisted maze of branches, whistles and echoes with nearly-words, a braided almost-sound of whispered conversation.

“Tell me, young Andrei. Have you never heard of a leap of faith?”

“Never.”

“Ha. But my gift is reserved for those who know their own hearts.”

A gift—

I stare downwards into the whirlpool.

“*Nice meeting you ...*” “ Distant words which might have been the wind. “My friend...”

Downwards.

Shera.

Maelstrom beneath me, roaring faster now.

For you...

Ever faster. Am I mad?

Shera, my love.

And leap.

...And snap into awareness, lying on my bed, the hotel-room’s safe wooden walls surrounding me.

A dream?

Except that I am dripping wet. I sit up, cursing, in my sodden clothes.

Some nightmare.

Outside, around the back of the hotel building, my pogo is neatly tagged in place with all the others, with one small addition. A braided crown of wood is hanging from the saddle.

I pick it up, and go inside via the public doorshimmer.

Walking past the hotel desk, I see the pretty, plumpish girl staring at me—I am dripping on the floor, after all—and I give her a rueful smile.

“You were right. You do need a sense of balance.”

“What—? Oh, I’m sorry. You fell in?”

“In a big way, yes.”

“Never mind. It happens to everybody.”

Not quite like this, I’m tempted to say.

But there are times when even a poet of the Mazhin a’Stansa Corisma should maintain his silence.

I lie awake, but no words come.

The next three days pass strangely, awkwardly.

Our dinner date was tentative, but when Shera failed to turn up at Convenors’ Hall, a deep, sure sickness took hold of me. I ate alone, morosely, not looking at the acrobats who were performing for the crowd. During an interval, I thought I saw the dwarf making his way towards me. I got up quickly and left, using my tu-ring to transfer payment and adequate tip.

As a quasi-tourist, I spend my time perusing local histories, looking at the sights, eating—small amounts—in as many different places as I can. Sometimes I notice the watchful men and women.

Twice, I see her.

She’s aboard a skimmer, both times, with men either side of her. It travels past the open restaurant where I’m having my solitary lunch, and for a moment her gaze catches mine—*I know why you’re here*, the look seems to say—and then she is past, leaving a white wake amid bobbing waves.

Later, inside a krifnajuice house, I find myself playing solo shachmati by candlelight, on three-dimensional wooden boards—every tabletop has them, along with other games—while I sip my drink and listen to the philosophers gathered at the next table over.

“—dialectic imperative,” one of them is saying, tugging earnestly at his long beard. “Forms the only possible explanation for—”

“Tsk, tsk.” A man wearing a soft white cap wags his knobbly finger. “Quantum predestination not only allows for teleological explanations, it positively demands them. Surely you must realize—”

“No!” Another man sits upright so abruptly he nearly tips the table over. “The *prima causa* which defines spacetime’s origin is both the tao-function’s boundary condition and the Divinity.”

I get up slowly, leaving them to it.

Perhaps I should work on my poetry, but I doubt the words will come tonight. That’s alright: the moment of ‘stuckness’ which precedes true inspiration. When I see Queen Rhiannon’s eyes at the moment of her death, that is when the whole poem will form in my mind—*sua sponte*, as these part-time intellectuals might say, and all of a piece—and I will strike.

Afterwards, I will use all my art and craft, through sleepless days and nights, to hone the words to perfection. But the true verse will strike in a split second: the rest is artifice.

“—mankind. I say...”

Someone’s talking to me, and for an instant my fingers twitch in a blade-release mudra, but I stop myself in time. It’s an old man, gesturing at his cronies.

“You heard their arguments. What do you think, young fellow?”

Are you addressing me? is the response which comes to mind. But I answer politely: “I think it’s all a bit beyond me.”

“Ha! See—” One of them is pointing an accusing forefinger at the old man who addressed me. “Nincompoops. No education. What I’ve said all along is—”

From a neighbouring tabletop where no one’s sitting, I cause a dinner-knife (no tine-spoons in this place) to disappear into my sleeve.

“Really, gentlemen.” I lean towards them. “My theory is—”

The knife is suddenly in the centre of their table, spinning. They twitch in time, like some group organism, noticing its presence.

“—that humankind knows nothing—”

Its spin slows.

“—about anything—”

And stops, pointing at the one who spoke to me.

“—at all.”

Their silence accompanies me as I leave.

I stop outside, leaning against a pillar, watching the waves. Thinking about quantum predestination, and the limitations of human understanding. Not to mention time's true nature, and life and death. Like that.

Ha!

But perhaps it is my Fate to be standing right here, right now, as the sea itself begins to foam and bubble before my eyes.

It begins—

Slowly at first, huge and convex and silver and magnificent, it starts to rise from the waves. Soon it towers: vast twin windows, hundreds of metres tall, like eyes to stare upon the tiny-by-comparison buildings it threatens to engulf. Those silver windows are at the great prow; behind it, long and magnificent, stand smooth panels surrounded by curlicued detail, all of it in silver. The body of the palace stretches back for kilometres ... maybe tens of kilometres. If I trod upon its hull, where it flares outwards, I could make my way from here back to my hotel on foot. And still, I sense, most of it remains submerged below the surface.

It is huge, and it is beautiful, and I find myself in awe of it. And pity myself, that I should dare to challenge the one who owns it, the one who rules within.

For Queen Rhiannon has arrived.

Halls of silver and glass. But it is not a monochrome palace: there are also great rooms and corridors of sapphire, of cream and gold, of burgundy. Royal-blue and azure tiles decorate a tessellated cloister bordering a courtyard—all within the palace hull—where fountains play and strange exotic birds (the first I've seen upon this world) fly and cavort and whistle their songs of courting and territorial warning. Fabulous half-seen serpents swim in transparent-sided tanks larger than most buildings.

Guards, wearing traditional half-armor and bearing halberds, stand at every major intersection and doorway. Halberds! But then, there are few energy weapons within the palace bounds. I felt the tingling of scanfields as I queued, along with hundreds of local commoners, to be allowed access into the palace's public decks. Not even my House's Weapons Masters know how to smuggle power-crystals

through smartscans: the essential components are always detectable.

My blades, on the other hand, appear part of my decorative tunic, and so pass inspection. One poignard, in the hand of a Blood Poet, is more dangerous than a dozen armed troopers bearing grasers or stringwhips.

And I have two dozen blades upon my person.

“Oh, look. How marvellous.”

It's the visitors' group that I'm with: they're admiring the paintings, loudly. I have to smile—not at their aesthetic sense, for the artwork is in fact well executed, but at their accents. They're adopting the patrician tones of their betters, as though the inanimate surroundings force linguistic patterns upon them.

“My word. Look at the infinite regression...”

We're in a hall of mirrors now, with shining pillars and sculptures everywhere, forming a maze of never-ending reflections in which it is easy to get lost without a guide. And that's where I slip away, into the nether world which visitors, unless they are damned unlucky, never get to see.

It's cold inside the shadowed slave-ducts, where the palace life-servants haul goods, or crawl from place to place, bearing new parts for servodrones—the public face of slavery—or merely food-cases (which they may not open) ... or anything at all. There is low illumination, pale among black shadows, for the benefit of overseers who must occasionally come inside.

Not for the slaves: they are dressed in ragged tunics, men and women alike, regardless of the cold. Pale-grey and silver scars ripple in the sockets where their eyes used to be.

There is no manumission for those taken into palace service.

I suppose I should not be surprised—the House Ethics Committee approved of my commission, after all—but I watch the slaves for a long, cold moment, before taking a deep breath, then moving on through the ducts and tunnels, to the great chamber where the Royal Audience takes place.

I look down upon it.

A sloping oval panel, transparent from my side, lets me view everything in the

great chamber below: the grand throne, with its spray of precious-metal jewel-encrusted rods, luxurious and threatening at the same time; the black, shining, obsidian floor which looks as cold as ice; the gathered petitioners by the thick baroque pillars; the armoured halberdiers.

The Queen, young and elegant, stands tall in her robes. Her dark crown pulses, and seems occasionally to twist out of existence. She's within the protective shimmerfield centred on her throne.

I peel the ceiling-panel open, ease myself through—out of sight from below, by virtue of an ornate platinum pillar—and drop downwards, spider-like. My belt-cord unravels, slowing my fall. I snap it off at the last moment, roll silently into a crouching position behind the pillar, and wait.

Heart beating faster—

There she is.

Behind the halberdiers, just outside the shimmerfield, stand the real defence: the plain-jumpsuited figures of the Royal Bodyguard. There are seven of them on duty, and Shera is among them.

“Look out! Over there!”

One of the petitioners is shouting, and pointing in my direction. Behind me, there's a discreet exit leading to the washrooms. What a mundane joke: he must have felt a sudden need (born of nervousness), tried to make an unobtrusive exit, and spotted me hiding here.

The nearest halberdiers come running at me, and there is no avoiding them. In a second, the first man is upon me.

Not Shera...

His blade passes close but I lean back just far enough. Then the edge of my thrust foot snaps his knee with a sickening crack. First man down.

Two more attackers are here, but I spin and pass my hands through an infinity-symbol gesture and now they're on their knees. Weapons clatter to the floor. They use their hands to stem the bloodflow. Crimson drops spatter from my twin blades.

“Stay back!” I cry out. “I'm not—”

But there's no arguing with them.

I use the daggers to block, digging into a halberd's haft, and take out the halberdier with a leaping knee-strike to the chin. Then I spring over him, away from his comrades...

And into range of the Royal Bodyguard.

The man is small and lean, and very fast, armed with two knives similar to my own. They slice through the air in dazzling patterns of speed and light. My right triceps suddenly burns—

“Never look at your wounds!” It's my Blade Master's remembered voice, yelling at me across the years. *“Fight for your life!”*

—but I take the bodyguard's lead wrist, and then the other, cutting twice. Disarming him, even as his final strike knocks both of my weapons from my hands. I spin away, leaving him to clasp his wrists—the arteries are severed—but his work is accomplished.

Shera is facing me.

“I didn't come to fight.” I get the words out quickly.

“You're a Blood Poet.”

From beyond the shimmerfield: “Don't dance with him.” It's a Royal command. “Kill him.”

I appear disarmed, but there are more blades within my tunic. Does Shera know this? She advances open-handed, weapons still tagged to her belt.

“I'm sorry.” Her glance flickers to one side. “This is my job.”

To prove her loyalty. Of course.

“Shera. You don't have to—”

She spins then, while my own words are distracting my cerebellar processes—or would be, in a fighter not trained in the distractive arts. Her heel grazes my jaw but I'm already moving in that direction, rolling as I grab—a sacrifice throw—and then we're both down on the ground but she's straddling me, in the superior position, ready to strike.

“Halt.” Queen Rhiannon gives the command. “But don't let him rise.”

Shera's hand is raised—in a hammer-fist, poised to descend—and a small deadly needle glints, reflecting the chamber's opalescent light.

I wonder how fast the needle's toxin works.

"Your majesty." I address Her Royal Highness, though I'm looking into Shera's eyes. "I'm not here to kill you."

"You're not?"

But Shera's body relaxes slightly. In that moment, we know everything of importance in our lives.

"He's telling the truth," she says.

Humans cannot lie to each other. Not when they communicate in all modalities, with their entire beings. Body language does not, cannot ever, deceive those who are open to its messages.

"I don't believe—"

Time to use the magician's gift.

I concentrate, and cause one of my poignards to snap into existence inside the shimmerfield, point slammed into the obsidian floor.

Now.

And then I am standing before the Queen, while her bodyguards are trapped outside the shimmerfield designed to protect their sovereign, not keep them from her.

"No commoner"—her face is pale with fear, but she does not step back—"may walk in here and live."

At that, I go down on one knee, and lower my head.

"I am Prince Andrei v'Danshin KaDonnel of the Mazhin a'Stansa Corisma de Calazzo Quattro. And I came here only to bid farewell to a warrior, one who would lay down her life for yours."

The shimmerfield snaps out of existence.

Someone's found the master control—

"No." The Queen's hand is raised.

Then she bends down, attempts to lift the embedded dagger, fails. Its blade is

part of the floor now, metal and obsidian intermingled at the molecular level.

“Hmm.” She stares at me. “I know you—”

“No, ma’am. But we have a friend in common.”

“A friend.”

“The kind to dream for. Or about.”

The Queen swallows then, and nods.

It’s true. She knows who I’m talking about. I stand close, then, and murmur, so softly that only she can hear: “*And he does not approve of slavery.*”

If I’m lying, who’s to say?

Though it’s a gambit, something changes in her eyes. Matching some message within her dreams? Perhaps I’m not so far off the mark, after all.

“Are any of my guards dead?”

The Queen addresses the question to me, but it is Shera who answers: “No, ma’am. Wounded, all treatable.”

I look behind me.

Medics are tending to the injured. The petitioners are huddled in a group at the rear, with guards protectively surrounding them. There are dozens more dragoons and halberdiers inside the great chamber, energy weapons levelled in my direction, ready to slay me at their queen’s command.

“So, Prince. What do you intend?”

“Only to say...”

I turn to face Shera, whose eyes are wide with sudden hope.

“...goodbye...”

My love.

“...before I leave for Calazzo IV.”

Did you think that I would kill Her Majesty? Even after I found out that my true love's life—her entire warrior's path, her way to enlightenment—was dedicated to preserving her ruler's health?

But that would ruin my mysterious benefactor's joke. On the one hand, to have given me the sole gift which would guarantee success; on the other, to have made success's consequence unbearable to me.

Shera. Your discipline, as profound as my own—

For insight was the true gift I received at the magician's hands.

And courage, to accept what I already knew.

Twin straight lines of blazing white spheres: they stretch back along a hall whose rectilinear interior is cut from featureless blue stone. Perhaps two metres in diameter, each globe shines so brightly that no motion is visible. They are spinglobes.

"It's peaceful, this place." Shera's voice echoes back oddly. "Don't you think?"

"No. I think you shouldn't be here."

Not here, my darling.

But the shuttle-pad lies beyond the far doors, and this—by design—is the only way to reach it. I am leaving, and Shera must remain behind.

"I'm going to do it." Her tone is soft but determined. "I will."

Then we kiss, just for the briefest moment. Her warm lips are silk-like, desperate to absorb me. I *want* to sink into her. I want to stay here, with her, forever. She is me, and I am her: entanglement can't even begin to describe it.

"Please don't, Shera. I don't know what will happen there, back home."

I love you.

But I cannot stay. I must not. The consequences, to me and to Shera and the Queen, and to the Great House I belong to, are all unthinkable.

This departure hall is a deliberate reminder, to those who are embarking on voyages across the light-centuries, that there are others waiting at home, spinning in

their chambers at the speed of light, where duration has no more meaning than to a photon, or a lightship. They are frozen in place. Waiting, perhaps forever...

Spinglobes are illegal upon Calazzo IV.

“It’s the only way,” Shera says, “that I know you’ll keep yourself alive. Or try to.”

“No.” If I fail to live, she’ll never waken. Is that better or worse than death?

I love you! It’s a silent howl inside me, tearing me open.

“So someone must die? Then let me come with you.”

I shake my head. “It’s not allowed.” Allowed. As if rules matter. As if anything matters more than her.

Shera shrugs her shoulders, then, as if to say: *See? That proves I’m right.*

“Take care, my prince. My love. Use your new strength. Come back to me.”

I want to stay. I need to.

Her hand is soft against my face.

But the consequences...

It’s time for me to go.

Fate and consequence. Shuffle the deck, and deal. Pick a card, any card—

The Joker grins, then chuckles.

Face pressed against the cold viewpanel, I watch the landing-pad drop away below, until her small figure is lost amid drizzling rain, clouds closing in ... And she is gone.

Shera, my true eternal love.

Soon there is darkness outside the viewport—we’re at low-orbit altitude—and for the first time in days there are stars visible, beyond the twin rings of suns placed here by the Ancient Ones: dealers in unknowable magics, sometime bringers of gifts.

My soul has been torn apart, and I groan with the ache of it.

It will be a while before the tangledrop station is visible, or the lightship which is waiting there. Waiting for me, to take me home. It will send a tangleblip—there is bandwidth enough for such short messages—so that the Tribunale Transgressioni will know in which year to expect me. They will activate no punitive action against anyone here on Quinvère.

If I don't go, they might send Dad.

For who else would take responsibility—leave his wife forever, on a one-way trip to right the worst wrong imaginable—for dealing with a Blood Poet who has besmirched the name of the Mazhin a'Stansa Corisma?

I wish I could see you both, my parents. But I pray that you'll be centuries dead, long at peace, by the time I get there.

Silver stars, black velvet space. And at journey's end, a red climax awaits, within the long Duello Cruciato.

Forgive me ... however this ends.

For whatever else is true, I do know this: I am a Blood Poet of the House of the Crimson Stanza, a prince of the finest Great House upon Calazzo IV, and we have endured ten thousand Standard Years by the strength of our discipline, the depth of our perception, the power of our love. *I love you, Shera!* Yet greater than any man or woman is the Tao San'Verso, the Way of Blood and Verse, and none shall gainsay the insight which kills, the enlightenment of word and blade.

Of those who were to die, some have lived. This has been known. Yet never has a Poem, once commissioned, failed to come into being ... however much the poet must suffer.

Tao San'Verso, I dedicate myself to thee—

And every great Poem ends with Blood.