

Passing of the Minotaurs

by Rjurik Davidson

For the first time in ten years the minotaurs came to the city of Caeli-Amur from the winding road that led through the foothills to the north. There were three hundred or more of them. From the city they appeared as tiny figures—refugees perhaps. But as they approached, the size of their massive bodies, the magnificence of their horned bull-heads, the shape of their serrated short-swords, became apparent. The minotaurs had come for the Festival of the Bull. When the week was over, they would descend from the white cliffs on which the city perched and board the ships that would carry them out over the sunken city and home to their Island of Aya.

The citizens of the city watched the minotaurs silently, from their balconies or the city's white walls. Some of the elderly leaned toward each other and whispered: "So few? There are so few of them." Many of the children, especially from the factory districts, ran out to meet the magnificent creatures, laughing and calling to them until they drew close and the power and size of the minotaurs quietened them. Gliders swung out over the creatures and watched them from above, safe on the cool currents of air that swept in from the sea. Finally, when the minotaurs arrived at the city, some, who still held to the old ways, fell onto their knees in supplication. The minotaurs were still worshipped as gods by a few, though to harm them was considered a crime by all.

The orderly line broke apart when the minotaurs entered the city and spread out like tributaries into a delta: some climbed their way down to the water-palaces and steam-baths that ran along the peninsula at the north side of Caeli-Amur, others caught the sooty street-trams through the windy streets along the cliffs. Others took the cable car that ran from the massive machine-tower near the piers to the top of the cliffs. Those minotaurs seeking knowledge found their way to Caeli-Amur's famous cafés, where the philosopher-assassins debated in the afternoon, drinking coffee and eating fruit. By nightfall, the minotaurs could be found in the liquor palaces and beer halls.

In one such drinking tavern, long after the sun had descended over the mountains to the west, Kata eyed a group of minotaurs. They dominated the place, which was little more than a hot and dirty hall with a bar along one wall. The men sat frightened and quiet along the walls or in the corners, or slinked past the minotaurs, hoping not to brush against them. Minotaurs were quick to anger, especially when they were filled with beer or hot liquor. Kata knew she would have to approach; she needed two of them. But first things first, she thought, as she took a drink of the bitter liquid from the flask at her waist. She kept her face still, though she wanted to grimace. The medicine tasted earthy and pungent, like dirt and ul-tree roots mixed together.

She watched and scratched distractedly at the metal sheaths that rubbed against her skin beneath her shirt. Realizing what she was doing, she stopped. The shirt was dark and loose, and she wore a skirt that reached her knees. Together they showed off her shoulder-length hair, which was black as the minotaurs' eyes. Beneath her clothes Kata was lithe but unusually muscular; she was an athlete, of sorts.

A group of four minotaurs sat laughing at the front of the room, telling each other jokes about labyrinths and reminiscing about the Numerian Wars. She remembered the Festival of the Bull a decade earlier, when she was living on the streets after her mother's death, but had forgotten the sheer *physical presence* of the minotaurs. Their shoulders and chests were like the statues of Caeli-Amur's heroes that stood in

the water-parks to the south of the city, where waterfalls and canals cut their way through light woods and the statues were seven, eight feet of white marble, muscles sculpted beneath their stone cloaks. But it was the minotaurs' heads, those most valuable of trophies, that emanated majesty: the flaring nostrils, the wiry and scented hide, and most especially, the deep and dark eyes, mesmerizing and inhuman. Kata was afraid to look into the eyes, but she would have to.

To one side along the bar sat a slightly smaller minotaur with a dark hide. He did not speak but seemed to be brooding.

That one, she thought.

She slid down the bar and stood next to him.

"Why are you watching us?" he asked.

She could not look him in the eye; she felt guilty. "How far is it to Aya, across the sea?"

"Five days, if the wind is good."

"Why don't you use steamers? You could be sure to arrive in time."

"Tradition. Anyway, I do not trust steamers. What if they break on the open sea? What if those wheels along their sides fall off? Give me the wind any day. It cannot be conquered but offers its gifts freely. It is a trusty partner, at times."

She looked up into his left eye and then away from its glistening darkness. Its inky magnificence horrified her.

"What have you here, Aemilius?" The booming voice came from another minotaur. She forced herself to look up at the massive head, towering over her. She held his eye for a moment before looking away.

"You know," he said, stepping toward her so his chest came close to her face, "there was a time when a minotaur could stay wherever he liked during the Festival of the Bull."

The smaller one sat impassively. "Those days are gone, Cyriacus."

Kata stood up and placed her hand against Cyriacus's chest, which was like a solid wall close to her face. His presence was magnetic, his strength palpable. She pushed against him. He didn't move. She pushed harder, and he took a step backward. "It's rude to stand so close to someone you do not know," she said.

Cyriacus laughed and turned. "Hey, Dexion. We have a spirited one here."

Aemilius leaned into her and said, "It is not wise to play with minotaurs. They are unpredictable and dangerous."

"I can hold my own," she replied. He nodded, turned, and walked away, leaving her with Cyriacus.

"Have a drink," the minotaur said, handing her his own tankard.

She took a swig of the liquor, which burned her throat. She held back the cough. "Anlusian hot-wine,"

she said, feeling her lips and mouth burn with the spices, the vapor rushing into her nose, making her eyes water.

"Yes. These new liquors fire the belly and the mind."

"I live close to here," she said. "I have more wine there, and it is free."

He stood close to her again, and she felt the heat of his breath on her face. She forced herself to look up into his deep black eyes and put her hand against his chest again. This time she did not push him away.

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They climbed up the stairs that ran along the side of the house, Cyriacus behind her. The key rattled in the lock, and the door swung open into her first-floor room. Kata lit the lamp by the door. It was her windowless parlor, a kitchen off to one side. More stairs led up to her bedroom and a balcony that overlooked the northern parts of the city.

Kata walked over to the table and leaned against it. Cyriacus slammed the door behind him—it shuddered on its hinges. He strode toward her, grasped her by the waist, lifted her like a doll, and sat her on the table, leaning in so she could smell the hot spices of the Anlusian wine and his hide, scented with pungent ginger and clove perfume. She touched the side of his face, feeling the thick and wiry hair. But still she could not look him in the eyes. Quickly she took her hands from his face so she would be ready.

Cyriacus stepped in and pulled her closer by the hips, so their bodies were hard against each other, Kata's legs splayed around his trunklike thighs, her skirt riding up her legs. She placed her hands on the table behind her as he slowly and carefully unbuttoned her shirt. He looked down to see the waistband that held the sheaths behind her back.

"What?" he said, laughing. "A knife belt? What would a little—"

But Kata had already drawn both long-daggers. She plunged them into his ribs. Cyriacus let out a deafening roar and threw the table away from him. Kata flew through the air backward, the table rolling and spinning beneath her. She struck the wall and fell to the ground, the table crashing against her shins. She felt no pain yet, just the rush of adrenalin.

Cyriacus stared down at the two daggers, his head shifting from left to right in disbelief. Only the handles were visible, one jutting from each side. Blood coursed in deep red streams down his waist and onto his thighs. He snorted, looked up at her and said, "You've killed me."

Kata struggled to her feet and stared back at him. She was horrified by the scene: everything was wrong. Though she had killed before, it had always been in the wars between the Houses. She had felled three men with her knives, watching them collapse in seconds before her. It was war and she felt no remorse. Now she could hardly bear the sight of this magnificent creature at the end of its life.

Astonishingly, Cyriacus came at her. She turned and ran to the stairs that led up to her bedroom, thumping footsteps close behind her. She pushed herself, taking the steps three at a time, her breath loud

in her ears. If she could make it to her bedside table she might stand a chance.

She burst into the room and dived across the bed, reaching for her bolt-thrower on the small table. From the corner of her eye she saw him charge into the room. She turned, raised the bulky weapon and fired a bolt. Blood spurted from his abdomen like pollen from an open flower.

He staggered back and came at her again. She threw open the doors and ran onto the balcony, reloading the thrower. No man could withstand such physical punishment, yet Cyriacus still came at her, massive and godlike. She heard the final click of the thrower and raised it, but it was too late. He was on her, his force crushing her against the balcony wall. A cry escaped her lips. So, she thought, this is how it ends—I was wrong to commit this blasphemy.

His breath steamed from his nostrils; his long, thick tongue lolled from his mouth. "I will crack your neck like a rabbit's," he said, grasping the top of her head in one huge hand. "I will take you with me, woman, to the land of light."

"Please," she said, her voice broken.

Cyriacus looked at her in puzzlement, blinked slowly, his hands losing their strength, and crashed to the floor like a cliff into the sea.

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Kata left him there, changed her clothes, and walked out into the night. She cut through the factory district, full of dirt and grime, the smoke from the underground machines pumping out even at night. She had grown up in these streets, after her mother had died, running with the urchin gangs, selling trinkets, stealing, doing odds and ends for House Technis, running messages, setting up robberies and murder. Finally, she joined the long ranks of dispossessed philosopher-assassins who lived moment to moment in Caeli-Amur, debating in the cafés in the afternoon, lounging in the liquor halls in the evening, convinced they were free but forever at the beck and call of the Houses.

When she lived on the streets, Kata had been a pinch-faced girl, scrawny but sly. She had never forgotten her mother's last words, as she lay in the factory infirmary, her face a splotchy red-white, the contagion eating away at her insides: "Do whatever you must to survive, Kata. The gods know there's nothing else to do." And then blood had come to mother's lips and dribbled down her chin, her chest had thrust itself forward unnaturally, an awful odor was loosed in the room, and she had died. The next day Kata was on the street. She cried that first day—never again. Now she had one more minotaur to kill and she would be free.

Now Kata climbed to the complex of palaces and administration buildings and found Officiate Rudé, a wiry little half-Anlusian administrator of House Technis. Things were set in motion. Rudé accompanied her with two workmen back to the house in the carriage that would secretly carry away the minotaur. She took them to the balcony but avoided the sight of the minotaur's body.

Rudé took a sharp intake of breath and ran his hands through his fire red hair, speckled slightly with white. "Majestical," he said. "Fascinating. I should have liked to have talked to him ... " Like most

Anlusians, he had a youthful visage for someone so late in life: it was his quick and energetic movements, his lithe and boyish body. "I didn't think you would do it."

"I told you I would," said Kata.

"I knew you were hard, but even so."

She stole a glance at the creature. It lay at odd angles against the balcony wall.

"Get to work," Rudé ordered.

The workmen opened their cases and took from them mechanical saws and jagged knives with wicked blades.

"And be careful of the horns. They're the most valuable pieces. And the hide."

"You people . . .," Kata said.

"Remember, you asked for this job," Rudé said, looking away from the minotaur.

Kata could not bear the high whine of the saw or the wet thump of the minotaur's flesh, so she walked down the stairs.

As Rudé followed her, he called back: "Don't damage the eyes. Our thaumaturgists need those eyes for their preparations. Don't get anything in the eyes." He followed Kata into the room and said, "One more, Kata, and your debt will be repaid. Think about that. Think about how hard you've worked. Just one more minotaur."

"Even if I repay the debt, I'll never be free of you. None of us ever will. It doesn't matter which House, you're all the same."

Rudé threw his head back and laughed. "Kata, remember, without us you'd still be on the street. Remember who this building belongs to."

From above, she could still hear the sickening sound of meat and bone being cut to pieces. When they left, she suddenly felt her legs and back. She looked down at her blood-covered shins, pieces of skin scraped into ridges near her ankles. The adrenalin had long ago left her and now all she could feel was pain.

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Two nights later, Kata watched the Sun Parade, celebrating the moment four hundred years earlier when the sun had broken through the fog and Saliras's forces had been routed by the minotaurs and the Caeli-Amurians together. The parade descended from the top of the cliffs toward the public square by the piers. Figures walked with hideous masks: distorted faces that looked as if they had melted in great heat, goats with gigantic eyes and too-thin faces, and, of course, bulls. Others played thin, high-pitched

flutes or circular drums that fit beneath their arms and could be squeezed to change the note. All were dressed outrageously in oranges, reds, yellows. Crowds watched from the side of the road, clapping at the leering masks. Scattered among them were the minotaurs.

Kata glanced at the crowd. On the other side of the road stood the smaller and darker minotaur she had met at the bar. She emptied the acrid medicine from her flask, gagging as she swallowed it. It was the last of the preparation. When she had finished the job, she would be able to afford more. She had spent most of her remaining money at the markets, buying deadly herbs. From these she had prepared poison, mixing it with the flagon of wine, which she then placed in her cupboard. She could not risk another fight: who would have believed anyone could be as strong as Cyriacus, to take so much physical punishment?

She had enough poison for ten men. That should be enough.

She scuttled gingerly through a break in the parade. Her shins were still scabby and bruised.

"Hello," she said to the minotaur.

"Ah," he said, "the woman who can hold her own. And did you?"

She smiled. His eyes did not seem so terrible this time; they seemed to be laughing. "I always hold my own."

"I see. I'm Aemilius."

"Kata," she said. "You're not marching in the parade."

He shrugged and looked to the sky. "Look at the moon. Can you see Aya's handprints, side by side, from when he threw it into the sky?"

"It's bright, isn't it?"

"So bright that on a clear and calm night like this, you can see the sunken city through the crystal water."

"No." Kata frowned in disbelief.

"I swear. Would you like to see?"

She hesitated. She should take this chance. It was falling into her lap. "Yes."

They marched together up to the great steam towers, full of the thumping and clattering that powered the cable car from the top of the cliff to the pier. There were too many people on the streets, and the walk would have been a long one. They stepped into the cable car, which filled with white-haired people with pointy beards or shawls or aging, curved backs.

As they swung over the city, looking at the parade winding below like a cascade of lights, Kata noticed the passengers in the carriage kept away from Aemilius. She recognised their wide-eyed apprehension.

"You realize the effect you have on those around you," she whispered to him.

"Of course." Aemilius did not look about: to do so would be undignified.

"You have a strange bearing; you hold yourself apart somehow."

"And you," he said. "You do also."

She looked away from him, down at the street-trams caught in the traffic below. She could think of nothing more to say.

They reached the quay, with its nine piers jutting into a glassy, silent ocean, the moon hovering above, lighting a section of it in one silvery molten band. Aemilius paid a boatman and took a rowboat.

"It's too far," she said. "We need a steamer."

"It's not too far. Get in."

She hesitated, then stepped onto the dark wooden planks of the boat.

Aemilius rowed away from the city, over the glassy ocean, the oars making satisfying creaks against the wooden oarlocks and subtle splashes as they entered the water. They were silent as they left the city far behind; they could still hear the laughter and the pipes and drums of the festival floating over the water.

"Look," said Aemilius after some time.

Kata peered over the edge of the boat and put her hand to her chest in astonishment. "You can see it, you can really see it."

Beneath them the sunken city shimmered silvery white. Buildings and boulevards came suddenly into focus and then blurred again as the water moved quietly beneath them.

"The entire city was once white marble," said Aemilius. "I walked those streets when I was young. I watched white-caparisoned horses pull crow black carriages. I watched street-officers lighting gas lamps on hot summer nights as lovers drifted through the wide streets."

"How old are you?" asked Kata.

"Five hundred and twelve."

Kata drew a long, quiet breath. So old. Eventually she said, "There is a sadness about you."

"Look," he said. "Can you see something moving down there? They say there are still sea-serpents with heads like houses, bodies big as Numerial caravans."

"There are," she said. "I've seen them. They come closer to land during the winter." She caught a glimpse of something snaking its way through the sunken city's streets. It seemed to warp in and out of existence. A chill ran down her spine. Should it surface, their rowboat would capsize and the serpent would swallow them whole.

"Perhaps we should head back," she said.

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Again, Kata led a minotaur up the cobblestoned alleyway to her house. Again the creature came in without encouragement, looking around her parlor with interest. He stopped at the bookshelf with the few philosophical classics she could afford: Marka's *Unintentional Action* and Ugesio's *Morality and Madness*, the two most popular texts.

"You taught yourself philosophy?" he said.

"A little."

"This book, *Unintentional Action*, what does it argue?"

"Ah, one of the new philosophers. Marka argues we only have the illusion of choice, the illusion of free will. He says that we are controlled by our past, by our surroundings, that we are forced into certain actions." The streets where Kata lived as a child, the death of her mother, flashed into her mind, as did her desperate and ongoing desire to escape them, to escape the memory of them.

"And what do you think?" Aemilius asked.

"I think he's right. We are all forced to do things we'd rather not, to compromise."

"But is it not possible that our very knowledge of those forces allows us *some* measure of freedom?"

Kata closed her eyes. "I don't know. Sometimes I don't even know where I am."

"The ancients said that everything has its place," said Aemilius. "Everything finds its place."

"Those days have passed."

"Perhaps."

"Would you like a drink?" She felt a knot in her stomach and tried to swallow, her throat dry with fear. Nausea began to build up in her body. Her little finger twitched for a moment and was still. Oh no, she thought, not now. She fought the rising sickness back.

"Yes," he said.

She walked to her small kitchen, took the flagon of wine, two cups, and placed them on the bench. She stared at them.

"You have no windows in this room?"

"It's hemmed in on all sides. Above, there is a balcony."

"It is a sparse house. Not much comfort here."

"As much comfort as I need. I fought for this place. I struggled for it. Even now it is not yet mine." She stared at the flagon. She should pour the cups, but she could not. Nausea rose again in her body. Oh no,

she thought. Quickly. She unstopped the flagon but set it down again on the bench before she dropped it. Her legs gave way beneath her and her body shook violently, as if her legs and arms were driven by an engine. She gurgled as the fit came on. Aemilius was above her, grasping her shoulder.

"Kata, can you hear me?" He grasped her hand. "Squeeze my hand. Try to squeeze my hand."

Though her body shook and spasmed, she was aware of his presence above her. He held her hand and her shoulder and he comforted her. Though his voice faded away, as if down a long corridor, she was not entirely alone.

When the fit was over, she felt as if she had been wrung like a wet piece of clothing, twisted and distorted and empty. Aemilius carried her upstairs to her bed and laid her down.

"You will be all right now," he said. "But you must sleep."

Kata closed her eyes and opened them again. Aemilius was sniffing the air and looking around curiously.

Exhausted, Kata closed her eyes again. She drifted off to the sight of him sitting above her, his deep eyes impassive, occasionally closing as he looked down on her. When she woke he was gone.

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Rudé let himself in during the afternoon, as she lay on her cushions in the corner of the room, still exhausted from the fit. It took her a day to recover, at least, and now that she had run out of the preparation that eased her condition, her body would remain tired and drawn.

"This is my house," she said to Rudé, lifting her head with effort. "You can't just come in here."

"But I can," he said, holding up his key, straightening his sharp-lined clothes. "And I will."

"I need money, for medicine."

"Do you now? The agreement was *two* minotaurs. Not one."

"I need an advance."

"I see. Well, don't ever claim that House Technis is not generous, that it doesn't look after its own." He carefully placed a pile of ten florens on the table, stacked like a little tower. "By the end of the Festival, yes?"

"Yes."

There was a knock on the door. Rudé, his wiry little body always full of quick movements, darted against the wall for protection. Officiates lived always in fear, even though the vicious war between House Arbor and House Technis had recently fallen into a lull. They worked at the most vulnerable level, out on the streets, meeting their agents and assassins face to face. They were powerful enough to be targeted, but

not high enough in the House hierarchy to warrant protection.

"Get the door," Rudé said, pulling out a long-knife from underneath his jacket.

Kata pushed herself to her feet and wearily opened the door. Aemilius stood towering behind it.

"Come in."

"I came to see if you were feeling better."

"I am, thank you."

"Well, look," said Rudé, smiling slightly, the knife hidden. "A minotaur. Fantastic ... Let me see. But you're a little small for a minotaur, aren't you?"

"Is greatness measured by size?" asked Aemilius.

Rudé approached Aemilius, looking even smaller as he came close to the minotaur. "Incredible."

"A friend of yours?" Aemilius asked Kata.

"Oh," said Rudé, "I've known Kata since she was just a girl. I've seen her ... grow up."

Aemilius nodded, as if thinking.

"I'd better go," said Rudé, grinning quickly. "There are things to do! But I should very much like to see you again, minotaur. I should very much like to talk to you."

"Perhaps you shall," said Aemilius as Rudé closed the door behind him. "Strange," he said to Kata, "is he a New-Man, with all that quick energy?"

"He is half-Anlusian," said Kata, swaying slightly on her feet. "You can see it in his actions, his movements ... his ambition."

"I have never been to Anlusia, but I should very much like to see it. They say the New-Men are voracious, insatiable, that they take everything they can and destroy it to rebuild it. They say their city is constantly growing, constantly changing."

"But is that any way to live? Isn't that just distracting yourself from who you are, by concentrating solely on what you do, what you have?" She pursed her lips and thought of the time she'd spent on the streets, of her desire to own her house.

"Of course. And for that reason I should like to see it. To watch the New-Men build their technical wonders, only to throw them away."

Kata shuffled to the kitchen. The flagon was where she left it. "Would you like some wine? We didn't have a chance last night."

"No. I have someone to meet. Thank you, though."

Kata breathed a sigh of relief. She was not well enough today. She returned the flagon to the cupboard

and walked him to the door.

"Rest," Aemilius said.

"I will."

She closed the door behind him and collapsed onto the cushions in the corner. She would kill him, or perhaps another minotaur, tomorrow. But even as she thought it, her mind was filled with doubt.

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Kata bought her medicine the next day at the market, with the money Rudé had given her. As she drank the preparation, she felt strength grow in her limbs.

She searched for a minotaur, but every time she found one, something stood in her way. First there were too many of them, gathered in the steam baths on the northern peninsula of the city, with no way of isolating one. Another simply ignored her when she approached him in a café. A third, telling stories of the Numerian Wars and Saliras's assault on the city, was surrounded by wide-eyed young women, their hands reaching out to touch him. Yet others laughed and played games with sticks and bone dice with old men and women. The citizens had grown more comfortable with the presence of the minotaurs.

With each failure she felt the sickly feeling of dread creeping into her. Desperation made everything seem out of focus. Her eyes flittered from one person to another.

Slowly she made her way up the white cliffs on foot. Finally she scaled the winding stairs that hugged the cliff like a mountain-goat trail, doubling back on itself dangerously, at places so steep as to be almost a ladder. Eventually she reached the Artists' Square, jutting from the cliff like a great sandy disc. Painters with their easels were dotted between tables where men with braided hair and spectacles drank green tea. There she found Aemilius playing chess with another minotaur.

Kata sat next to them and looked over the city below. It was beautiful, despite the smoke that rose constantly from the factories. The city was silent; only the sound of the artists' voices could be heard, rustling on the wind.

"This is Kata, Dexion," said Aemilius.

"You have a new friend already?" said Dexion, whose hair was light and sandy. His hands were smooth and young.

"I do," said Aemilius, looking at Kata.

"You old ones, you never surprise me with your cunning," said Dexion.

"No," said Aemilius, "nothing like that."

"Oh no. Nothing like that," said Dexion, laughing also. "Actually, I remember seeing her with Cyriacus."

You know, no one's seen him in days. There are rumors . . . rumors of abductions, of a black market."

"Rumors don't stand for the truth. He'll be around," said Aemilius, looking across to Kata.

Kata felt her stomach tense but kept her face impassive.

Dexion nodded and said, "I'll leave you two to your . . . friendship then."

"But our game?"

"Next time."

"You're only leaving because I have the upper hand."

But Dexion was already walking away across the square, looking around happily.

"The city is beautiful from the square," she said.

"Look at the smoke though, poisoning the air."

"I grew up on the streets around those factories. I learned to love the dirty alleyways, the grime-covered walls."

"Yes," he said, "there's energy in the new technologies. Many possibilities. Many choices."

They sat in the afternoon sun, watching the painters around them try to capture the scene just so, in their very own ways, and talked. Aemilius had been born on Aya. Like all minotaurs he had burst forth from rock full of mighty rage, clamoring for knowledge and adventure. He had sailed on sleek longboats, traveled the deserts of Numeria, studied now-lost texts such as Sumi's *Necromancy and Agency* in the ancient library of the sunken city.

Kata tried to keep the conversation focussed on Aemilius, but eventually he asked her about herself.

"My mother died of the contagion when I was a child", she replied. "She had worked the factories for House Technis. I remember her hands were knobbly from the spinning wheels. When you held one, you could feel the calluses and where there had been breaks. But you know what the Cajun philosophers say, 'One must pass straight through pain—to attempt to avoid it is to warp your life, to cripple yourself.'"

"It intrigues me that you would know such philosophy. I thought it was out of fashion," said Aemilius.

"It is, among the House philosophers. But many of the philosopher-assassins still contemplate it. Many who still live in the margins, or who, like me, grew up on the streets."

He looked over at her curiously before taking her hand in his own rough fingers. "And you have raised yourself up. Look at you now: a real citizen of the city, free, capable."

"Come," she said, "let's go."

She took him back down the staircase, the wind picking up to buffet away their talk. And then down through the streets that grew in size, where children laughed and ran barefoot between houses and old men sat silently on stools by the front doors of their square, blocklike cottages.

Kata led him ultimately to her house. She took him inside and walked to the kitchen. She opened the cupboard door and glanced at the flagon. She left it there and walked back out of the kitchen. Aemilius stood before her, majestic. She reached out and placed her hand on his chest. It did not ripple with muscles as Cyriacus's had, but his body was powerful nonetheless. Kata leaned in and rested her head against his chest, reaching up to touch his hairy face, the bristles wiry and oiled beneath her hand. The smell of sweat and perfume intoxicated her, and she felt calm as his arms closed in around her. She closed her eyes and felt his chest rising and falling beneath her cheek. Pushing back, she looked up into his onyx eyes, noticing for the first time the soft and dark eyelashes that interlaced beautifully as he blinked.

"Come upstairs," she said.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I have to leave at the end of the week."

"I don't care. Come upstairs." She turned and pulled him by the hand. He came, hesitantly, behind her, as if she were leading a child into the dark.

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They lay the next morning in her bed, watching the light as it slowly shifted in intensity across the wall. In the afternoon, when he left to buy fruit from the markets, she locked the cupboard that held her bolt-thrower. When he returned, they ate the fruit naked at the table.

"Look at this," he said, running his fingers along the roughened edge of the table that had been scraped when she'd killed Cyriacus.

"Scraped when I brought it through the door."

"I hope you didn't fall and give yourself those bruises," he said.

"No. Those came from Cyriacus."

"Ha!" He threw his head back.

"What?"

"I knew. I smelled his blood on the balcony. What happened?"

"We fought. I struck him and he left."

"He left? Just like that? Don't lie to me. I know what he tried to do. The young minotaurs, they let pain

make their decisions for them."

"It's not what you think. He didn't ..."

"I'm sorry for whatever happened. I'm sorry you had to go through that."

She crossed her arms and clenched her teeth.

Aemilius reached over and placed his hand over hers. "You are distant."

"To be close to someone is ... dangerous."

After he left, Kata lay on the cushions and cried, cursing House Technis and their hold over her. She had volunteered so readily, a chance to cancel all her debts at once. But now ... She had to kill another minotaur. It was sacrilege, of course, which is why they had agents like her do it.

She could not fail. She had two days.

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Kata sat in the almost-barren room before a polished redwood desk. She looked out of the window to the hanging gardens with their red round fruit, their tinkling waterfalls and marble fountains. Soft purple flowers floated on the breeze. She smelled pollen and overripe fruit.

The door opened and Rudé entered. He sat in the red leather chair behind the desk. "Well?"

"I want to change the agreement."

"We can't. We have customers waiting for the different parts of the body. And the House's thaumaturgists are waiting for the eyes, the liver and kidney, and the skin."

"Perhaps you could get someone else to do it."

"Yes. I suppose we could. But it's a bit late now. Anyway, I've already given you an advance."

"That was hardly worth the price of the first minotaur."

"Yes, but let's see. You still owe us for half the house. Now, we could repossess that ... but you don't want to go back on the street, do you? Anyway, look at it this way, Kata: it's time for you to show some loyalty. Loyalty will get you far in this world."

She rose to her feet and leaned over the desk at him. "Everyone finds their proper place, you know, Rudé. One day you'll find yours."

"Fine," he said, as if Kata had not spoken at all. "I'll come to collect the body at the end of the Festival tomorrow night. I trust you'll be obliging."

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Kata met Aemilius in Lataza, a tiny coffeehouse specializing in exotic fruits, nestled dangerously high on the south side of the cliffs where white houses and eateries piled upon each other like children's blocks. The coffee there was dark and imported, the cigars rolled across the sea in Ambibia, and the owner a wasted old man called Pezhi who coughed up blackened phlegm between bouts of wheezy laughter. Nearing death, Pezhi found everything hilarious.

When Kata and Aemilius entered, Pezhi was talking to a fat philosopher-assassin with a shaved head and two bolt-throwers dangling from the back of his belt. Another couple played chess in one corner, their backs against the wall. Kata took Aemilius out onto the tiny, semicircular balcony where a small table allowed them to look over the city and the sea. Kata looked at the peninsula with its steam baths and liquor palaces on the far side of the piers. She would not look at Aemilius.

"I shall not see you again," she said.

"I see."

Pezhi stepped out onto the balcony holding a tray. He placed the coffees on the table. "Waterberry pastries?"

"No."

Pezhi nodded, laughed to himself about something, and left them alone.

Eventually Kata said, "You're leaving the day after tomorrow. You'll sail across the sea to Aya. That's that."

"I see."

"Is that all you can say? 'I see'? What about me? Why are you so ...?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, opened them again and reached out to her. "You don't have to feel alone."

"Oh, but I do," she said. "I do have to feel alone."

He lifted her up in both hands and held her close to him. She could hear his heart beating in his chest, and felt the warmth radiating into her cheek.

"Look over there," he said. "Can you see how the color of the sea changes as it passes over the sunken city? There are many who still lie on those marble streets, with skeletal horses and crumbling carriages around them. They are the only ones who should feel alone. But we—you and I—we are alive."

"Come back with me," she said. "Come back to my house and never leave. Never go to Aya."

Later, when he was asleep in her bed, she watched as his eyes moved beneath their lids in sleep. Sometimes he groaned and half-lifted an arm, as if there was something to fend off in his dreams. She did not sleep that night, but lay awake thinking of how they would spend their last day together. And what she would tell Rudé.

Perhaps there was a chance to convince Aemilius to stay; they would not have to live in Caeli-Amur. They could escape the city and find somewhere quiet. But in her heart she knew it to be a dream, for he was a child of Aya. But she would struggle for it, just as she had for everything in her life.

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In the morning she left him asleep and walked the streets alone. She wandered through the factory quarter, breathing the soot and grime that rose from those square gray buildings or from the chimneys that led from the underground factories.

When Kata returned to her house she found Aemilius and Rudé sitting at the table eating olives and melon. Three flagons of wine stood on the table before them. She stood in the doorway, aghast.

"We've brought sustenance," said Aemilius.

"Ah," said Rudé, "the woman of secrets returns. I must say, I expected I'd find a minotaur here, but I thought you might be here also." Rudé grinned, his teeth red with wine.

Kata walked to the table and looked at the flagons. They were empty. "Yes," said Aemilius, "I brought Anlusian hot-wine also."

She breathed out.

"So," said Rudé, rubbing his stomach gently. "We'll have to find some more work for you, as you've clearly failed at your last task."

"Are you in an enterprise together?" asked Aemilius, throwing a slice of green melon into his mouth.

Kata turned away from them and saw the empty cupboard.

"What's the matter?" asked Aemilius.

Thinking the question was directed at him, Rudé, who was now looking white, said, "That hot-wine doesn't agree with me. I think I need some air."

"I'll show you the balcony," said Kata, leading him toward the stairs.

"I know where it is."

"Even so."

She led him up the stairs; he doubled over when he reached the balcony. "Oh," he groaned. "That wine. The one we took from your cupboard, was it ..."

Before he could finish speaking, Rudé dropped to his knees on the balcony and vomit came streaming and red from his mouth, dribbling down his shirt, onto the floor.

"The wine, did you drink it all?" she asked.

"We shared it," he said. "Why?" He slumped onto his side.

"It was poisoned."

"No."

"Yes."

"Help me." Rudé fell forward onto his hands, breathing quickly and shallowly, drool coming in long lines from his mouth.

"No. There is nothing that can be done."

"You bitch. You filthy ..."

She leaned in over him: "You're nothing, Rudé."

"I fought to be where I am. Like you, I struggled."

"No, you did exactly what the House wanted. You're an appendage."

Only a gurgle came from his white-frothed lips.

She ran back to the stairs, descended as quickly as she could, and found Aemilius standing by the table, steadying himself with one hand.

"No," she said.

"What?"

She stood there, the room between them, looking at his massive presence.

"You," he said. "You didn't."

"I'm sorry."

"So it's true, you murdered Cyriacus." He staggered backward, unsteady on his feet. "I would have done ... whatever I could. I would have ... helped you."

"You wouldn't have. You would have left for Aya with the others. You would have sailed off, leaving me here, alone."

There was froth around his mouth, and his magnificent eyes had lost their edge. They were clouded, as if a white substance were billowing into them.

He collapsed to the floor, his legs, once so powerful, at awkward angles beneath him. "I fought in the Numerian wars. I defended Caeli-Amur when Saliras's fleet of a thousand ships appeared from the winter's fog."

She sat next to him. "It wasn't meant to be this way. If only you hadn't drunk the wine."

He snarled, a sudden burst of energy lighting his face. "This is how the city repays me. There is no justice."

She took his massive head in her lap and looked down on him. "I'm sorry." She refused to cry.

He looked up at her, his words slurring as he spoke. "The New-Men will take this city, break it down and rebuild it. Then you'll know what it's like to be overtaken, to be ... obsolete." Finally he lost consciousness, dying quietly in her arms.

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"You shall have to pay for Rudé's death, you know," said the new Officiate, another gray, middle-aged man with a cold, efficient manner. "There must be payment."

She closed her eyes and tried to block out the sound of the saw as they cut up Aemilius. Still, she did not cry. In her heart she knew it was time to leave Caeli-Amur—she had struggled enough.

When the men from House Technis were gone, Kata stood on the balcony, watching over Caeli-Amur. She stood there, motionless. The night stars shone down over the water until dawn broke over the horizon and the sea changed from blue to green with little crests of white.

In the morning the minotaurs stepped their way down to the piers, one by one, their hulking bodies small against the ships. The citizens of the city watched them leave, these godlike creatures, powerful and mysterious. The children were solemn this time, knowing the minotaurs would not return for ten more years. And next time there would be fewer still. The elderly nodded their heads and said to each other: "So, they're off again." Others were unsure what to feel. When the last of the minotaurs embarked, the ships hoisted their sails and made their way over the sunken city and out to sea.

The End

