

The Gods in the Jungle

A Kalieda novel by
Rik Roots

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For more information on the Kalieda world
visit the Kalieda Encyclopaedia at
<http://www.rikweb.co.uk/kalieda>

The appendices and maps for this book
can be found on the Rik Web at
<http://www.rikweb.co.uk/GIJ-book>

To Anne, my mother

For giving me the gift to read books
and the desire to write them

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[Author's note](#)

This story tells of a time before the Balje Peoples escaped from the disasters that consumed the Vreski Empire over five centuries ago.

Some of the people I write of – such as the Story Keeper, the Burning Woman, the Horned Man and the Mother of Disasters – are well-known characters in other stories (I've chosen to give them different names here).

The rest of the characters I've mostly made up, having perhaps caught a glimpse of them in obscure documents hidden here and there – enough to inspire me to give them mouths and words.

The locations are real, or at least they existed five hundred years ago. Except for Louge, of course.

The barby rats are real, too; I can accept no liability for any damage or death arising should you attempt to approach a barby rat using anything written in this book.

It goes without saying that this story is not based on fact. Though given our scant knowledge of that dark period in our history, this is as good a guess of what really happened as any other ...

[The Story Keeper Tells of Beginnings](#)

The red moon was setting in the west as Julyeis clambered from the old tunnel, but the glow of the white moon, still high in the part-clouded sky, was enough to see by. Dusting the detritus of

her journey from her pants, she drew her rough goat-wool blouse tight around her shoulders and stepped down the hill towards the telling circle.

Tonight's meeting place was no more than a clearing in the jungle, reached by following a goat-track that wound in meandering sweeps across the northern face of Bassam Hill; at several points dark, sharp-thorned undergrowth covered the track. Julyeis was careful to avoid scratches as she pushed past the barriers and followed the familiar route to its destination.

A score of people clustered in small groups about the glade, listening. As she hurried towards them a large man approached her; she recognised him quickly from the set of his broad shoulders gathered beneath his tight, rough-cut shift and the surprisingly light tread of his gait; he carried a heavy branch easily in his broad hand.

'Julyeis, you are welcome here, though possibly a little late.'

Her lips tightened at the greeting. 'Business is brisk, Akambue; I was tempted not to come. It looks like a thin crowd tonight: maybe others felt the same way – unless some people have left already?'

'No, your feelings are good,' he said, looking around. 'It seems that fewer of us feel the need to hear the old stories – though it makes the guarding work easier.'

She shook her head in agreement. 'Times have changed, old friend. Who needs the stories when there's so many other things to be enjoyed on a moonlit evening, yes?'

His smile was broad, the large, uneven step of his teeth glinting through his beard. 'The Story Keeper knew you were coming. She says she needs to talk to you.'

The news bemused her for a moment. 'Did she give any reason?'

'Of course not; you know how she is.'

'Yes,' agreed Julyeis. 'I know how she is.'

Julyeis settled at the back of the small crowd, careful to keep clear of the sharp undergrowth enclosing the glade. Beyond the fringe of branches and leaves the unseen denizens of the jungle continued their songs of threat and allure, careless of the invaders clustered within the clearing. The long, low hoots of giant barby rats were barely audible, which gave her a little comfort.

She had missed the main story telling; people were now testing the Story Keeper with questions. Julyeis did not mind: she always preferred this part of the evening – without questions, how could a person make sense of the world and their place within it? A good question could supply a banquet of thoughts for many hours after.

A young man was talking. He stood a little clear of the others, giving himself space to sign his question with his hands as he spoke the words aloud. His hand-speech was clumsy, as if only recently learned; Julyeis didn't recognise him.

'In your last tale you spoke of fish: "bullets of flesh that shot through the seas and rivers, glorying in their rainbows of colours," you said. What are these 'fish'; are they some sort of worm? Can you tell us more about them, what happened to them?'

The question was aimed at a figure sat on the lowest bough of a lutestran tree that grew to one side of the glade. There was not enough moonlight to make out the Story Keeper's features, except that she was a tiny person - a doll of a woman with wiry limbs.

'You are named Tazhos, yes? You came to this city not long ago to work on the vedegga harvest and to make the dye?' The woman's voice was high, yet even in tone.

The youth nodded. 'This is my second time here.' Then, feeling the need to explain further: 'My friend Akambue brought me.'

'You have the knack of finding good friends,' said the tiny woman, 'you wave your hands with Akambue's accent, I see. Do you know why we are here?'

He answered quickly. 'We are here to learn who we are, what we were. This is what Akambue told me.'

The Story Keeper giggled. 'I like your answer! It crept into my ears unawares. But it is not the answer my ears yearned for. They are callous lovers to unexpected answers. They want my mouth to try a better question: do you know why people are here? Why this tree grows here for me

to sit on? Why the jungle murmurs and the river chuckles and the sky cries rain in the afternoon?"

'I don't understand,' said the young man, more slowly this time. 'Is there a story to answer such big questions?'

Julyeis sensed the woman smile. She seemed to hunch her head into her shoulders whenever she was really pleased.

'There is always a story, Akambue's good friend,' she said. 'But this telling is the greatest of all stories, for it is the first tale; the story from which all other stories grow. And for you I shall recall its words again, now, so all of us can leave this story-telling circle tonight with great knowledge in our heads!'

As the tiny woman set out her story Julyeis relaxed, let her mind wander as the cadences of the narrative lapped around the glade. The Story Keeper was easily the best that Julyeis had ever heard; she had a knack of bringing visions to the eyes of her listeners as she spoke, making her voice and tone – even her hand gestures – work as hard as the words themselves to make the ancient fable feel real, alive.

'And in an instant, He set about casting together the rules of life – weaving together ash and water, air and fire, until a heap of seeds lay at His feet. Then He took each seed in His hand and whispered a secret word into its core, and threw it across the curve of the world to land and unfold in the form of its own true nature.'

Around the glade, the jungle seemed to have quietened, as if the children of that first creation wanted to hear the story too. Not that there was much jungle left on this side of the hill. Varoul had once shown Julyeis a map of the city – a gift from a satisfied client, he told her. Central was Bassam Hill, she remembered, its two long spurs jaggling to the great river as it bent east away from its southern course – the lines on the paper had reminded her of a hammock, with the city nestled into its shallow bend and the arms of the hill reaching out to comfort it.

The bulk of the hill, though, ran northwards – a bulwark of jungle festooned rock separating the terraced cultivations that fed the city. She could feel the weight of the hill looming above her, a black mass occluding the purple-black sky and its heavy veil of stars. Only the broad summit of the hill was bare of vegetation, kept that way by the barby rats who made the hill their home.

Remembering about the barby rats, that they might hear voices and decide to investigate the glade, tightened her stomach. She listened out for their deep whistles, felt her body relax as she located the tell-tale songs some distance away, high on the hill's brow. Akambue might be carrying a big branch in his hands, but it would offer little defence against one of those terrifying queens.

'From the fires that roared from the depths of the globe He grasped some dust, whispering to each mote a harsh word and releasing them all into the hurricanes of His anger. Disease came to the world, and decay, and unmaking – for those motes were in truth the Councils of the Imps!'

The Story Keeper's half-caught words turned Julyeis's thoughts in new directions. It was easy to feel safe in Bassakesh, the city buried so deeply in the jungle that the only passage in or out was by water, travelling along the wide roads of the Taete river. No other city in the Empire was like this place, she knew – or at least she had been told by others who came to settle here.

She felt the first tingle of a cramp slide across her thigh. Shifting her weight to her other leg, she concentrated once more on the form of the Story Keeper sat on her low bough. What could the woman possibly want from her, she wondered.

She shrugged the question away. The story was reaching its close. Ahead of her the lad whose question had prompted this telling stood with his mouth half-open, as if he had never heard of the two creations before, nor of the Councils of the Imps whose domain was death and decay.

'And where the seed landed, a great tree grew, and from that tree came forth a great fruit. When the fruit fell, it split in two: from one half strode Sama-Lovare, Prince of Men, while from the other rose Mara-Gaye, first of all women and Queen of Princes.'

'And our creation was complete!'

'Believe the truth of my story, a story that has passed from the lips of only the greatest Story Keepers. And keep this truth close as you depart: never let Tipi-sasane, that tiny, wily guardian of

our crops and our histories, steal this telling from your heads or your bellies. For this is your story, my story: our story. The story of why we are here.'

Maybe we're too comfortable here, Julyeis thought, if we're letting the young ones grow up without knowing our stories, our history.

Julyeis walked forward to the tree as the small crowd broke and dispersed from the clearing. As she came closer she could make out the Story Keeper's deformed face, now illuminated by the slant light of the white moon. The disc in the sky seemed to be holding her attention; Julyeis felt the rats of impatience growing in her as she waited.

'Sometimes,' said the woman, finally, 'the telling leaves a hollow taste in my mouth. The one who taught me said this would be so, that the stories can overwhelm the body and all you can do is endure until the day moves on.' She looked down at Julyeis, as if noticing her for the first time. 'I do not enjoy the taste of hollowness.'

'Hollow, Maeduul?'

'It's like a yearning for the past, the future; for what might have been, yet cannot be. When the stories become more than words, when I see Mara-Gaye and Sama-Lovare, and the Corn Bird flapping her mesmer-dance just out of my reach, then I can taste the hollowness. It leaves me – sad.'

'It's a new thought to me.' Julyeis considered this for a moment. 'But now you mention it, it does sound familiar.' Choosing not to dwell on this uncomfortable feeling, she changed the subject.

'Akambue mentioned that you wanted to talk to me?'

'Ah, yes,' said Maeduul, her demeanour transformed in an instant. 'News for the brothel keeper's woman! Help me down from this log and we can chat as we walk.'

Julyeis did as she was asked. She was not shocked by the Story Keeper's abrupt change in manner – the woman was known for her eccentricities – and she was interested in what news Maeduul may have for her.

As they walked away from the clearing the Story Keeper began talking, her voice a low, conspiratorial whisper which Julyeis had to lean down to hear properly.

'*Luetsa-ten* is worried. She frets in the evening. She talks long with the Governor when she thinks no-one can hear them.'

'But you hear?'

'I like to watch the stars dance to the Creator's whistles and hums. You need to be high up to appreciate the sweep of their curtsies and bows.'

Julyeis nodded. She had heard whispers that the little woman liked to sit on rooftops after dark.

'*Luetsa-ten* worries that her history is coming to visit her again. She hated the Old City, you know? But the Old City is coming to court her kittens. He may sit comfortably on his golden cushions in the Old City, but he is not as strong as he once was.'

'You're talking in riddles, Maeduul.'

'Did you know that I was once his ornament?'

Julyeis nodded, spreading the middle fingers of her right hand wide to acknowledge the question. The Story Keeper was steeped in rumours: the fact that she had once been the Emperor's ornamental Servant had become common gossip within days of her arrival in Bassakesh.

'I am his parting gift to *luetsa-ten*. We came together through the jungles and down the Taete river. He was old when he gave me to her, you know, and now he is much older still. The Courtesans and Clans and Temple-men do not fear him as they used to. Some of them want what he has.'

'Courtesans and Clans and ... Maeduul, I have no time for the games played by Tall Ones!' Still, parts of the tiny woman's riddles were beginning to fall into place for Julyeis.

'Your talking of plots, yes? Something to do with the marriage of the Governor's eldest daughter?'

The Story Keeper smiled, hunching her plate-crowned head into her shoulders as her cheeks pulled into a grin.

'They say you are quick! Yes, they want *luetsa-ten*'s kittens, and she is not happy. She's protected them for so long – she fears that they will not survive the passions and poisons of the Old City.'

They had reached the entrance to the old service tunnel that passed under the brow of the hill and its barby rat guardians back to the city. Rather than step through, Julyeis turned and crouched before Maeduul.

'It's interesting gossip, Story Keeper, for which I thank you. But why should I care about the affairs of the Tall Ones?'

'Like it or not, they matter to us.'

The woman paused for a moment, as if inviting Julyeis a chance to protest, then continued. 'We serve all of creation, yes? Even those whose memories of the Creator have been stolen, corrupted?'

Julyeis nodded, her face still echoing her question.

'This is a good place,' said Maeduul. 'Here we are safe within our jungles and our walls. Servants and Clansfolk and common-folk, we get along, yes? Yet this city is perhaps too sweet, too tempting a fruit for the plucking.'

Julyeis's question was simple. 'Who would dare pluck it?'

Maeduul turned away, pulled herself onto the old tunnel's crumbling lip. Once she was in the bole of the channel she turned back to look at Julyeis, her shoulders again pressed against her ears.

'I've heard rumours, too. They waft over the roofs like smoke from the pyres. Rumours can burn as hot as the flesh, if given the right tinder. People are coming, I think: some to take things away; some to take people, their bodies, their minds ... I'm worried for us.'

'You want me to do something?'

'A little thing, yes? I want you to watch someone for me. A woman. She will come from the jungle, I think, with nothing except a shawl over her shoulders and words in her hands. Strong words. Dangerous words. She'll be needing a place to stay – you can do this thing for me?'

Before Julyeis could nod her assent, the tiny woman had turned and disappeared into the labyrinth delved within the hill's rock.

Delesse

'She always refused to wear tambelskein cloth, though people swear it is the most effective ward against memory-loss,' her mother said. 'She told me once it was textured too rough for her taste!'

Delesse agreed with a nod as they walked together past the shops and stalls that lined the elegant course of the Street of Horizons. 'Has Auntie Moesser settled into her new apartments?'

Temis paused to consider a collection of amber beads displayed in a jeweller's window. 'We shall find out soon enough. Devisek has invited us for lunch.'

The mention of food prodded Delesse's stomach to a low grumble. Dutifully, she ignored it.

They had been shopping for cloth, decorations, wards, jewels and beads, boots, awning mounts and centrepieces for close on two hours now – though they had nothing more than paper receipts to show for their efforts.

More accurately, decided Delesse, her mother had been considering items and bargaining prices with nervous shop owners as she stood by her side, forcing herself to look interested in the proffered goods and services. Normally the shop keepers came to Temis, not the other way around, but the novelty of seeing her mother operating in the wild had soon worn thin.

'You're being too quiet, dear. I was hoping you'd show more interest in your contract feast.'

'I didn't think you'd approve of my choices.'

She could tell her mother was smiling by the wrinkling of skin at the edge of her eyes. The Governor's wife rarely smiled with her mouth while she was on public display.

'You don't care for my taste?'

'Oh, I've no complaint about your eye for quality materials and craftsmanship ...'

'... And yet ...'

Delesse sighed. 'Why does everything have to be yellow? You always tell me yellow doesn't sit well on me.'

'Don't be silly, dear. That dress material wasn't yellow. It's much creamier.'

'It reminded me of goat's butter.'

'There was a certain sheen to it,' agreed Temis. 'But with the right makeup, and possibly dying your hair ...'

'And Velledue will insist I wear some vile grease potion that will clash with any cloth we choose.'

'Velledue will not be a problem, dear.' Delesse could as much feel the undertone in her mother's voice as hear it; Temis rarely agreed with the family astrologer's decrees. 'But you know the theme has to be yellow ...'

'... Because of the dye.'

'Yes, because of the dye. The guests will expect us to flaunt our wealth.'

'Sometimes ...'

Temis glanced over, eyes level with her own, inviting her to continue.

'Sometimes I wish Grandfather Rollusek had never worked out how to make dye. No,' she corrected herself to block her mother's obvious response, 'that's wrong: I'm glad I'm not poor. But if he hadn't become so wealthy, if he had never become a Favoured Courtesan and turned the family into a Clan ...'

'Then you wouldn't be marrying the heir to Clan Arallo, dear. Do you think God is cursing you?'

'He's an Honoured Courtesan – the first rank! Everything he does is probably the gossip of the court. God Himself knows I don't like people staring at me – of course it's a punishment!'

Again the smile at the edge of the eyes. 'Many would go down on their knees and beg for such a curse. By all accounts, he is an attractive man.'

Delesse had spent many, many days learning to control the spread of her blush, and sometimes – like now – she liked to believe that willpower alone was enough to stop the darkening heat rise past her neck to her face, though the heat of the day caught on the worn cobbles of the street wasn't helping her cause.

'What's the good of an attractive man if it means having to leave here to enjoy his company, mother?'

Temis turned her head away to look in the window of a well-regarded accessories shop.

'We'll need new gloves to go with the dresses, yes?'

'If you say so.'

'It's the thought of change that scares you. I remember you made such a fuss when your sister was born: you sulked for weeks.'

'I've never left this place before. I don't know anyone in the Old City.'

'You were born in the Old City, dear.'

'I have no memory of it!'

Delesse knew she had raised her voice, shown a taint of emotion through pitch. Thankfully her mother chose to ignore the fault.

'I've told you what it's like though. I've taught you all the courtesies and routines, the politics of the Court, yes? Though I ought to go with you, at least for the first few months; I can understand your ... reservations ... about life at Court.'

'You cannot leave Igell, mother; he's not yet four years old. I know this. I worked it out for myself the evening I was told about the marriage.'

'The risks would be fearful,' she agreed. 'Thank you for understanding. I hope Clan Arallo appreciate what an insightful woman they're acquiring.'

Delesse smiled – as much as she tried, she had not yet gained her mother's ability to mask all

emotion from her face.

'They see me as a big fat purse, I expect. I hope they like yellow.'

'Everybody likes yellow, dear. I think we ought to investigate the gloves in that shop.'

Delesse checked the sky for clouds as they emerged. Solstice was less than a fortnight away, making the afternoon rains a daily affair as the season's heat sucked moisture from the surrounding jungles to build bruised anvils, then lacing the clouds with lightning as they hammered free their wet loads.

Her mother was still thanking the shop keeper as she backed out into the street, dousing his enthusiasm with short nods. Many people had reason to be grateful for the business her marriage would bring to the city, she realised.

'I think we should walk near the trees, dear,' said Temis, grasping her arm. 'My desire for trade is just about spent and,' she glanced briefly above her, 'Devissek is expecting us, yes?'

Delesse agreed, placed her own hand over her mother's. They walked along the Street of Horizons in a companionable silence, keeping to the welcome shade of the mametaa trees set along the length of the road.

'How many guards has Tuuke assigned to you today?'

'Hmm?' said Temis. 'Oh, I've noticed three: two ahead of us and one behind. Why do you ask?'

'That man ahead of us seems to be herding people into the shops. The Guardsman worries too much: who would attack us here?'

'You'd be surprised, Delesse. Though not so much attack us as crowd around us. You've become very interesting to others since the contract was announced.'

Delesse scowled, her annoyance overcoming the strictures of face etiquette. 'Is this the way things are going to be for me now? Always a guard, always someone watching me?'

'It's been that way for quite a while, dear. Tuuke's been assigning guards to you since the beginning of the year.'

'Really? Why haven't I noticed them?'

'He uses you as a training exercise, I believe. "Unobtrusive guarding" he calls it. They're getting very good at it, too.'

'I'm not sure I like it, people spying on me.'

'Would you prefer it the other way, people crowding around you all the time? Bothering you? Demanding your notice, your business?'

'No,' she conceded. 'Is that what it's going to be like in the Old City?'

She felt her mother squeeze her hand. 'You'll probably be given a bodyguard once you reach Stal – possibly a detachment of Imperial cladesmen, if your Aunt Feyn has any say in it.'

'No peace, no privacy! I'll ... I suppose I'll just have to make the most of these last days of freedom.'

Temis slowed her pace, tugged Delesse to a halt. 'Is that why you fear this marriage? No, don't shake your head – I know something is worrying you. Something more than your normal fear of change. If it was your sister getting married I'd have a hard job keeping her here – she'd be in Stal already!'

'Demanding her rights as a wife,' agreed Delesse.

'Ah,' said Temis. 'It's the ceremony itself you fear.'

Not until her mother spoke the words did Delesse realise the truth in them. This time there was no controlling the blush.

'Why does it have to be so ... physical?'

'It's the custom. You know this.'

'But other people don't have to endure it. Most people can get by with just one blessing, without having to perform – that – in front of strangers.'

'Things are different for us. You're a Favoured Courtesan, soon to be an Honoured Courtesan ...'

'A courtesan who's never even been to Court. It'll be humiliating!'

'It'll be a few moments of nakedness, and then it will be done.'

'Did you do it, with father?'

'Of course. He was more scared than me – remember, it's worse for the man. Anyway, what made you say such a thing about Arbelle?'

'Arbelle,' her sister, younger by three years, 'dreams of nothing except becoming someone's wife. She obsesses about it, mother! Do you know she measures the width of her hips every morning and moans about her lack of growth at every opportunity?'

'She always was slimmer than you, dear.'

'It's – unbecoming.'

Her mother looked at her strangely, making her wonder if she had been speaking too loudly; a quick check assured her that nobody was close enough to overhear them. The prickles of blush about her neck was becoming unbearable.

Then Temis smiled at her, properly, allowing her lips to move.

'If it worries you this much, Delesse, there's things that we can do, maybe, that will make the ceremony – easier – for you. Come now, walk with me. Let's see if we can reach your uncle's house before the clouds burst open.'

'You must not hesitate to insist on our help,' Temis was saying.

'I appreciate your offer, though I only do as I must!' Delesse watched her uncle lean back in his chair with both hands over his small-but-growing gut. 'You know if I did not collect mad relatives, I'd have to collect dogs from the street!'

He laughed at his own joke, intelligent eyes half-lidded, as if judging his guests for discomfort. But Temis had been too long a courtesan to show any loss of balance, and maybe her smile was genuine. Even Delesse, after seventeen years' daily contact, had trouble judging her mother's real emotional state at any given moment.

'Dogs would be cheaper to feed, dear cousin,' said Temis. 'Our family has always had a taste for the better cut of meat. This is not charity we are discussing, but honour. Would you at least consider a contribution in kind?'

'I would accept your contribution with speed, my Lady, believe me on this! I am a businessman before I am a Clan leader in most issues, and I have yet to feel shame for overcharging. But on this particular matter I am on the losing end of the contract! Mother is adamant that none of her old staff enter the compound. She's convinced they were draining her blood every night for cursing rituals.'

Delesse was proud that she managed to maintain an interested-yet-distant look on her face. She and Arbelle had decided that Aunt Moesser was mad beyond distraction many years before.

'You have an alternative solution, surely?' asked Temis.

'I have been thinking, my Lady.' He reached for his cup and drained the last of his wine. 'I could ask you to take mother in – that is the prize she's fishing for, I'm sure. But the Governor's House is too public; I don't want her decline to be common gossip! No, best to keep our embarrassments corralled within high walls, I say.'

'You do make a strong argument. And we would be happy to accommodate some of your other guests to give Moesser the room that is proper to her station.'

'It is, my Lady, nothing less than I would have expected of you.' He waved towards Delesse: 'Help yourself to another drink, young Honoured Courtesan-to-be!' This smile was genuine.

'But even though you will soon have more than enough spare room,' he continued, 'we'll soon have a flood of young bucks from the Imperial Court, come to search of wives as beautiful as our Delesse.'

Delesse managed a correctly uninterpretable smile, winning her mother's approval. 'Arbelle will be pleased to hear such rumours,' she said. 'She much prefers to negotiate contracts in person.'

She had always admired her uncle's ability to ignore the rules of decorum. He laughed out loud. Temis waited a moment, before pressing him again. 'You do have a solution, though?'

'Indeed! But it will cost more coin than I have spare at this time. There is a compound behind this one. A sad story: both sons killed in a boat accident two years ago, and the parents are growing older. The family was once a force in the city – worked with Grandfather Rollusek for a while and profited from it, too – but they attracted a nasty set of demons to their hearth. The parents have been offered shelter by cousins living in Towes Whate; they're willing to sell me the property. With a little inventiveness the two compounds could be joined ...'

'For you to fill with more ailing relatives?'

'Not at all! More space is what we need! Mother would be content with a small suite of private rooms which can be locked against the marauding bloodsuckers!'

'It is an intriguing idea, dear cousin, one that Gelleris will find interesting.'

Delesse watched the man nod: for Devisek, that was as good as a sealed agreement. If Temis said yes, the Governor would not disapprove.

With the main business settled, Devisek called for the traditional farewell tea steam. Conversation fell again into gossip, this time surrounding Delesse's forthcoming exchange of contracts – the first, less worrying part of the marriage ceremony – and the list of guests likely to attend from the jungle cities and Stal, the Old City.

After the steam was served, Temis cocked her head slightly to one side, inviting her cousin-by-marriage to engage once more in business. He lifted his oiled eyebrow to start the conversation.

'Your businesses go well, you mentioned,' said Temis.

'Indeed! Fingers on fruit, and all that. A small gain here balances a small loss there.'

'I shall pin a special warding stone to the Clan emblem to encourage the gains for you.'

'That is indeed a kind and unlooked for gesture! I must hunt out an heirloom ward for your eldest to wear on her contract day!'

'Such generosity does not come as a surprise!'

Devisek smiled, as Temis continued. 'Would you indulge a mother in an additional gesture of kindness for her daughter?'

'If it is in my power, my Lady!'

'Tell me: do you still have a shareholding in Varoul's business?'

'Varoul's business?' Devisek had opened his eyes wide in surprise. 'But that's a ...'

'... A good place to learn, yes? Delesse has some concerns, don't you dear, that a few practical lessons - in a discrete establishment such as Varoul's - may help allay.'

The Naming of the Parts

On her third visit to Varoul's House, Delesse finally looked at a naked male of the species.

As before, she was met at the door by Julyeis, the housekeeper. Devisek had agreed with her mother that it would not be appropriate for the city gossips to be aware of Delesse's tutelage; the whole operation of travelling to and from the bordello was carried out with great stealth.

Once inside the doors, Delesse was free to lower the hood of her cloak. The decor was becoming familiar to her: the hand-woven rugs scattered across the polished wood floor; the tastefully erotic tapestries hung from plastered walls.

'My Lady is welcome!' declared the Servant in her low, even tones. 'Always welcome! Does she require a refreshment before we proceed?'

Delesse shook her head, though her mouth was dry.

'Then please, my Lady, follow me to the relaxing room.'

They walked the length of the entrance hall together, the shorter woman in the lead. Delesse knew that most of the doors in Varoul's House were kept locked, to ensure the maintenance of privacy at all times, so she was not surprised to see Julyeis produce a key from a pocket in her knee-length shift as they reached their destination.

'Thank you, Julyeis,' she said as the Servant closed the doors behind them. This room was

decorated in a similar style to the hall, but with the addition of a padded bench beside a fireplace, lit, and a sunken bath to one side. Currently the bath was empty, so Delesse went to sit on the bench.

Julyeis bowed, and then knelt to help Delesse undo her boots. 'Has my Lady been practicing her exercises?'

Delesse nodded, a slight blush touching the sides of her neck.

'Do not be embarrassed, my Lady! The exercises are to help you stretch your joints. A supple body is an excellent gift to offer a gentleman – a husband.'

'Those exercises I have no problem with,' said Delesse. 'I fit them into my afternoon routine quite easily.'

'Then it is the massaging exercises that cause you distress ...'

'Not distress – not exactly distress. I have been following your advice, massaging after a warm shower in the evening. I ... hadn't expected it to have such an effect on me!'

Julyeis smiled, professionally. 'The Lady's body shook?'

Delesse nodded, and the Servant's smile became a little more genuine.

'This is good progress, my Lady. By understanding the various effects of the massaging on your body, you can begin to learn to control them, to ride them, to make them meet your purpose. You can also learn how to mimic them ...'

'Mimic them?'

'Indeed, my Lady! There may come a time when you prefer not to abandon your sensibilities in the waterfalls of sensation, when it would serve your purposes better to pretend that the man between your legs is reducing you to fruit pulp, but all the while keeping your eyes clear of tears. Some say that the congress is a melding. Others consider it to be a war.'

'And you?' asked Delesse. 'What do you consider it to be?'

'The Lady perhaps should not ask a Servant for an opinion. Much will depend upon the man between your legs. I have prepared a light wrap for my Lady to wear for this next lesson, if she would put away those damp clothes of hers.'

Delesse did as she had been asked, slipping her cloak and dress onto the floor. Her undergarments followed, until all that remained on her body were the warding stones she wore around her neck, wrists and ankles. Quickly, Julyeis folded the clothes neatly and placed them in a marked basket ready for cleaning and drying.

The new garment felt rougher than it looked as Delesse picked it up from the couch. She looked at the Servant: 'I thought this was scrivengoat wool?'

'No, my lady. The fibre is coarser, as is the weave. The wool comes from the common goat, from the flocks which roam the higher pastures of the Loa Vreska hills.' Julyeis took the garment from Delesse's hands and shook it loose, ready for the girl to put her arms into the wide sleeves.

'But while the wrap may seem to be of common stock the wool, when harvested from those flocks at the most auspicious time, has a particular warding quality – it keeps away those devils and demons that take a special interest in a woman's first adventures in love.'

A small viper of shock ran along Delesse's spine, loosening her jaw and widening her eyes.

'I had not thought ... will someone be joining us today? Will we be ... practicing?'

'The Lady has the choice of it.' Julyeis made no effort to touch or calm her client. 'Today we shall concentrate on the naming of the parts, and after that we shall learn the Lady's decision.'

She shook the garment again, and Delesse complied with the unspoken request, placing her arms through the sleeve and then letting the Servant pull it close around her body. A knotted belt of the same material finished the dressing.

'It's a little too short for polite company,' Delesse observed, and the Servant graced her with a thin smile of acknowledgement.

'There are many things a woman can wear in her private rooms, my Lady, but others will be able to advise you better than me.'

She stepped back and looked at Delesse. 'There is nothing to fear, my Lady. Slow your breathing and collect your face. As I said, today we name the parts.'

And with that, she turned and walked across the room. When she reached the wall, she shook one of the tapestries forward, revealing a second door. 'Shapeis! Attend!'

He entered, his stance suggesting that he owned this room. Delesse's first impressions were of a man, almost naked, as tall as she, muscled, short hair, a common face – though faultless and symmetrical. And horns. She concentrated on the horns as he walked towards her, unsmiling. They grew from his forehead, reaching up a hand's length and curving back, slightly ridged, polished and blunted.

A recreational Servant.

She had heard of such people from whispered conversations with her sister, always eager to share the gossip she had overheard. Just as there were Servant farms who specialised in the breeding of ornamental Servants - like Maeduul, her mother's companion - so other farms created recreationals: perfect in form and, allegedly, function.

He stopped in the centre of the room, his hands loose by his thighs, even his fingers still. He did not look at her. Julyeis beckoned her forward.

'Let us name the parts, my Lady,' she said. 'We shall start at the back.'

For the next few minutes Delesse listened as the woman explained the various areas of the horned man's body, and what role each area could play in the act. When invited to, she stroked his body; feeling his firm young skin and the muscles beneath with her fingertips.

'The Lady should be aware that massage forms a central part of the magic. With the correct oils and a supple dance of the fingers a woman can bring the beast within the man to the fore in ways that she can control.'

'And you are to teach me these?'

'Alas no, my Lady. Each man is different, and what works on one man will not work on another. To learn the full range of techniques can take many years, practicing on many men. But you will only need to satisfy one man – at first – and we cannot know what his preferences will be. Instead, we can teach the Lady a few subtle practices, and those areas of a man's body that are most likely to respond to such ministrations. After that, you will need to experiment with your man, explore the possibilities within him.'

Delesse nodded, her eyes still concentrating on the man in front of her.

'Now feel the line of the jaw, and trace your finger from under his chin towards the back of the neck. Most men have stubble here. An unscented oil is often most usefully applied to this area in slow, straight strokes, or alternatively spittle direct from the tip of the Lady's tongue.'

The lesson continued. Throughout the naming of the parts, the explanations and the rubbing and caressing, he never moved – not even a flinch of muscle. His breathing continued in its regular pattern as his nipples were explained, explored, pinched and nibbled. His stomach remained tight and silent as palms and fingernails traced their course between the fine hairs surrounding his birth-wound.

And then Julyeis unknotted a cord and let his loincloth flutter to the floor.

'This, my Lady, is the nub. It is, for a man, a treasure beyond price.'

To Delesse's eyes the nub dangled like a leather hose emptied of water, nestled in a perm of rough hair.

'I expected it to be – well – bigger than that ...'

Julyeis arched her eyes: 'And with a simple word, the Lady learns how to kill a man's pride! But do not fear, the nub will grow when a woman coaxes her man to the act with soft words and kisses.'

'To what size?'

'We shall find out. Though the Lady must remember that just as each man has his own preferences for massage, so each man will have his own length and girth of nub. Shapeis here possesses a straight nub – others can curve and bend like a flower stalk seeking the sun – and he is slightly larger than normal. Now touch the nub, my Lady: stroke it. We cannot examine it properly in this sorry state!'

Delesse did as she was told, gingerly running her fingers down the length of the shaft. When it twitched she pulled her hand back, sharply. She looked at Julyeis, who nodded encouragement with a thin smile.

Again, she engaged with the shaft, this time running her fingers behind it, her finger knuckles scraping against the scrotum. Veins appeared along the length, which she traced with her thumb, watching as their net expanded with each pulse.'

'Does it always happen this quickly?'

'No, Lady. Sometimes the man will disrobe already aroused, the thought of his woman enough to inflate him. At other times the same man will barely respond to the most tender of kisses, or will harden and soften quickly. Such are the times that a woman should take care with her words, or move rather to massage the man's back and neck, smiling to her man however disappointed she may feel. As I said, a man's nub is his closest, dearest treasure, but you can think of it more like an untrained puppy that only sometimes obeys its master's commands.'

The image of a puppy made Delesse grin. 'This dog seems to be very well trained!'

'Indeed, and ready to hunt!'

'So, how do we name these parts?'

The lesson continued, Julyeis pointing out the sexual anatomy and commenting on various methods of stroking and rubbing the inner thigh, testicles, shaft and head. She showed Delesse how a sharp tap to the base of the shaft could deflate it, and how a twist of the wrist as the foreskin was shuffled across the head could bring the whole back to life. She indicated the place between the testicles and anus to press the forefingers which – she insisted – would make a man worship her at the height of the act, and how to cup and turn her spittled hand around the bared head to make a man scream with pleasure even before he entered his woman.

Mention of the penetration brought to mind a question that Delesse was scared of asking. She played with the nub a little more before saying: 'I've heard that it hurts ... the act.'

Julyeis reached out and took Delesse's hands, slowly pulled them away and into her own. For the first time, Delesse noticed a glint of concern in her instructor's eyes; the smile she gave her was broad and soft.

'My Lady must not think of the act in this way. Did you not feel some pleasure as you stroked the man, as you discovered his body?'

When Delesse slowly nodded, she continued: 'Think of the act as part of a larger play, a sensual, exciting play where each scene adds to the enjoyment of the next. The penetration will only hurt if you let it, if you fail to relax. Just as you are playing with the man's body, so will he be playing with you, and a good man will never want to hurt his woman in that way! Yes, there will be a little soreness the first time, and maybe for a few times after that, but it doesn't last!'

And now Delesse remembered the Servant's earlier words: '*the Lady has the choice of it.*'

'I think it would be useful to learn how a man ...' she swallowed, her voice dipping to a whisper '... how a man pleasures a woman.'

Julyeis's eyes crinkled a little narrower to accommodate her understanding smile. She nodded her head and moved her hands up to Delesse's cheeks. 'Yes, my Lady. If that is your desire.' She turned towards the recreational and said: 'Shapeis ...'

And for the first time Shapeis looked directly at Delesse – looked straight into her eyes, and through them at her, naked and aching and a little scared inside her own skull.

'I can't,' she said, suddenly. 'What if ... what if I fall ... a baby ...'

Julyeis nodded her head. 'Good, good! The Lady thinks of all things. There are ways for a woman to protect herself, herbs and juices, caps and springs and the like. We can talk about such matters the next time the Lady visits, yes? But there is no need to worry with Shapeis.' She took his scrotum in her hand and lifted it high, exposing the two small scars beneath the wrinkled skin.

'Ah,' said Delesse, not comprehending what she was looking at. Her tone must have made the Servant aware of her confusion.

'A small operation, yet decisive: no seed can progress beyond that point. Does the Lady still wish ...'

She nodded her head with a sudden determination. Without knowing why she realised she very much wanted to experience this man, and now.

Slowly, he stretched, reaching his arms above his head and arching his back and just as slowly he relaxed, smiled. Not any smile, but a small smile that pushed through Delesse's chest to pat her heart and pinch her stomach. She didn't even notice him walking towards her – only that his eyes seemed to grow larger: deep, dark brown eyes with wet slate intrusions surrounding pupils wide in this dim light. She felt his hand on her cheek, a dawdle of finger trails from her ear down to her chin.

Then he kissed her. Gentle lips moistening her own, his tongue tipping across the thin, dark line of face-paint so carefully applied around them, triggering reflex responses from muscles across her cheeks and within her own tongue that she had not even suspected to exist. And still his hands explored her, massaging her neck, her ears, her shoulders and backbone; the line between her breasts – lessons she had so recently be learning herself now applied to her own body by a man who had practiced those massage techniques on an unguessable number of other bodies.

When the rough wool wrap slid open, she didn't notice. When she felt his thumb on her nipple she remembered to breathe. He seemed to be playing her carefully: keeping the little fear awake in her bowels, yet taming it – feeding it and soothing it in turn by touch; a palm across her stomach, a thumb across her buttock. Warm hands.

He broke their tongue dance and spoke: 'The Lady desires for me to continue?'

Delesse opened her eyes to stare in his face, open and questioning. Seconds passed, then she took the back of his head in the palm of her hand and slowly pulled his lips back into her own. He complied with her order, the heel of his hand slowly circling her secret nub nestled in its own growth of black down.

The groan escaped her lungs before she could catch it in her throat. Again, he broke their kiss, slowly slid his tongue down the length of her throat and through the crease between her breasts, down further to orbit her birth-wound, nipping, and down again, down so his chin met the thumb kneading her vulva pulsing in its heat of engorging blood. She leaned forward, her hand on his back forgetting to return the massage; the other hand stroking against the curious warmth of his horns, grasping one across its ridges as he started to kiss her nub.

When he stood, when he lifted her up and took her, standing, she lost the last vestiges of control over the beast within him, let it trample her into oblivion.

Shapeis

'I heard Zhamelle hitting someone. What happened?'

Shapeis relaxed when he heard Julyeis's voice behind him at the entrance to the kitchen. He returned to tending his patient, a girl with blood across her face, as he answered.

'That bitch treated her client with less respect than he thought he deserved. His tip was short of a few coppers and Zhamelle was not happy. So she decided to beat the shit out of Kaalis when she went to tidy the room.'

The girl looked up at Julyeis: 'I did nothing wrong! She used her fists on me!'

Julyeis didn't bother to hide the anger in her eyes. She moved quickly to Shapeis's side, taking the cloth from his hands to continue cleaning the blood away from Kaalis's broken nose and split lip. Then she checked her face from different angles.

'There'll be no need for stitches, but the bruises will be large. I want you to stay out of Varoul's sight until the worst of the swelling has gone. We don't need him getting concerned about us just now.'

'What about Zhamelle?' asked Shapeis.

'Fix some hot water, man, and make me a steam. I'll deal with that one in my own time. You' – she pointed at him – 'you will do nothing! No words, no glances. No attitude! We will not give

Zhamelle any reason to come down here! Nor Varoul, understand?"

Shapeis shrugged. 'She would not be stupid enough to mix with Servants.'

'Fix my steam, and one for Kaalis too.'

He turned away, happy in his stomach to comply with the order. Quickly he prepared the drinks: plain tea for the women; a stronger lutestran steam for himself. Julyeis disapproved of his use of the drug, he knew, but he had two clients later who liked to be whipped: he preferred to deliver the service with a muffle of narcotic between himself and the action.

When the last of the steam had condensed into the cup he carried them over to the women, now sat by the small hearth at the back of the brightly lit room.

'You made her dress in goat-wool,' he said to Julyeis as he handed her the drink.

She didn't smile. 'I thought you would appreciate it.'

'I did. I liked the story that went with it too, the harvesting at the special time to keep the devils and demons away. I almost laughed when she put it on!'

'You are well trained, lad. And I wish it had been my idea.'

'It wasn't? Who else would want to play such a cruel trick on the girl?'

'Her mother.'

'No!' said Kaalis, quickly recovering from her hurts.

'Oh, yes!' said Julyeis. 'I had specific instructions: the Lady was to be dressed in cheap clothes for this lesson, and was to be encouraged to fuck the buckman. Apparently the peasant look is a big fashion in the Old City at the moment and she didn't want her daughter to be shocked by the idea. She took the shift, too. I told her to keep it hidden in her bedroom and to wear it when practicing her massages.'

Shapeis laughed – a short, deep hack of breath. 'The mother worries about such trivial things? She should worry more about the girl's body!'

'Why?' asked Kaalis. 'I thought she was pretty, for a Tall One.'

'She is pretty, I'll give you that,' he said, 'but she danced on the end of my nub like a sack of onions!'

'There's no need for that!' said Julyeis. 'She knows nothing except the writhes and groans stitched into her reflexes. What I don't understand is why the mother left such training to the last minute.'

'How so?'

'Well, if the girl was destined to become that sort of courtesan ...' he could feel the housekeeper's disapproval of "that sort" by the way she dipped her voice as she spoke the words, '... then the training should have started months ago. I get the impression that plans are changing, that maybe Lady Temis has learned something lately that may affect her daughter's contract once she gets to the Old City.'

'What could it be?' asked Kaalis.

'I've no idea, child. Perhaps the Emperor is dying ...'

'Hush!' said Kaalis, her hands going to her mouth. 'It's dangerous to even think such a thing! My friend, she told me Tall Ones can tell even the silent words in a person's head!'

Shapeis laughed at the girl's superstition. 'Your friend lies!'

'Even so,' said Julyeis, who gave him a dark look as she spoke, 'Kaalis is right. We should be careful about what we say, and thoughts can write themselves on our faces without us even noticing. We won't be wanting attention from the Tall Ones just at the moment.'

'Why not?'

'Because we've got a guest coming to stay. A special guest.'

Julyeis went to collect her guest an hour before the next dawn. Shapeis accompanied her, mainly because he wanted to; he rarely got an opportunity to leave the bordello. Both wore long shifts with hoods even though the air was already warm; Shapeis kept his hood raised over his horns to minimise the stares from curious early risers. Wherever possible, Julyeis chose to use back streets rather than the main thoroughfares. To bypass Market Square, where the first stall-keepers were

beginning to arrive, they walked alongside the main sewer under the cobbled space.

They reached the river a little above the lower docks. Two strangers were waiting in the mists, sat on the bank of the river near a poorly maintained boat carrying a cargo of cabbage and yams. As Shapeis drew closer he could see that one of the strangers was a child.

'You said nothing about a child,' he whispered.

'Neither did the Story Keeper,' she responded. She looked around then quickly signalled: *come*.

The other stranger – a woman by her shape, Shapeis guessed – responded with a signal of her own. She took the child's hand and started to walk towards them. Julyeis did not wait for them to catch up; she turned and started back towards the sewer entrance. Shapeis followed, not bothering to look back.

Only when they had reached the relative safety of the sewer tunnel did Julyeis stop.

'We need some light, lad!'

Shapeis obliged, turning on the torch they had brought with them, though its illumination was feeble; the small spring boxes that powered it were mostly unwound.

As soon the guests reached the safety of the tunnel, the two women started hand-talking. The older stranger carried most of the discussion, weaving her hands through space in gestures and comments, her face miming and grimacing as the silent conversation continued. Shapeis trained the torchlight mainly on her face and hands so that he and Julyeis could pick out the nuances in the woman's chatter, only rarely turning the light on his companion when she needed to sign a response to a direct question.

Throughout the performance the child stood silent and unmoving, a little behind the woman, her eyes lost in a gaze of brickwork patterns.

Then the talking was done. Together the four of them began their journey back to the bordello beyond the warehouses in the Western Quarter. The torch springs finally failed as sunlight breached the city walls.

Back at the bordello, they entered as quietly as possible, moving directly to the Servant quarters hacked into the bedrock beneath the foundations.

'I'll make some steams,' whispered Julyeis. 'You fix the stew, and find that bread Varoul left yesterday.'

Again, Shapeis did as he was told without question. He was curious about these guests, and intended to stay on Julyeis's happy side to learn as much as he could. He watched them now. The woman had already removed her cloak and was attending to the child – a girl who could be no more than eight or nine years old, he judged. Both were filthy and their clothes were little more than rags.

'They'll need to wash,' he said. Julyeis nodded an agreement and broke off from tending the steamer to sign a quick chat with the woman. She, too, nodded an agreement before continuing to tend to the child.

Shapeis understood hand-talking: he had learned it, secretly, on his home farm alongside the other children being raised for their various purposes. Even so, the woman signed with a definite accent: her fingers failed to make the expected inflections for tense and mood and some of her signs were skewed or new, meaning Shapeis had to concentrate harder than normal to get the gist of her words.

The child was not typical, he thought. Throughout the journey, and now in the Servants' quarters, she had shown no interest in him, Julyeis or even the woman. She walked when she was led somewhere, sat and stood when pushed down and pulled up. But otherwise she did nothing, looked at nothing, reacted to nothing.

He attracted the woman's attention and signed: *Is the little one deaf? Blind?*

No, the woman signalled, her right palm outwards and fingers splayed. *She sees and hears only the Creator*.

Shapeis was sure he had misunderstood, but carried on signing – aware that his speech was slow through irregular use. *You have names? Will you share your story with me?*

Not yet – the time is not good, the woman responded. *But I'll give you our names. I am*

called Kebezzu when I am among friends, and this is my charge: Sosunda.

He was busy working from mid-morning, and received his last client some time after sundown. This one – a woman – had asked him to dance for her, performing one of the more erotic Laoma fire-dances. Shapeis met her request, though his mind was elsewhere. He dressed in a short toga and set small fires in metal pots around the room. Some of the steps were out of place – and he completely forgot one of the short, intimate hand runs near the climax of the routine – but the woman was beyond caring at that point. Taller than him, and fatter than average, the woman had masturbated herself through the whole performance.

He took her roughly at the end, not bothering to check how moist she was between her legs, rutting her mercilessly from behind to prevent her hanging from his horns. Soon enough she was screaming for rapture. He acted his way to climax, not delivering his salt to her womb; he knew the client, high on the lutestran leaves she was chewing, would notice no difference.

Then he bathed her, massaged her, got rid of her. Varoul himself, tall and gaunt with decaying molars, took her money as she left. Shapeis returned to the room to clean up, and was joined a couple of minutes later by Kaalis, dressed in a hooded shift to shadow the raw bruise now spread across her face. She froze when she heard new voices in the main hall: the slow, dragging tones of Zhamelle greeting her latest client, but someone else had already prepared a room for her on the first floor and she seemed eager to get her client to bed.

Shapeis continued collecting the fire-bins and Kaalis mopped and cleaned the sunken bath. When they were finished the girl put out the lamps while he checked the hall. Varoul must have retired to his office, leaving the way clear for the two of them to reach the hidden door to their quarters below.

Nobody was in the kitchen. He left Kaalis to prepare steams for them both and went in search of Julyeis and the guests.

He found them hand-talking in the space she called her office, the child asleep on the floor between the two women. Without asking permission, he knelt on the smoothed stone near to where Julyeis sat to watch the conversation.

The woman – Kebezzu, Shapeis remembered – seemed to be discussing rumours she had heard on her journey upstream to Bassakesh. *Petezbarre is closed, he told me. The roads are guarded and the port blockaded. A total quarantine, with not even Tall Ones allowed through.*

And how long ago was this? queried Julyeis, her lips jutting the question from her face.

No more than five days ago. He was the man who arranged our passage from Rhus Barre.

Shapeis knew little about geography. Rhus Barre was a settlement somewhere downstream, before the Taete joined the Vaeyuu River; Petezbarre was a seaport somewhere on the east coast, far away from the world he knew.

And he had good sources?

A cousin who Serves in the Temple there. The aether has been seething with the news, apparently!

Julyeis kept her hands still for a few seconds, considering the information. Reluctantly, she shaped her hands and her face into the questions she didn't want to ask. *Why? What do they fear? Strife? Rebellion?*

I do not want to think that. Few of us survived the slaughters of those unhappy times.

Plague?

Kebezzu shrugged her shoulders, but her face made plain the fear she felt in her bones.

At that moment Kaalis arrived with the steams, and Julyeis – who seemed thankful for the distraction – set about their distribution. Shapeis received his lutestran steam and sipped the hot liquid from the rough edge of his clay-glazed mug. He smiled his thanks to Kaalis, even though the drink was weaker than he preferred it. As the commotion continued he considered the child, sleeping on the floor, oblivious to the sound of scraping chairs and clattering spoons. Now the dirt had been cleaned from her he could see that she was older than he had first thought – eleven or maybe twelve rather than eight. But she was small, as if she had been underfed for years.

She appeared to be normal in every other respect. Her hair was a nondescript curl of black and her skin was dark olive-brown, though scratched and scabbed – if she had ever worked, then she had worked outside, he surmised. He decided to venture a question.

Placing his palms together, he brought his hands to his chin, his thumbs covering his nose and his eyes staring directly at Kebezzu. She noticed his request and nodded. Rustily, he started to sign.

It is strange to see Servants travel without Tall Ones – why?

We are without Tall Ones, friend Shapeis, she responded, slowing her movements to accommodate his interpretation skills.

Why? Who do you serve?

There is more to Service than mere ownership. I am owned by the Creator, and my Service is dedicated to His creation.

Shapeis frowned at the answer. *And those who don't Serve, who don't understand the purpose of our Service – the Tall Ones – they accept this?*

The woman shook her head slowly. *Such people pollute our Service; we prefer to keep our activities from their notice. There are places in the jungles and mountains where Tall Ones do not go. Places made by Servants after the great slaughters many years ago. I come from such a place.*

A city of Servants?

Kebezzu's hands laughed: *No, young one. Hovels they are for the most part, clearings in the jungles wide enough for a small crop of yam. Nothing more, and yet they suffice.*

And you were born there, in this place without Tall Ones?

Again, the slow shake of the head. *These are not places to be born in, rather places to discover, a safe space for us to perform the Creator's work in peace, without distraction.*

Why? Is our Service not worthy?

True Service should be freely offered beyond the bounds of shackles, yes?

Shapeis was surprised when Kaalis, crouched behind him, broke her silence.

'What's so special about freedom?' she whispered, not bothering to wave her hands into the phrases. 'Life's as hard for most Tall Ones as it is for us. At least we don't have to beg for food.'

But for the first time in his life, Shapeis did not share Kaalis's certainties. He glanced again at the sleeping child, then signed his request:

Will you share your story with us now, friend?

And the woman called Kabezzu nodded, and stood, and unfolded a new vision for his mind.

Tabeed

Tabeed broke away from her search for a perfectly ripe mango, looked once more around the Market Square. The crowds were thinning now as people returned to their offices and desks behind the grand facades of the buildings surrounding the massive space on all sides.

Time was pressing. When a braid of her hair worked its way loose from its tightly pinned bun at the back of her head, she pushed it back in place with a frown. She had a long and evolving list of chores to be completed before the rains arrived; shopping for mangoes was not a part of her plans.

The stall keeper hovered into her view with a wide face and open palms: she scowled at him, threw the mango in her hand back into the pile and moved on to a large pyramid of stacked garfruit. At least the man had the sense not to follow her.

More minutes passed before the other woman arrived. Tabeed hid her frustration with a nod and a tight smile.

'You're late, Julyeis!'

'My deepest apologies, friend! Varoul woke in a garrulous mood this morning and now the whole house is in disarray.'

Tabeed gave her a calculating look, but accepted the story at face value. 'Employers often choose to be difficult at the most inappropriate times. You have my sympathy. Shall we work as we talk?'

The woman, taller than Tabeed by a finger's length, agreed. She offered her an arm to hold. 'I need flowers, and soap. Are those stalls out of your way?'

She looked across the expanse of cobbles, past the squat spire of the market manager's offices that hid their view of the river. Even when the crowds were thinner, like now, a stroll across the longer axis of the Market could take more than twenty minutes. But this chore was important; she agreed with a nod.

'Our – mutual employer – insists we discuss matters in detail: she will have to accept the fact that other things won't be done. And anyway,' she continued, 'her "ornament" does need some more of her soothing ointment, which I know Bafue the herb man will have in stock.'

'Good!' The taller woman smiled broadly as they started to walk together through the market. 'Shall we gossip as we browse?'

Tabeed kept her mouth even. She knew Julyeis by reputation, understood that her wide, face-splitting, tooth bearing smile was used only to impress strangers and onlookers. Instead she loosened a pin, pulled the loose braid of hair back into place within its woven nest.

'I could do with some henna. I swear my hair will be as grey as the clouds before the year is done.'

Julyeis refused to stop smiling as she checked the state of Tabeed's hair. 'Henna's expensive, and over-rated. The grey looks good on you, gives you a mark of authority. Watch where you're throwing your waste, man!' She put out her arm to stop Tabeed walking into a pile of wet cornhusks that a fat man had just thrown into their path. He laughed at them. She responded with a coarse hand-sign which the stallholder didn't understand.

As they stepped around the detritus Tabeed picked up the conversation. 'I'd rather rely on my tongue to keep my authority,' she said. 'Lady Arbelle told me I was looking ancient this morning. She said I should ask the Governor to give me lighter duties.'

'She probably thinks she's being kind.'

Tabeed sniffed, choosing not to give the suggested excuse more consideration than it deserved. Instead, she slowed down her pace as they passed a stall with a good display of brightly coloured goat-wool bed sheets. Catching the eye of the young stallholder, she asked: 'Are these the finest weave you have?'

'No, friend. We keep the better goods at the back.' He pointed behind him to where the afternoon tarpaulins were stacked around a small, covered space. 'But they're expensive, mind. What would you be needing the sheets for? Maybe something like this' – he reached across the table to pick out a large square hanging from the rail with a broad blue and white zigzag pattern across it – 'would meet your needs? We have a complete set on offer.'

Julyeis scowled. 'The pattern looks uneven. Are you sure you didn't weave it yourself when you were drunk?' Before the man could protest, she continued. 'She has the Governor's purse in her pocket, idiot.'

The stallholder refused to take offence, but his grin told Tabeed that he didn't believe a Servant would be given the job of picking out new linen; the Lady Temis always made those decisions. Even so, he soon showed them into the covered alcove where the better linen was already wrapped and stacked. With the arrival of another customer immediately after, the two women found themselves alone.

Tabeed wasted no time. 'She – ' her eyes darted upwards towards the bulk of the Governor's House '– is keen to know how the special lessons are going.'

'The girl learns quickly. But she doesn't learn well.' Julyeis shrugged, before continuing: 'I feel that she enjoys the lessons for what they are, rather than lodging their content in her skull, if you know what I mean.'

Tabeed nodded, slowly. 'Go on.'

'I don't know how to teach her what she needs to know without knowing what – our

employer – thinks the girl needs to know. She remains fascinated by the male body, but plays with it for her own pleasure rather than judging what pleasures the man may need.'

'I assume that this is a problem,' said Tabeed. 'Our employer wants her to learn enough to be able to survive ... intrigues, I believe, though why she thinks this is necessary I don't know. The girl's future prospects in the place where she's contracted to go will be different: for a start, she'll already be married.'

'And the betrothed is ambitious?'

'From what I hear, he is his father's tool – even though he's the heir. And that family is taller than most Tall Ones, if you follow me; they have an – intimate – relationship with powers beyond my understanding, or so I've heard people say. Well placed enough not to require the girl to trade favours, I would have thought.'

Julyeis reached up and pulled out a large, deep yellow sheet from the pile.

'That trader wasn't lying about the quality.' She stroked her ringless fingers across the material. 'This is a good weave.' She checked the stitching along the hem. 'I'm worried she may fixate on our lad. She needs to see some variety if she's to understand how differently men can react.'

Tabeed took a moment to check outside the alcove; the stallholder was engaged with another customer – he seemed to be doing a brisk trade. Even so, she was beginning to worry that they'd spent too long in one place. 'There's more important things to buy than pretty sheets,' she said.

Julyeis agreed with her, put the sheet back on top of the pile. They left the stallholder with a promise to return, Tabeed questioning him on where the man's workshop was in case the Lady Temis wanted to see the merchandise for herself. Once they were walking again she picked up the conversation.

'So you've used just the one man for the lessons?'

'Our employer was strict on this point; I don't know why. She told us only to use our "recreational" for the practical sessions. He's a good lad, but he lacks the experience of real life, you know?'

Tabeed shook her head.

'This lad,' Julyeis started, 'well he does as he needs to do. He's good at his job, but it's a job to him. His only concern is to give the client what they desire, preferably with minimal effort on his part. Frankly,' she finished, 'I'd be happier if we could let our pupil see how the staff deal with a variety of men, and then used that knowledge on a couple of our lads.'

'You want me to tell ... her ... that the education she's planned for the girl is, what, flawed?'

They dodged some children racing through the market in a couple of small handcars. Soon they would reach the flower stalls; the ointment sellers lay immediately beyond.

'I'm sure you can think of a more tactful way of telling her,' said Julyeis.

'Remind me to find a Tall One to curse you with one of their demons,' grumbled Tabeed. She checked the height of the sun. 'Those clouds are banking already, and I'm hours behind on my work!'

From the open flatness of the Market Square, laid out close to the river walls and the city's docks beyond them, Tabeed started on the long, uphill walk back to the Governor's House. The whole town was built on a hillside within a broad half-bend of the river, its main streets looping around the hill with minimal incline along their lengths; shorter, steeper streets connected them, giving the woman a choice of an easy-yet long walk against a quicker, harder journey. She chose both options, switching to steeper streets each time she regained her breath.

The House itself wasn't at the very top of the hill – that was the domain of the barby rats – but rather two thirds the way up, built on a shoulder of land which gave good views of the terraced cultivations carved between the dark jungle walls and the muddy, wide reaches of the river.

Soon enough, she reached the fortress's massive front gate. Instead of walking beneath the arches, she continued along the side of the high, thick, stone dressed wall and through a much smaller side-door into the kitchen gardens that stepped down the landward side of the promontory.

She enjoyed the gardens and often came out here to work, but time was pressing and thunder-clouds were already covering much of the sky. She bustled along the gravel path and into the kitchens and store rooms, reordering work priorities in her mind.

She gave orders and directions on the trot. The front part of the compound, overlooking the five-walled Reception Courtyard, was devoted to city administration and office work. Her office was in the back of the House, where the workrooms which formed the heart of her empire spread around the lower tiers of two sides of the almost-square Fountain Courtyard.

With no time to satisfy herself that her orders were being taken forward properly, Tabeed reached her office and pulled a clean over-tunic from the linen stack, tying it loosely at her waist. She allowed herself a moment to check her appearance in a mirror, searching for a new hairpin to skewer the recalcitrant braid back into place. Then she was off again, crossing the courtyard, its herringbone pattern brickwork already scrubbed, towards the great staircase which served as entrance to the upper floors surrounding both courtyards. Somewhere above her she could hear the Governor's young son and heir, Igell, trying to remember the words of a nursery rhyme.

She found the Lady Temis in her reception chamber, on the west side of the first level furthest from the staircase. The chamber's doors ran the length of the walkway; all had been opened to allow the room to catch the morning sun. The space itself was only lightly decorated: most of the fittings and furnishings was expensively new. The only old piece of furniture in the room – an overstuffed, frayed armchair – had been pulled near to the open doors so Temis could sit and look over the courtyard as she worked on her papers.

'My Lady,' said Tabeed as she drew close.

Temis looked up from a letter she was reading and wrinkled the sides of her eyes in greeting. She rarely moved a muscle in her face more than was necessary. From the neatness of the small pile of papers next to her on a stool, Tabeed surmised that the Lady had been waiting for her, rather than concentrating properly on her work; Temis had a habit of spreading her work around her as she engaged with it.

'Ah, Tabeed! I was just about to call for your help to close these doors.' Her voice was even and slow, as controlled as her face with never a misplaced word or tone.

She nodded, moved to the end of the room to start the process of door-closing. 'The rains will be early today, my Lady,' she agreed. By the time she reached the old chair and stool, Temis had moved her papers over to an ornately carved work desk placed at an angle in the centre of the room. Under the desk lay a small figure, curled up as if in sleep.

'Maeduul, my sweet one. Wake up now. Tabeed is here.'

From under the thin, bare arm appeared the wrinkled face of the Lady's "ornamental" servant. Her head's disfigurements had once shocked Tabeed, but time and acquaintance has soon cured that issue: Tabeed knew better than to accept things as they appeared to be.

'I'm not sleeping, *luetsa-ten*. I was listening to your pen whisper its secrets to the paper!'

'You were snoring, dear. And now you're pretending.' Temis could always find a small smile for her pet Servant, as if she was remembering secrets of her own. 'Now come here and stand before me.'

Beneath the table the tiny woman stretched, then rolled onto her knees and crawled out towards where the Lady was settling her old chair in the corner of the room.

She was short, barely more than a metre tall. And yet well-proportioned along her length, like a doll of a woman, thin in the arm and the buttock. Today she was wearing a light blue smock with white hems around its edge. It reached down to her knees and left her arms bare to the shoulder, wrapping her body like a loose sack.

Tabeed could see the woman's age plainly. It showed in her face, the lines around the eyes that peeked out above the large, flat bony plates that grew from her upper jawbone to almost circle her furrowed, hair-free head.

Temis reached out and took Maeduul by the hands, turned her round to face Tabeed. 'She has been sitting on the roof again, haven't you, *hosha*? Her skin has burned.'

'I was watching the red dog chasing the white rabbit across the sky. It was a good race! And

then the hearth-woman came and cleared the cinders out and lit the new sun. How could I refuse her gift of soft rays?"

'You should know better! Your skin is too white to sit out in the sunshine! What happened to that old parasol I gave you?"

'You are silly, *luetsa-ten*. Why would I need a parasol over my head to watch the moons play in the sky?"

'Nevertheless.' Temis moved the muscles around her mouth to form her special scowl, the one she used to show the woman that she was not happy with her. Maeduul reacted accordingly.

'I'm sorry, my Lady,' she said, bowing her head as low as her deformities would allow. 'My work is to please you. I only thought you would like my skin to be brown and soft like your own.'

'And now it is red, like Brach the fire imp's droppings.'

'And you want me to be white,' said Maeduul, a soft grin on her still lowered face, 'like snow petals on the mountains.'

To Tabeed this seemed like an old exchange, signalled in stock phrases: for both women each utterance probably referred back to previous, much longer conversations.

Temis waited a few seconds before continuing. 'I can forgive *hosha-ten*, if *hosha* agrees to have cream rubbed into her burns now – and to stay off the roof for at least a whole week.'

Between her cheek-plates, Maeduul smiled. 'Of course I shall obey my Lady! The moons will not be running together for another ten days.' Quickly, she pulled off her smock and stood before the two women, naked. 'Have you brought me the minty cream, Tabeed? That one makes my skin taste nice!'

'No, Maeduul. I've been to the market this morning to get you some special cream – the one with the balming herbs you said you liked.'

'I don't mind the tingles,' said Maeduul, 'they make me feel free like the light, but they do bother me after a little while.'

'Turn around then, *hosha*, and hold out your arms,' said Temis. 'And stay quiet while Tabeed applies the cream. We need to discuss other business now.'

Of Sex and Love and Politics

Solstice eve. It rained until after sunset, each cloud unfurling its blanket of fresh water across the city, the force of the liquid sheets flattening the river into a resentful calmness. The storm washed the city's stone streets to a dark grey cleanliness, rivulets digging and scrubbing away the rubbish and dust as they weaved their glugging paths down the great hillside.

The rain stopped as quickly as it had arrived. For a short while the only sounds were the city's sounds: the knocks of doors and windows being unshuttered; the splash and clash of the traders in the Market Square tipping water from their awnings and dismantling their stalls; the warbles of neighbours and friends greeting each other as they started their preparations for the festival celebrations.

Then from across the river and beyond the city walls the volume of the jungle began to grow. High-pitch chirrup, loud in the ears of children but blessedly damped from adult hearing. Deep yowls echoing through the dark from unknown mouths and snouts. Careful people listened to the growing cacophony, attempting to catch the cadence of the imps and demons now rustling through the vegetation, adjusting their personal wards to combat this night's special dangers: an extra green rag tied around the left wrist for some; a stone with blue veins placed in a pocket; a whispered blessing over a thimbleful of warmed ghevvesein turned opaque by the addition of water.

By the time the evening meal had been served in the Governor's House even these sounds had been drowned out as the land started to release the water it had soaked up during the afternoon downpour, like a heavy sponge placed on the side of a basin.

For Delesse, the sound of the jungle draining itself was the sound of safety. Surely no imp or

demon would venture far from its home tree while the valleys expelled their waters.

Arbelle was not so sanguine. Delesse watched her younger sister as she followed the orders written down for them by Velledue, their father's astrologer, placing the candle he had prepared for them on a low table in the middle of the room and lighting it, then dimming the room's electric lights to a fraction of their full strength. Soon enough a sharp, peppery aroma pervaded the room, tickling the lining of her nostrils.

'We can tell stories in this room tonight,' suggested their guest.

'Ghost stories, Maeduul?' Arbelle stretched her eyebrows high in mock fright as she turned to look at the tiny woman.

'Who knows what stories the Corn Bird will try to distract us with tonight.' She pulled up the sleeve of her oversized blouse to rub her fingernails across her arms.

'Mother told you not to scratch. Do you want your skin to blister again? Anyway, the Corn Bird doesn't exist. It's just a Servant story to distract us from the real dangers.'

'As you must believe, *Arbelle-ten*. What imp do you think has fractured my skin?'

'The imp you were born with,' said Delesse as she folded away her dining dress, laying it in a basket ready for collection. She had changed into a pair of baggy hemp pantaloons and her rough goat-wool wrap as soon as she had reached the room – a protest, she had explained to Arbelle, at not being allowed out into the city to celebrate, though the truth was she had grown used to the scratchiness of the material, enjoyed the feel of it against her body.

Arbelle gave her older sister a calculated stare. 'Have you washed that old rag, yet? I'm surprised your skin isn't rampant with louse-bites!'

'Of course I've washed it! I wash it every morning in cold water just as Varoul's people told me to do. I'm more likely to get louse-bites from you – have you greased your hair?'

'Velledue!' replied Arbelle.

Delesse understood her sister's chagrin at the old astrologer: he had become decidedly more spiteful with his warding orders over the past few days. House rumours suggested the man was not happy with the Governor's decision that he accompany Delesse to the Imperial Court in Stal for the final marriage ceremonies.

'You don't have to follow his every order,' said Delesse. 'That man lost all interest in us the day Igell was born. He devotes every waking moment to protecting our little brother from evil influences.'

'I wish he'd find a way to keep the sticky devil away from the kid.'

'I wish he'd find a way to stop him picking his nose – it's unhygienic, an invitation to every passing imp! How long are you going to keep that gundge in your hair?'

'I'll have to wash it out before I sleep, in case it glues my head to the pillows.'

Delesse smiled as they settled themselves around the low table with its candle. She sat cross-legged on her floor pillow, while Arbelle folded her legs to one side and rearranged her prized pale blue jarales thread night robe around her. Maeduul, as ever, chose to sit on her heels. When she was settled the tiny woman grew still, closed her eyes.

'So,' started Arbelle, 'when is your next appointment?'

'Not tomorrow,' said Delesse. 'The dressmaker will be here in the morning, and Mother is teaching me more etiquette and intrigue in the afternoon.'

'She ought to let me sit in on those lessons,' said Arbelle. 'It will save her time.'

'You're so sure you'll marry a courtesan, sister?'

'Of course! I'm sure there's more than one Honoured Courtesan looking for a bride, or even an Esteemed Courtesan – that's a step up from our current rank, yes? The Clan needs strong alliances in the Old City. And they all need us. Everybody craves what we have.'

'But what of alliances here, in the province? You might find yourself contracted to an old man in Towes Ferhe.'

The shock on Arbelle's face made Delesse laugh out loud. She hadn't realised that her sister was convinced that she, too, would soon become a powerful figure at the Imperial court.

'Oh, little sister,' she said. 'Why does everything have to be political?'

Arbelle gave Delesse a hard stare. She didn't like being laughed at. 'Everything is political, Delesse. There is nothing but politics and misery in this world. Have you not bothered learning Mother's lessons?'

'You've been listening, haven't you.'

'Of course! Maeduul isn't the only one who knows how to sit quietly on a roof.'

This made Delesse laugh again, and soon enough Arbelle joined her with a smile.

'Even so,' said Delesse when she regained her decorum, 'you haven't answer my question. If everything is politics and misery, then why do we have love?'

'Do you have love?' Arbelle lowered her voice to a whisper. 'Have you found someone to love?'

'Of course not! But I wish for it every day.'

'You will love your husband, I am certain of it,' said Arbelle.

'But what if I don't? What if he is no more than a pretty leather glove wrapped around a knot of worms?'

'Then you must do your duty, sister. I can't have you ruining my chances of a good marriage! Anyway, the man comes to collect you in three weeks: don't you think it is a little bit late to be worrying about love?'

'Every person needs to worry about love,' said Maeduul. She had opened her eyes and was now staring steadily at Delesse. 'Without love, we are not human!'

Delesse turned her head to face the Servant's stare. 'Why do you say that?'

'It is the way we were built. It is the Creator's only desire for us, that we learn how to love each other.'

'Don't be silly,' said Arbelle. 'God does not love us. He cast us out of His house and sent His imps and demons and devils to punish us. That is why we suffer. That is why everything must be politics and misery. Only by enduring our punishments can we hope to gain His forgiveness.'

Maeduul ignored Arbelle, kept her gaze locked on Delesse. 'Is the act of sex such misery?' she asked. 'Is it a punishment to be endured?'

The room fell silent. Delesse found herself blushing as the others waited for her answer. She knew her answer, but it embarrassed her, here and now, to speak it out loud. To admit to having an answer so readily to hand – and yet she knew she had to speak, if only to fill the silence of the room with sound.

Finally she said: 'Why do you ask me that question?'

Maeduul hugged her hands between her knees, leaned forward: 'Why do we have sex?'

'To have children, of course.'

Maeduul cocked her head to one side, her skull ridges and jaw flanges making her look very alien in the dim light. She remained silent.

'To further the cause of the Clan,' Delesse continued. 'To have children, to be strong. To remain alive in a cursed world, together.'

'No,' said Maeduul. 'That is the purpose of your contracts and your marriages. Why do people have sex? Why can't we just bud new babies like the gar bush buds new shoots?'

The little woman's stare was penetrating: Delesse felt like she was being looked at naked, skinless. Even so, she met the question. 'We cannot bud our children because they would then be us. Men and women have to come together to mix themselves in the congress of sex. That way, our babies can be different from us, and will be able to fight off the demons and imps that finally kill us, their parents.'

Arbelle joined in the conversation. 'The first men and women were budded from God's own fingers. That is why only we are in the image of God. And it is why God created sex, as a punishment on humanity, and to prevent us becoming gods in our own way. I can't believe you don't know this, Maeduul!'

Maeduul ignored Arbelle, continuing to stare at Delesse. As the silence continued the sounds of the jungle became louder, invading the room. Finally Delesse spoke: 'Why are you challenging me, Maeduul?'

Still the Servant didn't smile. But she did move back onto her heels, relaxing her shoulders. 'I apologise to the Lady.'

'Good! I do not enjoy your company when you are suffering these strange moods.'

'I apologise to the Lady, for I had forgotten how much the Corn Bird has stolen from the Tall Ones.'

Delesse cleared her throat with an uncertain laugh. 'You and your Corn Bird! What can this Corn Bird steal from me?'

'Stories, Lady! Tipi-sasane steals stories from the head of the unwary child, and thus is the child diminished. She remembers nothing but the rag ends of stories, like a dream half-recalled five minutes after waking.'

'Remember who you're talking to, Maeduul!' said Delesse, her voice lowered to a sharp whisper. 'If Velledue heard you saying these things to me ...'

'... he'd assume you were possessed by a treasonous demon and demand that you be beaten in the Market Square!' finished Arbelle.

Now Maeduul smiled. 'Nevertheless,' she said, 'this is the way of the world. Your politics is beating the weak for telling the true stories, nothing more. Can we drink water now? Then maybe I can talk some more. I can tell stories in this room tonight, this special night, for those with the ears to listen.'

Sometimes, when she and her sister had been much younger, Delesse remembered, Maeduul would come to their room before bedtime and tell them stories: strange stories; stories that could get the girls into trouble if they repeated them to other people. For they were very different to the stories old Velledue told them during their lessons. They were about how things became and what things were and why things happened. There were no devils or demons in Maeduul's stories, though still they could frighten Arbelle to tears; then she would have to hug her sister until she fell asleep.

Maeduul had not offered to tell them a story for more than six years. For Delesse, the evening had already been strange, with the rain lasting hours longer than it should, and the Servant's even stranger than normal behaviour. Suddenly, for no reason – apart from perhaps a desire to recapture the certainties of her childhood – she wanted to hear one of the tiny woman's stories.

'It will do us no harm,' she said to Arbelle. 'What story will you tell us, Maeduul?'

'Not the one about the Waily Fish,' said Arbelle quickly. 'That story was too sad. How about a funny story instead?'

'I like funny stories,' said Maeduul as she returned to the table after filling her specially adapted mug with water. 'But tonight is perhaps a good night for a different story.'

She settled back down at the low table, sitting on her heels.

'Someone once told me – a wise woman, this – that the first men and women were budded from God's own fingers. That is why, she told me, people are built in the image of God.'

'And she was right, this wise and wonderful woman, because people are built in the very image of the Creator. And men and women did indeed bud from the Creator's very own fingers.'

'But alas for this clever woman, for even though she protected her thoughts and her words well, the Corn Bird was able to confound her and steal away the real story. The whole story.'

'But tonight I shall help this wise and beautiful woman. Tonight with my words I shall do combat with Tipi-sasane and take back what is rightfully hers and ours to know.'

'The Creator came and made the world, the mountains and the oceans, the rivers and the plains. And then He created life to make the world beautiful in His eyes. But He underestimated His powers. His life consumed the world, choking the rivers and sapping the mountains of their strength. So the Creator brought forth the Councils of the Imps, who are death and decay, and the battle of life and death became.'

'The Creator was saddened by His world, and left it for many, many ages. But He never forgot this place as He travelled among the stars. He yearned to make things right again, and finally He returned. With new magic He undertook a second creation, a more powerful and ordered creation. And in His final act of this creation He formed the People Seed, which He threw across the

arc of the world to land where it willed.

'This seed fell to ground in the Valley of Home, and there it took root and grew a great trunk and a great branch, and on that branch it formed a great fruit. And there, within the fruit grew the first man and the first woman, clasped together in their formation. When that fruit finally dropped from its branch it clove in two. From one half strode Sama-Lovare, strong and lithe and eager to hunt and explore. And from the other half emerged Mara-Gaye, perfect in every way: beautiful and intelligent and quick.

'These are the words of my story for those wise women who sit with me tonight. Listen to my words as I tell you the fortunes and misfortunes of Sama-Lovare and his birth-sister Mara-Gaye while they lived in the Valley of Home. Keep these words close to your hearts and your guts, so the Corn Bird may never steal them away from you again!

'The Valley of Home was the most beautiful place in the world. Through it ran a river whose waters were fresh and cold for the drinking, but which also provided shallow, warm pools where the first man and the first woman could wash and swim and play. Above the river were great cliffs, their faces dressed in a riot of vines and lianas, with wholesome mosses and sugar-sweet fruits for the eating. Within the cliff walls were wide caves where the siblings could shelter from the wind and the rain, and sleep in safety from the battles of life and death that still raged across the world.

'In those first days the world was a wonder to explore, with each day bringing a new discovery. Every morning Sama-Lovare would head off into the hills around the valley to seek new pleasures and sights, and every morning Mara-Gaye would head to the river to learn new knowledge by listening and watching the ways of the world.

'For the Creator was never far from His greatest achievement. Sometimes He would become the divine breath and sweep through the trees, letting their leaves dance at His passing. At other times He would become the giving rain, whose patters and spatterings would entrance the siblings. And sometimes He would send His other creations to teach His beloved children.

'For instance, one day Sama-Lovare met Wrak-Katch, the cockerel that greets the hearth woman each morning with praise and song for the Creator, who came back to the valley to teach the siblings how to prepare and mix their food so that it would always be tasty and safe.

'And then there was the time when Uruk-We the toad stayed for a while in the valley. It was from the marks on her skin that Mara-Gaye learned the secret arts of reading and writing words.

'But their greatest teacher was the People Tree, for this was their birth tree. By listening to the voice of its creaking bark the siblings learned which foods were good for the eating, and which would harm them. From the whisper of its leathery leaves they learned the shape of the world beyond the valley, and from the curves of its questing roots they learned of the Creator, and how to worship him through their enjoyment of life.

'Ah, my wise women! Now you must listen hard to my words. For now I must rest from recalling the pleasant things, and instead whisper in your ears important words. Words that must not be forgotten!

'One morning there came to the Valley of Home Leprhe-he the rabbit, and his wife Leprhe-she. Mara-Gaye was enchanted to meet the couple, and begged them to stay with her and her brother for a while.

'The rabbits were glad of the invitation, for the grass in the valley was sweet. They built themselves a home in the ground and every evening they would entertain the siblings with stories and plays. Their speech was a treat, for they bickered their way through conversations – first Leprhe-he setting out a tale, then Leprhe-she correcting him in his details; sometimes their arguments would last so long that the story they were telling was forgotten! Then they would start a new story, for their quarrels were of the moment and conducted within the love the two creatures had for each other.

'A morning came when Mara-Gaye came across the rabbits beside the river. At first she thought they were fighting, such was the noise they were making. She grew scared for her friends and interrupted them. Leprhe-he was most annoyed at this intrusion, but Leprhe-she cuffed her mate around his long ears and led Mara-Gaye away to the stream.

"You frightened me," said Mara-Gaye. "I thought you were battling like the storm clouds."

'Leprhe-she laughed. "You could call it a battle, little straight legs, if you like. But we were not fighting. This morning is a special time for me; it is a morning for making rabbits."

"I do not understand," said Mara-Gaye. "Why do you need to make more rabbits? There are two of you already."

"Oh, we are not the only rabbits in the world," said Leprhe-she. "The Creator has given me the gift of life, but only for a short while. A time will come when I shall no longer be. Then it will be the turn of my children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren to enjoy the Creator's gift."

"What is a children?" asked Mara-Gaye.

'And again Leprhe-she laughed. "In a few weeks I shall be able to show you my children, if Leprhe-he has done his work well!"

And sure enough, after a few weeks, Mara-Gaye led Sama-Lovare down to the river where they met the rabbits with their new babies – miniature versions of them squabbling and playing in the long grass of the bank. Sama-Lovare was amazed by what he saw. He went to Leprhe-he and asked him how this miracle happened.

"I have no idea," said Leprhe-he. "There comes a certain time when Leprhe-she looks most beautiful, her fur is so sleek and her scent is so intoxicating, and then we play with each other the special game where we roll and bicker in the grass and I mount her many times, rubbing my nub in her until the Creator's own pleasure shakes our bones in our skins. Then Leprhe-she boxes my ears hard and tells me to fetch her the sweetest young shoots so she can eat them and grow fat. I do not mind; soon enough the children are born and then we can play again."

"Do all creatures play this game?" asked Sama-Lovare.

"Oh, yes," said Leprhe-he. "It is the Creator's greatest gift. Do you not play such games with your Mara-Gaye?"

'Sama-Lovare was confused. Later, he told Mara-Gaye what Leprhe-he had told him, and Mara-Gaye repeated what Leprhe-she had told her. Then they wondered what it would be like to play the special game and Mara-Gaye boxed Sama-Lovare around the ears, but Sama-Lovare said that that was supposed to come later. So Mara-Gaye apologised and placed her lips on his ear, and Sama-Lovare took her in his arms and placed his lips on hers.

'The sun fell out of the heavens and they didn't notice. The moons rose above the hills, the red dog hard on the heels of the white rabbit, and they didn't notice. When Wrak-Kateh summoned the blue sky back to the valley Sama-Lovare clasped and Mara-Gaye arched and their bones shook in their skins.

'Sama-Lovare did not go out exploring for many weeks. Each evening he brought the freshest green shoots to Mara-Gaye in her cave, and every evening Mara-Gaye would throw them to one side and take her sibling into her arms instead. Eight times the red moon grew fat and shrivelled away, and in time Mara-Gaye too grew fat, though she chose not to eat the fresh shoots and instead went hunting for mud and bark to sate her strange cravings.

'When the first waters flooded from Mara-Gaye's loins, the siblings grew fearful. "What is happening to me?" wailed Mara-Gaye. Sama-Lovare went looking for Leprhe-she, who by this time was surrounded by many children and grandchildren. Together they went back to the cave which Mara-Gaye had decorated in soft leaves and dry earth.

"Now is the time for you to relax your limbs and let the birthing waves flush your children from your body," said Leprhe-she. But for Mara-Gaye the waves were earthquakes breaking her body. For a day and a night the pains wracked her spine and her stomach, until a time came just before morning and a tiny person pushed past Mara-Gaye's loins and entered the world.

"Now is the time for you to lick the new one clean," said Leprhe-she. "He will bring you a present at the end of his tether, which you must eat. Then you can place him near your teat so you can return the gift, pressing the warm milk into his belly."

"Why does he have holes where we have eyes?" asked Sama-Lovare.

'Leprhe-she looked at the baby. "I do not know," she said. "My children are born ugly and naked, but they all have their eyes hidden behind their lids. Maybe the next child will look better."

'But there were no more children born to Mara-Gaye that day, just the tethered meat which Mara-Gaye ate, its blood running across her cheeks. And by the time she had licked the baby clean and placed it by her teat, it no longer cried, or breathed.

'Mara-Gaye knew at that time a shivering and sorrow and hurt of such force that she could have rent the universe into pieces, if only she had known how. Leprehe-she said to Sama-Lovare: "Maybe if she had eaten the green shoots instead of mud and bark, your child would still live." And then she went away.

'For a time the siblings were sundered from each other, though no mountain or river separated them. Mara-Gaye had loved her son from the first moment he had tickled her ribs with his toes. Together the siblings dug a hole by the river and laid his tiny body within it. They showered him with flowers and moss, then filled his grave with tear-mixed earth and placed a great stone on top of him. And after, they left the Valley: Sama-Lovare climbed the mountains that lead to the Roof of the World, while Mara-Gaye followed the river down and down until eventually she found the ocean.

'Seasons passed until a new spring came, and time had curdled their pain into an ache beneath the heart; only then did the siblings – each in their own way – return to the Valley of Home.

From beyond the window, the jungle was in full song, overloading the night air with unknown howls and chirrups. In the room, Arbelle was crying. Delesse moved over to her sister to comfort her, wiping tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

'This is an awful story, Maeduul! What do you hope to gain by scaring her like this?'

Maeduul rose up from her kneeling position, limped her way across the room to refill her mug with water from the tap in the corner.

'How could the little baby die?' sobbed Arbelle. 'This story is worse than the Waily Fish!'

Still Maeduul said nothing, instead returning with her mug to resume her kneeling position on her heels. She held her head down, nestling it to one side so the bony flange along her jaw line dug into her thin shoulder.

'I will have an explanation, Maeduul!'

Maeduul looked up at Delesse, the features of her face smudged and flickering in the light of the half-burned candle. But her stare was strong and steady, unfazed by Delesse's admonition.

Finally she spoke. 'You must know the truth of these matters. Send the young one to bed if she is too upset to hear more of my words.'

'What truth? There is no truth in your stories. They are an abomination to God!'

At this, the tiny woman smiled: 'And you have lived in the Old City for how many years?'

'What? I don't understand you! I live here, in Bassakesh.'

'And by your own words you confirm your ignorance, sweet one. They will eat you like a sugared date; they will suck your flesh like a mango, and throw the stone of you in the street.'

'I will be a Courtesan ...'

'You will be what your husband decides you will be, and nothing more, unless you know the truth of these things!'

Delesse was shocked at the sudden, harshness – Maeduul never used such a direct, challenging tone. Arbelle, too, was staring at the woman, her crying diminished to gulps.

Maeduul straightened her head, smiled at the open mouths in front of her. 'The wise ladies should settle themselves,' she said. '*Luetsa-ten* has asked me to tell you both a story. It is a story I have told before. I told it to *luetsa-ten* many years ago, when she was scared to her death. Scared by not knowing who to trust in the windy courts of the Old City. I was sent by another to tell her this story; it horrified her, yes, the story can do that, but then that is the purpose of stories, is it not?'

'Mother told you to ...?'

'No, she asked me to tell you this story, just as she asked me – begged me – to tell you the stories when you were much younger, the Servant stories of Mara-Gaye and Sama-Lovare, of the Princes of animals and birds, of the majesty of the Creator Himself. And so I have done.' She sipped her water, then continued. 'But once this story is told, this night, there will be no more. Understand?'

Maeduul will not risk her soul's breath for *luetsa-ten* or her sweet kittens after this night is done!

'Now settle, my wise women, and listen to my words.'

'Seasons passed until a new spring came, and time had curdled their pain into an ache beneath the heart; only then did the siblings – each in their own way – return to the Valley of Home.

'But the valley had changed in their absence. Now it was the Valley of Rabbits – everywhere Sama-Lovare looked, he saw fur. The green swards along the banks of the river were trodden to mud; the warm pools filled with dung. Everywhere Mara-Gaye looked she saw Leprhe-hes mounting Leprhe-shes; she saw Leprhe-children suckling at their dam's teats. Sama-Lovare was angry at the destruction of their valley, but Mara-Gaye could only taste a bitterness in her mouth, and her teat ached for the touch of a miniature man's lips.

'One morning Wrak-Kateh returned to the valley, his loud song welcoming the dawn of a new day. Sama-Lovare said: "let us go and talk to Wrak-Kateh." Together, the siblings climbed the valley cliffs. The Prince of Chickens welcomed them warmly, but he could see grief in their faces.

"Tell me all that has happened since I last visited you," he said, and so they did, each recalling a part of their story until the puzzle of its telling was made clear.

'Then Wrak-Kateh howled! "Woe that Princes of Creatures should be so poorly advised! I wish my wattles ran with blood for leaving you to learn such things from the rabbit folk!" And indeed, from that day hence, the wattles of all cocks and hens became the colour of blood, to remind them of how they failed to teach people the truth of the Creator's intent.

"We thought the Leprhes were wise, like you," said Sama-Lovare.

"The Princes of the Rabbits are indeed wise creatures, but the Leprhes are not princes. Princes are born of the first fruit of their Life Tree; they are the knowledge and the souls of their race. But the creatures that emerge from the fruit that follows are lesser creatures. I am the first fruit of the Tree of Chickens; I would not trust my kinfolk to tell you the time of day!"

"So why did life run so quickly from my child?" asked Mara-Gaye. "Why was the wind of his lungs stolen?"

'Wrak-Kateh looked into the sky, as if searching for answers in the shapes of the clouds. Finally, he said: "The Creator first created life to decorate His creation, but that life was without knowledge. It knew nothing of His designs. When He created life anew, He arranged things differently. To each race of creatures He gave knowledge of what was and what is, and maybe what shall be. And yet life is life, and is driven to recreate itself. So He chose to give knowledge to the first fruit, and fecundity to those fruits that follow, so that knowledge will not be diluted through the ages."

"I do not understand," said Mara-Gaye.

"You are the first fruit of the People Tree," said Wrak-Kateh. "Within you, you hold the knowledge of everything the Creator wishes your race to know. But it is not your purpose to create new life: that shall be the work of the lesser fruit that the People Tree will bear."

'Mara-Gaye was silent for a while, then said: "I wish now I didn't understand. I would trade all the Creator's knowledge to feel a child grow inside me again."

'But there was hope in Sama-Lovare's heart, for he learned from Wrak-Kateh's words that the Leprhes were lesser folk. The Great Cockerel called out to Kaya-Brishe, the Prince of Eagles, who came to the Valley of Home and taught Sama-Lovare how to hunt and cook rabbits. "They are good eating," said Kaya-Brishe, "and their fur will keep you warm when you travel to the mountains where the rain turns to ice and snow."

'And soon enough the valley was cleared of the vermin, except for the fattest and furriest rabbits, which Sama-Lovare kept in a cave.

'For Mara-Gaye, though, the days turned slowly. She took no interest in Sama-Lovare's activities, instead preferring to sit between the great roots of the People Tree, waiting for signs of new fruit.

'One evening, when the valley was flush with the growth of fresh grass blades, Mara-Gaye fell into a dream. She climbed the People Tree and sat on its great bough, close to the trunk. The

Tree asked: "Why do you sit among my roots, little one?"

"I wait for your fruits," said Mara-Gaye. "If the Creator does not wish me to carry a child in my womb, then I will nurse the lesser people to come."

"Little one, there will be no lesser people. You and your brother are the only fruit I shall ever bear. It is the Creator's will."

'And in an instant Mara-Gaye saw the truth in this knowledge. She raged. She woke from her dream and still she raged! Her anger brought rocks crashing from the cliffs. Her wrath drove the waters in the river uphill! When her feet stamped on the ground in her passion dance the very earth cracked and bled.

"What ails you?" shouted Sama-Lovare. The sight of his sister's violence scared him so much that his eyes almost came loose from their sockets.

'Mara-Gaye screamed, the force of her lungs carrying her words even to the peaks of the Roof of the World. "I am Your greatest creation," she roared, "and yet You would deny me what I most desire? I deny You! I shall oppose Your work and Your world with every last muscle and sinew in my body. I shall see You crawl on Your belly like the least of worms!"

'Mara-Gaye was not challenging Sama-Lovare. She was challenging the Creator Himself. And the Creator heard her challenge and for the first time since the start of existence He knew fear. For Mara-Gaye was indeed His greatest creation, greater even than Sama-Lovare, and the knowledge within her was the most powerful.

'The Creator knew He had no choice but to answer Mara-Gaye's challenge. He stepped from His palace of ice and fire within the peaks of the Roof of the World and stepped into the Valley of Home. Sama-Lovare cowered at the sight of him, a giant in the form of both man and woman, and covered his ears when the First Voice of the Universe spoke. Mara-Gaye, however, stood firm.

"I am," He stated.

"I shall become," replied Mara-Gaye, her voice a whisper compared to the Original Roar.

"I remain," said the Creator

"Only to the end of days. Only until the last galaxy has spun its final circle. Then You shall be no more. A void as absolute as the space within my womb!"

'And the Creator smiled. "That is a truth," He said.

'Mara-Gaye, too, smiled. "Change me," she asked. "Let me be the mother of lesser people."

"You have eternal life," said the Creator. "You are the Queen of Princes. You are the eyes that see My creations and the mouth that gives them meaning."

"Nevertheless," said Mara-Gaye.

"And what of the Prince of People?" asked the Creator.

"He shall come to understand, in time," said Mara-Gaye.

The Creator nodded. "That which has been set in motion, it cannot be changed. Only a new situation can be created, only a new motion set."

"You have that power in Your hands," said Mara-Gaye.

"Indeed!" agreed the Creator, and in that moment He took His great axe from His belt and in one shining sweep severed His hand from His body. And then He took that hand and laid it upon the bough of the People Tree and drove a splinter of diamond through it, so that the giant hand hung from the tree like a fruit.

"Grow!" He commanded the tree. And the People Tree did as it was ordered, pumping its life-sap into the Creator's hand. As the fingers lengthened, the tree's roots became brittle and dry; as each digit took the shape of a person, the tree's trunk withered and cracked. When finally the lesser people stretched free of the husk of the palm, the People Tree died, its last act complete.

'And there, my wise women, my telling of this story must end. For you know the rest, from the faint resonances that you remember after the Corn Bird stole the true story from your mind. To the first man came four women, one from each finger, shapely and comely and compliant to his will. But know this: from the thumb grew a man, a husband for the first woman and the father of her many daughters, who held in their bodies the steel certainties of their mother.

'I have restored this truth for you; do not repeat it! You do not have the skills – yet – to

defend your minds against the Corn Bird, and she will be eager to reclaim those words from you. Keep the story close to your hearts and your guts! While the meat that hangs from your bones may be a flesh-gift of your parents, and theirs, and theirs before them, be aware that the blood of Mara-Gaye herself runs within the veins of women as wise as you!

The Groom's Party

Loken emptied the cup of dice onto the roughly carved bench. 'Seventeen,' he counted. 'I swear you've cursed these bones against me!'

'Not me,' said his companion, gathering the five cubes into his own cup and shaking them idly. 'You must have attracted a stray devil when you went for a crap.'

'That would not surprise me. This place reeks of devils and imps.'

'Has your uncle said any more about when we'll be leaving?'

'No. He sits on the boat surrounded by papers and plots and says - nothing.'

'And we sit here rolling dice. You owe me half the empire, by the way. Shall we gamble for the other half?'

Loken chose not to smile. 'At the moment my empire amounts to a heap of goat shit, Sheslan. You're welcome to it.'

'How about we gamble for the right to mount your bride?'

'She probably is a goat.'

'If she ruts like a goat, then we're in business! Anyway, you only want her for her golden fleece.'

'Father wants her fleece, not me. All I want is a good fuck and a decent cup of steam.' Turning towards the wooden building on whose decking they were sat, he shouted: 'Steam! Bring me a steam! And a barrel of ghevvesein to drown myself in!'

'And a goat!' added Sheslan. 'He needs a goat for the fucking!'

The sounds of bodies moving within the building reached Loken, but didn't hold his interest. Instead he stared along the river's bank to where their boat were berthed. Over the past four days the two young men had explored every metre of the settlement looking for some form of entertainment, but had quickly discovered there was none to be had – not even a dockside whorehouse.

The settlement had been substantial once, but Loken reckoned there could be no more than a hundred people living here now. If it had a name, it certainly wasn't worth remembering. A forgotten place on a bend in the river, its cultivations abandoned to the growth of timber; old folk abandoned by the young in search of better opportunities.

The hostel on whose veranda they sat had been recently built, which was strange now Loken came to think about it. A middle aged couple ran the establishment; the rumour was that the man had once worked in the Arallo Clan's personal guard – for some unknown reason Lord Puusen had generously pensioned him off, then ordered him to move to this place.

Whatever business the man now conducted, it wasn't catering or inn-keeping – not a single other boat had docked at the settlement in the past four days, much to Loken's disappointment.

The afternoon rains began on schedule, a low rumble of thunder announcing the deluge. He watched his friend hastily unfold from his chair and gallop towards the eaves of the building.

'You know you run like a woman!' he shouted after him.

Sheslan shouted back: 'You want to get soaked?'

'I've been wearing these rags for two scab-fouled days! Bring me some soap and an old woman who knows how to scrub a man properly.'

'Your wards will be ruined!'

'Sheslan, you act like an old chicken. Is it true you fuck boys to protect yourself from the scrotum pox imps?'

'You want to drown in the piss? You drown in the piss. I'll take you upriver and stand your

stinking corpse in front of your beautiful bride during the ceremony, yes?"

'Hah!' Nevertheless Loken took his friend's advice, abandoning the dice and cups to the rain. Once beneath the shelter of the eaves, he stripped off his tunic, letting the cooling airs of the rainstorm ease across his shoulders.

'Think of your station, man!'

'Who's to see? Who's to gossip? Uncle Loetopas won't be leaving the boat now, the soldiers are busy marching or something and the locals don't count.'

Sheslan didn't answer. He was staring past Loken's shoulder towards the river.

'What is it?'

'Boats. Look.'

Loeken followed the man's gaze downriver. All he could see was great sheets of water billowing between the dark browns and purples of the jungle walls and the wide waters of the slow-moving river. But when the downpour lessened for a few seconds, waiting for the next roll of thunder, he spotted shapes in the distance, long and low in the water.

'How many?' he asked.

'Two, definitely. Maybe three. Big boats.'

'Cargo haulers, then, heading upriver.'

'No, they're too close to the bank. I reckon they're heading here.'

'The channel's not deep enough for big boats.'

'I don't think they're rowing,' said Sheslan. The rain had turned heavy again, the boats once more lost from view.

'Paddle boats?'

Sheslan shrugged. 'Do you want to go down to the docks?'

Loeken dismissed the idea with a cut of his hand. 'No. I need a strong steam.' He turned his head towards the building's doors. 'Make my steam strong!' he shouted, 'and bring me some rags to dry myself!'

Loetopas, second brother to the Clan Leader and an Honoured Courtesan in his own right, was annoyed. His nose annoyed him by the way it sloped to the left, marring the symmetry of his face, but there was little he could do about that: his brother had broken it for him when they were children, and had refused him permission to fix it.

The beard, however, was a travesty. He watched his face in a mirror as his body officer – the only man he trusted with a blade near his neck – trimmed the hairs close to his skin and carved an outline to a fashionable shape. Loetopas endured the vagaries of fashion for the sake of propriety; he looked forward to a time when the full-beard look would be back in vogue.

'Three boats, you said?'

The officer nodded as he edged the blade around the courtesan's upper lip. 'Three boats, Sir. Two as expected, sent by Lord Puusen; the third an Imperial boat.'

'Is Jassael in command?'

'Yes, Sir. He's already sent word that he needs to see you.'

'Immediately, no doubt.'

The officer said nothing, instead wetting a cloth in fresh water to wash foam from the face.

'What of the Imperial boat?'

'Commander Jassael said nothing about the third boat, Sir. Nor is it flying any flags. We've identified it as the *Pride of Lachlasser*, a pleasure craft of the Emperor's personal fleet.'

'A river boat, then.' Loetopas considered his options as he stood from his chair and threw down the towel protecting his tunic from water marks.

He soon reached a decision. 'Hoist a signal welcoming the Emperor's boat,' he ordered. 'Use courtly language. Ask if there are any specific wards we will need to deploy to receive the captain and any guests on board. Use Loken's standard.' He walked across his spacious personal cabin to a full-length mirror to check the state of his dress.

The officer looked surprised at his orders, but bowed his head to show compliance.

'Then tell Jassael to be here – indeed – immediately. I want to know what's going on before I meet these secretive folk. And find Loken!' he continued. 'I need the boy on board and in his cabin in twenty minutes. Tell him to be prepared for civilities. If he's drunk, then take him to one side and – softly, mind – beat him into sobriety!'

Jassael looked immaculate as he walked into the cabin, though a quick perusal of the wards pinned to the man's cloak tightened Loetopas's stomach – he was meticulous in his daily choice of fetishes; these ribbons and stones indicated a sharp worry hunting through the Commander's mind.

'Welcome, cousin!' Loetopas started. 'I see you have endured your journey well.'

'Thank you, my Lord. I see you are untroubled by the jungle's warehouse of imps. I can only apologise deeply for my tardiness.'

'I'm sure Lord Puusen would not delay you without reason.'

'Indeed, Sir. He said you would understand. He ordered me to deliver this to you by hand.' The man was tall; he did not have to bend far to place the bundle of rolled papers on the desk.

'Sit with me a while, cousin.' Loetopas indicated to a chair to the side of his desk, which Jassael settled into quickly, placing his hands on his knees in the accepted courtly manner. Neither of them had yet smiled.

Loetopas flicked his wrist to order the attending guard to leave the room and secure the door behind him. Once he was satisfied of their privacy, he leant back in his chair. He kept his voice quiet as he talked.

'Tell me what I need to know, cousin.'

'Lord Puusen has been generous with reinforcements, though he would prefer you not to deploy them unless circumstances require it. We also have the gift ...'

'The gift? Oh, yes.' He kept his face and voice passive. 'How many?'

'Only two, Sir, acquired from Petezbarre.'

'The city remains closed?'

'Yes, Sir.'

'Have the imps within them expressed themselves?'

'No, Sir. They show no such signs. The healers claim the imps are present and viable.'

Loetopas had argued long and hard against this course of action. His brother had chanced on the idea a day before they had set out – a demon-induced plan in Loetopas's view, but Puusen was the head of Clan Arallo and would not be dissuaded from the idea.

'How does the affliction run?'

'Loudly, according to our force leader, and quite debilitating. But the imps are not as vicious as rumour would have it.'

Loetopas nodded. He had learned as much before sailing, though confirmation of the knowledge was welcome.

'How are you transporting them?'

'They travel in a locked compartment with separate ventilation to the rest of the boat. They have water, some grain, some roots and some chickens. The healers advised us to place a weaned piglet in the compartment as well – they claimed it would eat any vermin that found a way in through the ventilation. And the compartment door has been peppered with subtle containment wards.'

The news didn't assuage Loetopas's worries. 'How many people know of their presence?'

'Two of us now, Sir. The force who acquired them, and the healers who worked with them, no longer have to suffer the tortures that afflict this world.'

He didn't believe the Commander. 'They make no noise?'

'Tongues are not included in our manifest, Sir. The boat crew knows only that the compartment holds live chickens and pigs, pre-blessed for the contract ceremony.'

'My, my,' said Loetopas, smiling at his cousin for the first time. 'My brother thinks of every detail!' Even so, he still felt uneasy about transporting such a dangerous ... weapon. He understood his brother better than most other people did – sharing a womb for nine months had given him an

advantage there – but when it came to sacrificing his closest blood for the cause?

He chose to ignore such a devil-inspired doubt. Instead he called for steam drinks. While the two men waited for the beverages to arrive they discussed recent happenings in the Old City: appointments, betrothals, slights and demotions – the rumours and gossip that energised the Imperial Court. Only after the steams had been delivered, and the cabin door shut tight once more, did Loetopas move on to the other issue that was worrying him.

'You seem to have acquired a flotilla, cousin. Tell me more.'

'I saw your signal, Sir.' Although the man kept his face relaxed, Loetopas noticed the way he let one hand cross to the other knee, as if to comfort its companion.

'You worry about the etiquette of my approach?'

'I don't know who's aboard the boat.'

'It's common courtesy for boats in convoy to let each other know who they travel with, yes?'

'The boat wasn't with us when we left Stal.'

'But you know the boat?'

'Oh yes. The *Pride of Lachlasser* is part of the Emperor's personal fleet. A pleasure boat, nothing more.'

'It's a long way from home!'

Jassael nodded his agreement. 'It was waiting for us just upriver from Towes Whate.'

'Waiting for you?' A moment of concern flexed its way across the muscles of Loetopas's jaw, though he managed to keep the tone of his voice disinterestedly even.

'Waiting for us. As we approached, it signalled– we couldn't ignore it. When we came alongside the captain told us he had orders from the Emperor to accompany us upriver, to witness the contract.'

'That's interesting,' said Loetopas. 'The Emperor himself gave permission for the marriage to proceed, and gave us special dispensation to expedite the exchange of contracts. He even pre-imposed the terms of the contract on us so that we could not change them before the ceremony.'

Resting his elbows on the armrests of his chair, the older man knuckled his fingers into loose balls to rest his chin on them. As he considered this news he could hear the gentle slapping of the water against the planks of the boat. A minute passed, and then another.

'This makes no sense,' he finally said.

'You want to know how the boat had reached the Vaeyuu river, Sir?'

'Surprise me.'

'The captain told me they'd moved the boat by wagon.'

Loetopas arched a doubting eyebrow. 'You jest! The roads are not wide enough to carry wagons that large. It would have caused chaos – and would have been widely reported!'

'My words exactly, Sir. He said they'd dismantled the boat, moved it overland and rebuilt it on the Vaeyuu. Apparently the Emperor ordered the boat to be designed for such manouevs.'

'God's aching teeth! The old dog kept that one quiet! Did the captain divulge any other state secrets?'

'No, Sir.'

'Well, cousin, you leave me with a puzzle. Still, we can't waste time; we'll be heading upriver at dawn tomorrow. We need to be in Bassakesh in five days, otherwise poor Loken will be signing his contract on the dockside.'

Jassael was half-out of his seat when someone knocked at the door – a severe breach of protocol.

'A signal from the *Pride of Lachlasser*, Sirs,' announced the guard, his cheeks drained of blood. Momentarily, Loetopas wondered if the guard feared the contents of the message or the consequences of his audacity more.

'Tell us!' he ordered.

The guard remembered to bow, and then started to recite the message.

'From Bassok, Captain of his Imperial Majesty's barge *'Pride of Lachlasser'* to his Imperial Majesty's Honoured Courtesan, the Lord Loken of Clan Arallo. I salute you and invoke God and

the Emperor for your continued health and success. I salute the honour and bravery of Clan Arallo, whose stature can be second only to the Emperor himself. Greetings. The Beloved Courtesan has instructed me to forward these words to you.

'She thanks you for your message and will be happy to dine with you at sundown. She wishes you to understand that she will be visiting you as a friend and travelling companion. She further thanks you for your kind offer of wards and considers the legendary hospitality of Clan Arallo will more than suffice to keep the most invidious of imps from her person. She looks forward to meeting your uncle.'

Again the guard bowed, this time keeping his head down, awaiting orders.

Seconds stalled as Loetopas struggled to still his wild thoughts. He'd suspected there might be a senior court official on board – an irritation, no more. But this?

It took an effort of his will to prevent himself from swearing out loud. Finally, the decades of court ritual ingrained in his bones came to his rescue.

'Respond with courteousness and warmth. Tell the Beloved Courtesan, Lady Feyn, that we will be honoured beyond breath and heartbeat to greet her at sunset.'

Loken was working hard to make sure no sign of his nervousness showed in his face or stance. Since being hauled back on board his uncle's boat he had been witness to chaos. Loetopas had given orders that everyone was to be put to work making the boat look as presentable as circumstances allowed and the newly arrived Commander, Jassael, had not spared Loken from his share of the duty.

Then an hour before sunset Jassael had ordered Loken to his cabin. 'Make yourself look presentable, man!' he'd shouted after him. 'Wear your ceremony garb if necessary. And don't waste time on your make-up wards – she has views about men who paint their bodies and faces!'

"She" was Feyn, the Emperor's "Beloved Courtesan", a title traditionally reserved for the Empress's senior attending courtier, according to Loken's tutors. But since this Emperor had never married, the title had taken on a different meaning over the past few decades.

He had first met the woman on his majority day; he remembered the occasion without fondness. 'Such long hair covering his muscular frame,' she had observed to his father. 'But he grooms himself well. You have plans for his contract already?' And for the rest of the allotted hour he had stood stock still, not smiling, not saying a word as Lord Puusen and the Emperor's mistress had conducted their political battle through a variety of compliments and courtesies.

Everyone said afterwards that the Lady Feyn had outscored his father. Naturally, the father blamed the son. The special treats that had been arranged for his fifteenth birthday had been cancelled as a punishment.

'And now the witch has come to ruin my wedding!'

Sheslan said nothing. He had been given his own orders to be back in the settlement before sundown.

'I'll talk to uncle,' said Loken, trying to comfort the man. 'Maybe you can travel on the soldier's barge. We'll still be able to have some fun in Bassakesh ...'

Though his uncle did have a point, he mused, as he watched Sheslan bundle his gear into a cart and head back to the settlement. The man was not built for court intrigue: his job was to keep Loken company; there had been occasions in the past when his friend had forgotten his station, reflecting poorly on the Clan and earning Loken some nasty lectures.

And now the sun was setting. He had chosen not to wear his ceremony costume, instead opting for a black tunic skilfully embroidered in jarales threads dyed to a rich golden yellow; similarly, he had chosen to wear old family wards and, as instructed, his face remained free of all cosmetics. Even his beard had been trimmed – an exact copy of his uncle's cut, and thus a good two seasons out of date.

Beside him on the deck stood Jassael, his uniform characteristically immaculate, his face unblemished.

'Will she make us wait?' Loken asked.

'Probably not. She usually does as she says.'

'Why is uncle not here to greet her?'

'This is your show. You are supposed to be commanding this adventure – an epic journey into the deep jungle to rescue your bride and bring her back to civilisation, or so the Court's been told.'

'I'm not prepared for this! One mistake and my name will be goat droppings in my father's mouth!'

'Lord Loetopas is not worried; he has faith in your tutors. Just be courtly; feel free to smile and blush more than etiquette would think seemly.'

'If this is one of uncle's jokes, or another of his lessons, I swear ...'

'He knows the Beloved Courtesan; he doesn't believe she's here to insult you, nor the Clan. She only spars with those she considers her intellectual equals.'

'You're not helping me!'

'If you want help, then maybe you should assume she's here to demonstrate her support for you.' He turned to look at him, his lips as straight as the creases in his uniform. 'Knowledge that the Beloved Courtesan accompanied you will give you massive precedence at court. Now look sharp! She's on her way.'

Loken breathed out slowly, watched the *Pride of Lachlasser* navigate through sandbanks towards the dock.

He couldn't stay silent. 'How is it powered?'

'There should be a large paddle wheel at the rear,' said Jassael. 'But I've not seen it on the journey up. It must have propellers.'

'Then where's the steam?'

'No idea. How are you going to greet her?'

'Elegantly, with a touch of informality. She claims to be a "friend and travelling companion", so I'll take her at her word.'

'Good!'

The progress of the boat was both slow and almost silent. As it edged closer he could make out the detail of its hull and fittings. His first impression was that it was over-decorated; he immediately mistrusted his analysis. A more studied look, tied to his fresh-learned knowledge of boats and intrigue, showed him that much of the ornamentation looked – wrong. His eyes saw an ostentatious old maid; his guts saw a well-disguised fighter.

'If you removed its crust of jewels, I reckon that boat could move pretty fast.'

'You're learning. Keep that thought in mind.'

Everything about the *Pride of Lachlasser*, bar the decoration, spoke of a subtle efficiency. When it reached the dockside it swung into its berth with barely a ripple to disturb the water; the gangplank was extended and lowered without the aid of any crew member. The small honour guard his uncle had ordered to attend to the boat were given no sign that their assistance was required, or even wanted.

And then *she* was there, moving swiftly across the deck, negotiating the steps to the dock without breaking her stride. Only one man followed her – a short man, old by the look of his gait, yet just as determined to ignore the soldiers.

The dockside was lit by biers of smoking reeds hoisted high onto poles, making it difficult for him to make out her features. Her dress – black cloth cut in the simplest of styles covering shoulders and knees, cinched at the waist by what looked like a thin, golden rope – was as different from the normal courtly dress as it was strangely elegant.

In moments she was walking up the carpeted gangplank and standing in front of him. Unsure of what to do, he chose to bow, holding his head down as he sought for the words. When he straightened, he smiled, feeling the falseness of his muscles across his jaw.

'Lady Feyn. Your titles and honours are beyond the count of stars. Your presence waters the gardens of Clan Arallo as a gentle rain. Will you honour us further by joining me for dinner?'

'Loken, my dear. So you can speak!' She returned his practiced smile as she came to a halt;

appraised him in a single, brief yet noticeable down- up sweep of her eyes. 'And in such a flattering manner. Thank you! You look immaculate, dashing even – are the jarales threads dyed with Bassakesh vedegga? Such an expensive colour, though I'm sure my niece will approve!

'Now take my hand and lead me to your uncle. We have many things to discuss before we can settle down to a feast.'

Remembering to blush, Loken led the Beloved Courtesan into the depths of the boat.

The Burning Woman's Tale

The darkness of the night was almost complete; only the great sash of stars that stretched across the deep purple sky offered any illumination. But it was enough: Shapeis could see a man standing in the shadows of an entrance within the half-ruined compound. Signalling to the others to wait, he moved across the courtyard to talk to him.

'Akambue?'

'I'm here, lad. How many have you brought?'

'There's five of us.'

He could see the bearded man's eyes widen, the whites of his eyes flashing his worry.

'Julyeis made the decision. Our absence won't be noticed. How many are here?'

'Too many! I can hear their shuffling feet and growly whispers from here. I'm not happy with this place, Shapeis. It only has the one entrance! The risks are ...'

'Big, I know. Are you the only guard?'

'No, there's three of us tonight. Are you staying up here?'

He was tempted by the idea of standing guard. This was his fifth meeting and he was beginning to grow bored of listening to the same message.

He shook his head. 'No, I have to look after the girl.' With a wide swing of his arm he signalled to the others. They wasted no time in crossing the courtyard, and went into the cellar with barely a nod to the bearded man.

'Are we expecting anyone else?'

'Two who should be here haven't arrived yet.'

'Make sure the door's closed tight after they get here - we'll have to light a lot of candles if they insist on hand-talking again.'

Akambue nodded, then patted Shapeis through the entrance.

The stairs were rough stone – this place was on one of the highest streets in the city, built into the rock of the hill itself. They had used other venues before – the story telling grove on the other side of the hill and even an underground room carved into the rock beneath the market square. Each had felt more secure, to Shapeis, than this building.

He could tell he was entering a big space as he walked down the winding steps: the echoing whispers made it difficult to guess the number of people here. *Forty, or possibly fifty*, he thought as he rounded the last turn of the stairwell and peered across the gloomy room – lit, to his surprise, by electric crystals.

He saw Julyeis close by; when she beckoned to him, he descended the last steps and headed towards her.

'Where's the girl?' he asked.

'Kebezzu's taken her over to the corner. It looks like they've built a stage for her.'

'You make it sound like a performance, a show.'

'As much of a show as your performances for clients. Mind you, it's a good one. This is a big audience.'

'Some people would say you're blaspheming!'

Nevertheless he could feel the tension and expectation of others around him. He gazed across the crowd, looking to see who he could recognise in the blue-tint crystal light. Almost all of

the people were new to him; until Kebezzu and Sosunda had come to Varoul's place he hadn't bothered to explore the city much, or spend his time making friends. But he was gaining a wide circle of friends now.

'Where's Kaalis?'

'Do you know, I reckon she's found herself a fancy man!' said Julyeis, smiling at him. 'Did Akambue say anything about this being a social gathering?'

Before he could answer, a sound on the stairs caught his attention. He watched as a tiny woman with bony plates circling her head came into view, with another woman behind her.

'This will be interesting,' said Julyeis, noticing the direction of his stare. 'I don't think they've met our house guests yet.'

'Who are they?'

'Shapeis! How long have you been in this city?' She didn't wait for an answer: 'The woman behind is Tabeed – she runs the Governor's House. And the little one is the Story Keeper. Don't stare at her, lad! It's not her fault: they bred her that way. You of all people should be able to understand.'

The people closest to the stairwell were moving back, opening a path towards the centre of the room. At the same time Kebezzu, the woman Shapeis had met at the docks only a few short weeks before, clambered up onto the makeshift stage, with the child Sosunda lifted up behind her. From above came the sound of a heavy door being closed. The meeting had started.

The story that Kebezzu wove between her hands was similar to the one she had told Shapeis on that first night: the Clan wars and killing times; the first Sosunda's prophecies; her execution. For many in the room this was a harsh story, the events too recent to be treated as an evening's tale – most had grown up hearing the whispers of massacre from those who had survived and moved to Bassakesh. They watched the thin woman with the strange accent in her wrists in silence.

Shapeis wondered, not for the first time, why they had come. The telling of stories was an old custom – dangerous, even, given the risks people took to gather together beyond the knowledge of the Tall Ones. And some of the stories were entertaining: he had good memories of his childhood on the home farm, listening to the old Servant who worked in the kitchens – Pagett, that was his name – learning the histories of Sama-Lovare and Mara-Gaye and the animal Princes in fields lit only by the moons and stars.

Not many people seemed to bother with the myths nowadays. The story Kebezzu told was of a world few of these people had encountered. Shapeis knew that many of them had been born here, in the city, not on a breeding farm or a plantation estate. Servants were tattooed, but not chained. They took orders, but beatings were rare – Tall Ones could be prosecuted, even exiled, for mistreating a Servant in Bassakesh. If young Kaalis had found herself a fancy man then that was her business, not Varoul's, even if she did wear his tattoo on her thigh.

During the storytelling the mute girl stood next to Kebezzu, one hand grasping the hem of the thin woman's tunic while the other drew slow shapes in the air. Shapeis was concerned for the child. In previous meetings she had stood where placed by her guardian, silent and mostly unmoving as the tale was told. In the discussions that followed she had become agitated, as if disturbed by the movements of so many faces and hands in front of her. On the first occasion she had hidden her face between Kebezzu's thighs; since then he had always made sure he was close enough to take her somewhere quieter while the discussions continued.

He'd asked Julyeis about the child. Kebezzu had told him that she '*spoke only to the Creator*', but he hadn't believed her.

'I've heard of such children,' Julyeis had told him. 'They're not often born, and when a Servant child shows the signs it's usually taken away and killed. I don't know what the Tall Ones do with their afflicted – they probably pack them off to some temple to try and drive their God's imps out of the body.'

'Imps like the ones in the Tall One tales don't exist.'

'They do if you believe in them, I suppose. Not that the children are in any state to believe. It's like, well, like something breaks in their heads – as if the will that makes us people has

shrivelled up in their skulls. They eat and shit; some babble, some scream. They have routines that they do over and over again, for hours, and you can't break them from it. *Safru*, I've heard them called.'

'I've heard that word before.'

She nodded. 'I expect you have, if you listened to the myths. It was the name of Mara-Gaye's firstborn.'

He'd considered this for a moment: 'But she can't be a *safru* – she doesn't have routines. She doesn't do anything like that.'

'Oh, she does. You have to watch her carefully. Always making the same shapes with her hand she is. And when she's not doing that, she's staring at the walls – or more like right into the walls: they fascinate her!'

'Do you believe she sees the Creator?'

Julyeis had looked around at that point, checking for eavesdroppers. Then she'd shaken her head.

'No. Whatever she sees, it's not the Creator.'

'What makes you say that?'

'Watch her fingers. Every so often, in between the babble, she'll spell out the same phrase over and over and over again.'

'What phrase?'

'Watch her fingers. That's all I'll say.'

In the cellar, the story was coming to an end. Normally by this time, from what he had seen before, the crowd would be restless, ready to challenge Kebezzu with questions and doubts: why should they believe the Sosundan prophesy; when would the disasters come; how could the memories of one person come to live in another – a girl who was not even alive at that time. Kebezzu had answers for all these questions, and more. She had persuasive arguments to deploy, and a quiet charisma around her that could still the doubts and fire the imagination. Even Shapeis had started to half-believe.

Something was different tonight. Looking around the candle-lit room, he could see disbelief on many people's faces. Other people – people who had been to previous meetings – had a different look in their face: they believed, and Kebezzu had again re-confirmed their belief for them. But something was missing.

It took a moment for Shapeis to identify it: the usual background noise of foot-shuffling as people listened, or whispered translations for friends who could not understand the hand-speech, had died down. Instead of discussing points or preparing questions, the audience was falling silent.

He leaned over to whisper in Julyeis's ear: 'Why are they so quiet?'

She shrugged her shoulders, but she had a tense look in her face. She, too, seemed worried.

'You might want to be closer to the girl,' she whispered back.

He nodded once, started to edge his way around and through the crowd, slipping himself sideways through gaps in the mass of bodies. By the time he reached the wall on the other side of the cellar he had managed to gain on the stage and, being taller than most other Servants, had a better view of what was about to happen.

The mood in the cellar seemed to be affecting the girl. She stood now a little apart from her guardian, one hand clasped in the other, rocking slowly forwards and backwards as if she was trying to contain something in her body. Even her eyes were rocking as she squeezed them shut on the backswing and opened them wide on the return.

Kebezzu seemed nonplussed. Normally the first question came within a minute of her signalling the conclusion of the story. Her stance suggested she was relaxed, but the way her eyes kept scanning the room suggested to him that she knew something was amiss.

He had to admit she was good. Most people would have tried to drive out the silence with words – something he'd noticed on many occasions when entertaining clients at the bordello. Kebezzu remained silent: challenging her audience to fill the void for her.

Why were they quiet?

Only after several minutes had passed did she move, striding forward to the front of the temporary stage – a couple of old tables – to bow before stepping down to leave.

'I remember her now. I remember how they hoisted her high above the pyre. I remember her curses and screams as the flames kissed her bare thighs. She had good lungs.'

Kebezzu had frozen in her bow, looking to see who had spoken. As if to help her, the crowd at the front of the stage parted, though Shapeis could not see who they were parting for.

'Well help me up, then,' said the voice. 'And bring me a stool. And a cushion – the flesh has run from my buttocks like the rabbits before the hawk!'

A low chuckle rippled across the room, breaking the tension. As if by magic a stool was placed on the stage, alongside an old net folded to make a cushion. Then a man hoisted a tiny woman onto the table. Kebezzu reached out and grabbed her hand to steady her, led her to the stool and helped her settle on top of it.

Shapeis remembered the girl, quickly checking to make sure she was okay; she appeared oblivious to what was happening around her, though she seemed to be rocking a little quicker. He took advantage of the crowd's change of mood to edge closer to the stage.

Kebezzu started the debate: 'You are Maeduul, the Story Keeper of Bassakesh. People say your knowledge and insight run deep; will you share some of your thoughts with us tonight?'

'And you are Kebezzu.' Seated on the stool, Maeduul was still a full head shorter than the other woman. Not that this seemed to bother her, Shapeis thought.

'You are Kebezzu from beyond the walls, a maker of stories. Your story tonight has stirred memories and hopes to a froth in many of our chests.'

'It is the truth that our history may taste bitter on the tongue, but would you agree there is hope for us?'

Maeduul didn't answer for a moment, seemingly lost in thought.

'"Hope" is such a large sound in our mouths. Sometimes I wonder how it ever manages to wriggle its way through our throats! She had no hope, you know.'

'You say you saw her burn. How can this be so?'

Without hesitation Maeduul lifted her arm up high, palm to her face. Even from where Shapeis stood he could see the broad outline of an imperial tattoo on the back of her hand.

'I was a gift, you know. From some Clan or other to him. I met them later, of course – everyone meets in the windy halls of the Old City if they wait in one place long enough. They seemed quite nice and I was quite nice back to them.'

'He liked their gift to him. He was old even then, old enough to enjoy the company of a woman without the need to fuck her. Not that I was a woman; I was more of a dog that had learned not to piss on the carpets and tapestries. He ordered me released from the chains that – by his own law – all Servants had to wear. He insisted I attended him as he met Lord this and Lady that.'

Shapeis could see that she had a small smile on her face, as if recollecting fond memories. Around him, the room had grown still again. Was this a story she had not told before?

'The killing had been going on for a while before they found her. Something in the air that eases through the stones of the Old City makes the Tall Ones do strange things. They're not allowed to kill each other, so one Clan decided to kill another Clan's Servants, like slitting the Clan's tendons to bring them to their knees. They all had Servants in those days. He was told of this "destruction of property" – he ordered reports and investigations and inquiries where the Tall Ones could wear their pretty hats and golden cloaks.'

'Someone found her in a story telling circle. They'd watched her tease her stories from between her fingers. The priests said she was cavorting with imps and devils and demons – especially devils, allowing them to enter her body between her legs. He always listened to the priests – I think he was awed by the height of their hats.'

'Then a day came and he put a collar on me and led me into the big stone square with the breadfruit trees. We stood on a platform and watched soldiers build up a great stack of wood. They had to carry her into the square – I could taste her fear. She was a shapely woman, and maybe the

priests and guards had tried to fuck the devils from her body before bringing her out because she had such big bruises around her legs.

'You know the rest, Kebezzu of the jungles. She had good lungs, that woman, and a fine set of words for cursing. But in the end the flames tickled her feet and tore open her belly. She roasted like a festival pig, and then she was dead.'

Throughout the speech Kebezzu had stood still, her hands in the open position to mark her attention. Now she brought her hands together and bowed her head to acknowledge the tiny woman's report.

'They were evil times, Story Keeper. But now we must deal with Sosunda's last words.'

'Her last words were curses and screams.'

'With a prophecy woven within them.'

'I heard only curses.'

'Yet when a curse comes true, and then another, and another – can these things not be considered prophetic?'

Maeduul smiled. 'I curse the sun every morning – it steals the moons from me. By the afternoon the clouds have smothered the sun's bright smile and blessed my skin with raindrops. Am I a prophet?'

'Do you curse the Emperor too?'

Shapeis saw Maeduul glance away from Kebezzu towards the child. Following her lead, he flicked his eyes towards her.

Without him noticing it, the girl had stopped rocking. Instead, she was standing stock still, arms straight by her side, chin lifted. Her hands were curled into fists and her eyes were screwed so tight shut that her teeth were exposed in a grimace.

Maeduul, too, closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and another. Then she started reciting.

'I see you! I see you all! I will see you cursed beyond endurance!'

Her words were harsh, painful, shrill. They seemed to come from a different body than the Story Keeper's: a larger body, a deeper set of lungs.

'Witness the trees in this square – they have given you their last fruit! Their leaves shall shrivel in the salt waves that will wash the cobbles beneath your feet!'

'Witness the stones around you – the earth shall reject them, topple them into the dirt where great vines shall crumble them to dust!'

'Witness the man who wears a nation around his waist – no sons for you! No child you sire will see the sun rise on their tenth year!'

'Your Clans shall snivel and cough! The words in their mouths shall become blood! Pain shall run from every orifice and none shall come to their aid, or honour them in their graves!'

'Cousin shall fight cousin, and brother shall rape sister! Mothers will place their hands – oh please no, it hurts! – place their hands across the faces of their babes until they are blue and still!'

'This land shall burn as I burn! I see you all! I see you cursed beyond endurance and I shall return to witness it! You shall all burn as I burn!'

'You shall all burn with me!'

Shock ran through the cellar. For Shapeis, it was as if the tiny woman had conjured the actual ghost of the Burning Woman into the room with them. For once, he noticed, Kebezzu also looked shocked.

'Your words are her words!' she said. 'You recall them exactly. And already her prophecies have been made manifest: the earthquake ...'

'The earthquake did as earthquakes do!' Maeduul's response was sharp, final. 'Just as the sun lights up the morning sky and the clouds announce the afternoon rains and the dog chases the rabbit among the stars in their endless cycles.'

'But the Emperor has no heir! The line of kings has never been broken before.'

'He has no heir,' said Maeduul, her voice returning to its more normal sing-song timbre, 'because he has many enemies, and his many enemies have many poisons, and he was always too trusting and forgiving. And now he is very old and the Old City will indeed see strife and bloodshed

as the Clans fight for the prize. As he himself fought for it once; the line of kings has been broken many times, Kebezzu, many times before! And once the prize is won, the winner will change the histories they nurture in their books and the line of kings will be unbroken once more.

'Don't you see, Kebezzu? We're Servants: wise men and wise women gathered together in a story telling circle in the attic of a city deep in the jungle. We feel safe today, but we know this is just a moment in time. The Tall Ones use us, and sometimes beat us, and occasionally kill us, just as they use each other, and beat each other and kill each other – and it is wrong! Yes, wrong! But we don't need a prophecy to free us from this wrongness; we don't need belief. We need our hands and our heads and our legs and our will, to free ourselves from the chains we still wear around our throats, however invisible they may be.

'I watched her curse and scream. I watched her burn and die. Sosunda is dead and her execution pyre is ashes alongside her. She can no more return to us than Sama-Lovare can walk the world again. Dead – is dead!'

The crowd took the story keeper's pronouncement as a signal to start talking. Questions flew from the floor to the two women on stage: how – why – when? Discussions between friends who believed and friends who doubted grew louder and threatened to break into arguments.

Shapeis took his chance and forced his way between bodies to reach the front of the stage. He waved towards Kebezzu, who saw him, nodded twice – two jerks of her chin which was their agreed signal to take the girl back to their quarters below the bordello.

When he reached across the stage to grab her hands, she collapsed like all the bones had been removed from her body. He caught her as she fell, carried her in his arms towards the stairwell, not caring about who he pushed out of the way. Only when he was up at the top of the stairs did he stop to consider what he was going to do next.

Akambue was still at his station. Shapeis knocked on the door sharply – he couldn't pull the heavy wood open with the girl in his arms.

'I think you need to clear the cellar,' he said to the bearded man as he heaved the door open. 'They're getting a bit too passionate – people might hear!'

Akambue nodded, his bearded face set in a grim scowl. He signalled to another man in the darkness and together they headed towards the stairwell and the commotion below.

Shapeis knew he had to move fast, but something caught the corner of his eye. In the dim light coming from the stairwell he noticed the unresponsive girl's fingers were slowly forming patterns. He watched in confusion as the phrase formed and reformed.

'Burn with me! Burn with me!'

He didn't abandon her, or drop her, as a spring of fear in his guts pistoned his legs downhill.

The Beloved Courtesan

'Arbelle! You're being as bad as Igell!'

'They're not here yet!'

Delesse put as much fury into her whisper as she dared: 'We're on public display! If Mother sees you fidgeting she'll disown you and have you locked up!'

Which was probably true, Delesse thought. Since word had reached them that the contract party were on their way to Bassakesh, and the names of the people who were in the party, the Lady Temis had transformed herself into a tigress. Luckily for her children, most of her ferocity had been trained on their father and poor Velledue, the family astrologer.

Velledue had gone spare when he had heard the change of plans. He'd actually stood in the courtyard and screamed at Temis: 'The risks are unacceptable! If the two parties meet before the contracts are signed the marriage will be a disaster! What woman would curse her own firstborn in such a manner?'

Ordering the old man's arrest had visibly affected her father – Delesse had never seen him

look as angry and scared as at that moment. She had watched the silent communication between her parents in the moments after the outburst, watched her mother beat down all his objections without moving or uttering a word. With a flick of his wrist he summoned a guard: 'Lock him away with his charts,' he'd said. And it had been done, the astrologer too shocked to resist his detention.

The subsequent argument that came with the afternoon rains was conducted behind closed doors, but nevertheless remained the main point of gossip across the city for days: it had raged for hours, often at high volume. She had never heard her parents so much as shout at each other before; she wanted them to stop it, but the doors to their rooms were locked and guarded, and she had her own hands full trying to charm Buccu, the imp of sudden-onset hysteria, away from Arbelle's belly.

In the end the Governor did as his wife demanded. The plans remained changed.

For this morning's formal introduction Delesse was wearing a full, loose, light green dress and pantaloons with heavily embroidered wrist and ankle cuffs, touched off by new goatskin boots and a series of golden warding buttons and brooches – attire that her mother considered appropriate for an outdoor reception. Her hair had been cut and set in a style that swept around her head, leaving her neck bare and providing a fringe from which a light lace veil could be pinned. Arbelle had been kitted out in a similar costume, though in a darker blue palette, and the Lady Temis herself wore white and gold. Her father, alongside the other men in the reception party standing on the dockside, had taken refuge in the uniforms appropriate to their rank and appointment – an anachronistic collection of tunics, skins, buckles and helmets which saved them from being judged by the ever-watchful court of fashion.

Arbelle was fidgeting again. 'Can you remember your speech?' whispered Delesse in an attempt to distract her.

'Yes! Like I've been allowed to say anything else these past three days. Which one is her boat?'

'The first one, I think. The other boats are under strict orders to remain in the river until this is over.'

She could see the four boats through a gap between the lower docks and the mid-channel island that disappeared during the spring floods. The three larger boats were already weighing anchor; the fourth continued towards them.

'I hope the captain knows what he's doing – wouldn't it be awful if he hit a mud bank!'

'Arbelle! I promise I'll kill you later! Even to think such a thing is to invite the devils to act on your wish.'

'Listen to you! Haven't you been paying attention to Maeduul's stories? Devils don't exist.'

'It's because Servants don't recognise the truth of these matters that they're Servants. Now behave!'

'What I don't understand is why Mother insisted that Maeduul be part of the welcome party. Surely it will be an insult to the Beloved Courtesan.'

'Shush! She's almost here. Maybe if you behave well enough to keep yourself from being thrown off the boat, you'll be able to find out.'

And then the boat was at the dockside. As the crew made haste to bring it to a halt and secure it, the Governor led his party down the ramp that connected the upper and lower decks of the wharf.

The boat looked marvellous to Delesse: across the bow a great fretwork of carved wood displayed a panorama of ships fighting ocean storms and brine sea monsters, all heading towards the welcoming arms of the Emperor atop the towers of Stal. Beneath the carvings, the hull of the boat was a gleaming, seamless white with various rings, hooks and other fittings painted in black and red bands. The open deck was high, with a glass-and-wood steering cabin to the rear and a smaller awning-covered stairway further forward.

'She always knew how to travel in style,' whispered Temis to her daughters. Delesse's eyes widened in shock at her Mother's breach of protocol; Temis gave her a small, tight smile in return.

'This is one of the Emperor's pleasure boats – a place where he can conduct private business. The cabins inside will be gorgeous, so make sure you don't brush against anything and break it. And

be careful of the stairs, they'll be quite steep. You remember your introductions? Remember to say nothing else, even if she asks you a direct question – not unless your father gives you permission to answer. Short answers, mind! 'Yes, Beloved Courtesan; no Beloved Courtesan.' And don't fidget, Arbelle! She'll think you're crippled, or not able to control your bladder.'

With her final instructions given, Temis followed her husband across the short gangplank and onto the *Pride of Lachlasser*, trusting her daughters to follow her.

In single file the party of seven crossed the open deck and made their way down the broad stairs – which were not as steep as Delesse had feared. Crew members in crisp red-and-white uniforms lined the deeply carpeted passageway that led back from the stairs along the length of the boat.

A set of richly carved wooden doors, studded with brass-work relief, blocked the end of the corridor. In front of them stood a man, an old Servant decked out in the red-black imperial colours. As they approached him, he bowed deeply, only straightening again once they had come to a halt before him.

'My Lady will be happy to receive the Governor of Bassakesh and his officers now. The Lords Loetopas and Jassael of Clan Arallo are already in attendance.'

As her father moved forward with Tuuke the Guardsman and the Harbour Master, Delesse glanced at Maeduul. The little ornamental woman rarely bothered to mask her reactions, but if she knew the man at the door she showed no sign of recognition in her face. Instead she stood next to Temis, rhythmically knocking her hands into shapes against her thighs as she gazed around the corridor.

The next fifteen minutes were hard on Delesse. She tried to relax by concentrating her gaze on a set of painted tiles that decorated the opposite wall: some of them showed hunting scenes and landscapes; others, however, were more sexual in nature with men and women cast in various positions to perform the congress. One tile in particular showed a man with short horns jutting from his forehead mounting a naked, busty woman from behind. For some reason the coloured enamel fascinated her, locked her eyes into its shapes.

Temis must have noticed the tile's effect on her. Casually, she reached out her hand and touched her on the cheek, drawing her gaze towards her own.

'Not now,' she muttered. 'Count how many stars are woven in the carpet, dear.'

Delesse suddenly felt embarrassed, felt the familiar heat of blushing blood at the base of her throat. She did as her mother suggested, willing the colour not to bloom into her cheeks.

By the time the doors opened again, she had overcome her personal crisis. She heard Tuuke and the Harbour Master walk past, heard the Servant invite them into the room. As if she was a spring-driven marionette she found herself walking into the centre of the room, bowing deeply, offering her compliments and devotions to the old woman seated in front of her. Somewhere to the left of her Arbelle stumbled her way through a similar set of courtly platitudes. Then they stood silent as the conversation between the adults wound around them.

'Why, sister!' the old woman was saying. 'Once the court realises the jungle contains such ravishing fruit there will be a veritable stampede from the city!'

It was her father who answered: 'The Beloved Courtesan jests at my expense. The whole empire knows that only the fruit tended by her own hand can be considered ravishing.'

'As you should know, dear cousin! What do you say, Lord Loetopas? Have we discovered the rarest of jewels at the end of our adventure?'

An older man to Delesse's right bowed his head and answered: 'They are indeed a discovery that can only warm the eyes of all men and women fortunate enough to behold them. The vitality of the imperial ancestors has found a strong and secure berth in these young Ladies.'

'They certainly do set the mouth salivating, yes? It has been many moons since I've tasted spittle enough to dilute the venom in my mouth.'

'Now you jest at my expense, Beloved Courtesan, as you know it is the true word that trips from your tongue, which can only be venomous in the ears of traitors.'

'Indeed,' said the old woman. She wasn't smiling. 'I understand your son is too young to be

presented to me, Lord Gelleris.'

'Many things grow swiftly in the jungle, Beloved Courtesan. It amazes us both how quickly our children pass through God's dispensation of ignorance. Thankfully our son has a few moons left to him before he must start learning God's purpose for him in this world.'

'It is the greatest punishment we must endure, I'm sure, knowing our young ones cannot remain ignorant forever! Delesse, my dear, do you yearn to recapture the hint of ignorance in the eyes of a child at your teat?'

Delesse remained silent, waiting for her father to answer or to pass the question to her mother.

Instead, he said: 'Please permit your niece, the Lady Delesse, to respond.'

For a second her mind was blank, a hole where the phrases of the question should have been. Then she recalled the words the old woman had uttered, and the advice her mother had given them before boarding the boat.

'Yes, Beloved Courtesan.'

'Yes, Beloved Courtesan,' the old woman repeated. 'Well, I hope young Loken has the balls for the job, little niece, for I have instructions from the Emperor. He has consulted his mages and priests and astrologers. It is his determination that the issue of his succession be settled on the fruit of the contract we are here to celebrate.'

For the first time since Delesse had entered the room, the old woman smiled.

'This is joyous news for everyone gathered in this room, I am sure,' she continued. 'Once the contract is consummated in the Emperor's personal temple, he will declare that he intends to continue suffering God's punishments until such time as he can adopt your firstborn son as his own. You will agree with me, Lord Loetopas?'

Delesse risked a glance to her right. Loetopas, she could see, had been placed in a nasty predicament: while his face remained a mask of polite interest, the blood had drained from his skin to leave it the colour of dried wood.

The man answered within a second or two, though for her the silence dragged long and heavy.

'Yes, Beloved Courtesan. I can only agree that this is – or, may I say, will be – joyous news, though I am sure my future grand-nephew will have many, many years to wait before he has to endure the heavy chains of imperial leadership.'

'Well said, Loetopas! And now you will wish to leave me so that you can celebrate this news in less formal surroundings. I suspect there will be alcohol involved, and many edible delicacies that the good folk of Bassakesh have wrested from the imp-infested jungles that surround their fair city. Go now, with my heartiest blessings and good wishes for your newfound fortune! I shall ask the Governor and his family to endure my company a little while longer yet.'

As Loetopas and his silent companion left the room, the Lady Feyn signalled to her Servant. Soon the room was busy as crew members brought in chairs and small tables to be placed in a circle in the middle of the room. Retreating to the wall, Delesse watched them set each table with cutlery and glasses, followed by delicately wrought dishes of hot and cold finger-food. The transformation was completed within a minute; as the last uniformed officer left the Beloved Courtesan was already directing people to their assigned places.

When the great wooden door closed, Feyn said: 'Temis, you will do me the honour of remaining silent for a few minutes more. I know you are upset, but there are things you need to be aware of before you start upbraiding me.'

Delesse stared at her mother, saw her anger in the curl of her lips. The old woman had insisted on calling Temis her 'sister' during the meeting, but was that true? There was at least twenty years difference between their ages, she thought.

'Please, all of you, eat! We have no more need of formality in this room this morning, and I have heard many rumours of the Governor's refreshingly relaxed approach to breakfast. I'm sure it will be an interesting experience for me.'

'Beloved Courtesan ...' began her father.

'Lord Gelleris, you must learn to call me 'cousin'.'

Before her father could answer, Feyn picked up a chicken drumstick, using it as a baton to conduct her guests to start eating.

'Tell me more about your Guardsman, cousin.'

'Tuuke?' Delesse got the impression from the tone of her father's voice that this was not a question he had expected. 'He is a good man, competent. He was in the imperial army for fifteen years before he came to Bassakesh.'

'You dishonour him with such bland compliments. He is a very observant man, I think.'

'As you say, er, cousin.'

'I know this because he has managed to uncover every single spy I've attempted to place in your household, or indeed the city. I'm reduced to relying on the reports of traders, and the occasional correspondence from my sister, of course.'

Gelleris paused to taste a slice of garfruit. 'Beloved Courtesan ... if I may be so bold, I don't understand the game you are playing here.'

'Cousin, I'm not here to play games.'

'Then if the theft of my illusory grandson is not a game, what is it?'

Delesse was so shocked by her father's words that she forgot to chew the chicken meat in her mouth. Her coughing fit brought her mother to her side; two sharp bangs between her shoulders dislodged the meat.

Through her tears, she could see her mother was angry, and not even attempting to conceal it.

'What are you plotting, Feyn? Why are you really here?'

'I told you to be silent! These walls are not as thick as they look. You must restrain your temper, sister.'

Feyn had not raised her voice, but the tone of authority in her voice was absolute. Even so, her mother remained standing next to Delesse, her arm across her shoulder and her hand digging tight into the cloth and flesh of her arm.

'As I said,' continued Feyn, 'there are things you need to know. But there are things I also need to know – your Guardsman's competence has left my intelligence incomplete. Now sit, sister. Please! At least let us pretend we are having an informal breakfast.'

Temis gave Delesse a quick hug, before reluctantly nodding and resuming her seat. The room fell quiet for a few minutes as her family attempted to eat the food. Only Feyn managed to eat heartily, and Maeduul, who had been seated next to the Beloved Courtesan. Beside her, Temis pushed fruit segments around the curve of a bowl with her fork. Arbelle, too, attempted to eat some fruit, though Delesse could see she was struggling to stop her body shaking.

'How old are you, Arbelle?' Feyn's question came without preamble; it seemed to send a shiver through her sister, who spat out the fruit in her mouth.

'Yes, Beloved Courtesan,' she said, her eyes fixed on the table in front of her. 'I'm almost fourteen.'

'And wise beyond your years, I think. Look at me, dear.'

As Arbelle raised her head, Delesse saw Feyn smile at her – a warm smile that reached for the first time to her eyes.

'I asked your mother not to bring you here, today – most young nobles do not have to endure my company until they are fifteen. But you are here, and you have heard things that scare you. Can you be brave for me, Arbelle?'

Delesse watched her sister gather her panic and control it. When she nodded, it was sharp and sure.

'Good girl. You remind me of your mother. So scared she was when she was your age, and rightly so. And yet so brave, too!'

'Why was she scared, Beloved Courtesan?'

'She was scared because she was alone in a city full of people who wanted to use her for

their own schemes and plots, Arbelle. I did what I could for my little sister, and the Emperor helped when he was able to. Do you think it strange that your beautiful mother can really have a sister as old and ugly as me?

'You are not ugly, Beloved Courtesan.'

'And yet it is true, little one. And you must learn to call me Aunt Feyn – yes, I like the sound of that!'

Her laugh was sudden, unexpected.

'So many years I've had to play games with the devils of deceit and avarice that flood the corridors and courtyards of the Old City. Never did I dare hope that someone would call me 'Aunt'! Tell me, Delesse, why did your father not bring that old astrologer of his to meet me?

The woman's quick turns of conversation, her unexpected changes of mood, were confusing Delesse. She glanced over to her father at the next table, but he offered her no comfort. She'd have to answer the question herself.

'Velledue is – indisposed, Aunt Feyn.'

'I hope he's not been taken low by one of your jungle imps, dear!'

'Possibly he has, Aunt. He was most distressed by the thought that my contract would be present this morning ...'

'... and such a meeting would curse the marriage. That is what the Lord Loetopas believed, too. He spent much time and energy during our journey attempting to excuse young Loken from this morning's meeting. I'll admit I enjoyed witnessing his frustrations, but as you can see I relented in the end.'

'If I may ask, Aunt – what sort of man is Loken?'

Feyn stared at Delesse for an instant – it felt as if the old woman's eyes were melting her face and inspecting the inside of her skull. And then the moment was over, a quick flick of the side of the mouth signalling its end.

'He is pleasant and courteous. Handsome, in his way. And obedient to his father's desires. But remember this, Delesse, and remember it well: you are not marrying a man; you are marrying the needs and desires of an entire Clan. The brothers Puusen and Loetopas have plotted for many years to have you, or rather to possess what you have and what you represent.'

'And what does my daughter represent, Feyn?' Her mother's voice was low and even.

'Not yet, Temis. I told you there are things I need to know. Maeduul, dear – why have you not hugged me?'

Again the turn of conversation left Delesse confused. Feyn had said something about the Emperor adopting her son; why would he want to do that? She hid her confusion by attempting to eat an egg, letting the cold scramble ease past her sore throat.

Everyone else was staring at the tiny woman who had been perched on a stool next to the Beloved Courtesan in a position of honour. Maeduul, for her part, seemed to ignore the question.

If Feyn was annoyed by the Servant's lack of response, she refused to show it. Instead she smiled at the woman, reached over to pat her on the hand.

'He asked me to give you a message.'

Maeduul lifted her head and turned to Temis seated next to her. 'Sometimes I miss him,' she said. 'I miss him when the moons are hidden and only the starry veil is left to shine down on us.'

'I miss him too, *hosha-ten*. Do you not want to hear his words?'

'I think I would,' said Maeduul, turning towards Feyn.

The look between the women was too complex for Delesse to decipher – another conundrum to confuse her. When Feyn spoke, the message was short.

'He says: "the Burning Woman must die".'

Delesse watched Maeduul's reaction – the message obviously meant something to her. When at last she spoke, her voice was quiet, barely more than a whisper.

'He died inside his skull as he watched her burn. He tried to stop it, but he was in such a bad place. Does he understand what he says?'

'Yes,' said Feyn. 'And so do I.'

Delesse could take it no more. Too many meaningless words were swirling through her head. She needed answers.

'I understand nothing, Auntie! Why are you here? Why does the Emperor want my son?'

The outburst seemed to anger the old woman for an instant. Delesse felt like she'd been bitten by the harsh look she received. But when she answered, she looked directly at Temis.

'Sister, do you remember when you were a baby?'

Delesse watched her mother shake her head.

'Before you were born I fell very ill. Poison of some variety, almost certainly on the orders of your daughter's future father-in-law. I was disabled for over a year, and left barren. Not that I minded: you no doubt have bitter memories of me, but the truth is I have never been able to abide children. I'll not ask your forgiveness for my neglect.'

Temis remained still, said nothing.

'There is a new rumour at court, or rather the revival of a very old rumour. People are whispering to each other that you are my daughter, and that the Emperor is your father. There have been a number of – accidents, let's say – to those who witnessed your birth. The survivors of our father's last household seem to be leaving this world at an accelerated rate.'

'Do you understand what I'm saying, sister? Do you see the threat to your family? Your children? Your son?'

'I need you to be strong, sister. I need all of you to be strong – this is not just about control of some luxury dye market. The brothers Puusen and Loetopas are plotting something far more deep and dangerous. I think ...'

Feyn paused for a moment, considering her words. 'I think they want the throne; I know they're behind the rumours. But I don't yet know how they're planning to do it, how they will wield the knife and whose throats they will sever first.'

She examined each of them in turn, as if assessing their strength by the level of shock in their faces. By the time she reached the Governor she seemed to have come to a decision.

'Most of all, cousin,' she finished, 'I need information. Will you help me save the lives of your wife and children?'

Loetopas

On the short journey back to his boat Loetopas remained silent. Jassael took the lead, barking orders to the crew on the skiff, taking in hand the preparations for docking the flotilla once they were back on board. Loetopas left the Commander to it, headed immediately for his cabin and the safety of a large glass of ghevvesein. He let the sharp aroma of the alcohol anaesthetise his nostrils, but only took a couple of small sips to calm the imps dancing in his guts.

The familiarity of his cabin helped him gather his thoughts. He sat behind the mametaa wood desk, let his fingers run across its austere beading before pulling out a half-written family history – a journal he had been working on during the journey to while away the time. As he stared at the words he had inked down the previous evening he realised he'd have to rewrite them – the thought that history could be changed so simply, whether he wished it so or not, brought a wry smile to his face.

He turned the pages and concentrated on a blank sheet; took up his pen and started listing possible actions and outcomes.

It was a good hour before he felt the boat move. He took the opportunity to call for a steamp to accompany his barely touched alcohol, and sent for Jassael.

'People will talk, you know.' Jassael's choice of familiar language in place of his more deferential approach immediately caught Loetopas's attention.

'Close the door, cousin, and lock it. If you're going to embarrass yourself by forgetting your station then I'd prefer people not to witness it.'

'As you wish, Sir.'

'Then pour yourself a measure and sit down. I need your thoughts.'

Jassael complied, pouring himself a small measure of the citrus-flavoured liqueur before settling into the wooden chair against the wall of the cabin.

'Why do you think people will talk?'

Jassael answered the question immediately with one of his own. 'Are you always so quiet after meeting the Emperor's favourite whore – Sir?'

'It does no harm for people to assume she scares me.'

'This morning's news was – unexpected, though ...'

Loetopas pulled his sheet of scribbles towards him, circled a couple of the words in a carefully drawn oval.

'I'd not say "unexpected", cousin. We knew it was a possible response, though it carries its own dangers.'

Jassael said nothing.

'The question has to be "why now?" What will he gain by making such an announcement at this time?'

'It seems to me like he's sending out invitations to his own assassination.'

'Hah! I'll drink to that happy day! But the situation remains unchanged: there is no heir until a boy is conceived and carried to term. And even then the child has to live for at least a year before a declaration can be made.'

'So if the marriage fails for any reason, or proves to be barren ...'

Loetopas took a sip of his steam, grimacing at its lack of sweetener.

'If you've managed to come to such conclusions already, you can imagine that most of those avaricious fools at court will soon enough tread the same path.'

'So he's inviting us to kill him, and his bitch lover, to cement our hold over Loken and his alleged granddaughter while at the same time inviting everyone else to kill them before they produce the goods – an invitation which will no doubt extend to killing us.'

'You put it so crudely, cousin, and yet so well.'

'Well, we can always start first. The announcement has not yet been made; it's going to be a long journey back to Stal.'

Loetopas reached over to his ghevvesein, poured some of the clear liquid into the commander's half-empty glass.

'Drink! Your thinking is nowhere near as devious as I need it to be.' As Jassael complied, he continued: 'There's three good reasons why we can't touch a hair of Feyn's elegantly wrinkled head, cousin. First, she's almost certainly going to insist that her niece travels to Stal in her boat, which makes poisoning a risky option. Second, we have to assume that people know she's travelling as part of the Arallo convoy and, while accidents do happen in the jungle, I don't fancy enduring another bout of exile just to further my brother's imperial ambitions.'

He paused to take a another sip of the cooling steam.

'Third, the Fifteenth Imperial Clade has gone missing.'

'Missing?' Jassael looked surprised. 'How can you loose a thousand soldiers? Anyway, I thought they had been deployed on the Petezbarre blockade.'

'They were, and then they were relieved by the Seventeenth. Then they disappeared into the jungle.'

'You think they're here already?'

'You think he'd send his pet bitch into the jungle without any protection?'

Jassael shook his head.

'But none of this pertains, cousin. Why is he planning the announcement now?'

Jassael went quiet for a short while, examined his hands as he considered the question.

'The announcement will confirm the rumours.'

'Not important,' countered the older man. 'The rumours are just an insurance policy. Even without them my brother has a strong claim.'

Loetopas watched Jassael as he took a sip of his drink, his frown marking the start of a deeper consideration of the issues. He took no great pleasure in making the man drunk – nominally teetotal, Jassael's hangovers were legendary and affected his performance even after a couple of glasses. Yet the man had a rare talent for malicious thinking and planning under the influence, able to make connections in moments which for others could take hours to track down.

'You know,' the commander eventually said, 'it is nice to get away from the Old City.'

'How do you mean?'

'Most people think civilisation ends at the city walls.'

'It's an interesting observation, cousin. Go on ...'

'Well, he has an interest in seeing this child born. And so do we. So we have a shared interest in keeping the parents alive.'

'I'm not sure my brother would approve of anyone contemplating the murder of his son.'

'Oh, Loken's a good lad. He lack's his father's hunger, mind.'

Loetopas took the opportunity to pour some more of his drink into the Commander's glass.

'There may be some merit in what you say,' he said, 'though I'd not repeat it outside this room. So we're agreed that Loken should live.'

'Live here.'

'Explain yourself.'

'Loken can live here, in Bassakesh. It's a safe city. A long way away from court. And it's a rich city ...'

'We'll have our share of revenue from the marriage contract. The right to control the trading licences for dealing the dye in Stal is part of the girl's dowry to us.'

'Why not control the source? Loken would do well to learn a trade ...'

'Producing the dye?'

'Why not? It's an easier option than some others I've heard of.'

'Brother Puusen would go rat-crazed, for a start!'

Though in fact the idea did have some attractions for Loetopas. Such an arrangement would not affect the contract provisions. And it was true that keeping Loken away from the gambling tables at court would not be a bad outcome. Of course, he would need to keep his own household here – which would mean that regular visits from Clan retainers would not raise eyebrows. Maybe if the right people were drafted in to look after the household ...

It all came down to the dye. Loetopas had no particular imperial ambitions for himself, though he was always happy to support his brother in his various plots and ruses to place him closer to the succession. No, for himself, the key attraction of the impending marriage had been the promise of profiting from – and possibly even controlling – the dye trade.

Nobody knew how the dye was made: the Governor's upstart Clan had managed to keep that secret for over sixty years, despite the best efforts of every scion and sect in the Old City to uncover the processes involved. Oh, everyone knew where the dye came from; the vedegga nut was common across the lower reaches of the Laoma mountains, crushing the nut produced a powder which made an exquisitely golden dye. But the colour didn't last. Only the dye produced in this city, by Clan Rollue, possessed the ability to stain a cloth both brightly and permanently.

People were prepared to pay a lot of money for such a dye. The flow of cash to Bassakesh had led to coin shortages in other cities. Why the Emperor allowed this state of affairs to continue was beyond Loetopas's comprehension.

He needed another steam. And a fresh sheet of paper to help sort out the ideas in his head.

'I hate it when you make me drink alcohol, Sir!'

'I don't enjoy doing it to you, cousin,' said Loetopas, 'but we are under orders to celebrate our good fortune. Your hangover won't go to waste. Just one more thing before you go to lie down, Jassael.'

'Ask me.'

'This news renders my brother's hasty plan ... inappropriate, yes?'

'I don't know the details of the plan, Sir. I thought we were going to use the, uh, cargo ... I

thought they were to be used as a threat.'

The idea made Loetopas smile. 'I wish sometimes that my brother could be so subtle. His orders were to introduce the ... cargo ... to some of the locals, allow the imps they carry to spread. If the Emperor was so keen to blockade one city to contain the imps, then he'd have no problem blockading another.'

'Ah, yes!' Jassael emptied his glass in one gulp. 'Blockading the city before the dye is ready to ship out would cause many of our competitors problems.'

'Particularly given our efforts over the past three years to stockpile the dye. We'd have an effective monopoly this season, and once the marriage is consummated our position would be impregnable.'

'I can see why the plan appeals to you, Sir.'

Loetopas shook his head. 'No, cousin. It's too much. We already have the stockpiles; I see no reason for this additional risk. But Puusen insisted – he wants guarantees. He's probably invested our profits in intrigues already, but this new situation ... the plan has to be abandoned, I think. We don't need to engineer such a crude event, not now.'

'Playing with imps can be tricky,' agreed Jassael, the pupils of his eyes struggling to stay in focus. 'They're not the most reliable of God's curses, you know.'

'What are you saying, cousin?'

'I think your brother's gift of imps has enjoyed the journey too much, Sir. I think they've killed their hosts.'

Behin of the Fifteenth

Tuuke had always enjoyed the time around sunrise: it was a time of change, of old problems solved and new opportunities arising.

Above him, the sky was already shifting from the deep, dark indigo of the western night through purples and slates towards the lilac-blue of the eastern day. Cloud wisps blazed and bruised in response to the sun's approach. Across the river, the jungle's ever-mysterious night chorus were sounding their farewell notes, a quiet interlude before the more monotonous, raucous dayshift took over.

Today's business was the smouldering hulk of a boat floating at anchor some twenty metres from the wharf on which he stood. The harbour gang had been working for two hours to douse the flames, and the brightening sky showed the effectiveness of their work; much of the boat had been saved, but its stern was a blackened wreck of wooden staves and planks.

The Guardsman was accompanied by Sappu, newly promoted to act as his adjutant.

'Most people would start with questions like how, when and who.'

Sappu nodded. 'We already have answers to those questions, Sir.'

'And?'

'They're just answers, Sir. Probably not the most helpful answers. Some of them don't match with others.'

'Does this worry you?'

'I'd like to find a coherent answer, Sir.'

'I think that would be a good idea. I'm more interested in finding an answer to the question "why". And that's the question I want you to concentrate on.'

'But isn't this a matter for the Harbour Master to deal with?'

'Oh, I'm sure he won't object you having you around – a sort of liaison role, if you like.'

And then the sun was heaving itself over the long sinews of the Eastern terraces and Tuuke was making his way across the cobbled expanses of the mostly deserted Market Square. He knew it wouldn't be deserted for long; tomorrow was the Governor's daughter's contract day and orders had

been issued for a city-wide celebration to mark the event. Today would be the last opportunity to for the citizens to shop before the festivities started.

Acolytes were already busy clambering around the facade of the New Temple on the northern side of the square – he could make out the cadences of their chanting as they started the day-long work of setting out the wards and charms that would protect the building from uninvited devils, demons and other faith-testing influences during the exchange of contracts.

Tuuke didn't believe in a vengeful God, but had no objection to other people's superstitions; he'd decided long ago that such beliefs offered a distraction for people, making them less likely to riot along his streets.

His destination was behind the temple. As he swung left he saw the bricks of the Exchange Buildings being guarded by the city's latest arrivals. The Fifteenth Imperial Clade, almost a thousand of the Emperor's toughest soldiers, had walked out of the jungles and into the city as yesterday's rains had eased, just after sundown. Their presence was causing quite a stir across Bassakesh, though the soldiers were keeping to themselves as they set up home in their temporary billet.

Seeing the sentries brought back a mixed collection of memories for Tuuke. He himself had served in the Ninth Clade in his younger days – the competition between his 'family' and this one had been rough at times as each tried to prove themselves better than the other. Not that he regretted his time with the *Emperor's own fists*: it had been a wrench to move on.

Whatever privations the sentries had endured in their march to the city, they were refusing to put them on public view. Their uniforms were immaculate, their armour a mirror to the street. As he walked past the first one he noted that even the bandage around the man's forearm was clean, crisp and pleated in line with regulations.

'I'm here to see Commander Behin.'

The sentry at the entrance merely nodded an acknowledgement. Tuuke returned the nod; clearly he was expected.

The building was a warren of rooms over four floors, set around a series of ample yet austere oblong courtyards. Normally the place was deserted at this time of the morning, the empty desks and paper trays of the various clerks and inspectors hollow shells waiting to be animated after breakfast. This morning the desks had been shoved to the sides of the rooms to make way for bedding and washing lines.

He didn't have a clue where the Commander was, nor was he going to ask for directions. Instead he made his way to the central courtyard and waited.

Behin did not keep him lingering for long. Within a few minutes a large man, naked apart from a rough rectangle of cloth around his waist, was striding down the main staircase to meet the Guardsman.

'Well met, Tuuke!'

'Sir!' The salute came easy to his arm – almost instinctual despite the intervening years since he last served.

'Don't be stupid, man! I should be saluting you. You are *The* Guardsman of Bassakesh, heh?'

'It's a dry billet with food.'

'You always were a canny one, Tuuke. I always thought you would go far.'

'And look at you. Men to prepare your food and wipe your arse. Are you going to tell me why you're here, Behin?'

'You know why we're here. Historic marriage, joyous news and so on. The Emperor insisted we come.'

'So you're not going to tell me why you're here.'

When the Commander laughed it was loud and deep, his richly tanned face wrinkling around a full set of large teeth. The man dwarfed him in all ways, but then that had always been the case.

'What went wrong, Behin? How did you end up with this scab of a command?'

'Insults is it now? These are good men, Guardsman. Good men. We've come across mountains to be entertained by your fair city and only lost fourteen on the journey.'

'Dead?'

'Injured in the course of duty. There may have been a few less-than-clean whore houses on the way.'

'In that case I'll have to have my medical officers check them before I'll allow them loose in my city.'

Again the commander laughed. 'Come! Come to my office! We can discuss these details over a juice, yes?'

Without waiting, he turned on his heels and headed directly towards an unoccupied office opening onto the courtyard. Tuuke followed, observing his old friend. It took a moment's work for the Commander to clear the desk of papers and trays, scattering them across the floor with a sweep of his arm.

'I see you've still got the scars I gave you.'

Behin settled into the chair, made a show of observing his forearm in the light from the window.

'Ah, yes. You tried to rip out my sinews with a pickaxe. That was a good night, that. I won the fight, but got a demotion for my efforts. Malicious bleeding on parade, the Old Man said. Got docked a fortnight's wages, too. You still owe me those wages!'

'You got the demotion for losing the fight. Have you learned to be quicker in the brawl yet?'

Behin offered up a more rueful smile. 'Alas, my old fighting friend. Age is beginning to rob me of my reflexes. I don't think I'll be marching through jungles for many more years.'

Tuuke found a chair across the room, settled into it on the other side of the desk.

'I need your help, Behin.'

For a few seconds, silence, as each assessed the other. He could see the Commander's banter leave his face as he considered the request.

'I don't know how much help I can offer you, Guardsman, but if it's in my power to give ...'

'Firstly, some formalities. Can you account for all your men – yesterday and this morning?'

'They haven't been stood down, if that's what you're asking.'

'And none of them have left this building since you arrived?'

'Apart to stand sentry, no. They're tired, Tuuke. They'll need a couple of days before they can start causing you problems.'

Tuuke glanced out of the window. In the courtyard a detail of soldiers was breaking some old desks they must have found in a storeroom, readying the wood for a cooking fire.

'I've had an interesting morning, Behin. You can probably smell it in the air.'

'Yes. Yes I can. What's been burning?'

'One of Lord Loetopas's boats caught fire.'

'The troop boat?'

'No, his rag-tag bodyguards are fine, though I'd be interested to find out how you know there was a separate troop boat in their convoy. This one was carrying goods for tomorrow's celebrations.'

'I know there was a troop boat because I was told, Guardsman. The Beloved Courtesan told me after I gave my compliments to the Governor, last night.'

'Were you asked to torch it?'

'No, Tuuke! Whatever else my orders are, the burning of boats forms no part of it.'

'On the blood of your birth? The blood of our blows?'

'I swear it!'

It was good enough for him. The Behin he remembered had always been an immediate man, cursed by God to have a truthful outlook on life. Tuuke doubted that the experience of senior command had managed to teach him how to conceal a lie from a friend in the years since then.

'You know I had to ask. Others may not be so willing to believe you.'

The Commander smiled. 'We'll have to deal with that when it arises. Was there something more informal you needed from me?'

'You promised me a juice. Are you planning to stay here?'

'Not long. My orders are to continue west to Towes Ferhe.'

'Your official orders.'

'My official orders, yes.'

'In some ways, that makes me less happy than it should.'

'Why so?'

Again, Tuuke looked out of window. The cooking fire was almost ready to be lit, and more soldiers had found their way into the courtyard. Some were cleaning kit, others preparing food.

'Have you ever heard of the burning woman?'

'The burning what? Woman?'

Tuuke nodded, his eyes now fixed on the Commander's face.

'I've never heard of the "burning woman", though I've seen a few executions in my time.'

The tell was in the folds of the man's eyes, where it had always been.

'You never could lie, Behin,' said Tuuke. 'I need to know about this burning woman.'

The Commander leaned forward to rest his elbows on the desk between them. 'You intrigue me, Tuuke. Why this sudden interest in old history?'

'I, too, have orders.'

'Official orders?'

'No. Essential ones.'

'Ah. Well I don't know much. It's a Servant thing, the "burning woman". Do you remember the troubles when we first joined up?'

'The Clan fighting? It was pretty much over by that time.'

'But not finished. Oh, the Clans had got the message to stop killing each other's property, and the land seizures had been completed. Things had been peaceful for a good five years by the time we wandered into the recruiter's office!'

'Well now, after we were through the basic training and assigned to our Clades and you'd marched away north to the Istran Territories, the Fifteenth got sent on a strange mission. We were ordered into the jungle to hunt down runaway Servants.'

Tuuke had never heard this before. 'Go on,' he said.

'We found them, too. Not in ones or twos either, with only goat meat for sustenance. We found settlements supporting scores of Servants – mostly small, mind, but some of them had been established for a number of years. Some of the younger ones who fought us had no tattoos.'

The Guardsman didn't bother to hide the shock of this news from his eyes. 'Whole settlements of them? I never heard even a rumour!'

'Nor would you. Most of the Clade were set to building trails and depots, so it was only a few of us – forty or fifty – who got to do the hunting. And some of the things we saw ... well, none of us were proud of what we did. There's no bragging rights in killing babes and toddlers.'

To his credit, Behin did not look away from Tuuke's stare of disgust. The sounds of the soldiers stirring was becoming louder; he let his ears bathe in the familiarity of old morning routines before encouraging the Commander to continue.

'They fought hard, you know. Men and women alike – well, who would have thought a Servant would fight like that? But something was driving them to it. Even as we were torching their shacks and poisoning their fields they'd throw themselves at us. "The Burning Woman has cursed you," they'd shout, or "the Burning Woman shall see you suffer." It meant nothing to me – still doesn't. To be honest, I've spent most of my life trying to forget those first months in the jungle.'

'How many settlements did you clear?'

'There must have been seven or eight of them, and a few smaller affairs – a shack and a couple of fields. We did what we set out to do; I've marched through the jungles any number of times since then and I've not come across any other Servant settlements.'

Tuuke could see the recollection had taken its toll on his old friend. He reached out and grabbed his hand. 'Thank you for telling me this. It's been helpful indeed. But now I think it's time we shared a steam. You can tell me about these filthy whores you've been letting your men play with, just for the record, of course.'

The Pig at the Feast

For the past two days this storeroom beyond the family kitchens had been the domain of the pig. From the moment it had been delivered to the Governor's House by four sweating Clan Arallo soldiers, Tabeed had taken a dislike to it. It stank for a start, more than normal for a pig, and it coughed – a low, hacking croup that shook its half-grown body from trotters to tail. But it ran no temperature; the only fire within it was concentrated in its small, black eyes, now focussed on Tabeed and the bearded man behind her as they entered the room and closed the door.

'There's not much meat on it,' said Akambue, today being employed as a butcher.

'I know,' agreed Tabeed. 'They must have been starving it on the journey upriver. It's got a nasty temper – will you need some help?'

The man, whose body was swaddled in muscle, shook his head. 'Just be ready to catch the blood when I sever its neck.' He continued to stare at the creature: 'If this is a gift, then shouldn't the Tall Ones be whittling it to pieces in their temple?'

'Lord Gelleris has already organised the sacrificial offerings, beasts in better shape than this juvenile brute. Seeing as it's a gift from the Arallo Clan, he said they could have the honour of feasting on it first. We get the honour of sticking and roasting it.'

The man's laugh was curt and deep, which the pig echoed with its own short barking fit.

'Word is that our Lord and Lady are being very "formal" with their Old City guests ...'

'Word wouldn't be far wrong then,' said Tabeed, not taking her eyes from the pig.

'Not the expected behaviour of people whose daughter is about to marry into one of the most powerful Clans then ...'

Tabeed turned to look at the man, her stare drilling into his eyes. 'I wouldn't know how Tall Ones treat each other when it comes to contract ceremonies. I do know I want that beast ended, and quickly done too.'

Akambue had wrestled far larger swine to their death. Scowling, he stepped towards the animal, skipping sideways as it lunged its tusks towards him. Soon he was astride it, one arm wrapped tightly around its head, exposing its neck to the knife he now pulled from his belt. If he shouted a command to Tabeed, she couldn't hear it above the shrill squeals and yowls.

She grabbed a bucket from the wall and brought it close. When the knife sliced the silence was sudden, and welcome indeed to her ears. She dodged the first spray of blood, positioning the bucket to catch the subsequent crimson pulses skilfully enough to prevent her smock being soiled. Her nose caught the acrid aroma of the pork's final piss.

And within a minute the corpse was strung from the ceiling by ropes, stomach slit to let the entrails cascade to the floor in a shiny heap. Akambue used a larger cleaver to open its chest, ripping the cage of bones open with his hands to expose the heart and lungs. A few flicks of the first knife detached the offal from its cavity.

'They weren't starving the little fellow,' he said.

'No?'

'Its windbags are half solid.' He prodded one of the lungs with his bare foot. 'And the rest looks off-colour. It's not been well at all. Where did they find it?'

'Brought all the way from the Clan estates outside the Old City, so the soldiers said.'

'Hmmm. Were you planning to use the offal?'

'A special gift for the House Servants, the Lady said.'

'Some gifts are better fed to the dogs, if you ask me. And I'd roast that carcass to a crisp, just in case ...'

Tabeed nodded. 'I can see your point. You'd better wash yourself well before you go – there's a shower close by my office. Get some fresh soap from the kitchen on your way there, and I'll find someone to finish off here.'

And with a flash of teeth within his beard the man was gone, leaving Tabeed alone with the

dangling corpse.

'Pigs!' she thought. They were more of a bane than a boon. Good for clearing the kitchen wastes, and tasty in a stew, but not the healthiest of creatures. And they liked to share their ailments with the people around them.

'So what were you afflicted with?' she murmured to herself. She looked at the offal, then at the dangling carcass – but she didn't have the skill to tell healthy meat from unhealthy. Had the pig come from Stal? Or had it come from somewhere else ... like Petezbarre.

That thought shivered her. The rumours about the blockaded city far away on the coast had been building for weeks – an insurrection, some said; a punishment for failing to pay taxes, claimed others. A few people dared to whisper a rumour many feared: plague, they told their friends, a plague in the homes and courts of the port, killing old and young alike.

Nonsense, said others. The Emperor would have burned the city down if it was plague. Remember Louge ...

Louge, far westwards at the edge of the Empire, had certainly burned.

A Telik trader from the other side of the world, so the story went, had sailed the polar oceans and been caught in a storm. When it arrived in Louge, battered and far from home, the crew were sick and – somehow – the sickness had jumped from the dying men to the people sent to sink the boat. And they had gone home to their families in the city and within a week families were dying.

Ancient history. Tabeed had been told the tale by a wizened old story keeper when she was a child, and he claimed the events had happened before his birth. Even so his words had shook her; for months after she dreamed of the walls of Bassakesh being surrounded by Imperial Clades hurling fiery oils across the city while her friends and family succumbed to the bloody pustules and vomits of plague. And no roads led to Louge today. The city was no better than a myth, its stones crumbled back into the never-ending jungles.

She shook the dark thoughts out of her head, spat on the pig's entrails and left the bloody room.

The Governor's House had two kitchens; Tabeed oversaw both of them, as well as arranging the cleaning, laundering and stocking of the entire citadel. This kitchen was smaller than the commissary kitchen which serviced the offices surrounding the five-sided Reception Courtyard, its main purpose being the preparation of meals for the Governor's family, guests and live-in staff.

Not that it was "her" kitchen. Yupten, the Governor's chef, ruled this part of the mazy building with all the passion and pride that accrued to a true food artist. She could hear his sharp voice spraying orders and imprecations at the far end of the hot, cavernous room, a continuous curse bounding above the clatter of pans and dishes. Much as Tabeed liked the man, this was probably not the best time to talk to him, she decided. Instead she headed towards the passage leading to the Fountain Courtyard.

The open air offered no relief from noise. Stepping out of the doorway, she almost tripped over a Servant scrubbing the herringbone brickwork paving. He in turn was being watched by a Tall One – an acolyte from the city temple by the look of the plain, pointed cone atop his head – whose job seemed to be to make sure none of the new wards dotted across the courtyard were touched by impure hands. She smiled at the acolyte as she stepped over the Servant's legs; the smile was not returned.

'Tabeed!'

The caller, a young woman, was leaning over the second floor balcony, close by the Governor's personal rooms.

'What's the matter, little Macce?'

'The Lady desires a word!'

'Which Lady?'

'Lady Arbelle.'

'Where?'

'She's in the school room. She said it was urgent.'

'Thank you, Macce. Have you finished sweeping the corridors up there?' But the girl was gone from sight as Tabeed spoke.

Chaos! Not that Tabeed would ever admit it to anyone else, or even deign to look as if she was worried that the huge building wouldn't be spotless by the time the Tall Ones left for the ceremony in the city below. Well, she'd planned the work rosters as best as she could – now there was little for her to do except trust in the competence of others. Even so, she checked each step for dust as she ascended the grand staircase that connected the levels to both courtyards.

When she reached the second level she turned left and headed towards the school room. *'Another room, another empire,'* she thought. This was Velledue's empire, normally off-limits to Servants on the astrologer's insistence – he saw all Servants as carriers of malice and would not hesitate to break off his teaching to scream abuse should a Servant be careless enough to move within ten metres of his eminent domain.

The Governor had still not released his retainer from custody: Tabeed was safe from the old man's bile as she approached the classroom door.

Arbelle was inside the room with a very scared Macce, her broom brandished across her chest like a stave ready for combat. The young lady, already fully robed for the ceremony in a floor-length dress puffed by several layers of fine-woven cloth, looked more amused than annoyed. Curtsying at the door, Tabeed strode into the cool air, a question clear on her face.

'Tabeed – thank you for coming so quickly,' said Arbelle. 'I've been prepared for the festivities and stored in this cupboard until it is time to go, but Maeduul has abandoned me and I can't wait here without a chaperone ...'

She nodded across the room. Turning, Tabeed saw a young man – a Tall One as elegantly dressed as Arbelle in his jackets and feathers – staring in their direction. Instinctively, she curtsied to him, keeping her knees bent as Arbelle continued to speak.

'His name is Sheslan, a companion to my sister's husband-to-be. He's been sent here to walk with us to the temple. I think he's supposed to guard Delesse in case somebody decides to kidnap her – he's got a nice, shiny sword! He's very formal, too. No fun at all. But you can never be sure with strange young men so I need someone here to protect my dignity.'

The young man sneezed, its speed compromising his dignified stance.

'Oh, and he keeps sneezing. Maeduul's gone looking for a ward to protect me from Chuffhig – that's the imp that snorts dust up your nose – and left me with this girl. You can stand up, you know. He's only a Courtesan's companion.'

'As my Lady commands,' said Tabeed, straightening back up with quiet gratitude. 'Do you or the gentleman require refreshments, or perhaps a balm to stop the irritation?'

Waving a hand, the man turned away and sat back down in his chair.

'A steam would be nice,' said Arbelle, 'though Mother would kill me if I spilled any on this dress.'

Tabeed nodded, offering Arbelle a small smile. 'Go and fetch the Lady a steam, Macce, and a loose smock from the store room. Then get back to work. And if you see Maeduul, tell her to hurry!'

It was a good half hour before Maeduul returned to the school room, a small ward of chicken feathers around a purple stone in her hand. While they had waited Arbelle had tried several times to engage the man called Sheslan in conversation – about his journey upriver, about his thoughts on the city. Each time he had rebuffed her with polite formality.

The room was not bright – Velledue did not hold with excessive sunlight and had long ago had most of the wooden window shutters nailed to the frame – but Tabeed could sense the man was not well. His sneezes were sharp and erratic, coming in clusters, and his voice seemed husky.

When she left the school room she was worried. The Tall Ones were due to parade to the temple before noon, less than an hour from now, and there was still too much work for her to oversee – workers had only just started erecting the awnings that would protect the guests from the

afternoon rains. *'It's probably a coincidence,'* she thought. Nevertheless when she reached the grand stairs she turned towards the Reception Courtyard, away from her work.

The Guardsman was where she knew he would be. His position included a suite of rooms next to the Governor's own suite, but Tuuke had requisitioned a large office near the main gate within weeks of taking up his post, only returning to his more opulent quarters to sleep. She didn't bother to knock, or curtsy, at his door.

'Guardsman. I would welcome your advice!'

'Your timing is impeccable, as ever, Housekeeper.' Tuuke did not bother to turn round to greet her. He was sat in the middle of the room behind a desk littered with the cloth and plate of his ceremonial uniform. Most of the metalwork gleamed as bright as looking glass; he continued to work on a smaller piece – a greave? – as she entered the room.

'My deepest apologies, Guardsman. You know I wouldn't bother you unduly ...'

'I know that, yes.' Despite their different stations, the two of them had come to an accommodation long ago; she knew that Tuuke appreciated her competence.

'Have you heard of any sickness among the Arallo?'

Tuuke turned his head to look at her, his fingers continuing to buff his armour without thought. 'Am I about to hear such a rumour?'

'Possibly not. But if I don't report my worries ...'

'Indeed, Tabeed.' He placed the metal down on the table and turned to face her. Part of their accommodation was to share any concerns they had for the safety of the Governor and his family. 'Tell me your worries.'

'A pig was delivered to us yesterday evening, a contract sacrifice from the Arallo. We killed it this morning on the Governor's orders. It was sick – coughing; my man said it had the look of having been sick for a while.'

Tuuke said nothing, though his eyes told her that she had his full attention.

'Pigs are often sick,' she continued, 'nothing unexpected on that score. But I've just come from sitting with Lady Arbelle. There's a man – by the name of Shaso or Shasli? - in the school room with her and he doesn't look well at all. Sneezes and suchlike ...'

'Sheslan. A coincidence?'

'My thought, too. But the pig was transported here in the Arallo convoy, and that worries me.'

'Ah ...' He looked away from her for a few seconds; his finger in its buffing cloth started to make circles on the desk. Then: 'I can understand your concern, but there is not much I can do so close to the ceremony. I will have the man moved away from Arbelle – has she touched him, or shared a cup or spoon with him?'

'Not while I was with her. I want that room cleansed ...'

'Do it! Clean round the girl, too – even if it's only a cold that the man has, I can imagine the Governor will not want the ceremony tainted by a subsequent illness.'

As Tabeed turned to leave the room, Tuuke continued: 'I know you and the others are busy beyond belief, but can you get someone to find my new aide for me? I'll need to have a word with her before we parade into the city.'

She nodded once, then left. When the Guardsman resumed his polishing, his face was sour, eyes focussed inwards on his racing thoughts, letting his fingers guide themselves in their work.

The Contract Celebrations

Delesse hadn't expected the cheering crowds. Cheering crowds were for celebrating the spring equinox, or for decorating the Penitent Man with vedegga nuts to mark the end of the annual dye fermentation.

The crowds layering the processional route had been deep and cheerful, at times threatening

to break the lines of city guards and Imperial soldiers as the contract parties had walked downhill to the New Temple squatting on the north side of Market Square. What had happened within the temple was a blur of mixed images – sombre ranks of acolytes and priests droning imprecations to God, her father taking a sword to sever the neck of a goat, clasping the blood-wet hands of her betrothed as blessings and wards were waved over their heads. Signing the contracts was almost an afterthought, something to be hurried before breaching the throngs of people once more to head back to the Governor's House.

Now she was sat with three hundred guests arrayed before her along plushly decorated tables spread across the Reception Courtyard, and the afternoon rains had come. Beside her was Loken, the man she was destined to spend the rest of her life with. He seemed pleasant enough: a fine head of brown hair over a long, elegant face; even white teeth within a symmetrically shaven beard, cropped short. Grey eyes to match the grey highlighting on his mainly white tunic. He was drinking too much, she could tell, and the alcohol was beginning to loosen his tongue; she feared that some of his comments to others around the table might be verging on the inappropriate. Her father, sat on her other side, was wearing his "political" smile, as she thought of it – the one he used with people who were annoying him.

She risked a whisper in his ear: 'Must I sit here much longer, Father?'

He gave her a calculated stare, one eyebrow slightly raised.

'My bladder aches!'

While the smile remained political, his chuckle was genuine. 'When I went to exchange contracts for your mother, the Emperor himself hosted the contract reception. Of course, nobody can leave the tables before he does. I had to pass a vase to her – surreptitiously, of course – so she could relieve herself.'

Delesse looked at her mother, seated further down the table, with wide eyes. Then she looked back at her father.

His eyes were twinkling. 'You're playing with me!'

'It's true, I tell you.'

'Mother would never do such a thing. She has a bladder of steel.'

With the shifting of just a few muscles around his lips, his smile became warmer, more honest. For Delesse, the transformation twisted her stomach – tomorrow she was to travel to the Old City: would she ever see him again?

Leaning forward, he attracted Loken's attention: 'Son-to-be,' he said, 'maybe the time has come to release your guests from their seats. I'm sure many here are keen to congratulate you and your betrothed in a less formal manner.'

Loken responded with a quizzical look – he was enjoying himself.

'And we can't serve the more interesting drinks while we are formally sat,' her father continued. 'You really must try some of the wines and distillations from my cellars ...'

She watched recognition leak into Loken's eyes – how much had he drunk already? With a happy nod to the Governor he stood, held out his hand to Delesse so she too could stand alongside him.

'God forgive and protect the company attendant on this feast, as we depart replete from these generous tables!' he intoned, glass in hand to libate the traditional toast.

Chairs scraped as everyone else stood: 'God forgive and protect us all!'

Before the chatter could start up again, her father announced: 'My Lords, my friends – can we gather together in the Fountain Court while these tables are cleared for the entertainments to come. I'm sure the ladies will wish to refresh themselves before they return to the business of telling us men how we ought to run our businesses.'

Laughter masked the sounds of scraping chairs. The top table had been placed before the grand stairs connecting the two courtyards, making it easy for Delesse to lead Loken and the rest of the gathering up the stone steps. Midway along the passageway a second set of stairs bisected the first – here Delesse curtsied to her betrothed, and then to her father behind her, and made for the sanctuary of the upper levels of the building. By the time she reached the first floor balcony which

surrounded the courtyard the first men were already descending towards the awnings strung around the fountain.

'You're galloping, dear!'

'My abject apologies, Beloved Courtesan!'

If Feyn was annoyed with her niece's speed, it didn't show in her face or her voice. The Beloved Courtesan was walking alongside her sister, Temis. As they reached the balcony, Delesse could see they were walking in lock-step, their pace and their expressions perfectly matched.

Arbelle had said to her two nights before: *'it's as if they're twins, born decades apart,'* and the more she saw her mother in the company of the Beloved Courtesan, the more Delesse had to agree with her sister. When they sat together they held their hands in their laps in exactly the same way. They ate using the same motions, and tackled the dishes in the same order. They seemed to have the same dress-sense, preferring simplicity over show wherever possible. They even pursed their lips into the same shape, and to the same extent, dependent on the conversations around them.

They hadn't separated since meeting on the boat. Naturally her father had offered the Beloved Courtesan the use of the state rooms in the Governor's House, but if Feyn was sleeping there then Delesse didn't know of it. The two women were together when she retired for the night, and they were together when she went for breakfast in the morning.

'They're plotting something,' Arbelle had said, and Delesse had nodded.

'You heard what she told us on the boat,' she'd responded. 'I'm happy for them to plot.'

Looking over the balustrade, she could see her father talking to Lord Loetopas, or rather nodding as the man talked to him. Loetopas outranked Gelleris in the Noble Hierarchy, yet Gelleris was both a city Governor, husband to the Beloved Courtesan's sister (or Emperor's daughter – Delesse still shook each time she heard that item of gossip whispered near her) and now father of the Arallo heir's wife-to-be. She suspected he was still angry: he'd not bowed to Loetopas nor offered him precedence since that meeting two days ago on the boat.

'Ah,' said Feyn, seeing where Delesse was looking. 'It seems that Lord Loetopas has been thinking. Your mother and I need to discuss some things – and I need the bathroom. I'm sure you can handle the greetings by yourself, for a few minutes at least.'

'Of course, Aunt Feyn,' said Delesse.

'You'd be doing your father a favour if you could keep Evaye by your side,' added Temis, smiling as the two women stepped past her together.

Delesse sighed as she curtsied to the departing women. The Lady Evaye was a large woman in all senses of the word. Married to the Provincial Master, and thus nominally her parents' superior in the Hierarchy, she had arrived in the city by boat that morning from Towes Ferhe, first among the jungle cities. If the news of her usurpation in the ceremonial proceedings by the Beloved Courtesan had upset her, she'd managed to keep it to herself. Nevertheless, everything was political, as Arbelle was always saying, and that included managing the strange relationships between the jungle cities. Delesse mentally prepared herself for what she hoped would be a short period of petty humiliations.

'They'll say it's a good omen,' said Arbelle.

'What, my betrothed managing to drink three whole skins of wine on his contract day?'

Arbelle gave her sister a strange look. 'No. The rains stopping early. We'll have a good hour of sunshine before the evening comes.'

They were seated on a dais just ahead of the stone steps in the Reception Courtyard, so recently the scene of the contract feast. The tables had been cleared to make room for the entertainment, but few guests had claimed their places. For the first time today the girls were – almost – alone.

'You ought to drink some wine yourself.'

'It only gives me a headache, Arbelle. Remember when we sneaked a bottle from the table at the Equinox feast? I was sick for two days!'

Arbelle wrinkled her eyes at her sister. She was practicing her courtly face and was

determined not to smile.

'So how will you cope at court?' she asked. 'I thought most people in the Old City spend their entire lives with a drink in their hands.'

'Is that what you want me to turn into? A smaller, fatter version of Lady Evaye?'

Delesse's time in the company of the Provincial Master's wife had not gone well. As she had stood in the State Room receiving the compliments of her female guests, Evaye had kept up a continuous commentary on the guests, the feast, the state of the city. Nothing insulting, of course. Petty comments and snide asides that Delesse had had to field with a dignity she hadn't felt she possessed at that moment.

'I wish this day would end!' she concluded, more to herself than to her sister.

'Where is Loken?'

'With his companion, I think. He said he'd sit with me when the entertainment starts.'

'I don't like his friend.'

'I know. You've told me already. Where's Mother?'

'I've no idea. Do you think Loken's friend is, well, more than just a companion?'

Delesse closed her eyes. Too much had happened today – well, too much had happened in the past three days; she hadn't had any time to think. Would it be like this for the rest of her life?

'Tell me your gossip, Arbelle.'

'What do you want to know, sister?'

'Lady Evaye mentioned something about babies being born with horns – she said it was causing much shame among some of the "almost-noble" families.'

'Hah! You're worried, yes? You've been practicing with that Servant of Varoul's ...'

She opened her eyes and gave her sister a most un-courtly stare. 'Where did you hear that?'

'I know what you've been doing! We have no secrets, you and I. Tell me, is he as good as people say?'

She refused to blush. Instead she leaned back her head and once more closed her eyes, let the sounds of the festivities wash over her.

'Aha! She's napping!'

The cry snapped her head up, alert. Within a second she'd located the source. 'Uncle Devisek! You've been avoiding me! Assen, Sektas – I hope you enjoyed the meal!'

'Of course I enjoyed the meal! With every morsel consumed I could taste the profit.' The man was, in a certain light, the image of her father - though he was quicker to laugh.

'Will you sit with us a while? The entertainment seems to have been delayed.'

It was Devisek's wife, Assen, who answered: 'Thank you, but we were just leaving – your uncle does enjoy collecting elderly relatives, but forgets that they need to be fed and watered.'

'Perhaps Sektas can stay a while longer – would you like that, son?'

Sektas was a year younger than Arbelle; he looked bored in his finery, bored of having to be on his best behaviour. His mother came to his rescue.

'Why don't you stay for a while, husband. We can handle the old folk back home while you chase for more business opportunities. Delesse,' she said, stepping onto the dais to offer a farewell kiss, 'you look radiant! Not once have I seen you neglect your duties to your guests today, not once have you put a finger wrong to slight a person – and so many here just itching for an opportunity to be slighted! Your man is gaining a rare jewel: I hope he comes to appreciate his fortune quickly!'

It took Delesse a few seconds to fight back the tears she could feel pricking the edges of her eyes, though the hug they exchanged hid her discomfort from public view. It felt like the first genuine compliment she had received since setting out to the temple. In short order Sektas was bundled up onto the dais to receive his parting hug; Arbelle seemed to take pleasure from complimenting the lad's new tunic and cape until his blush reached his face. And then they were gone, heading for the great gate at the other end of the Courtyard.

'I see you found room on your dress for our ward,' said Devisek as he settled himself into a chair.

'Yes,' she replied, her fingers reaching up to her breast to stroke the small amber gemstone

set within a simple silver clasp. 'Mother insisted – the dressmaker was not very pleased; she wanted it hidden within the petticoats. She thought it ruined the line of the cut.'

'Some things are more important than the cut of a dress – you'd do well to remember that when you reach the Old City.'

Delesse gave him a cool look. 'You've woven a feather into you beard, uncle!'

His laugh, as ever, was loud. 'Hah! You noticed it! Mother insisted on it, and I didn't have the patience to argue with her this morning. It's only a small one, though.'

'How is Aunt Moesser?'

'The last I saw she was having the time of her life! It takes an occasion like this to bring out all the social climbers, and woe betide anybody who forgets she was married to a courtesan herself!'

'That was her first marriage, wasn't it?' asked Arbelle.

'Oh, yes. Alok was his name – a distant cousin of the Emperor himself. A political marriage, of course, but I believe she became quite fond of him before he died. In fact, I think the circumstances of that marriage were similar to your own.'

'I've not heard people talk much about it, except that Aunt Moesser married a courtesan and went to Stal,' said Delesse.

'The names are similar: Alok, Loken ...' suggested Arbelle.

'But that means nothing,' said Delesse. 'A name is just the birth ward, you know that. A set of sounds designed to keep imps and demons at bay.'

'Devisek!' The cry came from the top of the steps behind them, its source hidden by a group of guests making their way down to the courtyard.

'Well here's a chance to ask her yourself!' said Devisek, turning in your seat. 'Do you need some help there, Mother?'

She must have been a fine looking woman in her youth, Delesse thought as she watched her uncle step down from the dais to go to Aunt Moesser's assistance. She, like her son, had the broad, symmetrical jaw line so typical of the Clan, but on a smaller scale. She was wearing a deep purple dress, highlighting the paleness of her light brown skin, though the material seemed to have wrinkled almost as much as the folds around her eyes.

'So who have you been upsetting now?' Devisek was saying as he led her to the dais and helped her step up to the chairs.

'I wouldn't upset anyone! Why would you suggest such a thing?'

'I know you, Mother. You enjoy it too much.'

'Sit here, Aunt,' said Arbelle, standing. 'Shall I find you a drink?'

'Yes, yes, child. Yes, a cool juice would be very welcome. Thank you.'

As she eased into the chair next to Delesse, she gave her a look suggesting that rumours of her mental health had been exaggerated.

'My Lady,' said Delesse, bowing her head away from the gaze. 'God has seen fit to protect you – you look well!'

'My Lady,' responded Moesser as she settled herself into her seat, 'God looks after those who look after themselves. You honour an old woman with your beauty and charm! I saw your betrothed talking to his uncle just a few minutes ago, by the fountain.'

'They have much business to discuss, I believe. Arrangements for the journey to Stal. I hope the celebrations have not taxed your energy.'

Moesser looked around her like a hawk searching for rabbits. The courtyard was beginning to fill with guests now, many staring at the dais and its occupants.

'Taxed me? No, no, though the walk back from the temple was longer than I remember.'

'Actually, we were just talking about your first marriage ...'

'Ah, poor Alok! We had the contract ceremony right here in this city, did you know that? Of course, the city was smaller in those days – we used the old temple by the Street of Horizons for the ceremony, so yes the walk back here would have been much shorter. Much shorter, yes.'

'You married here?'

'No, no. We signed the contracts in the afternoon, I remember, and then back to the

Governor's House for the meal – Dada Rollusek hired the courtyard, a lot of money as he kept on reminding me – and then by nightfall I was on the boat heading upriver. Packed off to court like a shipment of goats! Thank you, child.'

Arbelle had returned to the dais with a drink in each hand; she gave the second to Devisek before taking a seat behind her sister.

'So you consummated the marriage in the Old City?'

'Oh, yes. Alok was the Emperor's cousin – they shared a great grandfather through the male descent. He had the right to marry in the family temple within the palace. That was a cold night, I can tell you. A big storm off the coast, and no glass in the temple windows!'

'Why not?'

Moesser took a sip of her drink, dribbling a few drops down her chin. Delesse looked around for a cloth, but Devisek was already prepared, pulling a cotton square from a pocket hidden in the side of his patterned tunic and handing it to his mother.

'Why not? I've no idea!' Moesser continued as she dabbed the cloth around her mouth. 'There's parts of that palace more than five hundred years old. Maybe glass was expensive in those days. I remember there was a good crowd to watch the consummation, but most of them had gone by midnight. Alok had worn a fur cloak for the ceremony and I tell you I was grateful for its warmth by morning!'

'You shouldn't be telling such stories, Mother,' said Devisek. 'You'll be giving her worries!'

'Nonsense, boy.' Delesse almost smiled to hear her uncle addressed in such terms, but remembered the watching crowds in time.

'Don't worry, uncle,' she said. 'The ceremony has been explained to me. I've been prepared for what will happen, as you well know! Tell me about the Old City, my Lady. Did you live in the palace?'

'No, no, my dear!' If Moesser had noticed her comment about "preparation", she was choosing to ignore it. 'Alok had a very fine town house near the harbour; we moved there immediately after the ceremony. Yes, I still remember that house. It was a good place – a safe place.'

'Is the Old City that dangerous?' Arbelle's eyes had widened as she asked the question.

'Dangerous, child? No, no. Not dangerous as such. A lady can walk the streets without the need for a bodyguard, if that's what you mean. But they were bad times. Bad times. The Clans were more willing to take their plots forward with poisons and flames in those days.'

'Is that how your first husband died, my Lady? With poison?'

'No, no, no! Ah, Delesse, my Alok died fighting outside the city walls. He had business at one of our farms down the coast. There was a raiding party, I'm told, from one of the other Clans looking to kill the Servants we used on the cultivations. He died trying to protect our property. Poor, poor man!'

'An honourable death, Mother,' said Devisek.

'But still a death, boy. Still a death. I wept when I heard, in front of the whole court! That's how much it hurt me. That's how much I'd come to love him.'

There was silence on the dais for a few moments. Delesse watched her aunt's eyes glaze with remembered tears. But then she shook her head and looked around her, as if confused.

'Devisek? Ah, there you are, boy! Such sad thoughts God sees fit to inflict on this old body. But you're right: we should talk of better things. When do you leave for Stal, Delesse?'

'Tomorrow morning, Aunt. I'm to travel with the Lady Feyn in the Emperor's boat.'

'Feyn, yes? This is good. Now don't you go listening to all the gossip at Court – most of those chickens have nothing better to do than scrabble around for petty talk. Feyn is a good woman, a kind woman. She'll look after you well, I'm sure.'

Delesse was surprised to hear this. She had not been looking forward to the journey with the Beloved Courtesan. She wondered if her aunt's mind had started to wander again.

Obviously Moesser must have seen the doubt in her face. 'I know Feyn, child. She looked out for me when she had no reason to do so. She helped me in many small ways. And you are her

niece! Blood will always look after blood, so don't be fooled by her manners. She had many enemies when I knew her; she must have even more now. You don't become strong by being kind to strangers, you know, yet she found the time to be kind to me after Alok died.' She took another sip of her juice, before continuing: 'She's a good woman!'

'Yes, my Lady,' said Delesse, again bowing her head.

'Ah, here's your young man coming now,' said Devisek. Without thinking, Delesse brushed her hands down her gown, checking for creases. When her hand passed over the ward pinned to her breast she felt a moment of gratitude – it was a memento she fully intended to keep with her when she started her long journey to the strange, legendary city far away by the sea.

Loken, now her formally betrothed husband-to-be, was descending the steps to the courtyard with his uncle, Loetopas. For most of the day he had seemed merry, as eager to enjoy the day as Delesse was to demonstrate her decorum to the crowds. But now he wore a more sombre look, as if some news had drained the alcohol from his blood. Delesse stood to greet the pair, leaving Devisek and Arbelle to help Moesser rise from her chair. When the two men reached the dais she curtsied deeply, then rose with a smile on her face.

'My Lords, I hope you are refreshed and ready for the entertainment to come?'

It took a surreptitious nudge from his uncle to remind Loken to bow in response. 'My Lady Delesse,' he said as he straightened himself. 'No entertainment can compete with your radiance. But I hope we have not delayed it with our tardiness.'

'It seems that your timing was perfect, Lord Loken; I believe the first act is about to start.' She held out her hand to him, to allow him to guide her back to her seat. Already Devisek was bowing to Loetopas and introducing him to his mother.

'Are you refreshed, Lord Loken?'

He had not let go of her hand as they had settled in their chairs. 'I am more sober than I was, my Lady,' he responded. 'I have been taken to one side and spoken to by both your father and my uncle – separately, I might add. I must apologise for my behaviour, and for neglecting you in such a reprehensible way.'

He had lowered his eyes as he apologised; she squeezed his hand to bring them back to her face.

'My Lord, I forgive you. I would have drunk a bellyful of wine today, if I had been able. But my belly does not appreciate the grape brew ...'

'God curses us in our own individual ways, my Lady. But I promise you now that I will not neglect you again. I shall be the perfect gentleman from this point on.'

'Forever, my Lord?'

'Forever!'

'Oh, I hope not "forever", my Lord.' Delesse allowed a faint trace of a smile to steal into her lips. 'I have heard rumours that marriage has its own special rewards ...'

It took a few seconds for the smile to mirror in the man's face, his eyes widening at what she had just said. 'My word,' he said finally. 'I, too, have heard such rumours ...' She felt his hand grip hers tighter.

Then he looked away again. 'But again God has seen fit to curse us.'

'Why so, my Lord?'

'It seems that we are to be delayed from exploring the truth of these rumours. My uncle has agreed with your father that we shall not be leaving for Stal tomorrow morning – business requires plans to be changed.'

'Oh,' said Delesse. The sudden news caused a conflict within her; a sudden joy in her chest at the realisation that she was to be granted a few more days with her family, but also an unexpected frustration in her stomach. Unsure of what to do, she squeezed his hand again.

'You will of course be our guest here at the House, my Lord. After all, we've signed a contract; I would not want to see you return to your boat empty handed.'

Loken's smile was rueful. 'It has already been arranged, my Lady.'

'Then as my guest, I will consider it my duty to show you all the sights that my city has to

offer – until business permits us to leave.'

'All the sights, my Lady?'

She caught his half-wink, but dared not return it. 'We shall see,' she said. 'Some sights are – more difficult to reach – than others ...'

At the House of Varoul

'Julyeis! Get up here now, woman! Julyeis!'

Varoul's bellowing was loud enough to pass though the flagstone floors to the basement where Julyeis had her office. Luckily she was still dressed; she had been tallying the evening's takings and finalising next week's budget. She pulled a shawl over her shoulders as she went to see what the man needed at this late hour.

He was standing in the main hallway, the pleats of his over-creased face dancing in the flicker of oil lamps burning low on the walls.

'Is there a problem, Varoul?'

'That stupid bitch Zhamelle! Does she think this is some cheap hostel where she can rent a room by the hour?'

She was tired; even so, she tried to hide her yawn from him when it caught her throat.

'Quiet, Varoul! Tell me what she's done and I'll see if I can sort it out.'

'Come!' he said, turning towards the main stairs leading to the upper levels. 'Come and see!'

They climbed to the second level of the house together, Varoul's invective now a constant, quieter stream of words: 'I'll not see my business cheapened like this! Who let her in the front door? Did you prepare a room for her?'

'She lives here, Varoul. She has her own key.'

'She won't have a key tomorrow! She can build herself a new berth, take her chances with those common whores at Jalapsoem's flea pit.'

The woman in question was standing on the second floor landing. Even from a distance Julyeis could sense that she had been drinking, though her golden eyes, framed in the mane of golden hair that men were willing to pay a premium to tousle, were clear, with a hint of anger angling their lids.

'Tell her! Tell her what you've done!'

Inwardly, Julyeis sighed. She clasped her hands before her and turned to face the angry man.

'Varoul, listen to me. We've done good business tonight. Zhamelle is one of your best, and she would do nothing to harm her earnings or your reputation. You know this! Now let me deal with the problem. Have you locked up yet?'

'How can I lock up, you stupid woman? We've still got a customer on the premises!'

She knew she was risking his wrath to talk to him like this; it had been a while since she had seen him this annoyed at one of Zhamelle's "little escapades", as she liked to think of them.

'Let me deal with it, Varoul.'

'I don't know why he's making such a fuss.' Zhamelle's voice was low, contrived; the voice she often used with her clients. But one of her hands was clasped to the landing banister a little too tightly. Julyeis knew the woman's manner: something was definitely worrying her, and it wasn't the man cursing her.

She risked placing her own hand on Varoul's arm.

'Women! You're all conspiring to ruin me!' But he didn't push her away. 'Tell her what you've done!'

'I met a client, as you well know Varoul, and I brought him back here. You opened the door for us, remember? You had no objection. You took his money yourself!'

'Poisoned coins!'

'They're no more poisoned than you are, Varoul.'

'They must be poisoned! Why in the name of God's own scrotum did you have to bring him here?'

Without turning away from the man, keeping her hand on his arm, her voice quiet and even, Julyeis asked: 'What's the problem, Zhamelle?'

She took a few moments to answer. 'I met him at the Governor's reception this evening.'

'You had an invite?'

'Of course not! I blagged my way in with one of the entertainment troupes. Anyway, I'd seen him before, when they paraded back from the temple ...'

'You should have been on your back, woman, not sightseeing!' growled Varoul.

Zhamelle ignored the interruption. 'He's high up in that Clan, I think: well dressed, and he had a heavy purse. He suggested we spend some time together.'

'Was he drunk? drugged?' asked Julyeis, slowly removing her hand from Varoul's arm.

'I thought so at the time – lutestran, perhaps, with alcohol. Some people can't take the combination. Now ... now I'm not so sure ...'

She turned to face the woman. 'What do you mean?'

'I can't rouse him! When we got back here he was rambling in his speech – more interested in the talk than the fuck. But time was pressing so I made the advance – he's burning hot and shivering! So I got Varoul up here to have a look at him; I won't be making that mistake again! You're worse than an old woman, Varoul ...'

'Enough!' said Julyeis, quietly. 'I'll go and have a look at him, and then we'll see what we can do, yes? Go fix yourself a drink, Zhamelle, and fix a drink for Varoul. Which room is he in?'

'The door's open,' said Zhamelle, letting go of the banister to walk down the stairs. She kept her distance from Varoul as she passed him.

Julyeis watched her descend for a few moments, then turned towards the hallway. There were four large rooms on this level, and two smaller ones. The door to one of the latter was open, halfway down the plush corridor.

She pushed the heavy wood wider as she entered the room. The centrepiece was a large bed, clear from the walls on all sides. A man lay on top of the sheets, angled, his head closest to the entrance. As the woman had claimed, he seemed to be shivering.

It must have been instinct that made her do it. Before she went over to the bed, she took one edge of her shawl and wrapped it across her mouth and nose. Not that it could help, she realised as she reached into her hair for a clip to keep the makeshift mask in place; the material was old and its weave loose.

Varoul had followed her. He stood in the door frame as she sat down by the man's head.

'Do you have a name, lad?'

He wasn't unconscious, but neither did he seem to be coherent. Zhamelle had not finished undressing him before she panicked; his cloak was half draped from the end of the bed, his tunic half-unbuttoned from the neck to expose the flesh of his chest, his nipples. Sweat was dribbling across the wall of well-developed muscle – she could feel his excess of heat without touching him.

'Name?' he whispered. His eyes were darting around, as if following a bee on the ceiling.

'Yes, name. Shez ... Shezin?'

He coughed then - a short, dry hack that squeezed his ribs like an accordion.

A moment to recover his breath, then: 'No, my name is ... is Sheslan. Dear God – he's roasting my bones!'

'Varoul, there should be a bowl and some towels in the next room, and some water. Can you bring them here, please.'

The old man didn't move: 'I don't want you to nurse him, Julyeis. I want you to get rid of him!'

The look she offered him was direct yet unchallenging. 'I need to know where to take him. If I can cool him down, he should be able to answer some questions.'

'Dump him in the street! Cart him down to the river and throw him in! That will cool him down.'

'And if he drowns, Varoul? Do you want the Governor's Guardsman knocking on your door, asking questions? Zhamelle found him at the Governor's House; she saw him walking with that Old City Clan earlier today. If he's important – listen to me, Varoul – if he is important, his friends won't appreciate us dumping him in the gutter. Or the river! Think, Varoul, for once in your life!'

'This is Servant work!'

'Servants can gossip, too. The fewer who know, the fewer to keep quiet ...'

Finally, he nodded. While he went to fetch the requested items, she checked the young man's clothing and his purse, searching for identification. As she reached across him for the cloak, his hand caught at her arm.

'Wards? Where are my wards?'

'I'm looking for them, lad. Can you tell me what they look like?'

'Red linen ... rose – yes, dried rose in a bag. And a stone – two holes in it, smoothed by the sea ...'

Again, the cough: short; dry; chipped from his chest without warning. She found a stone in a pocket within the cloak's lining and pushed it into his hand, and when Varoul returned with the water and towels she began the job of wiping him down, using slow strokes and a calming murmur.

'Where are you staying, Sheslan? Do you understand me?'

He nodded, a pained smile on his face as his eyes engaged with hers.

'Where are you staying?'

'Boat.'

'Which boat? Is it in the main docks?'

'No ... boat gone. Burned. A room nearby, I think ...'

She looked over at Varoul, once more stood by the door, his hand over his mouth and nose.

'One of that Clan's boats was burned a couple of days ago, I heard. Sheslan – what happened?'

'Heh, we burned it,' he said, followed by another short coughing fit.

'Why did you burn the boat?'

'Had to. Told to. They were dead ...'

'Who was dead? Clan folk? Soldiers?'

'Don't know. God's burning me now!'

'What happened, Sheslan? You can tell me.' She dipped the towel in the bowl of water, resumed wiping it across his chest, his neck.

'Pig ate their faces. Stank, they did. Rotten!' Another hack; she rested her hand on his chest as the air expelled.

'A pig ate their faces?'

'Yeah ... they were dead already. Room was locked – them and the pig and the chickens. Feathers everywhere. Pig ate everything. So we burned the room. Burned it all. Am I cursed now?'

'No, lad. You're not cursed. Who told you to burn the room?'

The shiver seemed to start from his stomach, rippling outwards to his limbs. She watched him grimace at the pain, dabbed the damp towel on his forehead.

'Who told you to burn the ship?'

He didn't answer. Another cough racked his body, curling his arms across his chest.

'He can't stay here!'

'I know that, Varoul. I'm thinking.'

'If he's involved in the burning of that boat ...'

'It must be poison that's taken him.'

'Are you sure?'

'No. But it's a better answer than some others. We'll get him dressed, Varoul ... there's something going on in this city and I don't want to be anywhere near it. We need him away from here, and we can't risk being seen when we move him.'

'How? How can we move him? The gates will be watched.'

'There's tunnels – that will save us having to go through the gates.'

'Take him downhill! Dump him over the river wall!'

She stared at him long and hard, with one hand over his mouth and the fingers of the other crossed in a warding sign.

'No. We'll walk him through the tunnels – he'll need an old cloak to go over his finery. Then we can take him to Exchange Street, prop him in a doorway. It's just offices down there – it'll be empty at this time of night. Yes, we'll leave him there for someone else to find him. Those Imperial soldiers are holed up in the Exchange Buildings – they can find him.' She started to button up the young man's tunic. 'He can be their problem, yes?'

'Yes, Julyeis.' She could see the beginnings of ease release the fear from the old man's thin shoulders, though his fingers remained crossed. 'Yes,' he agreed. 'Someone else's problem; not ours.'

The Gods on the Hill

'What's this powder for?'

'It's willow bark, my Lord. It will help with the headache.'

Loken viewed the brown powder with some suspicion. The woman in front of him was one of the Governor's Servants – an older woman, quite plain with her freshly henna-stained hair pinned back into a tight bun.

'Drink it with water and some of the fruit I've brought you.'

'Have you seen Lord Loetopas this morning?'

'He's already at breakfast with the Governor and his family.'

He groaned; one day into the contract period and already he was gathering black marks with the in-laws.

'What of the Lady Delesse?'

'She has a message for you, my Lord. She asks whether you would be happy to go walking with her after breakfast.'

His recollections of the day before were a jumble of images and smells; he had not yet had time to pull a narrative from the mess. But he did remember his betrothed mentioning something about showing him around the city – was it before the entertainment had started?

He made up his mind to make an effort. 'Breakfast is almost over, I assume? How long have I got to prepare?'

'It's still quite early, my Lord. I can tell Lady Delesse that you will be ready to walk with her in an hour, if you wish.'

'Yes, an hour should be fine.'

'Then I shall bring you some hot water directly. We've placed your travelling trunks in the dressing room – through that door. The Lady suggested you might consider wearing more robust, durable clothing for the walk.'

'Why so?'

'I believe she's planning to walk up Bassak Hill – the path is not paved and the ground cover can be particularly thorny.'

'Um, thank you! Yes, I shall wear my riding gear. Where shall I meet her?'

'She'll be here in an hour, my Lord. I'll fetch you that water. Will you be requiring help with your dressing? I can send in a man ...'

'No, thank you. Hot water and some towels will be fine.' And with a curtsy and a turn the woman was gone.

The next hour was an adventure in pain. After washing himself and sorting through the clothes someone had bundled into his trunks for him, he reversed his decision not to touch the medicine the Servant had left him – poisoning, he reasoned, could not be more painful than this headache.

His rooms were not large, though they were decorated in the latest fashion and the bed linen had been refreshingly crisp. The washing room included a full-length mirror in addition to a smaller

one over a dressing table. The lighting was electric – and operational, for which he was grateful as it meant he could keep the window shutters closed as he gathered himself into a state fit for public display. He was fixing the last of his wards – a small chain of four green-glass beads – into his hair behind his right ear when he heard someone knocking at his door.

Delesse was not alone. The Servant that Loken had started thinking of as the 'shrunk woman' was holding her hand. He remembered to bow – slightly and slowly, as was appropriate for a morning greeting between a man and a woman.

'You got my message then?' She was smiling.

'Yes, my Lady. It was delivered with some strange jungle powders.'

'Ah, the willow bark. My father swears by it when the circumstances demand he drinks too much wine. It really is good for a headache, though mother says two skins of water is just as effective. Shall we walk?'

'I feel a little over-dressed, now.' His riding outfit was a mix of leathers and sturdy woollens, whereas she was wearing light cotton pantaloons tucked into ankle boots, with no more than a blouse and a shawl over her shoulders.

'You might want to wear a lighter jacket, but I'd keep the boots and pants. I thought we could walk up to the top of Bassak Hill – it's a wonderful view of the city from there.'

'Thorny, so I heard. Who else will be coming?'

'Maeduul here has agreed to be my chaperone, and there's some guards posted on the summit – so I'm quite safe. But who will you bring as your chaperone? Has your friend – Sheslan, yes? Has he woken up yet?'

'Sheslan? I haven't seen him. Not since last night.'

'That's strange. I thought arrangements had been made for him to sleep in your rooms.'

'I wouldn't worry too much over my companion, my Lady. I'm sure he found himself a warm bed for the night. I'll just have to chaperone myself this morning.'

The Governor's House stood at the western end of the Old Parade, a wide street that curved slowly to the right as it descended towards Hill Street, the main thoroughfare that in turn led to the Street of Horizons and the new city beyond the original walls. Left behind in the expansion rush, the Old Parade was now lined by mansions converted into offices for the various businesses whose purpose was to trade with Bassakesh; merchants and guilds looking to profit from the city's recent wealth.

Yet to Loken the street looked like every story he had ever heard about the jungle cities – wide houses within their low walls, ironwork railings surrounding carefully tended gardens before sweeping stone verandas. The homes of men made rich from their battles to extract wealth of the jungles. By contrast Stal seemed cramped, mean, imposing – its salty, narrow thoroughfares had no place in this panorama.

'Are you sure we should be walking without protection?'

'You mean guards?' She looked over to him as they strolled along the shady side of the avenue. She seemed to be a different person today: gone were the stiff formalities and condescending masks in which she had cloaked herself during and after the contract ceremony. Today she seemed, well, human – or at least as human as a woman could be.

'Yes, guards – I'd not think to walk through the streets of Stal without at least two men by my side.'

'Walk, my Lord? I thought you had horses in the Old City and the Lords and Ladies rode everywhere – even into the shops and markets.'

'Well, this is true, my Lady – although it is always good to exercise one's legs every so often.'

This won him a smile.

'But even so,' he continued, 'we're important people! The Emperor ...'

She interrupted him: 'I don't want to talk about that man, not at the moment. His plans for us are ... are wrong!'

He bowed his head to acknowledge her sudden anger. Seeing his contrition, she blew her worries from her lungs, let the smile return to her face.

'I know we will have to deal with that – issue – sooner rather than later,' she said, 'but it is not yet common knowledge. Today I am the Governor's daughter walking with her betrothed man, showing him the sights of her father's city. Everybody knows who I am, and none of our people would ever think of attacking us. I expect they're more worried that you might try to attack me!'

'Would I be allowed to live if I did?'

'Probably not. We're jungle folk, you know; barely civilised.'

He laughed as they strolled on abreast, with the shrunken woman walking briskly to keep a few steps behind them. When they reached Hill Street Delesse turned left, heading uphill towards the stone ramparts and the gate leading to the Upper Quarter.

Hill Street lived up to its name, climbing quite steeply until it reached the highest lanes in the city. This road was roughly level, following the contour of the crest of the hill that now loomed directly above them.

The quarter seemed poorer to Loken, less well kept – some of the mansions and compounds seemed only half-built or dilapidated. The bustle of the Old Quarter was also absent: fewer people seemed to be working here, or passing through. He asked her why this was so.

'Oh no, it's not poor as such – the less well-off tend to live in the Western Quarter and around the lower docks,' she replied. 'There's some very fine compounds further down the hill. In fact my uncle Devissek lives near here – you met him last night, do you remember?'

'The man with a beard and a garrulous mother?'

'Yes, that's Devissek – and Auntie Moesser. She can't help her age, nor her temper. She was telling me yesterday about her first marriage; he was a Noble Courtesan, but they were only wed for a few years. He died in the troubles the Clans were having back then.'

'Oh,' he said. 'So why are these buildings not maintained?'

'It's a long walk to the market and back!'

He laughed. 'Is that the only problem? I thought you jungle folk were fierce and not afraid of hard work!'

'If only that were true! But no, the main problem is the hill above us.'

'Is it unstable?'

'Solid rock, so I believe. But you'll notice there's not much growing on it. Most of the other hills around have jungle growth all the way to their peaks ...'

'So why is this hill different? You burn the ground cover off in some scary, jungly imp ceremony?'

'You'll see,' she said, leading him off the road along an unpaved track which cut between two of the better kept compounds.

The trail was well worn: in some places it cut into the surrounding earth and in the steeper parts steps had been roughly chiselled into the bare rock. In several places it doubled back on itself in its climb to the top. Loken took the lead, eager to reach the brow of the hill, not taking much notice of the vegetation as he strode by. Only when the path levelled out did he stop; he could see Delesse below him, holding the shrunken woman's hand as they negotiated the trickier parts of the climb.

'God's teeth! You've got barby rats up here!'

'Don't go too far,' Delesse shouted back. 'They're dangerous!'

Turning around, he could see that the crown of the hill formed a massive Y shape, with the city below nestled between its outstretched arms. Northwards, the slope of the hill was much gentler. The ground was a flattened swirl of rusts and greys, littered with rocks and boulders, but little in the way of vegetation. Nearby to his right a stone hut had been built – he could see two guards sitting in the shade of its over-large roof while a third sat on top. All three were watching him; he waved a greeting to them and felt a touch of relief when they raised their hands to acknowledge him. None of them seemed to be carrying weapons.

The only vegetation of note was the barby rat trees. They were huge – the largest reaching

almost five metres from the ground. He'd seen such trees before: barby rats were quite common, even in Stal, but few grew above man-height.

'Magnificent, aren't they?' Delesse had reached the top of the hill and was walking towards him. 'The Governor before my Father had a barby rat tree growing in the Reception Courtyard, but it was cut down after my sister was born.'

'Why?'

She gave him a quizzical look.

'No, I mean why did he have it cut down?'

'These aren't normal barby rats. They're venomous – even the trees carry the venom.'

'Can we get closer?'

She pointed over to a smaller tree growing near to the stone hut. 'We can have a look at that one, if you like. I think the guards have developed an understanding with its queen. Are you coming, Maeduul?'

The shrunken woman had sat down on a small rock as soon as she had reached the top. On hearing the question she turned round to look at them, shielding her eyes from the sun's glare with a flat hand.

'No, no, little kitten; I've seen the little gods before. Do you think the guards will have some water?'

'You ought to sit with them in the shade, Maeduul.'

'*Luetsa-ten* made me put some cream on – it makes me sticky, but I'll not burn. Here, you should dab some on you, Lady: it smells lucky – and your young Lord too, yes?'

Delesse shrugged her shoulders, took the proffered cream and dabbed it over her face and arms, then with a smile repeated the operation on Loken. Then she grabbed at his hand to lead him towards the hut.

'Who's "*luetsa-ten*?" he asked her.

'It's Maeduul's name for my mother.'

'Do you allow all your Servants to talk to you like that?'

'Yes. Why? Shouldn't I?'

'It doesn't seem, well, right.'

'Do you have Servants?'

'Well I suppose we do, but I rarely see them. You don't even put collars on your Servants!'

They were coming close to the tree, now. One of the guards had stirred himself onto his feet and was walking towards them; Delesse waved him back to the hut, for which Loken was strangely grateful.

'We do things differently in Bassakesh. I'm not sure I'd feel comfortable if I had to give orders to a Servant forced to wear a collar. I think we'd better stand here.'

They stopped about ten metres from the branches of the tree. Looking, he could see the four roots – or legs – at the base, and just above their junction what looked like a large, half-lidded eye set within the bark-skin. The main bole stretched up, the backbone clearly visible on either side as it helixed around the trunk from which emerged the great, black, pinnate leaves stemmed in their pairs to fan across the sky in search of the sun.

'Why did your Servant call them *little gods*,' asked Loken.

'I don't know – it's just a local name. They are the most impressive beasts in this part of the jungle, I've heard. Maybe that's why.'

'So where's the – queen?'

She shaded her eyes with her hand, scanning the tree.

'There!' she pointed. 'She's sitting right on top of the growing arch.'

He copied her actions, but could see no sign of the creature. Then it moved.

It was much, much bigger than a normal barby rat. Rather than the sparse rust-coloured fur he was expecting, this queen had a luxurious pelt: alternate stripes of black and dark charcoal running slantwise across its flank. Two eyes, forward on its head, above a shortened snout and beak gave it a curious, human quality. He could see no ears; a row of stubby spines running the length of

its back, coloured red, were visible, as were the claws terminating each of its paws. It was sitting as if relaxed on its throne, yet its black eyes were trained on the two humans like a dare for him to move closer.

'It's beautiful!' His voice was a whisper.

'She's beautiful,' Delesse corrected him.

'How do you know its a female?'

'The queens are the big ones – each tree has its own queen. The princes are much smaller – no bigger than a common barby rat.'

He continued to stare at the creature. 'One of my tutors once compared the Empire to the barby rat: the tree was the land; the leader was the emperor; I was a guardian in this story. He said that when the leader died, one of the guardians would have to become the new leader, for without a leader the tree would die.'

'And you believed him?'

'Oh yes, for a while. I was only seven at the time.'

'I remember the tree that grew in the Reception Courtyard had no queen nor princes. I also remember it screamed horribly when it was cut down.'

'These trees have voices?'

'Oh, yes. And eyes and blood. Can you see the eyes?'

He nodded.

'Velledue – he was my tutor – told me that these barby rats were created specially by God to test us. He called them prison trees because they have eyes to watch our every blasphemy. I used to have nightmares that the trees would see all my sins and send their queens to hunt me down and poison me.'

'He wasn't a very nice person, this Velledue.'

She caught his hand in hers: 'Oh, he has his little peculiarities.'

Loken gave her a swift look; she had shifted her gaze away from the tree towards the northern horizon. He could see that some strands of her hair was beginning to work their way loose from their loose, white band. He squeezed her hand.

'So why do you tolerate these creatures so close to the city, if they are as dangerous as you say?'

'They're very, very good guards. They'll attack any large creature that enters the grove. And the queens attack in packs, you know. I think they're quite intelligent.'

'Ah,' he said, looking around him. 'That explains why the wall doesn't completely circle the city.'

She smiled at him, returned his squeeze.

'But surely fire would destroy them?'

'They're very resilient – at the first sign of danger the trees furl their leaves up tight and the base sinks into a hole in the ground. The queens can run away of course, carrying their favourite princes. But they seem to make an effort to keep the grove clear of burning material. Anyway, they only cause us problems when they spawn; there's not much room up here for new trees so the obvious place to go is downhill ...'

'Straight into the mansions and compounds we walked past earlier?'

'That's right! Every second equinox we have a festival where everybody comes up here to clear our side of the hill. The little ones aren't as poisonous as the big ones. The person who bags the most barby rats becomes First Citizen for the next year.'

'My, you are a strange race of people! Where shall we go next?'

'Let's fetch some water for Maeduul, then I'll let you choose the next destination.'

The more Delesse talked, the more he grew to like her. The next hour was spent sitting on top of the hill looking down on the city. By asking pertinent questions he found he could get her to discuss any number of interesting topics. When he mentioned the electric lights in his room she pointed to a low island in the river, describing the generators that were hung into the river's current.

He was shocked to learn that she had once dared her sister to steal a spring-box from the island, and laughed when he learned Arbelle had returned with a puppy.

Following her finger, he traced the main thoroughfares of the city, discovering where the best shops for various items could be found. She was telling him how the big market square was divided into separate areas for different goods when he reached over to touch her face.

She didn't pull back from his lips when he kissed her.

When he moved away, he apologised: 'We shouldn't have done that, I suppose.'

'Perhaps not. I won't tell anybody if you don't.'

'What about your chaperone?'

She looked past his shoulder to where the shrunken woman had been sunning herself.

'Maeduul? What's wrong?'

He turned to look at the woman. She was staring at something just above them. Intrigued, he made to turn around to see what she saw.

'If you love life: don't move!' the woman hissed.

Suddenly, a flutter of fear tickled in his stomach. He could feel Delesse searching along his arm for his hand. When she found it, she grabbed it tightly.

'What is it?' he asked the woman, his whisper as loud as he dared.

'Turn your heads very slowly. Don't make any sudden movements! Don't shout or scream!'

He complied with the Servant's orders.

It was sat on its haunches no more than a couple of metres away from them, with only the boulder they had been leaning against between them. It took all his resolve to stop his muscles throwing his body down the hill.

Delesse breathed next to him: 'She's magnificent!'

He could see the outlines of muscles beneath the creature's fur; the long, sharp fore-claws resting on its hind limbs. It seemed ... interested in them.

'Dear God,' he whispered, 'it must be almost as tall as I am!'

'Maeduul, what are we going to do? Can you stand up and get the guards' attention?'

The woman didn't answer. He could see clearly now the alien-ness of the animal; the fur-clad scales that lay over its skin. From its mouth a thin, blue tongue emerged and waved through the air, as if tasting it.

'Maeduul!' he hissed. 'Do something!'

'I think,' said the woman, 'that it's up to you to do something. This little god has come visiting you for a reason.'

'What?'

'I think your contract is being blessed by the jungle itself. I think it would be a good time for you two to make a baby ...'

He couldn't move, but the woman's words seemed to mean something to Delesse. Slowly she leaned her head towards his and whispered in his ear.

'It's certainly a novel way to die ...'

Her hand let go of his, moved down to the leather enclosing his crotch. Not believing what was happening – not believing he could stiffen so rapidly while the demons of fear beat on his chest with hammers – he did as the Servant suggested: slowly; silently. Relentless until his release.

Sheslan

For the first time in over ten weeks the afternoon rains had failed. Tuuke was grateful for small mercies; he had numerous tasks to worry about and, as welcome as the rain could be, it did have the habit of sapping his will to work.

His latest conundrum lay on the desk before him. Sappu had been busy while everybody else celebrated Lady Delesse's contract. This morning she had delivered her verbal report on the boat

fire, together with a scrap of skin recovered from a body washed up a couple of kilometres downriver from the city. Dry now, and slowly beginning to shrivel in the heat of the day, the evidence clearly had markings on it. Sappu had even gone to the trouble of tracing the likely origin of the tattoo; the result had left a cold lump in the Guardsman's stomach.

There were a number of other matters competing for his consideration. Some were neatly written in folders, fanned across one half of his desk so that he could quickly pick out the title of each. Others were less tangible; his old friend Behin, for instance, had sent word that he would like to meet him 'at his convenience'.

The message had been presented to him by an Imperial soldier in full, gleaming dress armour. He took this as a sign that the meeting was not likely to be social in nature; he knew the Commander of the Fifteenth Imperial Clade was aware of the anomalous position of the city within the Empire – if this was any other city the request would probably have been an order. Still, Behin's desire for a meeting intrigued him.

Coming to a decision, the Guardsman abandoned the paperwork and his desk. He hesitated at the door, thinking, before quickly returning to pocket the flap of skin and heading out into the afternoon sunshine.

The walk downhill to the Exchange Buildings was brisk. When he arrived one of the sentries wasted no time on formalities, instead leading him straight into the temporary barracks. Crossing the building's courtyard, he noticed that the place had been considerably tidied since his last visit: soldiers were busy cleaning and scrubbing every wall and floor.

Behin was in his ground floor office. He stood and bowed his head as Tuuke entered.

'Guardsman. Thank you for being so prompt.'

'Commander,' said Tuuke, bowing his head in turn. 'You are departing so soon?'

'We have our orders, Guardsman. We shall set out tomorrow, at dawn.' He indicated a seat, which Tuuke took.

'Two juices, cladesman; make them large ones. And some fresh water.' The sentry left with a salute. As he studied his old friend, Tuuke could hear the order being relayed in the courtyard.

For a while, neither man spoke. The Guardsman mused that the Commander would also be aware of this trick, leaving a silence for the other to fill with talk: it was a competition neither of them seemed willing to lose. As the silence continued, he kept his eyes steadily on the larger man sat opposite him, taking note of the gleam of his uniform, the choice of a full length shirt beneath the armour. From the side of his eye he saw a strip of wound cloth trailing from a waste bin.

The juices were delivered by a different soldier, who was waved away without words. Only when the door was closed did Tuuke break the silence.

'The Fifteenth Clade does not have a reputation for clean living, Commander.'

Behin smiled at his small victory. 'We take a pride in leaving a place in better shape than we find it.'

Tuuke thought briefly about the paperwork back in his office, waiting for his attention. 'You requested this meeting.'

For a moment Behin looked down. Tuuke could almost see the working of the man's thoughts in the creases of his eyes – as if he was preparing himself to lie. But when he looked back up, all such signs were gone from his face.

'Just tell me what's gone wrong, old friend. Have you some information for me? Perhaps about the fire?'

'I have a body for you.' The words seemed distasteful to the man.

'You have my full attention, Commander. Who?'

'Someone you probably don't want to see dead.'

'Hmm. Was this body "procured" by the Fifteenth, or discovered?'

'Neither, Guardsman.' Behin looked hurt by the insinuation. 'My sentries found him alive in the street three hours after midnight. His death was beyond the skills of my medics to prevent.'

Tuuke leaned back in his chair. 'Come on, Behin. Why are you stretching this out? Who's dead?'

'Tuuke ...' he began. The pause to check what he was about to say was noticeable. 'The politics of this is beyond me. You had best come and see for yourself.'

He nodded his acquiescence, took a sip from the juice in front of him. 'Lead the way, Commander.'

The body had been stored in one of the cellars – a cooler room with scrubbed walls and just the one door. Someone had covered the form with a sheet, though Tuuke could see the corpse's boots poking beyond the table on which he had been lain.

'This is the attending medic,' said Behin, pointing to a man stood to attention by the door. 'Show the Guardsman what we have.'

The medic moved swiftly over to the body and revealed the upper half with a flick of the sheet. For a couple of seconds Tuuke stared at the corpse without comprehension. Then he felt a jolt of electric ice feed through his limbs to spark at his fingers and heels.

'Oh ...' he said.

'Report, medic!'

'Sir! The man was brought into the barracks at around 10 minutes past the third hour after midnight by one of the sentries. He had been spotted slumped at the western end of Exchange Street and had not responded to challenge. I was ordered to attend the man at half past the hour.'

'What was his state?' asked Tuuke.

'He was seriously incapacitated, Sir, by means of unknown origin.'

'And when did he die?'

'A few minutes after midday, Sir.'

So somebody had decided not to take the man to one of the city infirmaries. Tuuke let this unspoken information gather in his head for a moment before asking his next question.

'How did you treat him?'

'Palliative treatment, Sir. Not knowing the cause, we could only treat the symptoms.'

'Which were?'

'A high temperature and shortness of breath. Acute lassitude.'

'Hmm. Did the man speak at any time before he died?'

'Not to my knowledge, Sir. There were periods of consciousness, but no lucidity in his words.'

It struck him that the medic's report seemed to have been prepared in advance. Nevertheless he nodded his thanks to the man, deciding not to challenge his version of events – for now.

'Commander, I would be grateful if both the sentry who found him and your medic here could prepare written statements for me, detailing everything that passed. Also, statements from any others who attended to him while he still breathed. In particular, I would be interested in anything the man might have said which they can remember – however incoherent it may have seemed at the time.'

'Of course,' said Behin. 'You have your orders, medic!'

And then the two of them were alone with the body. As soon as the door had been closed, Behin moved to cover the man's body with the sheet.

'I notice you never asked for a cause of death ...'

'Behin, the technicalities are of no interest to me just now. My only question is whether our friend here died of natural causes, or – as you said earlier – politics. Are there any wounds on the body?'

'None that my medic can find – he wasn't murdered by knife or bullet; he wasn't strangled or smothered. You know who he is, then?'

'Yes,' said Tuuke. 'He is – was – Sheslan, the companion to Loken of Clan Arallo.' Then, with sudden feeling: 'May God be fucked by the demons of impotence!'

Behin raised his brows. 'That bad, yes?'

'That bad,' he agreed. Only now did he approach the body, drawing back the sheet to once more show the late Sheslan's face.

'I'll need a cause of death. Is your medic competent to perform an autopsy?'

'Would it be wise to have one of my people do it?'

Tuuke raised his own eyebrow. 'Who would object?'

'You only have our word on how he came into our custody.'

'Who would doubt the integrity of the Fifteenth?' Though the Guardsman could imagine that a number of influential people might object to any form of autopsy.

'Who stands to gain from this death?'

'Ah,' said Tuuke. 'Politics. And of course you have orders to march tomorrow morning.'

The room was for some reason blessed with a set of electric crystal lights, their pale yellow glare filling every corner of the sparsely furnished area. The walls appeared damp, as if they had been recently scrubbed, as did the wooden boards across the floor. He moved down the length of the table, drawing back the sheet as he went.

'He's still wearing his contract outfit, I see. The clothes seem to be well worn, but not dirty. Yet his boots are muddy – black mud.'

'We're in the middle of the jungle, Tuuke. Everywhere is muddy.'

'The local soils are rich in iron, my friend. Red mud. And the river muds are a mixture of yellow sands and brown clays.'

'So?'

Tuuke smiled to himself. 'I think our man has been walking through tunnels. But that,' he turned to face the Commander across the table, 'is not important. I think you already know how he died.'

Behin shrugged his broad shoulders. 'Okay, Guardsman. I'll admit that I have my suspicions.'

'You said when you arrived that you had 'only lost a few men' on the journey. And you came here direct from Petezbarre, a city which – for reasons not officially stated – remains under quarantine on the direct orders of the Emperor. Tell me about Petezbarre, Commander.'

Behin considered the request, then nodded. 'In my office, Guardsman – yes?'

Reluctantly, he agreed: he needed a drink, and some time to think. Together, the men pulled the sheet once more over the corpse and then headed back up to the courtyard.

Back in Behin's office, Tuuke did not wait to be offered a chair. He retrieved his juice and took a long drink, emptying half the beaker. He kept quiet while the Commander settled himself behind his desk.

'I'll tell you as much as I can, Tuuke. But remember I'm under orders.'

'I won't forget, Behin. My only interest here is to protect my city and my people.'

He watched his friend pick up his juice and take a few sips.

'Ask me some questions, then.'

His first question was immediate: 'Is there plague in Petezbarre?'

'No.' The answer was equally quick. 'There is an illness – a miasma that affects the chest, but it is, I believe, only fatal to the unluckiest of the old and young. The reports I've seen say most people recover after a few days of mild prostration.'

'So why the blockade? We've endured such diseases in the past.'

'I don't know.' He smiled, then said: 'The Emperor is a very old man. Can you blame him for being – cautious?'

'Have any of your men been afflicted?'

'No.'

'Then why is the Clade not at full strength?'

Behin considered this question, taking another sip of his juice.

'I'll trust you not to repeat this information, Guardsman.' When Tuuke nodded, he continued. 'Some of my men have been deployed to the *Pride of Lachlasser*, a security matter you'll appreciate, I think.'

'I can understand the Emperor not wishing to take chances with the safety of his mistress,

yes. And Clan Arallo are not aware of this ...'

'As far as I know, no.'

'Then I see no reason to spread the news.' It was an unfair thing to say, he thought, but just at that moment he felt the need to remind the Commander of the city's autonomy. Behin's face remained impassive.

'This still leaves us with the problem in your cellar. Is there any chance that the Arallo convoy could have docked at Petezbarre as they journeyed here?'

'No, Guardsman. The blockade is complete. Shipments of supplies have been allowed in, but any boat attempting to leave is sunk on sight. You think this man died of the disease?'

'You do!' His answer was swift. 'Why else are you disinfecting the entire building?'

'Ah,' said Behin. 'I should have remembered that you're at your most dangerous when you're watching people.'

Tuuke raised his beaker to acknowledge the compliment, then drained the rest of his juice.

'Have you any idea why Clan Arallo chose to travel by sea? It's not the quickest way here from the Old City.'

'You'll have to ask Lord Loetopas about that. All I know is that it has cost me a long, hard march through the jungle.'

He stared out of the window as Behin refilled his beaker with water. He could see the entrance to the cellar across the courtyard. Two soldiers were leaning against the wall near the entrance, though they looked alert.

'And you swear the blockade is complete?'

'Yes! Why would you doubt this information?'

He felt inside the leather purse tied to his belt, pulled out the scrap of skin Sappu had brought him and threw it on the table between them.

'My lads have been investigating, Behin. Finding out why one of Clan Arallo's boats caught fire in the docks. They told us that a lamp was knocked over as they readied gifts for the contract ceremony.'

'And you don't believe them? Now there's a dangerous game!'

'How often did we lie to our parents when we were kids? How often did we lie to our superiors? I prefer to believe people's faces, not the words they choose to spew from them. No, I decided to do some investigating. We couldn't examine the boat, of course, but we could examine the docks. We got in some very good swimmers and searched through the mud to see what fell off the boat when it burned.'

'And found that?'

'That came from a body washed up on the banks downriver. Most of the body had been roasted to a crisp, but the hand somehow escaped the flames.'

'I heard no rumours of a death – not that I've had much opportunity to listen, of course.'

'Neither had I, my friend. And Clan Arallo are adamant that none of their people were killed in the fire.'

'Is this connected with our man downstairs?' Tuuke could see that Behin was intrigued by his news.

'I don't know,' he replied, truthfully. 'But what you say about Petezbarre and what we found in the river – well, they don't add up. The hand that used to wear that skin carried a tattoo. I can't prove it, but I'd swear on my grandfather's bones that the cargo the boat was carrying included at least two Servants, owned by Clan Arallo and employed in one of the properties they own in the city of Petezbarre.'

The Commander considered the news. Watching, Tuuke could see him mull the possibilities, come to terms with the idea that the blockade his soldiers were partly responsible for enforcing might not have been as watertight as he believed.

'Interesting,' he said finally. 'But not our immediate concern, I think. So how are you going to play this one?'

It was a good question, Tuuke conceded to himself.

'We're sure your "guest" was not poisoned?'

'If it's poison,' said Behin, 'then it's not one I've come across before, nor my medics.'

'Which leaves you thinking of imps. Big imps. Nasty imps. You're going to report this to Stal ... God's scrotum, you've probably reported it already!'

'The laws are clear, Tuuke. Not to report such a – suspicious – death is treason.'

Immediately his mind took him back to the stories he'd heard when he was a child; stories about another city invaded by lethal imps many decades ago – a city called Lounge, a city that burned to save the Empire.

'Have you?'

Behin must have been reading his thoughts: 'It doesn't need to be like in the old days, my friend. A blockade would probably be enough, until the infestation dies out, the disease runs its course. And there's no proof that this is a plague disease, like Lounge – the man could have been unlucky; possessed by an imp that weakened his body enough for a lesser illness to kill him.'

'Have you reported it?'

Behin sighed. 'Not yet, old friend.'

The words were little comfort. The more Tuuke stared at the entrance to the cellar, the more it seemed like the door to a tomb cut into the building's cliff face. Then a thought occurred to him.

'If our man carried a plague, then it is already too late.'

This widened Behin's eyes. 'How?'

'He was at the Governor's House yesterday. He walked alongside the dignitaries of half a dozen cities to the Temple, and then back. He shared food and pleasantries with them. And he was sneezing throughout the day. People are returning to their homes across the province even as we speak. More importantly to you,' he added, 'our guest of honour was the Beloved Courtesan herself! If Bassakesh burns, then so will she. And so will the Fifteenth Clade. And so will you!'

'Your city will not burn!' The anger was sudden, but Tuuke could sense it was driven by fear, a clenching in the Commander's bowels.

'He blockaded an entire city because he's scared of catching a fucking cold! What do you think he'll do when he hears rumours of plague in the jungle cities?'

'The Emperor ...' Behin started – but whatever he was going to say, the words died in his throat.

'So how are we going to play this one?' Tuuke asked, eventually.

The battle within Behin, his loyalty to the Emperor against his loyalty to his soldiers and his own life, presented itself to Tuuke's eyes as a sequence of tensions in the muscles across his shoulders, in his neck. The Guardsman knew he had won when the shoulders finally sagged into a state of resignation.

'We'll need to dispose of the body.'

'Dumping it in the river is not an option,' Tuuke told the Commander. 'Two dead bodies washed up on mud banks is the limit I'll tolerate in one week. In any case we don't know if the imps – if, in fact, those are plague imps that he carries in his body – can survive while the flesh rots.'

'How about burying it? You're surrounded by jungle.'

'No, Behin. You're not the only one who likes to go for walks beyond the city walls. I think we ought to burn it.'

'Pyres attract attention.'

'This death is going to attract attention in any case. Do you think Clan Arallo will sit quiet when they realise one of their own has gone missing?'

'Could the man disappear? Dangerous things, jungles and rivers. A missing person is a smaller problem, yes? And I've heard that castle on the hill has many cellars and caverns ...'

Rather than answer, Tuuke reached for his water again, took a sip. The mid-afternoon heat seemed to be sapping all sound from the building. As he considered options, he let his eyes slide around the room: sparse, whitewashed walls; a hook for a picture that had never been hung; wooden shutters warped into their open positions flush to the wall. The solution, when it came to him, was elegant.

'Tell me, Behin. Have you met our local barby rats?'

'You mean those brutes you keep at the top of the hill?'

'Yes, those barby rats. The thing I've grown to like about this city, the thing I appreciate most, is that people do things differently here. For instance, they use giant barby rats to guard the city instead of finishing the city walls.'

'I know they're venomous, but how does this help with our friend? He's dead already.'

'The locals have this custom: the bodies of people killed by the barby rats – they burn them. They even have a special ceremony for it – they call it "marking the bounds". They can be quite determined about it all, even defying the Temple on some occasions to see the burning gets done.'

Whatever defeat Behin had felt a few moments earlier seemed to be shaken away by these words. He leaned forward, elbows on the table.

'But the corpse is in our cellar, not on top of the hill.'

'We'll take him up the hill tonight, place his body just inside the borders of the grove. In the morning the guards will find him, by sunset he'll be on a pyre, burning. Nothing I say, or the Governor, or especially outsiders such as Lord Loetopas or the Beloved Courtesan, will stop the locals carrying out this ceremony.'

Behin considered the plan, awarded it one of his short laughs.

'You still have a problem, cousin. How do you get a corpse to walk into the barby rat grove?'

'We'll carry him there.'

'But I thought they attacked anything that enters their territory!'

'They do. And as a bonus, they'll scavenge any carcass they come across.'

'So answer my question!'

'I'll trust you not to repeat this information, Commander.' Recognising the quote, Behin laughed. To Tuuke, it suddenly felt like the two of them were children again, back in their birth settlement planning some new mischief.

'The barby rats don't attack their own. If you dab enough of their shared scent on your body, you can walk through the grove with some confidence. The queens will come over to check you out, but they'll keep their venoms to themselves. Mostly.'

'Hah! And you have a supply of this scent?'

'Of course we do,' he smiled. 'We keep a permanent guard post on the hill top; without the scent, we'd have to build a new pyre every day. Tell me, Commander, were you planning on doing anything interesting this evening?'

The Death of Sama-Lovare

Tonight's group was small – no more than a dozen men and women gathered in the little glade on the northwestern slopes of Bassak Hill. Without the cooling sweep of afternoon rain the air had retained its heat; in the sky the swirling patterns of stars were in full bloom, awaiting the arrival of the first of the moons.

Shapeis had been to this clearing before, but never in this company. During the story telling he had allowed his eyes to wander across the dark dome above him, trying to identify the constellations he had learned as a child. Maeduul the Story Keeper had recited the story of how Wrak-Katch, prince of chickens, had challenged Kaya-Brishe the eagle prince to a race across the mountains and, with the help of Mara-Gaye, beaten his adversary – thus confirming his right to be the first of the animal princes to greet the the hearth woman who lit a new sun each day. It was a good story, one he'd not heard before.

He felt that he shouldn't be here: they had set out for the grove a good four hours before midnight. On most days he would still be entertaining clients. But Julyeis had demanded he come, arguing with Varoul that she had things to do and needed his help. Unbelievably, Varoul had agreed – in fact he had locked the bordello's doors at sundown and taken himself away to his rooms with a

large bottle of ghevvesein. The sound of his tuneless singing was echoing through the building when the two of them slipped out.

Maeduul sat in the low branch of a tree, a lustran tree by the look of it, while Julyeis stood near at the centre of the clearing. Tabeed, the Governor's housekeeper, was standing to one side with a young woman he'd not met before. Others were scattered in pairs around the edges. He, too, stood at the back of the clearing with Akambue who, for some unknown reason, had trimmed his beard close to his chin. Akambue had been silent since arriving, not willing to offer Shapeis more than a whispered welcome.

Normally when a story concluded there would be questions and discussions, but not tonight. For some reason the silence of the group reminded him of the meeting six days before, in the cellar of the half-ruined building near the top of the hill. That meeting had eventually become noisy and confrontational; its consequences, after he had rescued the child Sosunda and carried her back to Varoul's place, had shaken Shapeis to his core. Kebezzu had arranged another gathering for her and the child to tell their story later tonight, but he had already decided he would not be accompanying them – even before Julyeis had insisted he came here with her.

That child – little Sosunda – scared him. He was beginning to believe she really was possessed by the spirit of a woman executed in a city far away more than forty years ago. Now he needed the certainties of myth, to hear stories about Sama-Lovare and Mara-Gaye and the Princes of animals; even if he shouldn't be here, he was glad Julyeis had made him come.

Still no questions to shake the quiet mood of the gathering. Though there were sounds all around, he noticed. The jungle never rested, never slept: mysterious clicks and growls and chirrups in a continual conversation of challenge, dare and retreat, and from the top of the hill the song of the barby rats underpinning all, their low hums and purrs adding the necessary bass to the evening's symphony.

'There is a reason for your reception of my story tonight, this I know.' Maeduul had finally decided to end the overlong pause in the meeting.

'One possibility would be that I have told you the story awkwardly and you choose to reproach me with silence, but that is not it. Or maybe it is because Thoel-sastrivde, the Corn Bird who steals memories and stories, has perched on the end of my nose to stop you from hearing my words. But that is not it either, for the Corn Bird has better work to do tonight. Which can only mean that I have told the wrong story; is that the reason, Julyeis?'

He could see Julyeis clearly stood in the centre of the clearing, her greying hair speckling in the strong starlight. She bowed her head when she was addressed directly by the Story Keeper – as if she had questions to ask, but was hesitant to ask them.

'Something is wrong, dear friend, yes?'

When she finally spoke, her words came slowly, as if she was testing each one before allowing it to pass from her mouth.

'Last night I met a man, Story Keeper. A young man, sprawled on a bed.'

It would have been easy to make a joke at that statement, thought Shapeis. But no one did. Looking around, he could see that the woman had everyone's attention.

'He was from a distant place. Yet to me it seemed that he was embarking on a much longer journey. When I looked into his eyes I could sense his oblivion. He was scared, and sick – so sick – yet his foot was crossing the last threshold whether he willed it or not.'

'Did he have a name, this man?' The question had come not from Maeduul, but from Tabeed. Looking across at her, he could see she was gripping her young companion's shoulder tightly.

'Yes. Sheslan was his name. Sheslan from the Old City.'

He watched as Maeduul and Tabeed exchanged a look, saw Maeduul make the hand-sign for "quiet".

'You have witnessed death before, my friend,' said Maeduul. 'Why does this man's death cause you worry?'

Julyeis smiled, finally looking up to look at her questioner. 'The Tall Ones are so superstitious, Story Keeper – their beliefs in imps and demons and wards, and yet ...'

'When you looked at him, you saw an imp looking back at you, stretching the man's skin into dust?'

'It's a stupid thought, I know. A vision brought on by tiredness and worry. But since I shared that look with him I've felt a need to hear a particular story ... will you tell us about the death of Sama-Lovare?'

For a moment Maeduul looked nonplussed. 'It's a long story, that one. There's intrigue and plotting woven within a fight for life and a requirement to die. When I first heard that sorry tale the story keeper started at sundown and the questions continued until dawn!'

Shapeis was shocked to hear what Julyeis had said – he'd not been aware of what had been going on at the bordello the previous night. He'd heard Varoul shouting, of course, but he had been tired. As only Julyeis had been summoned to attend their owner, he'd gone to his bed and slept well.

Yet the news made sense. Something had been bothering Julyeis all day; she had been particularly abrupt with Kebezzu and had shouted at the child Sosunda to stay out of her way – not that the child was in any state to respond. And thinking about it, he could now see why Varoul had agreed to close the bordello early. And maybe even why Zhamelle had started drinking before noon and then refused to work during the afternoon.

'We don't need to hear the complete saga, Maeduul.' Again, Tabeed had intervened. 'I, too, would welcome an insight into recent events that this story might be able to offer us. Will you tell us how the Grandsons finally killed the Prince of Men? Sheslan was the name of that young man who sat with Lady Arbelle before the ceremony,' she added.

'Yes,' said Maeduul. 'I remember him. If the whispers of the wind has put it into people's heads to hear this story, then I must speak it. And though it shivers my back to even contemplate such a neglect to my duty, I agree that we only need the bones of this tale tonight.'

'As all you wise people gathered in this story telling circle know, Sama-Lovare was given four wives by the Creator, who each gave him four sons and four daughters. And the firstborn of those sons took a wife for himself and also had four sons – these are the Grandsons we remember: the Lord of Rock, and the Lord of Storms; the Lord of Wood and the Lord of Imps - as we learned to call them.

'Each of the Grandsons was proud of his heritage – over-proud, as would become clear if the story was to be told properly. For each of them competes with their siblings and comes to dominate all the other progeny from the loins of Sama-Lovare, until such time as they declare themselves to be the rulers of all folks. Every person in the wide lands bowed to them except for one: Sama-Lovare himself.

'By this time Sama-Lovare was old. Eldest, they called him, and Hallowed Man. Many of his descendants worshipped him as a god, when they should have rightly worshipped the Creator! But Sama-Lovare did not know this, for at that time he lived by himself in a steep valley at the base of the Roof of the World. His beautiful wives were long since dead, and his sister Mara-Gaye was lost to him. His children had all moved away, as each in turn grew weary of his voice and, to the children of children, he was nothing more than a legend.

'Except, that is, to the Grandsons. They came to know of his continued existence, and in that knowledge each perceived that the one who enabled the Hallowed Man's death would inherit the world. The years had not been kind to their love for each other; each wanted dominance and, in the ways of such proud people, they would do anything to undo the power of their siblings. And each in their own way had found means to extend their lives, bargaining with various powers to put off the day that their feet would step over the threshold to oblivion.

'But you know the stories of their duplicities and deceits. It is enough for me to recount their encounters with Sama-Lovare; how each in turn failed to bring about the outcome they desired.

'The first to attempt the task was the Lord of Wood. His bargain was with the trees of his realm. When he found his way to Sama-Lovare's valley, he took a wooden club and beat the old man around the head. At first Sama-Lovare fought as if possessed by Rakh, Prince of Tigers, but he was too old. Soon enough the Lord of Wood prepared to deliver the killing blow. Yet in that

moment Sama-Lovare bargained with the wood of the club itself: *'deliver me to life and I shall give your kind my eyes!'*

'With the contract agreed, the club smashed against his skull, knocking his eyeballs clean from his head – but not killing him. The force of the blow splintered the club, and one splinter caught fire and drove straight into the Lord of Wood's chest, piercing his heart and slaying him in an instant. And as you know, from that day to this, there are trees in the jungles and forests of the world that have the power of sight, their eyes buried within the bark – endlessly watching all that takes place around them.

'A year passed before the second Grandson came to the valley. Sama-Lovare grew used to his life without sight, discovering new joys in the world around that were previously hidden from him: sounds and smells and tastes and textures.

'The second to come was the Lord of Rocks; he chose to attack the Hallowed Man with a spar of granite. Again the blows rained down on Sama-Lovare and again, just as the killing blow was to be delivered, he bargained with the stone of the spar itself: *'deliver me to life and I shall give your kind my anger!'*

'The contract was made. As the granite spar pounded into his face it shattered; a diamond at the heart of the spar spun free and sliced the Lord of Stone's throat with its cutting edge. And from that day forth the mountains and cliffs have rumbled and tumbled as they dance to the pulse of the anger that was once the driving joy of Sama-Lovare himself.

'It was only a season before the youngest Grandson climbed to the valley. In that time Sama-Lovare learned the power of serenity, and the peace of accepting what had to be. When the Lord of Storms arrived he greeted him civilly, asking him for news of the world beyond. When the Grandson offered to bathe his body in the valley stream he agreed readily, eager to feel wetness against his skin. He did not protest as the man held his head beneath the water. Yet as his last breath began to bruise in his lungs he bargained with the currents that wove along the length of the stream: *'deliver me to life and I shall give your kind my voice and my tears!'*

'Thus was the third contract brokered. Weed caught around the Grandson's feet and he stumbled, and once he had fallen the currents pulled him and pushed him and flung his body through the rapids which separated the valley from the plains beyond. Never again would Sama-Lovare speak, nor would he cry, for those were now the property of the waters of the world; to this day you can hear the voice of Sama-Lovare in the winds of the mighty hurricanes, and taste his tears in the foams of the waves.

'The last Grandson – whom we now call the Lord of Imps, though that was never his name while he lived – had seen his brothers leave their kingdoms to travel to the Eldest's valley, and was glad when they never returned. Now they were gone nobody could dispute his claim to be the King of the World. And for many years he was content with this state of affairs. He studied the realm of the imps, made his contracts with the councils of those tiny beings whom the Creator had brought into existence to scourge His first creation. But he could not change the basic truth: he was not a Prince of people; he was of the lesser kind and thus death was his duty. He grew old.

'When at last he had to confront his doom, the Lord of Imps devised a final plan – a bargain that he hoped would award him with immortality. He led a great force to the valley of the Eldest. When he arrived, he found Sama-Lovare sitting silently in a grove by the stream. He planned to take the Hallowed One by force back to his kingdom, yet when he laid his hands on Sama-Lovare – who was, lest we forget, three times the size of lesser men – he found he could lead the old man willingly just by whispering commands in his ear. It was in triumph that he returned to his great City in the Jungle, with Sama-Lovare in a wheeled cage in the midst of his victory parade.

'There was one who watched this event with great sadness. Long before, the Creator had made His own bargain with Mara-Gaye, the first woman and Queen among the Princes of creatures, agreeing not to interfere any more in the affairs of people. And yet Sama-Lovare had been His greatest creation, after Mara-Gaye: He could not bear to see him humiliated in this way. So He called together Ghan-Hokone of the pigs, and Wrak-Kateh, and His dogs Gwa-Rhose and Hyn-Rhouwe, and together they devised a plan of their own. Then He summoned the councils of the

imps and gave them His commands.

'Thus the imps came to the City in the Jungle, and there they stopped a while to play. You may not realise this, but imps are joyful creatures. They accept that their task is hurtful to those they infect, yet they are part of creation – they carry the Creator's words in their motes. The Creator brought them into being, and loves them as much as He loves any other part of His creation. And so they play, in the short time that is allotted to them. They grow and breed within the bodies of others; they explore each of us as if we are a new kingdom, trekking through intestines, bouncing in lungs, vaulting through veins. Blooming within the bones that hold our flesh within the skin.

'Sama-Lovare sat in his cage, unable to see the tumultuous crowds around him, serene to the abusive comments he heard in his ears, his eye sockets dry and his throat silent. Instead of reacting to his situation, he embraced an imp within his nostrils as it sailed past in the breeze: Sama-Lovare caught himself a cold!

'The imps came to the City in the Jungle. They played in the lungs of people and in the beaks of chickens; they partied in the snouts of pigs and in the muzzles of dogs. They did the Creator's work.

'You can imagine the fear that the arrival of the imps caused the last Grandson. He called on the councils of the imps and begged them to leave his City. He proposed bargains. He offered them the lives of his many children. But they were having too much fun following the orders of the Creator. They ignored him.

'Finally the Grandson decided to go and view Sama-Lovare, whom he had installed in a huge iron cage in the dungeons of his castle. His plan for survival had involved ingesting the Eldest, eating him slowly, morsel by morsel, until he consumed even the beating heart of him, for his advisors had told him that only through these cruel means could he become immortal.

'But when he opened the dungeon door and approached the cage he was astonished to see that Sama-Lovare was not alone. An enormous rooster sat at his head, and a massive pig lay at his feet. And on each side of the giant stood two great hounds, their tails dropped between their legs.

""What is the meaning of this?" demanded the Grandson.

""We are here to mourn the passing of our friend, Sama-Lovare," said Gwa-Rhose, the great hound.

""For even though he has sacrificed much, and is diminished in the eyes of lesser people, he remains a Prince of creatures and deserves to be honoured as he takes his last breaths," said Hyn-Rhouwe, the Creator's own bitch.

""But he cannot die!" said the Grandson: "The Eldest carries an immortal heart within his cage of bones!"

""You know nothing of your history, petty lordling," said Ghan-Hokone, Prince of pigs. "It was your own brothers that diminished your ancestor. They crumbled his immortality as they cracked his body, stealing his eyes and his anger and his tears and voice!"

""Is there a way to save him, o great Princes of beasts? For he cannot die in this way!" For as you will remember the Grandson had other plans for the Hallowed One.

""There may be a way," answered Wrak-Kateh, herald of the rising sun.

""Then tell me, and I shall see that it is done. I would see the Hallowed One restored to his glory so that I can beg him forgiveness for the actions of my brothers!" Ghan-Hokone snorted at this, for all pigs can snuffle a lie when it reaches their ears, and in any case he did not care for the word 'beast'.

""You must build a tomb in good soil," said Hyn-Rhouwe, "and line the walls and roof in stone. Then you must carry his body to the tomb while he still breathes. Once you have laid him down on the good soil you must bring a chicken and a pig to the tomb and seal all three within."

""It shall be done as you say," said the Grandson, bowing.

""There is more," said Gwa-Rhose, continuing from where his wife had stopped. "You must mourn him with great feasts; you must celebrate his triumphs in wine and song. You must learn again your history, and beg the Creator – who is the Lord of all things – for His forgiveness."

""And this will restore the Hallowed One to life and health?"

"Oh, yes," said Ghan-Hokone, his huge snout wrinkling at the fib. "Sama-Lovare shall rise again! As you celebrate and mourn and beg, so shall the imps who play in his body listen to your heart-felt grief. As the force of your sorrow shakes them, they shall leave his body, entering the realms of the chicken and the pig in their shame."

'And so it was done. I shall not tell you of the magnificence of the tomb, or the feasts prepared to honour Sama-Lovare. I shall not recite the litany of words the people of the City used to beg for forgiveness, except to say that in one heart at least these words were offered falsely. All you need to hear is that within the sealed tomb the imps fulfilled the last of the Creator's orders, moving between the forms of the man and the chicken and the pig until they created the deadliest imp of all, which the pig had the honour of birthing within its lungs.

'And when the feasting was done, Sama-Lovare walked the earth once more. Under one arm he carried the corpse of the pig and tucked within the curls of his white beard nestled the carcass of the chicken. He strode to the surface of the land and blew the plague imps from his lungs in billowing, destroying huffs. Across the plains and the forests and the mountains and the shorelines he wandered – letting his feet lead him, for he had no eyes – and everywhere he went, the great plague followed. All men and women died in that season, good and bad alike; those who held truth in their hearts were felled alongside those who kept falsehoods in their guts. Strong men collapsed alongside elderly mothers and innocent babies. Yet nothing that the people said could stay Sama-Lovare's passage, for all he felt was serenity. No tears fell from his eyes, nor words from his mouth, as the screams and sobs of death reached his ears.

'For he was not only the Prince of People, but also the creation of his Grandsons. And in that final, terrible season, he became the vengeance of the Creator, who mourned the loss of Mara-Gaye and Sama-Lovare through the punishment He devised for the lesser people.

'A few – a very few – people survived. When the winter of destruction finally passed Kaya-Brishe, who harvests the winds beneath his great wings, flew across the world to tell the fortunate ones the truth of what had happened, and why. And yes, in the early spring of that new year Sama-Lovare finally died. Where he fell, the earth swallowed his form. As his flesh decayed so the earth soured, seeping like a slime across the world: where once we could cultivate wherever we pleased, now we have to brew our soil, make it fit for life.

'For this is our task: for the sins of the Grandsons, we must tend to the frailties of the second creation. In humility we must brew soil and cultivate land fit for the needs of chickens and pigs, dogs and hawks, cabbages and millets and corn. We are the Servants of the second creation: through our work and our love we honour the Creator; we honour Mara-Gaye, and Sama-Lovare; we honour ourselves, and mostly our loved ones, such as those who are with us today.'

Shapeis knew the stories about the Grandsons; he had heard various versions explaining how hurricanes and earthquakes had come to be, the reasons for why trees had eyes and why a body killed by such trees or their guardians had to be burned – these were the meat and bread of the story keeper's trade. The tale of the capture and death of Sama-Lovare was less often heard, at least by him: he had always supposed that people were less willing to request the retelling of that one because there was little in the way of laughter or understanding in its telling.

Of course, the song the people sang as Sama-Lovare strode the land was always sung at Servant funerals – even when the Tall Ones forbade such activity. It was important to remind the dead that they had no choice but to accept oblivion, that any attempt to rise from the tomb would be catastrophic.

The truth was, Shapeis had never heard the complete story told in one night before. He'd never had the chance to see how the various stories congealed into the greater, overarching themes and messages. Maeduul may have complained that recalling the stories in such an abridged form was an insult to the stories themselves, he thought, but by doing just that she had managed to set new thoughts coursing through his head.

Was not an act of reincarnation a refusal to accept the oblivion of death? Would such an attempt release a new plague into the world? Despite the heat of the night, Shapeis found himself

shivering: he wrapped his arms around his chest and belly.

And what of the girl, Sosunda? She had no voice; he had never seen her cry tears. Of course, she still had eyes, but did she really see through them? She never seemed to react to anything that passed before her face. And she had never grown angry in his presence ...

No, this thought was too big for his skull – such comparisons must be wrong, he decided. He was glad when someone broke the silence that had fallen on the glade following Maeduul's final invocation.

It was Akambue stood next to him who spoke: 'Story Keeper – you tell a terrible tale forcefully.'

Sat on the bough, the tiny woman bowed her deformed head to acknowledge the compliment.

'I've heard other story keepers recall the Lord of Imps's quest for immortality,' continued the man. 'In each case, the Princes that come to pay homage to Sama-Lovare have varied – each giving a reason for their presence at his side. But all the keepers agree about the animals that join Sama-Lovare in his tomb.'

'Ah, you wear your beard with pride, Akambue! Surely its trimmed growth is testament to your insight! Have you ever felt the calling within your guts to take up the role of a story keeper yourself?'

Grinning in the starlight, Akambue shook his head.

'You should! You stumble on the core of the story without even realising it! For it is from these words that we remember the edict: never mix pigs with chickens and children when the imp of miasmic coughs is nearby.'

'These imps,' said Shapeis, eager to channel his thoughts into a new direction. 'They are not the same as the imps the Tall Ones fear so much, are they?'

'A good question, my friend.' Maeduul seemed to consider her words before continuing.

'It's my feeling that they are the same thing – they are the creatures of disease and death and decay. But while those of us who serve the needs of the second creation remember the full story of their birth and purpose, the Tall Ones have forgotten – or it has been stolen from their minds by the Corn Bird so they only remember the remnants where once there was the whole.'

'Why would the Corn Bird do that?'

'I've never had an opportunity to ask her! Whatever the reasoning, we are left to deal with its outcome. The Tall Ones have built an entire religion out of remnants: they promote our playful imps into fearsome spirits sent by their God to torment humanity. They take stones and rags and beads to string about their bodies, convinced that through such actions they can deflect these imps and devils and demons. Such pointlessness keeps them amused, I suppose.'

'I wouldn't call illness and death a playful thing!' These words were from Julyeis, still stood in the middle of the clearing.

'Not for us, Julyeis, no. We have as much right to play in the world as the imps have to play in our bodies. But for the imps, each of our bodies is as big as a continent! Do we consider the pleasure of the soil as we brew it and plough it? Do we care whether the mountain screams as we tear our tunnels and pits into it? We are imps to the world around us, yes?'

'It is a point of view,' conceded Julyeis.

'If there is a difference between the Tall Ones and those who Serve, then it is, I think, this: they know that death awaits us all, and they fear death to such an extent that they cannot live except in fear. We, on the other hand, know death awaits us all, and that death is final. But rather than letting that knowledge weave our guts into knots we choose instead to accept it for what it is, and to enjoy the life we are given in little moments: the smile of a baby; the hug of a friend. The taste of a morsel of food which may not be available to us tomorrow.'

'I saw that young man's pain! He was so scared ...'

'No death is pleasant, Julyeis. The doorstep to oblivion can often be rough or sharp or dirty. Some people get trapped on the doorstep for a long while and their deaths are lingering – painful not only for them but for those around them. Other people manage to leap the doorstep in seconds,

leaving nothing for those that remain but a heartbeat of memories.'

Shapeis could taste a faint tang of bile in his mouth. Mostly he never thought of the death that awaited them all: his doorstep was far beyond his horizon. Yet thinking of what Maeduul had said did seem to make sense to him. Why should he live in fear of inevitable death?

'Story Keeper,' he said.

'You have a question, Shapeis? I can see your horns wobbling in deep thought!'

'Accepting your words, why then do we allow the Tall Ones to treat us as they do?'

'Ah! A big question from a big man! Do you wonder why we call those who do not Serve the second creation '*Tall Ones*' – I mean, it's not as if we're tiny folk!'

She smiled as a low ripple of laughter circled around the clearing.

'We are Servants,' she continued once quiet was restored. 'We keep our heads low and tend to the needs of the soil. The Tall Ones, well, their heads have been emptied of the essential truths. They cultivate the earth not because they see it as their duty, but rather because it serves their purpose. They care more for status and power: they wish to elevate themselves over their neighbours. We have the stories to remind us of our duties. They have Emperors and Clans to tell them how to live, how to seek and use power over others.'

'We let them buy and sell us!'

'I know you have heard me say that this is a wrongness, Shapeis. But it is not just their wrongness; we share in this wrongness. We allow this wrongness to continue. For hundreds of years Servants have said: *we must endure. The stories must not be allowed to die.*'

Shapeis shook his head, though somehow he knew she was right. She was merely repeating what he had been told from when he was a child on his home farm.

'Now hear my words, my friends. These are important words, I think. My chest feels the need to shout them!'

'This is unexpected,' whispered Akambue. 'I've never heard the little woman invoke a warning in the story telling circle before.'

Around him, Shapeis could hear low murmurs as others whispered similar thoughts to their companions. Julyeis, in the centre of the clearing, appeared to tense her body – did she know what was about to be said?

'There has come among us in this city a woman who carries a message.' Maeduul's voice remained even, though the tone was lower than when she recited the stories or answered questions.

'She preaches that we must free ourselves from the unthinking control of the Tall Ones. I agree with her: I do not understand it, but the prophecies of the Burning Woman seem to have some power over our destinies – such as any destiny may be.

'But this woman would have us free ourselves through bloodshed and strife. She would see us desert those who hold us in thrall. She demands that we worship a child – a *safru* child, possessed by the ghost of a woman who refuses the ease of oblivion. I will not do this.

'I will not do this!' The words emerged from her mouth like a growl, sending a jolt of fear through the length of Shapeis's body.

'Yes, we must work to free ourselves, but we must never forget that we are Servants to a higher purpose. To spill the blood of the Tall Ones is to take ourselves to the front of the queue that waits before the doorstep to oblivion.

'And never should we forget that the Tall Ones are people too, descended just like we are from the loins of Mara-Gaye and Sama-Lovare and the hand of the Creator Himself! Their ancestors survived the death of Sama-Lovare, as ours survived.

'If we follow the orders of the Burning Woman's worshippers, my bowels tell me that not only will we die, but the stories will die too! And worse, the world we know, endure, love – the world the Creator made – it will fail. Fail!

'I tell you all, here and now: we have to find a better way!'

Rumours and Gossip

It was strange how this boat – this wood and iron construction – was beginning to turn into a refuge, a place where he could retreat from the demands of the Courtly games that had unexpectedly followed him into the jungle. By rights it should be moving, hauling its bulk upriver towards Viyame and the great road that ran from there eastwards, back to the certainties of the Old City. But circumstances kept it still, here in Bassakesh.

Loetopas sighed, stared again at the business before him. It had been his decision that had delayed their departure from this semi-detached city. He had sensed a business opportunity that offered the Clan an income rich beyond their wildest hopes; much of his work over the past few days had been dedicated to securing this deal, in addition to the business of witnessing his nephew's contract with the Governor's daughter. But politics – the wider politics beyond the deal, the politics of status and Empire – insisted on intruding on his time.

Damn that bitch to a slow and exquisitely painful death!

He fingered the note again, pushing it back and forth over the other papers. *The Lady Feyn cordially invites Lord Loetopas to lunch with her, at the Governor's House, at noon.* There were a bundle of words surrounding the message, of course. Such a message had to be conveyed in the appropriate terms. But no words spelled out the underlying message: 'you will attend!'

His other immediate concern also lacked a sound footing on the page. A body had been found at the top of Bassak Hill early in the morning; rumour suggested that young Loken's faithful companion had surfaced after going missing sometime during the contract celebrations. He had sent Jassael to investigate, but he had little doubt that the invitation and the body on the hill were somehow linked.

He desired the comfort of alcohol. He knew he couldn't afford such weakness at this time. He was determined Jassael would drink deeply on his return!

When the Commander reported he walked through the door with angry shoulders, though any such emotion had been carefully blanked from his face.

'Is it him?' asked Loetopas without preamble. He didn't offer his subordinate a seat.

'Yes, it's him, Sir. He was found wearing his celebration finery.'

'Something's bothering you, cousin. Give me a full report!'

'Sir!' It appeared that the Commander preferred to keep this exchange at the formal level. 'The body was found just after dawn by the guards the city post at the top of the hill. They claim they noticed nothing untoward during the night, so we have no idea about when he decided to go there – or when he was taken there.'

'Taken there, Commander?'

'Taken there, Sir. I had a long talk with one of their people – a woman called Sappu. She seems keen to investigate how our man died.'

'So how did Sheslan die?'

'I saw the body, Sir – they needed a formal identification. They've moved it to one of the houses at the top of the hill. He was ... he was mauled, it seems, by the barby rats that live on the hill, or possibly they scavenged his body after it was dumped there. His face had been ... chewed; I identified him by his hair, his clothes and his wards.'

'Barby rats! Now there's a novel way to die!' Loetopas knew of the beasts that guarded the city by reputation; he had not bothered to view them himself. 'Are they as big and fierce as the stories claim?'

'So I believe, Sir. The body has been badly damaged. But the woman told me that placing a body on top of the hill was a well-known way to hide the signs of an earlier attack – at least the knowledge is common among the locals. Hence her desire for an investigation.'

Loetopas considered this. An investigation might be useful, if only to bring some comfort to Loken; the two men had been close, he understood – perhaps too close, though he had no proof the friendship had ever developed in that direction ...

'Does Loken know?'

'I haven't seen Lord Loken this morning, Sir. I did ask, but nobody knew.'

'I think we can let them have their investigation. But why was the body moved to a house, not the temple? Sheslan has – had – rank by association: if it had been Loken, or you, then I would have expected the altar to be cleared for the body within the hour!'

'They're planning to burn the body, Sir.'

'Burn ...?' For a moment the shock of the words left his eyes unfocussed.

'Burn him, Sir. Yes!'

'We burn criminals, Commander! Since when has a victim – a possible victim – of crime deserved such an inglorious end?'

Jassael's face remained passive, apparently choosing not to have heard the outburst.

'We must stop this, Commander!'

'Yes, Sir. How?'

'Take whatever steps you deem necessary. I want that man's corpse at rest in the temple – any temple will do – as quickly as possible!'

'They're ... they're guarding the body, Sir. Are you ordering me to commit our troops to an assertive action against the city authorities, Sir?'

Dammit! He had a point, Loetopas conceded. The whole city lay between the docks and the hill; marching the Arallo troops through the city may cause some problems. And the discussions ...

Honour was honour, yes. But business was business. The dead man was not *formally* a member of the Clan. Burning the body would definitely upset his family, but they were not here, and they were not so powerfully connected at Court as they might believe ...

'Sit, cousin. Sit! There's a skin of wine in the sideboard, and glasses. Bring them here and sit down.'

He didn't continue until Jassael had settled in his chair against the wall of the cabin.

'Orders are not to be questioned, Commander, you know that. But in this instance maybe I was being too hasty. These things can be negotiated, yes?'

'Perhaps, Sir.'

'I've been invited to lunch with the Beloved Courtesan at the Governor's House; it should give me a chance to discuss these issues with Loken. Maybe it's time for him to deal with the unpleasant realities of life, yes? It will be an opportunity for him to learn the arts of diplomacy on an issue which he will care about. These will be his people, after all; he will be returning here to live – for a while – once the marriage is consummated in Stal. Pour the wine, cousin!'

Jassael knew the drill. Any objections he might have had were carefully concealed in his face. The glass he gave Loetopas was barely a third full; his own glass was topped to the brim: he didn't wait for a salutation before taking a mouthful.

'Now, cousin,' continued Loetopas. 'What other news do you have for me?'

'A strange thing – as I was walking through the market square I was approached by a woman. I assume she is part of our network; though she gave an old identification phrase.'

'Really? We've got no operatives in the city at the moment. That bastard Guardsman is too bloody efficient for his own good!'

'She said she needed to talk to you, insisted on it. Something about a burning woman, whatever that means.'

Loetopas nodded. 'Ah. I think I know who she is. Yes, a meeting might be useful ...'

Lady Feyn, the Emperor's Beloved Courtesan, already had guests in her temporary state rooms in the Governor's House when he arrived. Tuuke, the Guardsman of Bassakesh, had greeted him at the gates of the great compound, conducted him through the Reception Courtyard and up the sweeping stairs to the meeting place. He didn't leave when Loetopas entered the room to pay his formal compliments to the woman, instead standing to one side of the doors like a common sentry.

'The honour is entirely mine,' the Beloved Courtesan was saying as he flourished his final bow, using the motion to confirm the identities of the other people present. 'I would have

understood fully if you had not been able to attend. You are a busy man; arrangements and contracts do not complete themselves!

'The Beloved Courtesan jests if she believes any man could even contemplate not attending on her beauty!'

'You see, Delesse? Their tongues are woven out of the finest threads – Clan Arallo is widely recognised as one of the most courteous of families at court. Keep that in mind when your betrothed whispers in your ear at night!' Nevertheless, she nodded at him, allowed him to take the seat which had been set for him, opposite her.

Delesse, he noticed, had been seated in the position of honour at the Beloved Courtesan's side with his nephew, Loken, a seat further on. The Lady Temis was also present; she had brought her pet Servant with her. But it was Loken whom he concentrated on, from the side of his eyes, as he progressed through the ritual of thrust and counter-thrust on which a conversation with the Emperor's whore was built.

Loken had obviously heard the news: his face was a mask of indifference, though his eyes appeared bloodshot. An indication of tears? He considered the possibility as he stepped through the dance of words, his mouth dispensing the answers without feeling the need to consult his mind. He knew the boys had been very close at one time, but had satisfied himself that any suspected youthful romance had waned to a more platonic level by the time Loken was formally presented at court; he still remembered the look of disgust on Sheslan's face when he had questioned them. Loken had kept his face masked on that occasion, too.

But these thoughts were not important. If there had been a relationship, then it would give Loken an added incentive to prevent the burning of his former lover's body. If there hadn't, he'd still do his best out of arrogance. He knew how the boy's mind operated.

'You must be keen to see the port at Petezbarre opened soon?'

The question halted his thoughts. An instant check of the previous exchanges satisfied him that this was one of the woman's conversational tricks, changing the topic without warning. Nevertheless, hearing the name of the blockaded city had been – unexpected.

'We have a small town house within the city, my Lady. It will be a pleasure indeed to visit it again.'

'Were any of your relatives resident when the city – closed its gates?'

'A cousin and his wife, Beloved Courtesan. I'm sure they would have been at the forefront of the move to quarantine the city, though unfortunately we have not been able to contact them since the communication links were cut.'

'A brave and courageous move indeed, by the citizens of that unfortunate city – would you not agree, dear sister?'

'Indeed, sister,' said Temis. 'Perhaps the Emperor will find it in his heart to reward such a selfless act – some concessions, perhaps, or a new temple.'

Temis was sitting a little distant from Feyn. She was perfectly poised, yet she had not once taken her eyes off him since he had entered the room. Her gaze seemed calm enough, but were there hints of something else within it? If she was blinking, he hadn't seen it.

'What would you suggest the reward should be, Lord Loetopas?'

'I would not even think of counselling the Emperor in such a matter, my Lady. He understands his many peoples so well that whatever reward he decides upon, if such an award is merited in his eyes, would be unquestioningly appropriate.'

'Indeed!' said Feyn. 'Guardzman, I think we would welcome a drink – perhaps a small juice? How about you, Lord Loken. What do you think the Emperor should give the good citizens of Petezbarre?'

'Livestock, Beloved Courtesan.'

The words were the first his nephew had uttered during the meeting. Hearing them, Loetopas felt a strange imbalance, as if the floor had gently jerked sideways or the walls had moved a touch towards him.

The Guardsman returned quickly with two underlings who arranged small tables beside each

chair, placing elegant flutes of juice on each. One of the underlings, a middle aged woman with henna-dyed hair, remained in the room when the other left, taking up a similar position to the Guardsman on the opposite side of the entrance.

He lifted his glass to his lips without hesitation, though for some reason he thought of poison. The others around the room followed his action, except for Loken who instead stared at the glass, as if willing it to shatter. After sipping her drink, Feyn continued the conversation as if there had been no interruption.

'It is an interesting thought, Lord Loken. Livestock may well be the best gift for the city. You must learn to call me Aunty Feyn: you will soon be family.'

'You honour me beyond endurance, Beloved Courtesan.'

'At this rate, we shall soon be calling each other cousin, Lord Loetopas!'

'Beloved Courtesan,' he replied, bowing his head. Was she trying to split the family? He had never considered the possibility before: there had never been a reason to question Loken's loyalty to his father and the Clan. The thought left a shiver of raised hairs across his limbs; he dismissed it summarily – this was not the time, and especially not the place.

'I was hoping we would be able to set out for Stal the day after tomorrow. The Lady Delesse had kindly agreed to sail with me – I think she hopes to teach this old washer-woman better manners. Do the plans fit in with your itinerary, Lord Loetopas?'

'The Clan flotilla would be honoured to convoy with your boat, Beloved Courtesan. My business with the traders of this most blessed of cities will soon be concluded.'

'What of your boat, Lord Loetopas. Was it not damaged by fire?' This question came from Temis. Normal protocol demanded that the Emperor's whore asked the questions and everyone else answered. An obvious provocation, he thought, deserving of an equally obvious response: he chose to answer her directly.

'My Lady Temis. Such care for the chattels of my Clan indeed demonstrates just how blessed your city has become. The damage is largely superficial; the boat in question will be able to travel upriver. We can keep it apart from the main flotilla if the damage proves to be offensive to the Beloved Courtesan's senses, or the senses of her guests.'

'It was not an important boat, I believe, sister,' said Feyn. 'I understand it carried provisions and gifts for the contract ceremony – and allowed Clan Arallo's personal guard some comfort on their arduous journey upriver.'

'Such exquisite gifts they were too, sister!'

'Indeed, the expense of the gifts – not only for the contract ceremony but for the city itself – must have near bankrupted Clan Arallo!'

Again, the feeling of the walls moving closer came over him. He wanted to blame the sip of wine he had taken with Jassael before coming here, but he knew it was the conversation that affected him. Had his worry shown on his face? In his eyes? For a moment he could not tell.

Why in God's unknowable name were these two harridans talking about gifts? There had been no gift for the city.

His skin knew differently: he became aware of the faint sheen of sweat forming at his temple even as his mind groped towards the answer. Fire. Gifts. There had been a gift for the city, one his brother Puusen had insisted on him delivering. Petezbarre – the Servants had come from that city, Jassael had said as much when they had met up on the river so many days ago. But plans had changed: the gifts – or rather the imps the gifts had carried within their bodies – had not been delivered; they had been disposed of. At his insistence!

They couldn't know about that gift! The bitch must be fishing for information.

'The Clan did consider commissioning a bronze statue of one of Bassakesh's famed barby rats, Beloved Courtesan. The city is certainly deserving of rich gifts. But instead we decided that only the Emperor was worthy of such abject adulation. We do hope the gifts we have brought to the city – business deals and trade agreements that I am sure will bring great wealth to all concerned, even the Emperor himself – will justify the serious financial risks Clan Arallo will need to take to see the seeds planted this week turn into a bountiful harvest for all!'

She clapped at him! She even smiled! His eyes directly disobeyed him by widening slightly at this offence to Clan honour. It took a supreme force of will to prevent himself checking other people's reactions to his words.

'Lord Loetopas,' she said, still smiling. 'I shall be proud to call you cousin, for you are almost my equal in everything! However,' the smile left her face reluctantly, 'I feel your mention of barby rats is unfortunate. I was sorry to hear of the loss of one of your travelling companions.'

Finally, he thought. He had prepared tactics for this subject. That preparation allowed him now to speak as he mustered his thoughts and quelled his emotions.

'The loss of my nephew's companion is indeed deeply felt. My understanding is that the city authorities, so ably led by the Governor and his Guardsman, will be conducting inquiries to make sure it was an accident.'

'Tell me,' asked Feyn, 'how are the arrangements for his funeral coming along?'

'I intend to take this matter up with the Governor as soon as he can find time to meet me. It would be inadvisable to take his poor body with us to Stal, but his family would expect us to honour him with all appropriateness and dignity.'

'I am sure the citizens of Bassakesh will do everything they can to ensure your man receives a fitting funeral,' said Temis.

'I do not understand the Lady Temis's comment, Beloved Courtesan.' This time he chose to ignore the breach of protocol. 'I am certain his family will appreciate the condolences of the people of Bassakesh, but the funeral arrangements are a private matter. We cannot burden strangers with the evidence of God's displeasure for his poor servant ...'

'Oh,' said Feyn. 'I understood that you had already had taken steps for a public funeral, this evening.'

'I have not heard these rumours, Beloved Courtesan.'

'Would you welcome the chance to hear these rumours from my lips?'

'The utterance of rumours from your lips, Beloved Courtesan, would surely sully their purpose. I would not wish to waste your time in such a baseless manner. Once I – and Loken, of course – have had a chance to discuss the matter with the Governor, then we shall certainly rush to deliver the true account to your ears, dispelling the unpleasant drone of rumour from them.'

'So the good people of Bassakesh are building a bonfire on top of the hill, not a pyre? I am confused, dear Temis. What is the truth of this matter?'

Temis had not taken her eyes off him for a moment, not even when drinking her juice.

'It is, I believe, an ancient custom to mark the death of a person at the claws of the barby rats with a large fire, dear sister. Often with the body of the deceased upon it.'

'What a strange custom! And the Emperor allows this?'

'The Emperor, for reasons of his own, has chosen to bless this poor city in the midst of his mighty realm with a few nominal dispensations. His generous sufferance permits this custom to continue.'

Loetopas listened to the exchange with astonished ears. The path of the conversation appeared clear to him: it had to be stopped! All the rules of protocol forbade it, but it had to be done.

Deliberately, he coughed.

Feyn took the bait. 'Are you okay, Lord Loetopas? Perhaps a sip of juice ...'

'My deepest apologies, Beloved Courtesan. Most uncouth of me. Though I was interested to hear the Lady Temis mention that the fire was not always accompanied by a body?'

'Yes, sister. Perhaps there is a way for this wonderfully quaint custom to proceed, while at the same time allowing Lord Loetopas – and Lord Loken, of course – to arrange additional ceremonies that would meet the needs of civilised decorum?'

'My understanding, sister – though of course I may have been misinformed – is that the pyre burns alone only when there are insufficient parts of the body remaining to place on the enflamed bed with any dignity.'

'Ah. It would seem then that this is a well-established custom. One which the Emperor

himself seems to have sanctioned. What misfortune! Though I think we should check every detail before allowing it to go ahead.'

She took an opportunity to wet her lips with her juice, then continued: 'Lord Loken, I am distressed that you have had to endure this conversation, for I understand the man – his name was Sheslan, yes? – was a good friend of yours.'

Loken took a moment to respond. 'He was my best friend, Beloved Courtesan, and I am sure his family will be honoured unto tears to learn that you spoke his name.'

'Do you have any comments to offer on this terrible issue?'

His nephew turned his head and looked directly at Loetopas. Still his face carried its impassive mask, yet his eyes ...

After another long second, he spoke. 'Burn him,' he said in a voice with a strand of finality twisted about its tone. 'Burn him to ashes and dust!'

Around Loetopas, the walls seemed to close in a little further.

[The Marking of the Bounds](#)

For a second day the rains had failed. While clouds had gathered to sheet the sky as the afternoon progressed, and the air had hissed with the tang of lightning discharges, the storms themselves had bypassed the city and its surrounding cultivations. Later in the afternoon a strong breeze had arrived from the south west, bringing with it dust plucked from the river's drying mud banks; people muttered to each other, searched for their less commonly used wards to protect themselves from the imps such conditions attracted.

The setting sun saw Tuuke walking north along the western arm of the city's outer wall, one body among many who had chosen to witness the Marking of the Bounds ceremony. At the point where the rampart met the western rock of the hill, the feet of the crowds kicked up more dust, releasing it into the choppy gusts of the wind.

For most people, it was enough to wear the white and green ribbon around their heads: *we come as mourners*, the ribbons announced. *We come as those who continue to suffer God's displeasures, to mark the granting of God's final surcease to one of our own.* Which was a little strange, he thought, as most of the crowd had never heard the dead man's name before his discovery at the top of the hill this morning.

Tuuke, while never being formally introduced to Sheslan during the last few days of his life, at least remembered how he had looked before the barby rats had finished with his corpse. For this reason he had chosen to wear his full dress uniform, its plates and leathers freshly burnished and oiled. He, too, had donned the mourning ribbons and carried his ceremonial helmet under his arm: it was the least he could do for a man he had come to know more closely after his last breath had fled him than before.

As he walked, ignoring the chatter around him, he looked to his right to check the progress of the funeral procession.

They were approaching the pyre stone from the east, moving along a track that skirted the edge of the hill's plateau. Leading the procession was the limping figure of the Temple Elder, brow-beaten by the Governor himself into officiating over this most unorthodox of ceremonies. He was followed by Lord Loken of Clan Arallo; he was wearing his contract ceremony finery, freshly laundered, his hat replaced by a set of ribbons carrying the colours of the dead man's family. The mourning ribbons were looped around his shoulders and waist, crossed at the front – whatever feelings he might have felt, the young man appeared determined to fulfil the role he had given himself for the ceremony. He walked with his head held high, refusing to dishonour the memory of his friend.

Sheslan followed Loken, laid flat on white and green cushions of the finest material scattered across a wooden sled; while his body had been dressed in expensive clothes, his face was

uncovered, the wounds a visual testament to the – alleged – manner of his death. The sled was not pulled, but rather carried by eight soldiers from the Fifteenth Imperial Clade, a part of the last detachment of that division to remain in the city. Following them walked Gelleris, Governor of Bassakesh, accompanied by Lady Feyn, the Emperor's Beloved Courtesan.

Oh yes, thought Tuuke, even I can taste the politics swirling around this rite!

Of the Arallo party that had attended the contract ceremony just two days before, only Loken was present. Simply by walking on a hill, the heir to the Clan had very publicly broken ranks with his father and uncle. Imperial soldiers bore the body of a nobody as a mark of honour; the city of Bassakesh sent its leading citizens to mourn the passing of – who? A man of little substantive standing? And even though the body was to be burned – a distasteful means of disposal, admittedly – the Emperor's own mistress blessed the occasion with her presence, walking behind the commoner's corpse!

By such actions were rumours and myths built, Tuuke decided. Within days the whole Empire would be awash with this news of how the Emperor favoured Loken of the Arallo through these actions, how Clan Arallo shamed themselves by not attending. The Emperor was old, they would say – has he finally chosen a successor?

Tuuke had to stifle a yawn as he walked towards the pyre upon its flat, unformed rock overlooking the city. He had had a busy evening, and an even busier morning, arranging to bring about this event. Among other things. Who would have guessed so much information could be gathered by taking a walk through the jungle in the evening ...

Slowly, the crowd and the procession drew together. A semi-circle formed around the rock that lay a meter proud of the surrounding land, the pyre at its centre a further metre high. Children were pushed to the front of the crowd to get a better view of the proceedings. It was, he had to admit, one of the biggest turnouts he had ever witnessed for a Bounds service. Soon enough, the sled arrived with the guest of honour and was manhandled into its position atop the stacked faggots. As the Temple Elder began invoking the words of departure, Tuuke's thoughts wandered into recent memory.

In the end they had chosen to take the body to the top of Bassak Hill themselves, two old friends caught up in a child-like conspiracy to achieve mischief without being caught. Behin had encountered giant barby rats before, usually with a rifle to hand; the wonder of walking among the beasts with nothing but a club to protect himself showed clearly on his face.

The body was soon dumped, close enough to the stone hut to guarantee its discovery when the sun next rose. If the guards had noticed what was going on, they made no attempt to investigate further. Then Behin had gone; the Fifteenth Clade had marched through the city gates within an hour of dawn, with just an honour guard remaining at the Governor's House for the Beloved Courtesan's protection.

Tuuke had chosen not to accompany the Commander, instead heading deeper into the barby rat's hilltop realm. It was a dangerous thing to do – the scent protection would last only so long, and the creatures on the far side of the plateau were much less accustomed to people. But he wanted the adrenaline rush to continue, and some time alone to think.

When he reached the other side of the grove he heard voices below him, murmurs in the distance carried up the slope of the hill on weak gusts of wind.

The sounds had surprised him: this side of the hill was not cultivated – a patch of virgin jungle sandwiched between the extensive valley terraces to the east and the northern cultivations along the river. Locals had no particular fear of walking through the jungle in daylight, but when the sun guttered superstitions came to the fore – to be on uncultivated land after sundown was considered to be an unlucky omen, especially without strong wards in pockets, around wrists and ankles, hidden in hair.

Tuuke had not bothered with such superstitions for decades, yet hearing voices in the dark jungle below him had lifted the hairs on the nape of his neck. Without a second thought he went to investigate, using half-remembered army tricks to move downhill and into the jungle with minimal

sound.

The information he had gained from that walk, he thought, was worth a hundred times the risks he had taken. For one thing, he had learned where young Sheslan had gone when he left the Governor's House.

Around the pyre the crowds joined in the final invocations to God the Unknowable as the first part of the ceremony drew to a close. Tuuke watched Loken prepare himself for the next act in the performance: the eulogy. If this had been taking place in a Temple, the speaker would have been a leading member of the chorus, primed by the family with knowledge of the deceased so that he – or more rarely she – could pull together the most appropriate verses to help guide the loved one in their forthcoming confrontation with God. Only the justified could survive that examination, and then only with the help of those who had gone before and proved themselves worthy to abase themselves before the Wrathful One – such spirits needed good tunes to persuade them to the cause.

Loken had refused to allow anybody else the honour to sing the eulogy for his dead friend.

In fact, young Lord Loken had become a revelation in the past day and a half: either he was a superb actor with many hidden talents; or else he hated his father and uncle with a fearsome venom!

Tuuke had arrived early for his daily meeting with the Governor; in such cases the Governor would invite him to report as the family ate breakfast in the Fountain Courtyard. The only item of news he was willing to offer in such a public arena had been the finding of a body on the hill just after sunrise.

'Do we know who it is?' the Governor had asked.

'We suspect it may be a member of Lord Loetopas's entourage, Sir.'

'Those barby rats have killed someone?' Loken had taken an interest in this news. He glanced at Delesse as he asked the question.

'It appears so, my Lord.'

'It wasn't my uncle, by any chance? Though not the Commander, I hope. I quite like him.'

'No, my Lord. The evidence suggests that the victim was much younger.'

'Hm. One of the soldiers, perhaps. Uncle has forbidden anyone else from leaving the boats. Will you need to do an autopsy? I only ask because if it is one of our people we'll need to make arrangements for the laying out ...'

The blanching in his face was noticeable as a new thought crossed his mind. 'Has anyone seen Sheslan lately?'

'Isn't he your companion?' This was from Arbelle. Tuuke suddenly remembered the conversation he'd had with Tabeed just before the contract signing ceremony – another fear to stack within the cold pantry of his stomach.

'Yes. I haven't seen him since the celebrations ... I had assumed he was enjoying himself around town and didn't know the arrangements for him to stay here ...'

'I have a description of the victim's clothes, My Lord. Can you remember what Master Sheslan was wearing when you last saw him?'

The description had tallied, naturally. Tuuke then had to make a show of officious sorrow – his acting abilities were minimal, but the brief look of distaste for imparting bad news seemed to have worked. Loken had stood, bowed to the family and retreated to his room in silence.

He hadn't been present when the family told the poor boy of the local custom concerning barby rat victims. He could imagine the news was as harsh as hearing of the death in the first place.

It wasn't his problem: he had plenty of other things to arrange, a city to guard, investigations to hear reports on, paperwork to manage. Whatever the family had done, it had been completed by the time he conducted Lord Loetopas into Lady Feyn's presence.

Loken started singing the eulogy. Seemingly he had gone for simple songs – songs known across the Empire and not restricted to the temple choirs. His voice was not strong. Halfway through the second, he stumbled over the words, fell silent. In seconds, people in the crowd had

taken up the refrain: by the time the man had composed himself enough to continue, most of the crowd were singing. He started the third song, easily recognisable from the first few words, and was again joined by his impromptu choir.

The man had guts: there was no denying the fact. Rather than join in with the singing, Tuuke recalled as much detail as he could remember of Loetopas's confrontation with Feyn, Temis and Loken.

These memories were much more enjoyable to review! By the time the meeting concluded Loetopas was shaking like a tree in a storm. Not fear, no: anger, barely controlled anger as the man realised that not only had Feyn outrageously insulted his honour, but he had lost control of Loken. Either that, mused Tuuke, or the old man was an even better actor than Loken might possibly be.

Politics: it danced in so many different guises. When it came to the Clans, Tuuke was glad he was only fit to stand in the temple chorus and follow orders.

Loetopas had declared that no member of Clan Arallo would attend such an atrocity as this 'barbarous bounds marking ceremony'; Loken quietly informed him that he intended to sing the eulogy, and he quite understood if his uncle preferred to stay on his boat at sunset. Sheslan had never been invited to join the Clan in any formal capacity in any case. He agreed that the presence of the Clan leader's twin brother might look 'odd' to the factions at Court. Whereas his presence would not be remarkable. But the ceremony would proceed. The body would burn.

Feyn had said nothing, allowing the two men to "discuss" the issue. Only after Tabeed had led Loetopas from the state room – a final insult which he was probably too angry to notice – had Feyn announced her intention to follow Sheslan's body, on foot. Loken's uncle probably had no idea of the blows to Clan Arallo's honour that were being hammered out on this hill tonight!

The last song was a drinking song. Now Tuuke knew he had entered the realm of the absurd. Yet when the crowd finished singing the final verse, Loken waited for a few seconds before continuing. He sung two new verses, the words crafted to remind the spirits that Sheslan had led a full life, yet also a pious one in his own way: fealty; honesty; kindness to friends, strangers and foes; responsible for his own actions. God's man.

When his voice finally fell silent, one of the soldiers lit a brushwood torch and handed it to the Temple Elder. Further torches were handed to Loken and the Governor, who caught a flame each from the first. Together they approached the pyre and thrust them deep into the stacked wood. As the fire took hold, a few people in the crowd began singing a new song – a dirge imploring the dead man to remain dead, to return to the living only in happy thoughts and memories.

Again, the hairs at the back of the Guardsman's neck rose – if this song had been sung yesterday, he would have had no real understanding of it. Tonight, he knew its meaning. The Servants in the clearing had talked about a giant man who had spread plague after rising from the grave: this was their song, their plea to Sheslan to cross the threshold to oblivion both gladly and hastily.

Smoke from the fire drifted across the hill, working its stage-show trick. Barby rat trees folded their broad leaves upright, a wave of action surging across the hilltop from the pyre stone as each in turn furled their feathered fronds around themselves and sank their bases into their rocky holes. The queens reacted with a keening of their own: fire! Danger! As they always did, they gathered to face the burning pyre, ready to take action to protect their trees.

And the magic of the ceremony was complete; the bounds of the city and the jungle had been marked and acknowledged by the citizens of both; the victim's spirit had risen to God in the smoke from the pyre. Order was restored to the world.

Fear

It took Julyeis longer than normal to walk back from the market. It had been her first

journey for provisions for four days, what with one disruption or another, and she had run low on detergents, soaps and oils in addition to the more routine necessities such as food. Given the loads, she had brought Kaalis with her. Even so, she was still running late.

Yesterday's trip had to be cancelled because of the Guardsman's unexpected visit to the bordello. He wasn't looking to experience some of the more unusual delights that Varoul's business offered, either; this had been business of another kind. She had no idea how he had known that the man – Sheslan – had been in the building. The news that he was investigating the death, personally, had shaken her badly.

Not that there was any reason for her to lie to him. She offered the tonic of true recall to slake his questions, but nothing more. He was the seeker of answers: it was not her place to offer conjecture. Only when he asked her what she thought was ailing the lad did she not offer an honest answer. Poison, she had said, just as she had told Varoul. She also repeated Zhamelle's conclusion for good measure, that the man could have been afflicted by a bad reaction to mixing ghevvesein and lutestran.

She had hesitated before telling him how Sheslan had left their care; if he knew he had been here, he probably knew how he had left in any case. So again she had chosen the easiest path, explaining how Varoul had insisted that the man could not stay in the bordello – she had no idea what his reasons were, she confided – and so she had taken him through tunnels to the streets above the market. There was a hospice around there, she explained. It seemed the best thing she could do for him, seeing as she didn't know where his lodgings were.

It had been a tense interview. Afterwards she had had neither the time nor the will to visit to the market; instead she had sent Kaalis out for the bare essentials while she oversaw the preparations for the first of the day's clients.

The day before, she had been too tired after the previous night's activities to go. That had been Kaalis's first solo journey to the market – the girl had forgotten to buy shivi leaves, and the cornbread had been sour as a result. And the day before that the market had been closed for the Tall Ones' contract ceremony.

'We need some rain, Kaalis! Look how quickly the dust covers everything when the clouds fail to weep.'

'Yes, Julyeis.' The girl was struggling to keep up with her brisk pace. She took pity on the girl and walked a little slower.

'That wind last night blew grits and fines into every corner and crevice. The rooms will need a thorough scrubbing, and we'll probably have to clean every scrap of linen and sheet.'

When they finally reached their destination they walked in single file down the side alley to the service entrance. Julyeis opened the door with a sigh: sometimes she yearned for the simplicities of a cultivator's life. The Servants in the fields and terraces might moan about backache, but at least they stopped work when the afternoon rains appeared.

'Take these things downstairs,' she told Kaalis once they were indoors. 'Stack them well – and keep the oil separate from the detergent. Then check with Kiva; I want all the landings swept and washed and I know he won't have finished the job yet!'

'He's old. He creaks when he stands up.'

'So do I, my dear. Haven't you noticed? I need to go and see to the Tall Ones.'

She walked along to the main hallway, checked the greeting rooms – they looked presentable, though her practiced eye could spot the areas that had received more casual attention from the old Servant's brooms. She didn't understand why Varoul kept Kiva on: he would have been happier working on the terraces, weeding. Good work for an old body, especially Kiva's – his back was permanently stooping to the ground. And plenty of time to reminisce with the graves of his acquaintances, rather than boring her ears with childhood memories.

Varoul kept his office at the front of the building, next to finely carved main entrance. No client was admitted without his agreement – he was very keen to test the weight of a person's purse before they penetrated his business too far. He was good at predicting a person's preferences, too, and enjoyed guessing their needs before they requested the service. He might be a garrulous bastard

at times, but Julyeis liked the man. They understood each other, and over the years he had come to rely on her almost as an equal. Except when she shared his bed, of course: he was always the master on those occasions.

The office was empty. She considered walking to the top floor where Varoul kept a suite of apartments for himself, but decided against it. There were things she could be doing instead; he'd shout for her when he needed her.

She went back downstairs. The Servant's quarters were below ground level, windowless and thus lit at all hours by second-hand oil lamps screwed to the rock walls. Whereas the rest of the building was walls and ceilings and floors, all packed tight to make corridors and rooms in the available space, the Servant quarters were a series of caverns hacked into the rock of the hill, connected by tunnels and steps with no organising principle to pin their relative positions within a greater scheme.

If the above areas were a place of shared responsibilities, this warren was her domain, where her word was the only word that counted. In this Varoul conspired: for un-guessable reasons he forbade any Tall One to venture into the Servant's quarters, though she suspected that he worried that his goods might be harmed - Shapeis, she knew for a fact, had cost Varoul half a year's profits!

Before heading to her office, she checked on her guests. Kebezzu was not in her room - a chalk mark left on the wall by the entrance indicated that she had left the building earlier. Kebezzu was a busy woman: meetings to organise; people to persuade; arrangements to be made. When the Story Keeper had asked her to house Kebezzu she had agreed without hesitation - she had spare space in the privacy of the Servant's quarters, and access to extra food and clothing, thanks to her control of the household budget.

The child, Sosunda, was asleep on the stony floor of the room.

She thought back to Maeduul's words the previous evening: *'this woman would have us free ourselves through bloodshed and strife'*. Julyeis had been to the early meetings that Kebezzu had arranged. She'd listened carefully to the story, considered the prophecies made by the Burning Woman. Something within her wanted to believe these words - a desperate need that she had not even been aware of before Kebezzu's arrival in the city.

'She would see us destroy those who hold us in thrall' - was that true? She'd noticed no murderous words crossing the woman's lips, not here in these rooms nor in the meetings. Kebezzu concentrated on preaching the results that the prophecy would bring about, not the methods for achieving them. But then Julyeis knew nothing of what transpired in Kebezzu's other meetings - the daylight meetings which seemed to be increasingly common.

Sleep had stilled the child's hand, resting it from its repetitive messages. What was it that Maeduul had said? *'She demands that we worship a child - a safru child, possessed by the ghost of a woman who refuses the ease of oblivion'*.

Julyeis felt a shiver pass across her shoulders. She didn't believe in possession: once the body died, there was nothing more. Possession was a superstition for Tall Ones, and yet ...

The child refused to sleep on anything except stone. When placed on a mattress she would wake and moved back onto the floor. No fuss, no moans. She was like a compass needle - shift it with your finger and it shifted back. She ate when food was placed in her mouth; she usually shat and pissed when moved into a crouching position, though there had been a few accidents on the way. If you hugged her tightly enough her body would go limp, otherwise she stood or sat where placed, walked when dragged by the hand. She had no voice, no tears; there was no volition within her, except for the attraction to stone.

She didn't look like a monster ...

Sounds in the Servant's kitchen alerted Julyeis to the fact that Shapeis had woken up. His morning sounds were distinctive, with his habitual search for lustran leaves for his first steam of the day quickly followed by the splashes of water as he relieved himself and washed his face.

'Shapeis! Did you hear Kebezzu leave this morning?'

'No!' Shapeis was not good at dealing with mornings. Somehow she didn't think he'd enjoy working in the cultivations.

She left the child sleeping on the stone floor and headed back to the kitchen.

'I'll need you to help out with the cleaning this morning, before we open. And take some fresh sheets and towels up to the second floor.'

'What's the time?'

'Two hours to noon. I need you upstairs in five minutes.'

'I need to eat, Julyeis!'

'Ten minutes, then. And don't make that steam too strong.'

She headed down the tunnel that led to her office. The thought of paperwork reminded her of Varoul's absence. No doubt the man had grown lazier as the years went by, but it was unusual for him not to be in his office by this time. She came to a decision, grabbed the accounts books lying on the shelf and headed back upstairs.

Kiva was on the first landing, his brush sweeping the floor mosaics as he related some item of gossip to Kaalis, busy with polishing the banister and rails.

'Have you seen Varoul?' she asked.

'He had a fight, you know.' The old man spoke with a drawl caused by the loss of his teeth.

'Fight with who, Kiva? You?'

'Huh, and what sort of pleasure would he get from beating me?'

'Less than I will! Work faster, Kiva, and don't skimp on the task. So who did he fight with?'

'That Zhamelle – he was shouting himself hoarse at her door!'

'Why?'

'Don't ask me, huh Kaalis? Why should I know the thoughts in their heads?'

She realised she'd get no proper information out of him – he was in one of his garrulous moods this morning.

'We need this place sparkling, Kiva. We open in two hours. Shapeis is bringing up some fresh sheets, Kaalis – help him make up the beds, will you? Where's Varoul now?'

The old man chose not to answer her, instead making a show of industrious sweeping. Kaalis pointed a finger upstairs, managing to suppress all but the faintest edges of a giggle from her face.

She continued to climb the stairs, giving brief orders to people as she passed them. The third level was reserved for the men and women who entertained the guests in various ways. They were all Tall Ones; Shapeis was the only Servant who worked the clientele.

The fourth level was Varoul's home. When she reached the top of the stairs, she paused to smooth down her clothes.

There was no answer when she knocked.

'Varoul? It's me, Julyeis.'

Behind the door, someone was moving furniture.

'Varoul? Are you alright?'

'Who is it?'

'It's Julyeis. I've brought the accounts ...'

The door opened suddenly. Varoul stood naked and dripping in his hallway.

'I don't want people coming up here!'

'I'm sorry, Var...'

'Sorry, yes? Nobody is to come up here, do you understand me?'

'What's happened, Varoul?'

'She sneezed! Right in my face! How dare that bitch ... I want her out of my building, Julyeis. Take her keys and throw her out in the street!'

'Who, Varoul? Zhamelle?'

'Yes! Zhamelle.'

'I'm sure she didn't mean to ...'

She didn't see his fist lash out. One moment she was standing before the man, wondering why he was naked and wet. The next moment she was falling, books flying down the stairwell. Before she could regain her balance he attacked her again, a series of open-hand blows to her head

and shoulders.

'Varoul! Please no!'

'Do as I tell you, woman! Get that bitch whore out of my building now!'

'Okay, Varoul! Okay!'

He stopped hitting her. Slowly she pulled herself up to her hands and knees, not daring to look up. Through the landing balustrades she could see people peering from the levels below. Shapeis was with Kaalis, anger etched across his face. Grabbing the railing, she pulled herself to her feet, used her hands to sign a quick message to the young man: *Stay! I'm not hurt!*

When she turned back to Varoul she kept her head bowed and her shoulders hunched just in case he attacked again. He looked – scared, shocked at what he had done. But the fear was winning control of his face.

'She has to go, Julyeis. She sneezed in my face! What if she has an imp in her? That boy – died, you know? That boy she brought back here.'

Julyeis said nothing, just nodded her head. She had been in the crowds, had sung the words of passage when they burned him the evening before.

'Nobody comes up here, understand? You bring me food and water and leave it in front of the door, you hear me girl?'

She nodded again. With a new look of determination he turned on his heel and walked back, slamming the door shut behind him. Seconds later she heard the sound of furniture being dragged up to the entrance; Varoul seemed to be building himself a barricade.

She chose not to tidy her hair – let the others see what the bastard had done, she thought. With as much dignity as she could muster, she walked down the stairs.

Shapeis met her on the third level landing. 'I don't want your help,' she said sharply, knocking away his hand. 'We've got work to do, all of us.' She raised her voice and continued: 'If we don't open, we make no money. We are a business! Everyone has a job to do – this place has to be pristine when we open the doors!'

Zhamelle's room was the second one on the right. As she walked towards the door she realised that Shapeis had not left her side. Well, he could be useful, she thought. Zhamelle would need to find herself new lodgings for tonight.

Again, she knocked on a door. Again, she received no response.

'Zhamelle? Answer the door!'

She tried the handle: it turned easily. Beyond, the room was in semi-darkness; shutters still covered the window, only allowing horizontal threads of daylight to pick out the clutter within.

The bed was unmade, and unoccupied. These rooms were smaller than the ones downstairs: enough room for a single bed, a wardrobe, a dresser and chair. In the corner stood a wash-stand, with a jug and bowl piled on top.

'Zhamelle?'

She saw the woman crouched into a ball half under the bed.

'Open the shutters, Shapeis!' Quickly she went over to check on the Tall One.

'She's sweating. Zhamelle, can you hear me? Get up. We'll get you into bed.'

When the woman sneezed, Julyeis felt the spray shower across her legs. Suddenly she understood why Varoul had been naked and wet.

'We'll need to get a medic, Shapeis. Help me get her into bed. Then go and wash yourself down – use the soap I bought this morning. Kaalis can run to the infirmary.'

'Anything else?' He looked more concerned than scared, she thought.

'Make me a steam when you get a chance – one of your special steams that makes the walls wobble, yes?'

[A Festival of Imps](#)

Which pain is worse, she wondered. There's the grates in my bones and joints – they were bad. As bad as the stabs behind my eyes? She didn't know, couldn't decide. The bone pains were still there – it took a grunt to roll her body from one hip to the other. The action triggered a cough, a choke of air from her lungs blowing dust across the mattress: that was a nasty pain, but she was learning to control it, bringing in just enough air to not disturb the mess of sears across her ribs before letting the imp within her smack her stomach up into the bony cage.

Where am I?

No light.

No, there was a light, a lamp flame steady in its form on a low table across the room – was it a room? There were boxes and bags and large clay-fired urns lined up against the sides of the rough-hewn walls. Perhaps she was in a lock-up cell, like Velledue?

Her mouth was itching again – her teeth felt like great boulders entrenched in her gums, too sore to clench within her jaw, insistent for the scratching. She could move her tongue around her mouth, let its tip explore every unclean crevice and gap, test the sour, metallic shock of her spittle.

Water. Something told her there was water in the room. She just needed to lever her body off the mattress and crawl in search of the jug – *who brought me water?*

She spent a few minutes thinking about water, imagining cool currents washing her mouth and her teeth and her tongue. The image of streams triggered fresh reminders within her; the gentle insistence of the taut hump of her bladder would soon become a new, innovative pain as the imp trampled across its sphere.

She was beginning to understand the inner workings of her body – each new throb a declaration of form and purpose.

Rather than turning over onto her hands and knees, she let her hand cup around the bulge of her bladder, let its heat warm her frosty fingers – why was she so cold? She remembered the shivering fits, designed specifically to teach her the layout of bones and joints within her flesh.

More dreams came. Hard dreams, confusing dreams. She stood over her sister's bed, the last of the morning light fighting its way through the shutters. She was calling to her: *Arbelle! Arbelle! You must wake up!* Or was it the stings in the sinuses around her eyes that shouted? Arbelle was smiling at her: *it's all right Delesse, it doesn't hurt anymore. Everyone should wear white eyes – my eyes are bright white all over and I'm going to be a Courtesan!*

'Lady Delesse!'

Cool runnels of water across her face, cooling her brow, trickling past her ears and down, down to the back of her neck. When the wet cloth was put in her mouth she bit down, revelling in the protest of her oversize teeth as they were pushed down, down into the mattresses of her gums. The water washed her mouth. And then she coughed.

'Where am I?'

'You're safe, my Lady. You're safe! Let me wash you down – you've had a few accidents. I'll get you clean again. I've brought you cold soup, too. Bland soup, but nourishing. But you've got to sit up in the chair, first, my Lady, so I can change the sheets and turn the mattress over.'

Hands settled around her shoulders and waist, pulled at her. The pain was – less, or she dreamed it had been more painful once, perhaps?

'You're not Arbelle. Where's Arbelle? I need to look after her ...'

'Now don't you worry about anyone else, my Lady. We're almost there.'

The arms brought her forward and she helped them, bringing her legs under her and putting weight on them. The movements felt – good, like the first stretch after a long sleep. Still there was pain, mainly across her back where before her kidneys had burned and itched. Leaning heavily, she took a step, another, another. The chair had a blanket around it, a cushion. She grabbed hold of its back and sat on it sideways, drew her knees up to her breasts as she settled into the new position.

In this dream, the barby rats had taken over the Governor's House. One of their great trees had moved into the fountain pool in the courtyard. Its queen was talking to her: *we saw you build your hole with your teeth. The fires have gone, see! We always protect you. Now is the time for you*

to arch your leaves into the sun – we'll seed your belly and you will grow us an empire ...

When she opened her eyes, it didn't hurt. Someone had dressed her in a loose smock while she slept, or raved. She remembered the feeling of her skin trying to crawl free from her body, shaking itself loose. There was no pain now, just a thirst in her throat and the ever-present pressure in her bladder.

She sat up and looked around. More lamps had been lit in the room, illuminating her mattress on the floor. The sudden movement triggered a wave of light-headedness through her, but it soon passed. Taking her time, she turned herself over onto her knees.

Her father was slumped in the chair, asleep. She checked his face for news – new lines across the forehead, around the eyes, suggested hard work and sorrow, but nothing more. His hair was untidy: longer than he normally kept it – how long had she been here?

Is he ill too?

At that moment he snored, a short trapping of air at the back of the throat that told her he was asleep, not ill. The relief gave her the will to attempt to stand.

Again the dizziness, but she felt stronger, able to walk. She decided not to wake her father, instead making for the doorway beyond the chair.

The exit led into a tunnel, lit at intervals with oil lamps. At first she was lost; then she spotted lines on the walls – old marks made with coloured chalks. She remembered making these marks: she used to come down here with Arbelle when they were much younger and she would tell her little sister stories, illustrating them with quick drawings wiped out and redrawn as the story progressed.

She was in the maze of store rooms cut into the rock beneath the Governor's House. The knowledge gave her a feeling of comfort which she hadn't noticed was missing before. It had been many years since they had sneaked down here: Velledue, her father's astrologer who also had charge of their education, had stopped their adventures when he discovered what sort of stories the girls had been telling each other.

There were several exits from the store rooms. She orientated herself using her partial memories of those days and headed towards the family kitchens. Soon enough she found the stairs leading up: climbing them took more energy than she expected.

The kitchens were strangely quiet. Where was the head cook, Yupten? Where was Tabeed? This was their place: normally it was a hum of clangs and shouts as food was prepared and dishes washed. It must be late, she reasoned.

The kitchens led directly onto the Fountain Courtyard. She remembered the dream she'd just had, and was relieved to see the fountain in its place, undisturbed. Beyond the doorway it was raining, the sheets of water dimming the light of day.

Echoes of hurried steps and shouts floated from the stairwell she had recently used. Someone was searching for something, she thought. *What have I lost?* Then the steps were louder.

'My Lady! You scared me! I looked in your room and you were gone!' A young Servant girl stood at the top of the stairs, panting.

Delesse recalled her name: 'It's okay, Macce. I feel a lot better. I just need to relieve myself, and find some food.'

'Of course, my Lady. I'll find you a pot.'

'Talk to me, Macce. Tell me what's been going on.'

The girl had found a pan. 'It's not my place, my Lady ...' she said as she handed it over.

'Nonsense, Macce. Was it you who looked after me?'

'Yes, my Lady. Things have been ... bad.'

'How long have I been ill? What day is it today?'

'Do you not remember anything, my Lady?'

'No,' said Delesse. 'There were dreams – terrible dreams – and pain.'

'You've been ill for five nights, my Lady. The fever took you as you cared for the Lady Arbelle.'

'Where is my sister?'

The Servant looked away from her. She could see that the strain of the past few days had taken a toll on the girl, giving her the eyes of an old woman.

'Arbelle is dead?' It was a statement more than a question. When the girl shook her head, she felt – nothing. A numbness filling her up where once there had been ache.

'You did everything for her, my Lady, as did the Lady Temis. You never left her side, not until you collapsed.'

She feared to ask more questions, but forced her throat to action: 'What of my mother? My brother?'

'The Lady Temis is recovering. The fever was not so bad in her. She moved back into her rooms last night. Your brother ... I do not know how your brother fares, my Lady. He's being cared for by Master Velledue.'

'But he's alive?'

'As far as we can tell, yes my Lady.'

She felt a faint grumble of relief nudge at the numbness. As her bladder emptied into the pot beneath her, tears formed in her eyes and tracked their way down her cheeks.

She clenched the muscles in her jaw, wiped the unwelcome dampness from her face.

'My father is alive. He was in my room. What of the others? Where's Tuuke? Is Loken still here? And why are the kitchens so quiet?'

'My Lady, I don't know about the Tall Ones. The Governor's House has been sealed shut. I have no news of the Guardsman or the City. Lord Loken isn't here.'

The information didn't surprise her, nor hurt her. Yet the girl in front of her seemed to carry enough hurt for them both. Delesse took the cloth she was holding out for her and wiped herself dry, rearranged her smock about her.

Her actions, the questions about Igell and Loken, reminded her of something.

'Macce, did you look after me the whole time?' The girl nodded.

'Did I – did I bleed while I was ill?'

'No, Lady,' she said. 'You were so ill, but that curse let you be.'

She didn't know why she had asked that question. She changed the subject. 'Were you ill too, Macce?'

The Servant shook her head. The action lit a pilot light of anger in Delesse's stomach, a torchlight for the injustice of this admission. Somehow she remembered her long years of courtly training, forbade any such emotion the right to perform across her face.

'Some people ...' the girl started. 'Some of us were not considered worthy of attention by the imps, my Lady. Your father, Lord Gelleris, has remained well, and Master Velledue. Maybe Lord Igell your brother has been spared the fever. But the imps have played with many people here: some they have taken from us, Lady.'

'Who?'

'Tabeed has gone. She looked after Yupten. He, too, has found oblivion – he was my dad ...'

As the girl began to choke on her tears, Delesse reached over to her, folded her into her arms and rocked her, rocked her back and forth, ignoring the sound of the pot as their feet knocked it clear of their embrace.

The sight of her mother shook Delesse. She had never been a weighty woman; the fever had chosen to charge its price to her face and her arms. The sagging necklaces and bracelets of skin reminded her that she had not yet seen herself in a mirror.

Whatever the cost to her body, Temis refused to let it accrue to her demeanour. She rose to her feet when Delesse entered her room, her mouth a shallow curve of a true smile.

'You don't know how good it is to see you, my dear. Have you eaten yet?'

She couldn't answer. She shook her head.

'I have some juice – it's not very substantial, but adding a pinch of willow bark gives it a wonderfully restorative power. It should tide us over until the evening meal, I think.'

When her mother raised her arm out to her, she moved. The room, she noticed, was a mess

of papers and unwashed cups, as if it had been turned into a living space. Dust marred the surfaces of furniture, took away the sharp edges of the reception area's richly decorated wall hangings. She grasped her mother's hand like an anchor as soon as it was within range, allowed herself to be guided to a spare chair next to where she had been sitting, not bothering to clear it of papers before lowering herself into its padding.

Temis didn't let go of her hand. 'You look a lot better, Delesse.'

'I have only myself to blame, my Lady: I should take better care of my wards in future. I hope my lapse didn't – distress you unduly.'

'So formal?'

'I – I don't know what to think. What has happened to us?'

'No doubt people will say we're being punished, my dear. Maybe God has chosen to teach me a lesson for loving my children too much ...'

'Teach you ...'

'Teach us all, then! A punishment for enjoying the riches the jungle has given us. Though, for myself, I'd prefer to believe the Servant explanation.'

'What would they say of our plight?'

'They would say that you cannot negotiate with the councils of the imps, only oppose them with all your strength. And when they win, as they must surely do because that is the Creator's will, then we must accept the oblivion He offers us gladly, or mourn those who cross the threshold before us.'

'I think I want to be blamed. Otherwise it all seems so senseless – why Arbelle and not ...'

'Why Arbelle, and not you, or me?'

She nodded her head – and finally the tears came, shaking her body and whooping air through her throat as she cried at the shock of her sister's death.

As she crumpled within herself, she could feel her mother's hand tighten around her own, feel the other hand brushing her hair, her cheeks. The sobs seemed to be beyond controlling: she rode them, let them possess her. Between their chokes, she caught her breath, caught the sound of her mother's slow, even murmurs trying to comfort her. Somehow the sound and the touch tamed the outburst, brought order to the movements in her chest, allowed her to slow the sobs.

A new feeling crept through her: embarrassment, a red tide of heat and blood flushing across her breasts and rising into her cheeks. But when she finally looked up, she saw no accusing look in her mother's eyes, just concern.

'Auntie Moesser told me that she cried in front of the whole court, when they told her that her husband had been killed.'

'There's no shame in tears, little one. Not true tears – we weep when we have no choice but to weep.'

'I can't imagine her not being here ...'

'I know, Delesse. But after the weeping, we have to find strength.'

Looking at her mother, she realised that her eyes were dry, though a redness around the lids suggested that maybe her mother was still searching for strength.

'What happens now?'

'We support your father, Delesse. These days have been hard on him – too hard – but he has responsibilities to the city that cannot be put aside.'

'The Servant – Macce, she said something about Igell ...'

Temis looked away, clenched her hand around Delesse's fingers. 'Velledue has taken Igell – he says to keep him safe ...'

'How? I thought he was locked up?'

'We let him out, Delesse. We needed his help, his knowledge, to tackle this plague. But instead he took my son and barricaded himself in the Bell Tower. He refuses to let me ... let anyone in. Gelleris tried, but the old fool's armed himself – he put a knife into your father's side ...'

'A knife ...?'

'It's only a flesh wound, my dear. But rather than press the issue, we've let him stay there –

sent up food and water, a few toys for Igell. Maeduul has been climbing up onto the roofs, seeking a way in ... there was too much for us to do, too many deaths already.'

They sat in silence for a while. Then Delesse forced herself out of the chair and prepared juices for them both. When she handed the glass to her mother, she nodded her gratitude, managed a new smile for her.

'So,' said Delesse, 'we have a plague in the city.'

'Yes, we do. Your father ordered all the city gates to be shut and barred when the first people fell ill – and the tunnels between the quarters to be walled in, too, though he doesn't know if we found them all. Who knew how much our citizens like to tunnel through rock, heh?'

'Why did it come to Bassakesh?'

'We don't know the why of it, but we suspect it came upriver with Lord Loetopas – his soldiers were the first to fall ill. '

'Has Loken ...'

Her mother reached out to touch her daughter's chin, cradling it between her fingers. 'I don't know where Loken is, Delesse.'

'He ran away?'

'No! He went with Tuuke to help restore order in the city and enforce the curfews. It was bravely done, too – he flatly refused to look after his own safety first. He defied Lord Loetopas to his face, in public!'

An image of her betrothed filled her inner vision, accompanied by a touch of – what? Worry? Love? – in the pit of her stomach. She didn't have time to consider her reaction to the news as another thought arrived in her mind: 'What about the Beloved ... Aunty Feyn?'

Her mother laughed, a small sound in the room and yet the first half-joyful note Delesse had heard since her recovery.

'My sister is in her element, I believe. She's always been a woman who prefers to do things rather than take in the latest gossip – I think the constraints of courtly life would kill her if it wasn't for the Emperor's devotion to her. The last I heard, she had commandeered the city granaries and was arranging for the provision of rations. She took a huge whip with her, just in case her tongue didn't suffice to beat us natives into submission!'

Loken

Loken had noticed the tower jutting above the outer walls when he was walking back from burning his friend. Structurally part of the city's encircling wall, it was a functional lookout across the whole city, and a place he had come to treasure for its solitude – a place beyond care where he could gaze over chaos.

This evening he was not alone. The Guardsman of Bassakesh – whom he had now learned to call 'Tuuke' rather than 'Sir' – stood at the other side of the covered platform, staring at the sun setting over the terraced cultivations and the river and jungle beyond.

Loken didn't want to stare into the unknowable vegetation: the jungle could keep its harvest of imps and demons and devils. It was the demons built into the city's bricks and cobbles and rocks that entranced him now.

Before him the city was laid out like a map of disaster. To his left stepped the streets of the Upper Quarter where he had walked with Delesse to view the barby rats at the top of Bassak Hill. It was, in some ways, the least troubled part of his new world, despite his memories of it.

There had been a few reports of plague, but people had been quick to isolate the affected compounds. The food and water rations that the guards lowered down to the people trapped within the Quarter's walls had been distributed fairly and effectively; he hoped Devisek, who had taken charge of operations within the Quarter, was alright – he had not been seen since the previous evening.

Smoke still hung over the buildings of the Lower Quarter. That was a place of wide streets and comfortable houses, a place of orderliness equivalent to the Upper Quarter – until the first cases of plague had been reported a few days ago. The first building to be fire-bombed had been the local healing house, set alight by panicking idiots. Four blocks had been lost in that blaze, which had only subsided when the afternoon rains arrived.

He sighed, pulled the bottle from its pouch on his waist belt and un-stoppered it.

'Tuuke. Some water?'

'In a minute, maybe.' The man didn't budge from his staring.

He wiped the lip of the bottle carefully before he drew it to his lips. He had quickly learned that the best use for warding ribbons and rags was to wipe things clean. Hand washing had become an hourly routine; covering mouth and nose with a cloth, another reflex. When the rains came it felt a little like drowning, but not enough to stop him working.

In front stood the Old Quarter, clustering around the streets east of the Governor's House. He chose not to think of that place: he could not control the outcomes being played out in those streets and courtyards.

Instead he looked beyond the old walls towards the sprawl of the Market Quarter, with the southern part of the massive, cobbled expanse of Market Square clearly visible from this vantage. The people who lived in that area had built a huge pyre in the middle of the square – it had been burning for four days now, even through the rains; fat and muscle burned slower than timber, and there had been plenty of fuel for the baleful flame.

He couldn't see the Riverside Quarter beyond the new walls from here. He was glad for that small mercy. His uncle had set his guns on the place before escaping up the river – was it only three days ago? No: three and a half. He took another small sip of water, calculated how many hours it had been since taking Delesse on the hill, performing the consummation of their contract in front of an audience of barby rats.

Was Uncle Loetopas responsible for this atrocity? Loken could not doubt it - each night, when he caught a snatch of sleep, the same nightmare visited him: the hands of his uncle as tight on his shoulders as those of his father on the pillow pushing down on the face of his living mirror; the spasm of limbs; the lesson repeated in whispers to his ear ...

He shook his head to free his mind from the clutching images, continued his visual investigation of the city.

Much of the Western Quarter to his right was blocked from sight by the bulk of the Governor's House, perched like a citadel on its spur of rock. Only the upper stretch of Reach Street, parallel to the western ramparts, was clearly visible. Little moved below him, nor had it for the past couple of days. This Quarter was under a complete curfew – mostly self-imposed. If there had been more deaths in those winding streets, they were taking place indoors now, the bodies being left to rot where they dropped.

The Quarter was home to many of the people who looked after the northern cultivations. Scouts who had been out to the fields had discovered long graves at the edges of the growing crops. Planting and harvesting had stopped and whoever remained alive must have sneaked into the jungles beyond, preferring to take their chances with unknown dangers rather than the known perils of plague.

Food was becoming a major worry – Loken had heard talk that the rations would be cut tomorrow, though maybe not for the people delivering essential supplies to the quarters. His stomach grumbled at the thought.

'What are you looking for, Tuuke?'

'I don't know. Yet.'

Loken turned away from the city and concentrated on his temporary leader. Observing the Guardsman of Bassakesh had become one of Loken's distractions over the past few days. It was something the Beloved Courtesan had said, almost in passing, that had given him the idea to keep his eyes on the man. *'He's like a barby rat tree, that one,'* she had said, *'always watching, digging traps with his little questions. His venom is lethal, you know!'*

He tired of the tone of his thoughts, walked over to stand next to the Guardsman, proffered him the bottle of water. This time Tuuke accepted the offer, though he didn't let his gaze drop from the sinking sun or the jungle canopy spread before them.

'But there is something to look for, yes?' The question gained him a glance over the shoulder.

'Oh, yes,' said Tuuke. 'There's always something to look for. Some things can be predicted. What do you expect to see, when you look over the city?'

Loken knew the Guardsman had been watching him in return, but not as a game: the man was just doing his job as he always did his job. Watch, question, pounce.

He didn't know the answer to the question. If anything, he was hoping the web of streets and squares could supply him with answers, offer him an astrologer's reading to make sense of the chaos.

'I expect – to see more people. More trouble, more anger.'

'There's been some rioting ...'

'One riot, Tuuke. In one part of the city – an unexpected place to have a riot, I would have thought.'

'Why?'

He was about to respond when he caught the edge to the question.

'I'm making assumptions, yes?'

'Yes, you are, lad.'

There must an obvious answer to this conundrum, he decided, one a child could well understand.

He spoke with care, as if he needed to hear the words before adding to them, testing their truth as he had never bothered to test them in his previous life.

'When I was punished, I'd receive a beating immediately. Except for when I'd done something that really annoyed my tutors.' He offered Tuuke a small smile. 'Then they'd make me wait for my punishment – hours, sometimes, occasionally days. I think the fear of the beating was often worse than the beating itself.'

'Good. Can you see now why a riot in the Lower Quarter was more expected than a riot elsewhere?'

He nodded as the older man turned back to his study of the jungle. 'They had time to nurture their fear.'

And then: 'You're watching the jungle, I think, because you expect something – or maybe someone – to walk out of its shadows, yes?'

Tuuke grimaced – a half-faced affair. 'I think our visitors are late, lad. This is, perhaps, something to cheer us rather than make us scared.'

For a while both men became lost in thought. The rains this afternoon had been short – the storm lasting no more than an hour above the city. Now, as the disk of the sun touched the distant hills, the remnants of the storm flushed yellow, pink, carmine; for Loken the sunset seemed a beautiful, peaceful thing even though the canvas of thunderheads on which it was painted, and the colours that dominated the palette, were – threatening, unknowable.

Eventually, he turned away, gazed once more at the streets of the Western Quarter. He heard Tuuke take another sip of water, then felt the man press the bottle against his arm.

'Why do you think it's so quiet down there?'

Loken shook his head. 'I don't know.'

'Neither do I,' said Tuuke. 'But I think I want to find out.'

Twelve of them formed the scouting party. Rather than enter the Quarter through one of the barred gates they descended to street level from the wall next to the watch tower. Tuuke's orders were simple: scout in pairs; keep in contact; don't get killed.

Reach Street was straight for much of its length, crossed at regular intervals by lanes breaking up the brick-built compounds into blocks. Loken could see that at one time the compounds

had shared a similar design. Each was two or three stories tall with a central entrance onto the street and narrow alleys separating them from their neighbours.

Loken and the woman he had been teamed with took the second block of tenements on the left, their outlines dark against the bulking mass of the Governor's House on its spur of rock some thirty metres above them. He let her take the lead; he had never visited this part of the city before.

The first compound had no windows fronting the street. 'Do we go in?' he asked.

She nodded her head, walked towards the patchwork doors.

'This one's been nailed up.' She held her brushwood torch higher to examine the two metre door in a better light. 'Look! Two beams – they seem quite old.'

'So it's been abandoned for a while?'

'I doubt it – they wouldn't waste a good building in this Quarter. There will be an entrance down the alleyway. Come on!'

The alley also seemed to serve as a general drain, relying on the rain to flush it clean most days. Loken did not bother to step around the puddles caught in the holes where paving slabs had gone missing. The doorway was halfway down the alley, a much smaller, simpler affair than the one at the front.

He pushed at the wooden planking. It didn't shift.

'Try pulling the handle bar up.'

This time it worked, the door swinging back easily on its hinges.

'Careful! People might be scared and armed.'

'Why don't we let them know we're here, then?' he asked.

'Good idea. You shout a greeting and I'll go and introduce myself.'

He looked round at the woman to see if she was joking. 'Go on, then!' she said. 'We've got dozens of compounds to check yet and I'd like to be home before midnight.'

'I'll go in. You let them know we're here.'

'Dear God, man! We'll go in together. You can hold my hand if you're afraid. It's people who live here, not barby rats – and anyway, our bickering should have told them we're here by now.'

The room he stepped into appeared to be some sort of general utility room, with boxes cluttering one side of the wall and sets of farming tools arranged neatly against the other. The tools looked to be in good condition. Opposite lay another doorway, though the frame had broken long ago: Loken walked through it without hesitation.

This passageway led to the courtyard, a small area no more than ten metres by fifteen. Ropes had been hung from the surrounding balconies, criss-crossing the star-veil above in a net of pots, laundry and vegetable strands. One corner had been set aside for a communal hearth; a second was a washing area, enclosed by a low wall topped with wooden screens.

'Are all the buildings going to be like this?'

The woman was already heading for the hearth corner. 'No. This is a cultivator's compound. I reckon most of the people here work in the fields.'

'Who owns it?'

'The city, probably. The workers get a room for themselves, a right to use the facilities, a little money. Even the Servants get pocket money.' She took a stick and poked through the embers covering the hearthstones. 'This fire's cold. Two days, maybe three. We'll check the rooms, yes? Then move on.'

The first body was in a chamber just off the courtyard. Loken tripped over it before he realised what it was. He had been old, whoever he was, he decided as he checked the neck for a pulse. When the woman came up behind him, she took hold of his hands, bringing the torch flame close as if she was searching for something.

'Rip his clothes off, will you?'

The order seemed reasonable to Loken, considering the surreal surroundings. He lifted the man up to pull off his smock.

'Don't let your face mask come loose!' she warned him. 'Ah! Here we go.'

'What have you found?'

'He's got a tattoo on his shoulder – can you see it? City owned. I can't see any others.'

'The city owns Servants?'

'Oh yes,' she said. 'Two, maybe three thousand in this Quarter. It takes a lot of workers to grow enough food for us all.'

There were more bodies in a windowless room on the first level. The door had been poorly barricaded by a chair, easily broken by Loken's kick. Again they were old: a man with his arms wrapped around the body of a woman. A small bottle clutched in his tattooed hand suggested poison.

Other than that, the compound was deserted. 'Maybe they went to the cultivations,' suggested Loken. 'The Guardsman said there's been long graves found around the fields.'

'Maybe,' she said. 'Let's go.'

They left the building the same way they had entered it. He followed her as she walked along the road past two, three, four compounds. In the fourth, they saw a light shining from a room above the alleyway. They went to investigate.

This time they entered through the main doors, which swung back with a squeal as he pushed them. Through the archway lay the courtyard – again a fire pit in one corner, washing space in another. Around the fire were a group of survivors; the men tightened their grips on their cudgels as the crowd turned to face the intruders.

Soon enough his partner had put them at their ease, questioning them about their circumstances. They had a supply of fresh water, they told her, and a store of food in the cellars dug into the rock below. There had been deaths, yes – half a dozen of the older aunts and uncles, and two young babies – their bodies had been put in another cellar, away from the provisions. Another dozen were still ill, shut away in rooms on the upper levels, but they seemed to be pulling through.

Loken looked around as they were talking. While this compound was in a similar style to the first, it was smaller, more intimate. When a lull in the conversation arose, he asked: 'How many lived here?'

'Thirty three – no, four, sir,' said one of the men. 'All family.'

The questioning continued without him. Yes, they knew where other people were. About half of the compounds in this area had been deserted – families choosing to come together in one place to face the wrath of God in each other's care. Most chose to stay inside the compounds rather than risk meeting an imp in an alley.

They left the people around the fire, turning left at the main door to continue their reconnaissance.

'You didn't check them for tattoos,' said Loken as they walked downhill together.

'I didn't need to. You heard what the man said?'

'Not clearly, no.'

'He said the Servants have disappeared. He didn't know where, but three days ago there were Servants around, helping out, and the next morning they were gone – most of them, anyway. That's why the families gathered together; they were scared the Servants knew something even more terrible than plague was about to happen.'

They found the Guardsman at the crossroads where Reach Street intersected Top Street – the main thoroughfare through the Quarter linking the oldest parts of the city with the western gates and the cultivations beyond the wall.

Loken let the woman give the report – she had been in charge of them from the start, he realised, and more surprisingly he found himself comfortable with that thought. She knew this city intimately: her report contained nuances he would never have even thought to mention.

'Thank you, Sappu,' Tuuke said as she finished. 'I want you to wait here for the others and then head back to the Old Quarter gate. I'll meet you all there for a fuller debrief, but I need to show young Lord Loken something first. You have the command until we come back!'

Without looking at him, Tuuke started walking along Top Street. For a moment, Loken stood still, then the woman called Sappu – he'd never even asked her name – shoved her elbow in

his ribs. 'Go on, you oaf! Follow him!'

He walked quickly to catch the older man up. If the Guardsman had noticed his delay, he didn't show it.

'You know,' Tuuke said as he caught up with him, 'this is the very engine of the whole city.'

Loken's torch was burning low. Nevertheless, he held it high so its light could spread further.

'You don't need the torch, lad. The clouds are almost clear and there's plenty of starlight to make out the shape of things.'

'I've lost track of the moons,' he said. 'What do you want to show me?'

Tuuke ignored the question. 'Most of the buildings south of this street are workshops of various sorts. The dye has made an awful lot of people rich, but for some reason they choose not to rebuild their workshops with better bricks, safer roofs. I think it's something to do with not pushing your luck.'

Loken felt his face take on a look of bemusement: he chose not to hide it.

'Perhaps they thought the money could be spent on better things?'

'I don't know. Some people moved out of this Quarter when the money started to flow – originally there was no wall between here and the river; the floods could wreak havoc in bad years. But a lot of people chose to stay. The walls were built by local committees, did you know that? The Governor oversees their maintenance now, but it was the neighbourhoods who got the money together and built the walls in the first place.'

'That's very interesting, Sir.'

'A lot of the early wealth of the city went into those walls, lad, and they still pay to maintain them. Big walls built with the wealth of the golden dye to protect – what? Some old, half-dilapidated workshops and warehouses?'

Loken thought about this. He suspected he was beginning to work out what the Beloved Courtesan saw in this man; how the Guardsman operated people: it seemed like he wanted people to think, partly for him, but mostly for themselves ...

'If I lived in a place,' he started, 'which flooded quite regularly, I think I would have moved somewhere better. But rather than move themselves, they chose to move the river instead? This place must mean a lot, then, to the folk who live here.'

In the light of the guttering torch, Tuuke was nodding. 'Some of those workshops are almost as old as the Governor's House, so I've been told. Some of them probably have foundations that are even older. Loyalty is a powerful force, yes?'

'You think I lack loyalty?' As soon as he spoke, he could feel the acids of uncertainty in his gullet, sense the reflexive doubt layered in the tone of the words.

'No, lad. I think rather that loyalty can be misplaced, sometimes. I would have moved to a new house, too.'

They continued to walk along the quiet street for a few more minutes, each wrapped in their own thoughts. The truth was, Loken realised, that he didn't know where his loyalties – his true loyalty – lay at the moment. To Delesse, maybe?

Yes, he liked Delesse – another surprise – and was looking forward to spending more time with her ... if she was still alive.

But what of his Clan?

Loyalty to the Clan went without saying, of course, though some might view his recent decisions as treasonous. No, he felt sure he was still loyal to his Clan: it was what he was.

The Clan was more than one man, as Uncle Loetopas repeatedly reminded him. Yes, he could be loyal to his Clan even while fighting with his father ...

A face from his childhood floated into his inner vision. He shook it away.

'This way,' said Tuuke, indicating with a flat hand that they needed to turn to the left, head into the maze of old buildings that generated so much of the city's wealth.

'Would you call this city your home, Guardsman?'

'It's a good question, lad. Yes, I suppose I would.'

'Because of the folk who live here? Or the place itself?'

'Maybe the people; possibly both. Ah, here we are!'

They came to a halt in front of a tall building, at least five levels guessed Loken, which seemed to be better maintained than the structures surrounding it - though it matched them in shape and style. The door was impressive, with the stone around the frame carved into a series of flowing abstracts.

'It doesn't look like a workshop ...' he said.

'Nevertheless, important work goes on here. Or it did up until the last few days. It's a bordello.'

'You've brought me to a bordello? Why?'

'To see if anyone has survived. Come on!'

The Guardsman seemed to know his way around this place, which offered Loken some thoughts. Instead of approaching the main door, he headed down a side alley to a much smaller, plainer door. It opened easily.

'There's some lamps on the shelf next to the door – we'll use a couple of those rather than these torches. Hello? Varoul?'

Silence met the Guardsman's shouts. Shrugging, he took his lamp, lit it and headed into the darkness.

Beyond the first room Loken found himself in an impressively decorated hallway, with rooms on each side and a wide stairwell opposite the grand entrance. Tuuke seemed to be investigating the corners of the hall, his face coloured a dark, earthy brown by the flame from the lamp.

'On my last visit, this place was spotless. The housekeeper would never allow dirt like this to gather.'

'Is that important?'

'Oh, yes. There's at least three day's worth of dirt here, probably more.'

'Did you come here often, Sir?'

Tuuke lifted his chin over his shoulder, offering Loken a level, hard stare. Wrong question, he decided.

'The folk we met earlier told us that most of the empty compounds had been deserted in the past couple of days, after the Servants disappeared. So this place might have been abandoned earlier?'

Tuuke rewarded him with a half-smile, stood back up from his crouch.

'I've got good reason to believe that what you say is probably true, lad. The last time I was here, I was investigating your friend's death.'

Loken stood stock still, not saying a word.

Tuuke regarded him in the silence, as if analysing him for clues. Eventually he nodded to himself.

'At some point during the contract festivities, your friend met a prostitute. They came back here for a while. He brought a guest with him, too ...'

'A guest?'

'A guest, Lord Loken. An imp. And I'll bet good coin that this building was one of the first to suffer from the plague.'

In five strides, the Guardsman crossed the hallway and stood facing him, the bulk of his shorter body just inches away.

'What I need you to tell me, my Lord, is how your friend acquired that imp in the first place.'

Beyond the City Walls

Shapeis found it strange that, for a city whose only connection with the rest of the Empire

was the river, the jungles surrounding the city were littered with paths and tracks. This track, for instance, while being mostly dirt-surfaced, was well marked out and at points included steps incised into the rock as well as evenly placed stones across streams and, once, a brick bridge across a brook rushing downhill towards the Taete river, somewhere to the west of him.

They had been walking for two days now, stopping only for food and rest breaks. Mostly the people around him walked in silence, numb from their experiences of surviving the city; not ready yet to talk of what they saw, what they did. Shapeis knew it would be a long time before his dreams settled away from images of shaking bodies, wheezing throats.

He'd asked Julyeis at one point, sometime after they started walking, where they were walking to. She hadn't answered him, just shook her head. The fevers had wasted away the little fat she had had round her neck, leaving the skin to form broad collaring flaps. He didn't notice that she was no longer walking alongside him until they had stopped for a rest at sunrise, by which time he'd been too tired to look for his friend.

Later he had hallucinated as he walked, imagining himself talking to young Kaalis. Or maybe just her head, as if her body had shaken so badly that it rattled her skull from her shoulders. Did they bury her? He couldn't remember: there had been so many bodies laid out in the long trenches, each curled into their birthing crouch ready to leap the threshold to oblivion.

Perhaps they were the lucky ones, he thought. He stopped for a moment, moved the form of the sleeping child from his left hip to his right. Someone behind him – a face he couldn't remember – offered him a flagon of warm water. He took it without question, drank deeply from it without bothering to wipe the lid. He smiled his gratitude to the man, shifted his walking stick to his left hand and started to move again.

Walking through this part of the jungle was quite easy, he decided. The vegetation was thinly spread, most of its growing efforts spent on competing for the sunlight far above his head – they were so good at their work that the path was mostly shadows. Walking nearer to the great river had been far more arduous as they had forced their way through the spiny, skin-burning growth hanging low over the path.

The latest path terminated at a clearing within the trees. At some point the girl had woken up, allowing Shapeis to put her on the ground to walk. If she noticed the change in scenery she gave no sign of it; she did as she always did, walking forward when pushed or dragged by the hand.

Sunset had been a sudden affair – the deep greens and purples of the canopy above merging with the quick-dark sky, the shadows beneath pooling into a single, pervasive darkness. Somewhere above, the monotonous day-choir had quietened, allowing the denizens of the night to practice their more tuneful melodies before cranking up their volume. Some notes were ear-splitting in their intensity, others were deeper, felt in the chest as much as heard in the head. The noise had dragged him away from his daylight reveries: walking the jungle at night was a slower, more dangerous affair and none of the people around him carried a torch.

In the clearing ahead people were preparing a fire. Rather than move towards it, he sought out a quiet place where he could sit. Leading the girl by the hand, he circled around the edge of the clearing until he found a low wall; there he turned the girl around and, with a slow, firm push on her shoulders, sat her down. The relief to his feet, thighs and back when he eased himself onto the wall was palpable. Within minutes, he was asleep.

'Shapeis! Wake up man!'

Someone was shaking his shoulders, though in his dream he was the still one, letting poor Kaalis do the shaking for both of them.

He opened his eyes to light. A sear of flames had flowered in the centre of the compound, their eager tongue thrusts now dying down to the slower, more thoughtful sweeps of dull red as the fire was banked back to its main task of cooking food.

It was Kebezzu who shook him, not Kaalis. He roused himself by wiping the heels of his hands around his eyes.

'What do you want?'

'Feed this to the little one, can you?' She held a broad leaf in her hand, on which had been piled a small mound of white, glutinous dough. He looked at her quizzically.

'It's salted cornmeal, nothing more. She needs to eat.'

'I need to eat! I've walked all day on water and fresh air.'

'Wait an hour, man, and there will be roast goat to fill your stomach. But it's one or the other, not both. We need to ration the supplies.'

'Goat – sounds good,' he sighed: goat-meat was what folks ate when there was nothing else available. He took the leaf from the woman, who nodded at him unsmilingly before turning away.

The girl, too, had fallen asleep. He woke her by brushing the back of his finger against her cheek and pinching her ear, tore a portion of leaf from its stem and used it to mould a scrape of cornmeal into a ball. With his thumb he levered her jaw open to pop the dough in her mouth; she chewed and swallowed automatically. A few repeats and soon the food was gone: a minute later and she was asleep again, nestled on top of the rock wall. He knew when she slept because her left hand stopped spinning its messages into the air.

A man sat down next to them. He seemed to be older, though it was difficult to tell in this light. They acknowledged each other with a nod of the head.

'I'm told we're eating goat tonight,' said Shapeis.

'Ah,' said the man. 'The traveller's friend. Let's hope they caught a young one then.'

They sat for a while in silence, staring into the distant hearth's flames. Only when he felt his head jerk up did Shapeis realise he was falling asleep again.

'Can we talk?' he asked the man. 'I'm keen not to doze on an empty stomach.'

'Certainly, friend,' the man answered with a smile wide enough to show his teeth. 'What shall we discuss tonight?'

'Do you know what this place is?'

His new companion looked around the clearing. 'Yes,' he said eventually. 'It's a vedegga harvesting compound. I've never worked in this one, but I've spent a few seasons in a similar place further up in the mountains.'

'You work the vedegga harvests?'

'Oh, yes. Six years, now. Though not this year – my mother was ill. I had to find other work so I could look after her.'

'Is she ...' He couldn't finish the question.

'Here? No, friend. She crossed the threshold just before the Solstice celebrations. It was a growth in her chest that took her, not ...'

'Not plague.' He said the word firmly, determined not to let its sound scare him.

The man nodded. 'Are you looking after the Seeress, then?'

'The Seeress? Oh, you mean little Sosunda. Yes. That's my task on this journey.'

'Is it true?' The man's voice quietened to a whisper: 'Does the Burning Woman live within her flesh?'

Shapeis offered him a small smile alongside the shake of his head. 'The Burning Woman was a good woman, so I've been told. Why would a good woman – a story keeper – deny herself the ease of oblivion?'

'Ah,' said the man. Shapeis could tell by the set of his jaw that he wanted to believe otherwise.

'So where did you work?'

'This season? Oh, I found a job with the Springman – do you know of him?'

'He runs the electric generators, yes?'

'That's him! Well I was always a fair swimmer, so I thought why not. But the pay is not as good as the vedegga harvest.'

'Good wages, yes?'

'Oh yes. The Governor insists the harvesters get their choice of food, and at the end of the season he's very generous with the coin.'

'You know,' said Shapeis, 'I've never even seen a vedegga nut.'

'You jest!'

'No! I've always worked in the city.'

'I know,' said the man. 'You work in that Varoul's place.'

'Worked,' said Shapeis. 'Varoul won't be greeting any more customers.'

Again, they both gazed over to the cooking fires. At least four goats had been caught and slaughtered; now they were being butchered for the skewers and the pots.

'No use saving their bellies,' said the man. 'I heard the jungle's different where we're going. Those goats will have been born to the vedegga groves.'

'You mean for the boucha, yes?' The man nodded.

Shapeis understood the importance of goats. The story of how Mara-Gaye tricked Wah-Heh-Ne, Prince of the Goats, into housing the councils of the imps within his many stomachs, and then set them both to work so all goats – and thus all people – could eat whatever they chose, was a popular one with children. From the stomachs of the goats came boucha, a mix of imps which could be laid on top of any broth made of first creation foods to make them nutritious. Without the boucha, first creation food was worthless: a man could feast on hand-squid and garfruit and would die of starvation without ever realising it.

The trick was, of course, to catch the right goat. Imps could be tricky, too, and the wrong imp could ruin the broth. Local goats for local broths, was the rule.

'So tell me about vedegga nuts,' Shapeis said.

'What do you want to know?'

'What do they look like? How do you harvest them? Help me stay awake.'

His companion laughed. 'Well,' he said, 'they're big, vedegga nuts. From a big tree. Some of the trees we've been walking under are vedegga trees.'

'So you have to hunt for the nuts when they fall?'

'That's what normally happens, yes. But for our dye, we climb up the tree and harvest the nuts before they crack open. Once the nut's blown, it turns bright yellow and falls to the ground, like you said. But if you get to them before they crack, all that yellow is inside the nut.'

'How do you mean?'

'The nut is where the flies grow, yes? Every year around the first solstice, the nuts crack open and the flies go off and do whatever it is vedegga flies do – make new vedegga trees, I suppose. Then the nut husks fall to the ground. But if you want the best dye, you need to get to the nuts just a day or two before they crack.'

'But I thought you harvesters came up here long before solstice – is it just a couple of day's hard work and the rest of the time feasting on the Governor's profits?'

The man laughed again. 'That's right! We spend a few weeks up here resting our bones then trick the barby rats to pluck the nuts from the trees for us.'

Despite his tiredness, Shapeis found himself laughing along with the man.

'No,' he continued. 'Our Service is not for the leisure, huh? Those trees are tall, I tell you. We spend the time climbing and roping and marking so that when the time does come the harvest is as easy as possible. And you can't drop the nuts down – they have to be carried. Can't let them crack, else the flies will flit away in a cloud of lost riches.'

'So is that what makes our dye better than everyone else's? Harvesting the nuts before they crack?'

'Heh – I bet the Governor wished it were so easy! No, that secret's in the processing. I know the nuts get smashed in the grinders – they're kept in those sheds over there. We grind a mixture of cracked and un-cracked nuts to a paste, which then gets dried on big sheets we hang in the clearing. Then the sheets are taken elsewhere for further processing while we spend the rest of the season dismantling what took us so long to build in the first place.'

'Why's that?'

'Well, we can't be having spies discovering which trees are the best ones. There's lots of folk who would kill to learn the secrets of our dye!'

As the conversation went on, Shapeis found himself relaxing into a more wakeful state. Every so often he glanced over to the girl, Sosunda, to make sure she was okay. She hadn't moved – she never moved once she was sleeping on rock. Within an hour the first of the meat and broth was being served. They walked over to the queues together, Shapeis still leaning on the staff he had cut for himself on the first day of the journey.

'Why are you limping, friend?' Rhisett – for that was the man's name – asked him.

'My feet are a pillow of blisters.'

'Ah! I've got a cream that can ease the pain a little. I'll have a look at them after we've eaten, yes?'

Shapeis nodded as the queue moved forward. 'That would be good, yes. I'm not used to so much walking.'

'I expect you get blisters in other places, heh?'

'Oh, I've got special creams for that sort of blister!'

The portions, when they finally reached the head of the queue, were small. Not for the first time Shapeis wondered how many folk were part of this trek. He could see people still arriving at the clearing, walking in twos and threes. He'd ask Kebezzu later, or maybe go looking for Julyeis.

They returned to their wall, this time sitting closer to the sleeping girl. For a while they chewed their meat in a contented silence. Shapeis was surprised that it tasted so good.

'They've herbed the gravy,' explained Rhisett. 'There's nothing wrong with goat meat – the young ones taste very nice in a slowly cooked stew. But it does lose its appeal after a few weeks of nothing-but-goat. A month on this diet and you'll be dreaming of the delights of a simple cabbage, or well-leavened bread as dry as blown dust on your tongue!'

'I'll believe you, friend, though any food would taste good to me at the moment.'

When they had cleaned the last of the gravy from their wooden plates, Rhisett made good on his promise. Soon Shapeis felt the pain in his feet ease as the man burst, salved and bound the worst of the damage.

'You've given me a gift beyond riches,' he said.

'It is of little worth – cheap creams and frayed bandages.'

Shapeis stood, tested the fading aches. 'Maybe it's not the medicines that perform the magic. But even your salves won't ease the pains in my bladder! I need to relieve myself. Would you care to – join me?'

'Oh, I didn't sit here chatting to you in the hope ...'

Shapeis smiled. 'These jungles are like a second home to you, but to me they are as foreign as oceans and ice. I want to remind myself of – my certainties. Of course, if you have no inclination for a man ...'

'Be quiet,' said Rhisett, standing. 'I'll help you hobble into the jungle – you'll only trip yourself otherwise and undo all my hard work.'

Someone was shaking him: who? Not Kaalis – he had been laying her in the long grave in this dream, tucking her into the final crouch and linking her arms with those of the corpses on each side so they could all leap over the threshold together.

He opened his eyes, looked around. No-one was shaking him – for once, it had been part of the dream. The wall was above him to his left – he could make out the sleeping form of the girl on top of it, as still as death it seemed, until he caught the quiet rasp of her snore.

A memory of a man caught the edge of his mind, though he couldn't remember his name; they'd shared some brief pleasure together then returned here to rest for a while. Whoever he was, he'd gone – another dream beneath the stars.

The ground next to the wall was hard, lumpy. He stretched himself onto his arms and legs, then knelt up. Above him the full white moon was edging towards the fringes of the trees – well past midnight, then, he thought. Across the clearing he could see the cooking fire had collapsed to embers, offering no more than a dark glow to the silhouettes seated around it. He remembered Julyeis, decided to investigate whether she was among that crowd.

Of Julyeis there was no sign. Instead he found Kebezzu, seated like an Elder among acolytes. She stopped talking as she saw him approach, rose to greet him.

'Sosunda is well, yes? She ate?'

'Yes, Kebezzu. She's asleep now.'

'Good, good. Sit with us a while, Shapeis.'

He hesitated. 'Are you telling the story?'

She smiled. 'No. The time for storytelling is not ripe. We're discussing plans – they could involve you, so maybe you'll want to listen, yes?'

He nodded his agreement, then went looking for something to sit on: his back and buttocks had tired of the comforts of the stony soil. When he located an old wooden crate he dragged it towards the fire.

Someone he didn't recognise was talking: 'Everything's changed. We have to adapt the plans!' Kebezzu was shaking her head.

'Then why not?' asked another person, a woman this time: 'What's there to gain from such risks?'

'I understand your concerns, Gievan, Torheis, I do! But the Burning Woman prophesied this plague: we knew the time would come when we had to endure, accept the judgments of chance and circumstance as chaos descended. We cannot abandon our chosen course, not now.'

The woman repeated her question: 'Why not?'

'This plague is a terror, but also a gift. Yes, the Tall Ones will be far more vigilant, but those yet to hear the message will be more receptive. Our arguments grow stronger as another strand of the prophesy is confirmed! I can't deny those folk the truth of our message, not for fear of my safety.'

The conversation lulled as the group considered these words. Shapeis looked at each of them in turn: two women in addition to Kebezzu; three men – all strangers to his eyes. They were thin, dirty, much as Kebezzu and the girl had been when he had first encountered them. The two who had questioned the risks of whatever the "plans" might be had spoken with an eastern lilt, similar to Kebezzu's yet different in subtle ways.

'Who are you?' he asked.

He was answered by stares. 'We might ask the same of you,' said the man who had spoken earlier.

'He's with me,' said Kebezzu firmly. 'I've invited him into this circle. The decisions we make tonight could affect him as much as they affect any of us.'

'He's the kid from the whore house, yes? What use is a deformed fuck-toy going to be to us?'

'You can stop your tongue right now, Gievan!' The edge on her voice gave Shapeis the impression that Kebezzu was the leader of this group, and not accustomed to being challenged. 'He cares for and guards the girl.'

'He's not guarding her at the moment.' This was from the woman whose name had to be Torheis.

'She's sleeping,' said Shapeis. 'She won't move. And folk are too tired to disturb her – look around.'

'He's good with her,' said Kebezzu. 'She responds to him more than she's ever responded to any of you. In this I will respect her decision.'

'She's incapable of decision, Kebezzu – her head is empty! When did the tools start telling the craftsman ...'

'I promise you, Gievan, I will have your tongue still!'

For a moment, the man stared at her with an angry slant of defiance in his face. Then he bowed his head, acknowledging her order.

'She may be a tool,' she continued in a low voice, 'but she is not our tool. I'm not jesting when I say that to insult the spirit controlling her is to play with fire.' This time the silence within the group seemed less reflective, shoulders set at angles hinting at a more sullen acquiescence.

'You'll have to forgive my cousins, Shapeis. They are a little – feral – in their Service to the

Creator.'

'There's nothing to forgive, Kebezzu. He's right: beyond the walls of the city I'm useless.'

'No. I need you. My friends are right about the risks this plague has brought to the plan – though I hate to admit such thoughts into my head. But you have skills they lack. You don't fear the embrace of city walls around you.'

He considered her words. 'These are the people you told us about? Servants without Tall Ones, from places in the jungles and mountains where Tall Ones do not go?'

'Yes.'

So it was true, what she had told them. Despite his sleep, a blanket of tiredness still wrapped itself around his head. He needed more talk to help wake himself up.

'You have a plan, then? I thought we'd agreed to leave the city to save ourselves from whatever the Tall Ones from the east might do – a few weeks in the jungle before our return.'

'What is there to return to, Shapeis? Your owner is dead. Do you want to return to a new owner, a fresh collar around your neck?'

'We don't wear collars ...'

'Didn't, Shapeis. You didn't wear a collar. Will your next owner be so kind?'

He shook his head. Too much had happened over the past fortnight: he didn't know what was happening anymore, what new terror might come and seek him out.

'Your plan, Kebezzu. What alternatives do you offer us?'

She reached forward, placed her hand on his knee as if comforting a child. 'You know the plan – you've heard me talk about it often enough.'

'Freedom. I remember. But I still don't understand what you mean. Freedom for what?'

'Freedom to be who we are. Freedom to Serve the Creator as we see fit, openly and with pride. A surreptitious Service is not enough: we must be rid of owners and ownership; capable of survival beyond the reach of the Tall Ones.'

He remembered her words to him on that first night. 'Hovels, you told me. Servants living in clearings in the jungles wide enough for a small crop of yam. Are we to become no better than goats?'

She smiled at him, though others in the group were scowling at his words.

'At first, maybe. And for some that could well be all they need or want. Our Service can be performed in many ways. But the Burning Woman promised us so much more: settlements and plantations and cities of our own, where we can live as equals – a true folking, if you like, worthy of Service to the Creator and His works that surround us.'

He let the words echo in his ears for a moment before responding.

'Even I know cities are not built in a day, or a year.'

She sat back, folding her hands between her knees. 'People build cities, Shapeis. And free people build cities faster than those burdened by collars and chains and owners.'

'Where? Where will this city be built? How many more days must we walk before we reach this place? We cannot build it here, in these jungles.'

'Maybe we won't need to build a new city,' said the man Gievan. 'Maybe we can rebuild.'

Shapeis was stunned to wakefulness by the idea. 'Is there such a place?'

'There will be ...'

'Gievan!' Kebezzu's glare seemed strong enough to raise sparks from the fire beside them. Shapeis got an impression that this was an old argument between them. He was beginning to feel uncomfortable in the man's presence.

When she next turned to face him, though, he could sense that her anger did not include him.

'There was talk once that we could head west – have you ever heard of a place called Lounge?'

He nodded his head. 'The city that perished.'

'Yes, that city. For a while our plan was to rebuild that city – but when we found Sosunda, when we learned that the Burning Woman had returned, I knew that such a plan was not enough. Lounge was destroyed once: it could be slain again. Tell me, have you ever wondered where the big

river, Taete, goes?'

'No – the river, well the river just is.'

'Some of us believe our destiny lies in the mountains. It is where the Creator Himself lives – within the rings of fire and ice on the Roof of the World. Not that we would dare to disturb Him. But the stories tell of valleys – the Valley of Home, the Valley of Restful Ease where Sama-Lovare made his final standing – in such a place we can be safe; we can Serve as the Creator intended us to Serve, beyond the knowledge of the Tall Ones.'

Shapeis thought about this. 'It's a long walk to those mountains, I should imagine,' he said.

'True, and maybe we will not live long enough to arrive – but our children, and their children, they will build the city. Of that I am certain!'

'So the plan is to keep on walking?'

'Not us, Shapeis. Most of the other folk here shall follow the river into the mountains. We have different work to do.'

'Kebezzu, I beg you to reconsider!' The woman, Torheis, interrupted Kebezzu with a determined look on her face. 'I can understand your need to carry the words, but you forget the practicalities!'

'Practicalities will sort themselves out.'

'No, Kebezzu, they will not! You took the message to Bassakesh, and led more than a thousand people out of that city. It is a great achievement: proof indeed that the Burning Woman has the power to liberate all Servants. But now we have the problem of feeding a thousand new mouths. The hidden settlements can take no more than three, maybe four hundred – you know that. What will the others do? Starve? And the tracks of so many will lead the Tall Ones to the settlements ...'

'Torheis, I know you are equal to this task.' Unlike her response to Gievan, Kebezzu kept her voice low and even as she spoke to the woman.

'Even if we can cope, how will we deal with the folk from other cities? I say to you, the message within the girl will not sour as the seasons pass. Give us time to settle these people, to start on new settlements further upriver ...'

'I can't.' Her refusal was curt. 'What if the Tall Ones start slaughtering us again? The Servants in those cities – Ferhe, Kantagwafe, Viyame, Hwecose – what chance would they have? Bassakesh is not the only place visited by plague, you can be sure of it. Too many important Tall Ones attended that contract ceremony. The Servants of those cities won't be able to escape into the jungle if we aren't there to help them, guide them to freedom.'

'There's no talking her out of it, Torheis,' said Gievan.

'So the plan remains as it was,' concluded Kebezzu. 'You will take these people to safety, as we agreed. Most of them worked the cultivations – some of them know the secrets of brewing soil and have brought samples with them. They will not be a burden on the settlements, not for more than a few months at most. Then they can move north to start new settlements, new cultivations ready for others.'

'Okay,' said Torheis. 'I hear your words, Kebezzu. But at least consider this: don't go to Towes Ferhe – not yet, at least. The city is too large, too dangerous. Head north with us for a while, to Viyame. From there you can choose whether to go west or north. And we've got good contacts in Viyame, they can keep you and the girl safe while you do your work.'

For a moment, Shapeis thought Kebezzu was going to refuse the advice. Then he saw her head start to nod.

'I hear you too, Torheis. You talk with your mother's sensible tongue. We can walk together towards Viyame, yes. And then Shapeis and I can go to work.'

Politics

After the Governor's family had paid their last respects to the dead of the House, Tuuke oversaw the closing of the tomb. With twenty two bodies, the decision to inter them in the lowest of the rock-carved cellars had been the most sensible option – others had been burned on pyres like the one which still poured its greasy smokes into the skies above Market Square, but the Lady Temis had refused outright to allow her daughter to be taken by the flame.

The room was small, its new alcoves hastily chiselled into the walls. Nine of them were long and flat, the others smaller – wide and deep enough to accommodate a crouching body.

Even in death, Tuuke thought, *we differ from the Servants.*

To make sure the bodies were securely interred, each alcove was to be bricked up individually. Later, all but a small corner of the room would be walled off with a thick curtain of stone; the Governor intended to add a small memorial to Arbelle in the accessible area when the work could be commissioned, alongside curse-warnings for future generations.

Tuuke had been working so hard and for so long that he had difficulty remembering what time it was – had it really been only sixteen days since the contract ceremony?

And yet he could feel the immediate crisis was passing. A dozen people had died across the city overnight: more people were surviving as healers and the Temples learned how to treat the symptoms of the sick. No new cases had been reported in the past two days. He had survived – God alone knew why as he was not a particularly religious man. The only ward he wore was the one his mother had given him the last time he had visited her. So many people taken – almost as if selected for suffering by the roll of bony dice.

Or maybe it was the survivors who had been selected for suffering, he decided. Satisfied that the workers knew what they were doing, he took a torch and headed through passageways towards the light and safety of the ground above. The immediate crisis may be passing, but the deadliest poisons, he reminded himself, were often carried in the tail.

Lord Gelleris had ordered a general meeting, to take place in the New Temple on Market Square. When Tuuke had told him – shouted to him, more accurately – the news that the plague seemed to be passing, he had decided to risk allowing the barriers on the gates of the internal city walls to be lifted. People had stopped dying, he had announced, but the city itself remained very sick. When Tuuke had first arrived in the city he had considered the Governor's belief – that the city was as much alive as the people within its walls – strange. Ten years of living in Bassakesh, he was not so sure the Governor was mad.

People would need to work long and hard to bring the city back to health – if it was given a chance. *Though some people in the Empire might prefer a different outcome,* he thought.

It was this second concern that had persuaded the Governor to hold a more informal conference in the reception rooms before they went to the Temple. Decisions had to be made, arrangements set in place. Clan business. Tuuke had been invited because, as far as the Governor was concerned, he was part of the Clan.

He could see as he passed through tunnels and rooms that conditions in the Governor's House had been as bad, in some ways, as in the Western Quarter. Seventy people had been in the citadel when the order had gone out to barricade every gate and impose curfew across the city. Twenty two were dead, a further dozen still ill. The Ladies Temis and Delesse had survived the plague, as had Temis's Servant, Maeduul. Some of the losses would be keenly felt – for instance Tabeed, who had run the whole complex. The quality of the food would also suffer: Yupten, the Governor's cook, had been one of the best food-mages in the city, if not the province.

One of the deaths had not been due to the plague. Nobody would say anything to Tuuke, but there were whispers that Lord Gelleris had personally thrown his astrologer out of the top window of the Bell Tower. Velledue had gone crazy, they said, kidnapped the Governor's young son, Igell. Tuuke had already decided that this was one matter he wasn't going to investigate – the man's name had been included on the list of plague victims, though Gelleris had ordered that the body be laid out in its alcove naked and face down – no wards would help guide Velledue's spirit to God's forgiveness.

He reached the family kitchens at a rush, taking the steps three at a time. An old dish-rag slung in a sink served for a face cloth – he was late for the conference already, and didn't have time to change his clothes. The family would have to accept him as he presented himself on this occasion. He took the steps to the reception rooms at a more sedate pace – two at a time – so he would not be too out of breath when he arrived.

The room had been set up with a ring of chairs around three mismatched desks in the middle of the carpet. All the doors were open to the veranda overlooking the Fountain Courtyard. As he had expected he was the last to arrive.

'So no messages have mentioned plague?'

The Governor was questioning the Beloved Courtesan. As Tuuke settled into the last spare chair, he could see that the crisis had not been kind to the Lady Feyn.

'The Temple Elder himself sat by the Mechanism, slept in the room when his tiredness forced him to hand over to his senior acolyte. They've monitored the aether continuously for messages. If there is plague in the other jungle cities, then nobody – nobody at all – is broadcasting the fact. And neither did we, Gelleris.'

'What did we say?'

The woman's face was lined by tiredness and pain. Tuuke had himself witnessed her first act when she left the Governor's House to aid the city: she had stripped naked in the Market Square and walked into the Temple to have the acolytes scourge her as an atonement to God's punishment. That single act had brought the entire Market Quarter under her control, though it had cost her dear in blood and scars.

'We sent messages that there had been an accident at the docks. We advised traders and other boats to stay away as we repaired the damage. Not that there's been much traffic on the river over the past couple of weeks.'

'We sent our daily reports, too?'

'Yes, cousin. As far as the Old City is concerned – as far as he is concerned – there is nothing untoward happening here. He frets, nevertheless. He wonders why I'm delayed here.'

'What did you tell him, sister?' To Tuuke's eyes, the Lady Temis looked as careworn and tired as Feyn, though by all accounts she was much improved since her recovery. She was wearing an old gown, having insisted on chiselling the last of the rock from her daughter's alcove. Beside her legs, almost hidden under the low tables, little Igell was crouched with Maeduul, the Servant, playing. He could hear the boy gently humming to himself.

'I told him the truth – that is I told him you had invited me to stay here for a couple of weeks. It's been a long time since I've had the chance to spend time with my family.'

Temis smiled. 'I wish that your words to him were honest as well as true.'

'I said I would look out for you. You've heard this morning's news from the Old City, Gelleris?'

The Governor shook his head.

'He's ordered the blockade of Petezbarre to be lifted.'

Tuuke sat up in his chair, which Feyn noticed immediately. 'You look concerned, Guardsman – is this not good news?'

'Beloved Courtesan,' he began. 'Yes, I think it is good news, but ... was there any indication about where the Clades were being sent?'

Feyn was suddenly as alert as him. 'They have access to their own Mechanisms, yes? No, don't answer: I know they do. Stupid, stupid old woman!' she chided to herself.

Tuuke nodded. 'It's as much my fault, Beloved Courtesan. I should have reminded you – I should have gone to the Temple myself to make sure! They use their own frequencies rather than the warded bands ...'

'And the priests would not think to check for messages beyond the customary frequencies.' She finished his sentence for him. 'Superstitious old fools! Do we have any juice, Delesse? I can't think on a dry throat!'

Delesse, unlike her mother, had chosen to dress for the occasion, having found a laundered luncheon suit from the recesses of her wardrobe. She patted Loken's arm as she rose to look for drinks.

'Perhaps I can go ...'

Tuuke had met Assen, Devisek's wife, a few times, though he did not know her well. She and her son, Sektas, completed the circle. Neither looked comfortable: Sektas seemed overawed by the company; Assen, meanwhile, seemed to be on the verge of tears. He remembered that Devisek was one of the last to succumb to the plague; he'd overheard Assen say he was too far gone into the fevers to have been told that his mother, Moesser, had been one of the last victims.

'That's very kind of you, dear,' said Feyn. 'But do come back quickly; we will all need your advice. Devisek told me there were no secrets between you.'

Assen curtsied awkwardly and hurried after Delesse. Tuuke gave the lad sat next to him a wink from the side of his eye, hoping the sign would be enough to calm his obvious worry.

'So tell me, Tuuke,' said Feyn. 'What do you think the Emperor's ordering his loyal troops to do?'

'I don't know,' he answered. 'To second guess their movements is almost certainly to guess wrong. But the Tenth was stationed in Towes Ferhe waiting to be relieved by the Fifteenth, and the Second rotated to Kantagwafe just before first solstice.'

He pinched tiredness from the bridge of his nose before continuing. 'The blockade was being enforced by the First, Third and – Twelfth?' Feyn nodded her agreement to his recollection of facts. 'Well, they'll be moving in the next couple of days. The Fifth, Ninth, Fourteenth and Sixteenth are, I think, in Stal. The Seventh are in Towes Whate. Another five Clades are up in the north country – too far away to bother us.'

'So who can bother us?' This question came from the Governor.

'Let's assume that the other jungle cities have lied as much as we have in their daily reports. That ties both the Tenth and Second down. The four Clades in the Old City are more likely to head for Viyame in the first instance. The Seventh could come up from the south, but there's a dozen settlements between them and us which would need to be checked out. I don't think we need to worry about the Petezbarre Clades for a few days.'

'Which just leaves your old friend,' said Feyn. 'Commander Behin and the Fifteenth.'

'And I don't know where he is.'

When he stopped talking, nobody volunteered to fill the silence with more questions. Sektas beside him had visibly whitened; Loken, opposite him, still looked sullen after their conversation the previous night. Temis had bent down to check on Igell beneath the table. The Governor and Feyn were staring at the papers sprawled in front of them.

'We need more information.' Loken's observation was offered in a flat tone. The Governor nodded his agreement.

'Some of the Fifteenth are still here, with us,' said Feyn, referring to the soldiers who had been left behind to act as her personal bodyguard. 'How many managed to survive the past two weeks?'

'Eighteen, I think,' said Tuuke. 'Two are dead, two more recovering. The rest were spared the imps' sweetest gifts.'

'It should be enough.'

'For what, sister?' Temis sounded hesitant, as if she feared what Feyn might be planning.

'I can't stay here, Temis. You know how he gets when I'm away for too long. In any case, a contract is not a marriage until it's been consummated.'

Temis's stare was low and hard, as if she was trying to peel back her sister's face to see the thoughts and plans beneath it.

'I've lost one daughter. Now you wish to steal the other?'

'Not steal, sister. Save! Until I can get back to him, I won't be able to influence his decisions. If – when – word gets out that plague stalks through the jungle cities his advisors and courtiers will say and do anything to have him set the Clades to scrubbing the jungles clean. You know this! You

know what they're like. I can stop those orders, but only if I'm with him.'

'With who?' asked Delesse. She and Assen had returned bearing glasses and jars of fruit. They set the trays in the centre of the table, trusting people to serve themselves, before settling back into their chairs.

Feyn ignored her, her concentration focussed entirely on Temis.

'I hear you, Feyn,' said Temis. 'But that's not reason enough to take Delesse and Loken with you.'

Feyn leant forward, placing her arms on the table. 'Temis. You do not understand how strong his desire is to thwart those who would replace him. He has sworn an oath to God the Vengeful to destroy any family or Clan that threatens his plans for your daughter and her betrothed. They will be safe with me! But if we sit here and let the advisors work on him, eventually they will persuade him – that his plans have displeased God, that he must atone for his hubris, whatever they can come up with to convince him.

'He's old, Temis. If we are still here if – when – that happens, then we are dead!'

The silence that followed Feyn's speech was finally broken by the Gelleris: 'How are you going to travel, cousin?'

'Upriver to Viyame – he has an estate beyond that city's walls. Then east along the high road to Stal. Yes,' she raised her hand to stop the outburst already forming on Temis's lips. 'I know it is dangerous. The idiot who governs Viyame is likely to fire on us as soon as he sees us, but he won't see us. We'll leave the river before it reaches the bridge and cut through the jungle to the estate. From there we'll have carriages and horses. And if the Clades are moving along the road, it's unlikely they'll attack us. Especially as we'll have an honour guard of the Fifteenth Clade's finest soldiers accompanying us.'

Temis managed to control her anger by reaching across the table and pouring juice into some glasses. Tuuke could see that it was taking all of her willpower to stop herself screaming. Yet by the time she settled back into her chair and handed a glass of juice to her husband, her courtly training had overcome her emotions. Her face was a blank mask, her mouth small and relaxed. She nodded her head slowly towards the Beloved Courtesan to signal her – reluctant – acquiescence.

Tuuke liked the plan, though he had some worries. He waited as other people reached for their drinks before speaking.

'Beloved Courtesan, if I may?'

'Please, Guardsman. Speak! I assume you have some refinements to make to the arrangements?'

'Not refinements as such, Beloved Courtesan, but rather some considerations that I think you should take into account.'

'And they are?'

'Firstly, Lord Loetopas and what remains of the Clan Arallo convoy. When they left, they headed upriver. Loetopas has many days advantage over you.'

Feyn considered this point. 'We all know he was upset when he left – the damage to the Riverside Quarter is testament to that! But he only took two boats, and left half of his mercenaries standing on the docks.' She took a sip of her juice. 'Why do you think he can be a danger to us?'

'He has an incentive, Beloved Courtesan. It is essential that he persuades the Emperor to turn the Clades on us.'

'Go on.'

'It is the only way he can destroy the evidence of his crimes, and the crimes of his brother, against this city and the Empire.'

'That,' said Gelleris, glancing over at his future son-in-law, 'is a very serious charge, Guardsman. Can you substantiate it?'

He, too, turned to look at Loken. 'Tell the Governor what you told me last night, lad.'

Evidently, Loken had been preparing for this moment. He stood and bowed, first to the Beloved Courtesan and then to the Governor. Then he took a deep breath, and started.

'Beloved Courtesan. Please understand that had I known what my father and uncle were

planning, I would never have come here. There would have been more honour for me to be taken to work as a slave on the Istran plantations. That,' he offered them a rueful smile, 'could still be my fate. But knowing what I know now, I've tried to make what amends I can, with my service to this city in its most desperate hour. I chose to stay and fight the plague rather than escape with my uncle.'

'We know this, Loken,' said Feyn. 'Tell us what you know.'

'I insisted that Sheslan, my friend, should come with me for the contract ceremony. My father was not pleased, but in the end he agreed. We shared a cabin until our boat joined the rest of the convoy. When my uncle discovered that you were part of the convoy, he wanted to abandon Sheslan – it would dishonour the Clan, he told me, to have a commoner perform such an important role in the ceremony in the presence of the Beloved Courtesan.'

'I defied him. He finally agreed that Sheslan could continue with us – he was given accommodation on the supplies boat and told to stay out of your sight for the rest of the journey.'

'The next time I saw my friend was on the morning of the ceremony when he came to my room to collect his finery. The day before the supplies boat had caught fire – naturally I asked him about it, but he seemed upset. Looking back, it's clear to me that he was suffering from the early stages of the plague.'

Tuuke could see that even with all his will concentrated on telling the story, Loken was beginning to let the emotions of that meeting colour his voice.

'This fact is true, Beloved Courtesan,' he said, mainly to give the lad an opportunity to recover his equilibrium. 'On the morning of the contract ceremony Tabeed – the Governor's housekeeper – came to me with concerns about Sheslan. He had been sneezing all morning, and for a while he and the Lady Arbelle waited in the school room together. Also, Lord Loetopas had arranged for a pig to be delivered to the kitchens; Tabeed told me the animal was diseased. In this matter, she was quicker than I was to make the association between the pig, the man and the journey the Arallo convoy had taken – sailing past Petezbarre.'

'Unfortunately she is not here to take credit for her insight,' said Temis. 'What did your friend tell you, Loken?'

'He told me he had shared a berth with two soldiers – cadets. Their job was to make sure nobody approached the cabin at the end of the boat, which had been locked and covered in wards. Only Commander Jassael was to approach, and for most of the journey he never bothered them.'

'That was until the day before we docked here. That evening Jassael came down and dismissed the cadets. Then he sent Sheslan into the cabin – to check that "the special gifts" were okay.'

'Special gifts?' This question came from the Governor.

'Sheslan told me what he saw. The room was a midden – filthy. Half a dozen chickens were dead in their coops, grain was strewn across the floor mixed in with pig-shit. The pig, he said, looked fine – it had plenty of food. There was also two bodies. He couldn't tell how long they had been dead: the walls were covered with salted hand-squid nailed to the planking, enough to cover the smell.'

'On Jassael's direct orders, he checked the bodies. Moved them back onto the bunks. The pig had eaten their faces away. But he could tell they ... he could tell they were Servants because of ...'

The mention of Servants had brought the head of Maeduul up from under the table where she had been encouraging Igell to drink some juice. Again, Tuuke intervened to give the lad time to compose himself.

'This, too, is fact, Beloved Courtesan. After the fire we found two burned bodies downstream – a man and a woman – even though Lord Loetopas and Commander Jassael insisted there had been no fatalities. While the bodies were badly charred, the tattoo on one of the hands had survived. They were the property of Clan Arallo, from the Petezbarre household.'

Feyn smiled tightly. 'I knew you had found the bodies, Guardsman, and your suspicions of what they meant. Behin told me before he left.'

'He told you, Beloved Courtesan?'

'Yes, he told me. You put the man in a nasty position, which he solved by reporting his suspicions to me – as the representative of the Emperor.'

'So he never broadcast that information?'

'I told him I would pass the news on. Which I certainly will do, in due course – not to report such a suspicion is treason, yes?'

Loken was staring at her with his eyes wide open. 'Is that why you and the Lady Temis treated my uncle so – indelicately?'

'When he lunched with us? Yes, Loken. As you can now see, we had our reasons.'

'We assumed he were plotting something,' added Temis. 'What we didn't know was whether you were aware of the plan.'

Loken looked down at the table, nodding. 'I can understand, Beloved Courtesan. I curse my stupidity for keeping my suspicions to myself when I should have shared them with you, and the Governor, much earlier.'

'The one thing I don't understand,' said Feyn, 'is why? Why did your uncle send Sheslan among us? What does he, and your father, hope to gain from this disaster?'

For the first time since their exploration of the Western Quarter, Tuuke saw the ghost of a smile pass across Loken's face.

'Beloved Courtesan,' Loken answered, 'I don't believe my uncle knew what was going to happen. It was him who ordered the deadly cabin be torched. Sheslan told me this, because he was the one tasked with carrying out the order.'

'Cleanse the curse in the flames of righteous supplication,' murmured Temis, quoting the liturgy of the executioners as they thrust their torches into the killing pyre.

'And yet he brought the sick Servants here.' Feyn leaned back from the table. 'His intent was treasonous, even if he chose to destroy the danger before unleashing it.'

'There might still be time to honour the lives of those poor Servants, *luetsa-ten*.' The words had come from Maeduul, now standing next to Temis. 'They did not ask to bear this calamity to our city.'

Tuuke shook his head. 'The bodies are gone – they were among the first to be burned in Market Square.'

'Isn't that destroying evidence?' asked the Governor. 'If ever you're going to accuse Loetopas of treason, you'll need more than just our words.'

'I ordered it,' said Feyn. 'Loetopas's treason is now known, and can be dealt with in due course. And I don't consider Clan Arallo to be a major concern for our journey back to the Old City. Do you have any other "considerations" for us, Guardsman?'

'Yes, Beloved Courtesan, I do.' He reached out to the centre of the table and collected a glass half-full of juice, drank it back in two gulps before continuing.

'Governor, my deepest apologies, but I have not fully complied with your order to lift the barricades between the city quarters.'

'Tell me more,' Gelleris said.

'Yesterday I became concerned that the Western Quarter was – quieter – than I would have expected. I led a search party into the Quarter after sundown. As a consequence of what we discovered, I've kept the gates to the Quarter barricaded.'

'I'm sure you have good reason, Guardsman.'

'It appears, Sir, that the Servants in that Quarter have left the city – three days ago, if my information is correct.'

'Enlighten me, Guardsman,' said Feyn. 'Why exactly is this a concern for us? If the Servants chose to die in the jungles then that is a matter for their owners, yes?'

'It's the scale of the desertion, Beloved Courtesan, that worries me. The assessment of numbers is rough, but I believe that most of the Servants in the Quarter were owned by the city, and most of those who survived the plague have gone. Which amounts to somewhere between one and two thousand Servants.'

'Why?' Feyn was struggling to keep her composure. 'Maeduul?'

The tiny woman was still standing next to Temis's chair, which she was gripping hard, her head hung down – though not in shame, he thought. The news seemed to anger her in some way.

'*Hosha-ten* – do you know what's going on?' Temis reached up to take hold of her Servant's hand.

'Oh – stupid, stupid. Stupid! What are those idiots doing!'

Tuuke was glad to see that he wasn't the only one startled to hear Maeduul use such a harsh, sharp voice. Temis was openly staring at her, while Feyn had brought up her hand to cover her mouth.

'Maeduul,' he said quickly. 'Tell me what those "idiots" are doing. Anything you know – it could help us, help Lady Delesse and Lady Feyn. What do you know?'

When Maeduul looked up, she looked directly at him. And the face he saw was not of a deformed little toy-human, but rather the stare of a woman who was both wise and angry.

'Guardsmen, I too must apologise. I thought I could carry out his orders without the need for bloodshed and strife. Understand that it is not the Servant way to kill your enemies; rather it is preferable to bring them to their senses or, if that fails, to minimise the damage they may cause.

'I acted as I did because I believed you would have killed her.'

'Kill who?' he asked. But he knew who, as soon as the words were out of his mouth.

Maeduul ignored his question. She had already turned her attention to the Beloved Courtesan.

'Lady, you gave me words, from him. "*The Burning Woman must die*," he said. And after we watched her die in the big square all those years ago, with me on his leash, we talked about her, about what her words and curses meant. He understood that she was not calling for the destruction of his Empire, but rather for the destruction of those things that bind together and tear apart Servants and Tall Ones within the Empire.

'If the Burning Woman must die, then the things that are likely to fulfil her prophesy must die, yes? Ownership must die; secrecy must die. The farming of folk such as myself – must die. The stories need to be told openly, without fear of punishment, so that we can all reclaim a common understanding of the world around us.

'He said to me, on the night before he gifted me to Lady Temis, that when the time came to end these wrongs he would send me a message. He did what he could – this city is an example of how things can change. I, too, agreed that I would do whatever I could to convince those who Serve to grow in new directions.'

She looked round the room at the variety of expressions her words had caused. To Loken, she said with a smile: 'Does it surprise you that a little doll can bargain with a king?' But when she returned her gaze to Feyn the smile was gone as quickly as it appeared.

'He waited too long to send his message, Lady. Things happen. The Burning Woman is no longer an idea that needs to be tamed and used for the benefit of all. She has been made flesh: the quest for separation, freedom to some, has a heart again; its skin is free of blisters – or at least that is what a lot of Servants now believe.

'The Servants have gone into the jungles because those who control the Burning Woman have led them there.'

'She was here?' The question shot from Tuuke's mouth without thought. 'The Burning Woman was here and you knew about it?'

Maeduul took a second to compose her answer.

'No, Guardsman. The Burning Woman died forty years ago, executed over a pyre in Stal. Since that time her ideas have grown to fruit, the seeds putting forth a wealth of new thoughts. People here ...' she nodded towards the Governor '... have helped some better ideas take root, yes?'

Tuuke stayed silent, nodded his head once to acknowledge the information.

'But there's other settlements in the jungle – Servant settlements ...'

'So I've heard,' said Tuuke. 'I heard they were all destroyed.'

'Sometimes, Guardsman, I wish it was so. Beyond the walls of cities and settlements the words of the Burning Woman have taken on new meanings. Those lost Servants, they've discovered

a different harvest, a new Burning Woman - or rather a reincarnation of the old one ... '

She turned to look at Feyn, then at Temis.

'She's a child, *luetsa-ten*. I couldn't kill her. I told myself I had to do it, but I couldn't take a knife to the little one's throat ... I'm sorry!'

The Gods in the Jungle

Shapeis had told Julyeis of Kebezzu's plans when they finally met up again. He was walking with a limp, his foot bandaged with rough linen within his heel-strapped sandal. The girl was perched on his hip, apparently dozing.

'Is the woman mad?' she'd exclaimed. 'Viame is over two hundred kilometres away – fifteen day's walking with a good pace – and most of us can barely cover ten kilometres a day.'

'I don't understand distances, Julyeis,' he'd answered. 'I understand putting one foot in front of the other.'

'What did you do to your foot?'

'Blisters. A man I met looked at them for me, gave me some cream to rub on them. They're beginning to heal, I think.'

The surroundings were monotonous, tree trunk after branchless tree trunk, each spiralling into the canopy above them, as if they walked through an endless hall of pillars. The ground was covered in detritus, but there was almost no underbrush to impede their progress, and little variation on the flatness of the land: it was level; it went on.

'She asks too much, that woman. She abused our hospitality; all those secret meetings, secret plots and plans.'

'She believes in the goodness of what she does. She did save us from the city's fate.'

'No such thing as fate, lad,' she had snapped, irritated by Shapeis's willingness to comply with other people's orders. 'The city could well be fine.'

'Or it could already be fiery cinders and broken stones. We can't go back.'

'Do you believe in her?'

His silence had been all she needed to hear.

That was, what, two days ago? She had lost sight of him soon after they talked: she couldn't keep up with the pace the ferals set. She didn't like the ferals much, she decided; they acted as arrogantly as the Tall Ones, ordering people to do this or do that. Hurry! Walk faster! Most of the ones she had seen didn't seem to have tattoos, which bothered her – how could they demonstrate their Service to the Creator if they didn't have it marked on their skin?

She walked as fast as she could while taking care not to exhaust herself. There was a group of them now, those who were older or disabled in some way; they kept together as they lagged behind, always arriving at the resting places as the last of the food was being served.

Much of their conversation was confused, questioning of those who claimed to be saving them. These were people who may have gone to one of Kebezzu's meetings, but the passionate flame of freedom had not scorched their stomachs. They had left the city because everyone they knew was leaving the city. And at first it made sense to Julyeis that she, too, abandon her life for some dream she didn't really understand.

She thought often of her owner, Varoul, as she walked.

Varoul's death, like his life, had been querulous, loud, begrudging. He'd let her into his room the last time he stood on his feet, and she had nursed him for his final pair of days as he mewled like a kitten and cursed God, her, and every living thing between his gasping, dry coughing fits. She could have done no more.

With each step away from the city the realisation within her grew: even if it was not love, she had been fond of the old fool. She missed the comfort of his occasional caresses, missed his voice, his smell. His habit of clearing his nostrils with the nail of his little finger as he checked over

the accounts each morning. She missed the routine of it all.

Maybe he had loved her, she thought, in his own way. He'd spent the best part of a year persuading her to allow him to buy her registration from the city authorities.

Every step taken, every tall trunk passed, added an extra drop of resentment to the puddle – pond, lake – of mistrust that was filling up within her skin. Kebezzu and her ferals had taken away the walls of her life, her history, but for what purpose? For whose freedom?

She knew she was being irrational, but she had no one else to ...

'Watch out!'

Screams erupted around her, bringing her eyes back to the now. The people ahead of her were turning back, running towards her, semaphoring their sudden fear with white rings around their widened eyes.

'What's going on? What's wrong?'

People were pushing those closer to her back, dozens of bodies closing together like a flash flood. As the crush reached her she fought against the rush, clawed her way to the edge of the stream.

'Run!' someone shouted at her. Inside her head she heard something snap, like a twig in the fire. She refused – refused! – to be ordered anymore, by anyone! Instead she stood her ground, began to work her way forwards towards the source of the disturbance.

Arms grabbed at her, hands clasping to rescue her from her madness. She shook them off. And then they were gone and she stood in the clear. She didn't realise she had been holding her breath within her chest, not until she saw it. When she exhaled, her words flowed with the escaping air, unbidden.

'Oh, you are beautiful!'

She had always imagined that the jungle cats were bigger. This one's head would reach to the height of her hip, she supposed. Its eyes were large and green, the colour of fresh lettuce; its coat was a complex mixture of black stripes and swirls and rings across a tawny-grey-cream background. Its nose, she noticed, was pink – contrasting strongly to the darker hue of the arm it held in its jaws.

She didn't know the victim well – one of the old women who had walked with her on occasion. She was undoubtedly dead: the angle of her head hanging from her shoulders made that clear. Strangely, she could see no blood.

'Run, you stupid bitch! They hunt in pairs!'

It was one of the feral Servants, charging back down the path they had been following. The cat ignored him, continued hauling on the arm. She could see the play of muscles beneath its pelt, and could even count its ribs as it laboured to breathe with flesh in its maw.

And then its head exploded.

For a moment, her ears went numb. People were shuffling back now, pushing each other forward to see what had happened. The man with the gun was moving his arms up and down, signalling in hand speech for people to be quiet, but it must have been a futile order: the first sounds that came back to her abused ears were those of shocked exclamations and loud chatter.

Someone pulled on the cuff of her shirt, an older man – she recognised him as someone she had talked to earlier that morning. His face was a mixture of fear and awe; his mouth a blur of words. She brought her fists up to the sides of her head to make the sign of deafness. He understood, switching immediately to gestures.

'What were you thinking?' he signed. 'Were you planning to tackle the beast with your bare hands?'

She ignored the question. 'Who was she?'

'Ealle – that was her name. I knew her. Oh, what a merciless garden the Creator has given us to tend!'

The man with the gun had walked up to the corpses and was busy signalling to people to keep quiet, keep their distance.

'What's he doing? Why has he got a gun?'

'Haven't you heard? There was an attack this morning, so they say – a beast took a child, carried her off into the jungle. They've been looking for her all morning, just in case – well, you know how cats like to play ...'

'The same beast?'

'I don't know. Could be, could be.' He gave her a quizzical look: 'Why didn't you run, woman?'

She summoned one of her haughty stares: 'I'm not a goat, to be scared by a kitten!'

He shook his loose hands at angles to show his mirth. 'You're going to do well in this new life of ours, I think. Such courage! Here,' he turned to signal to the man by the bodies. 'Give this woman your gun: she can protect us laggards better than you!'

General laughter seeped through the buzzing in her ears. She decided to help the feral man out, holding up her forefingers and stretching her arms out and down: 'quiet!' Other ferals were coming back down the track now, signalling for folk to start walking again. Reluctantly, a few people complied, drawing the others behind them like day-old scum plucked from the top of a milk jar.

Julyeis ignored them. Instead she approached the dead woman and the cat she had so admired a few bare minutes before.

'Are you truly stupid, woman?'

The man had spoken to her: his hands were occupied with the task of moving the bodies. She heard his voice, and understood him – a good sign, she decided. She didn't enjoy being deaf.

'Stupid?' she said out loud. 'Yes, probably I am. But then I remember being told that there was little to fear from the jungle – that the stories about deadly demons and man-eating cats were lies told by the Tall Ones to keep us Servants within the city walls ...'

With an effort she brought her reflex anger under control. 'What are we going to do with her body? Can we bury her here?'

A hint of boredom seemed to have crept into the angles of the man's eyes. 'Was she a cousin? A friend of yours?'

She shook her head. 'No, but respect makes friends of us all.'

'The only respect we need,' he said, 'comes out of the end of this barrel.' He stood up and patted his weapon. 'We need to keep you all safe, but you're making it difficult for us – so get walking and try to catch up with the rest of us, yes?'

'I appreciate your concern, really, but ...'

The feral man snorted: 'You people are beyond belief!' Behind her, the crowd of people who had ignored the order to continue walking began to argue with him. She silenced them with a glance over her shoulder.

'She needs to be buried – that's the least we can do for her.'

'We don't have time.'

Julyeis considered this for a moment. 'So either we carry her body to a place where we can find time to bury her, or,' she counted out the second point on her finger, 'we leave her body here and carry on walking. Yes?'

The man stood up straight and faced her, his weapon cuddled to his chest. Seeing him so closely, she realised he was younger than Shapeis. 'Listen,' he said. 'It's gone midday and you're nine kilometres away from the next rest stop. If you want to live, walk!'

She could feel anger simmering in the pit of her stomach. 'No. If we fail to give this poor woman the decency of a grave, then we're no better than that cat. Animals.'

He shrugged at her. 'Carry her or bury her: be my guest. I don't have time to argue with idiot slave-heads like you. As for the rest of you,' he raised his voice to the small crowd, 'if you know what's good for you, you'll walk faster. There will be no food for those not willing to put in the effort to serve the Burning Woman's cause!'

She watched him walk off. Around her, the crowd murmured and shuffled. Then the old man who had spoken to her earlier put his hand onto her shoulder.

'He's right, you know. We can't survive without food. And we can't bury her here – the

grounds too rocky, see?' Others were nodding at his words, and soon enough they were walking after the young feral, a few patting her shoulder or arm as they passed.

She watched them leave, knowing that if she argued she'd start shouting. The boy with the gun had called her an "idiot-slavehead", and while she had never heard such words before, she had a fair idea what he meant by them.

If I'm to be a mad woman, she thought to herself, then a mad woman is what I'll be.

She moved, finally, bent down towards the dead woman to check her body, close her eyelids. She reached under the body and straightened her back, her arms hooked under the corpse's armpits.

But the woman, old and small and frail as she had been, was too heavy for her to carry on her own. It took all of Julyeis's energy to drag the still-warm flesh a couple of dozen metres away from the trail and set it – her – down besides one of the impossibly tall trees. Then she fell down onto her knees beside it and cried.

The outburst of sobs was so sudden she didn't realise what was happening to her until she felt the tears gathering on the angle of her chin. She never cried like this, she thought, not since she was a child. Why was she crying now?

Alongside the tears came other thoughts: fragments of images and words spiralling through her head, confusing her, unbalancing her.

What's happening to me?

A reflex of dignity took hold of her, forcing her lungs and throat to control her wails, silence them from whoever might hear: she had to be strong.

That thought lodged itself at the front of her head, between her eyes – she could feel its shape. *Have to be strong. Have to be strong.*

The exercise of repeating the phrase within her mind, over and over again, began to calm her. Slowly the riot of fragments began to settle; tears flowed more slowly from her eyes.

Looking around, she saw she had dragged the corpse to the far side of a wide-boled tree, blocking the sight of them both from whoever was walking past on the trail.

She waited a while before attempting to move again. She might have heard voices – more stragglers and laggards to vex the patience of the feral men and women and their guns and bullets. She let them go, let herself rest on her hands and knees, fists grasped into the thin soil around the tree's roots, and as time passed there were fewer voices, if there had been voices, until the voices merged with the chatter of the canopy above.

'I must be strong,' she whispered to herself. 'I must be strong.'

Far above her, the monotonous drone of the canopy wildlife quietened, to be replaced by the sound of rainfall.

She was thirsty, but no drops of rain fell to the ground near her. She remembered there was a bag strapped to her back: everybody had to carry supplies. She loosened the belt around her waist and eased the sack from her shoulders. Methodically, she took out every item and laid them across the broad hump of root against which she had rested the corpse of the old woman: cassava flour wrapped in waxed cloth; a handful of strands of sundried pork; half a dozen hand-squid, their tentacles frozen in saline supplication; a knife; a second knife, blunter than the first, strapped inside a small earthenware bowl; a reel of string and a round of cloth, for bandages she supposed – she couldn't remember. A cream of some sort: its odour suggested it was for external use only. A double hand-span of yam root, unprocessed and thus useless to her.

No juice. No fruit. No water.

She stood up. The action made her feel dizzy – she felt Mara-Gaye's veil cross her sight for a couple of seconds while her blood caught up with her head. Blood, she thought. She could drink its blood. She stretched, then picked out the bowl and the sharper knife and went looking for the cat.

She found it where it had been left, by the side of the trail. The head was a dripping mess of bone and flesh, but the body was as she had remembered it – the beautiful pelt a shimmer of blacks and browns. She knelt down beside it, stroked the fur backwards and forwards, mourning the loss of

its heat.

'So much death,' she whispered. 'Too much death ...'

She knew the blood would not be fresh, but still she sought for the veins in the neck and pressed her knife home. A trickle of liquid bloomed across the pelt. She positioned the cut over the bowl and waited, then pressed down on the beast's chest to try and force more of it out of the artery. When the bowl was half-full she brought it to her lips and sipped at the thick juice.

There was nobody else around. No human sound rose above the percussion of rain on leaf and branch. She stared at the track her companions had made through the detritus, wondered how far ahead of her they had got. Maybe no more than a couple of kilometres? They were not fast walkers, the laggards, and there was always just enough food left for them when they reached the resting stops. The salt in the blood reminded her of how hungry she was.

'So, I've got myself two companions. Both dead.'

She hadn't forgotten her desire to bury the woman – what was the point of shooting the cat if they then left the woman's body to be scavenged? Surely a shot in the air would have been enough to scare it away?

She considered the cat, stroked its fur flat. All the stories she had heard of the Laoma wildcats spoke of their great size. She remembered Maeduul once telling the story of Rakh and Rawl, the Princes of the cat folk, and how Mara-Gaye had bargained with them to help the People Village overcome an infestation of rats. '*Cats are too big,*' Maeduul had said, '*to worry about rats – when they sit before you they can rest their chins on your shoulder!*' So Rawl had found some cats bored of eating goats (and who could blame them, she thought), who agreed to bathe in the purest of the waters flowing from the Roof of the World. The water shrunk them, and then they came to live with Mara-Gaye, ridding the village of rats within a week.

The memory of the story brought an old, small smile to her face.

This cat was not big enough. Either it was the runt of the litter, she reasoned, or it was not fully grown. And now as she considered the evidence, she realised that she hadn't seen any goats in these woods either, nor signs of goats. What was there for one of those strange animals to eat in these woody halls? Not even a goat could live on rough bark and dead leaves. The wildcats went where the goats went – which meant that this cat was not where it was supposed to be.

Her conclusion comforted her a little. The feral man had said something about cats hunting in pairs, but she doubted whether this one had had a companion. It must have been very hungry to attack a group of people, she decided.

She had other decisions to make. For a start, she still needed water – the saltiness of the blood had caught on the sides of her tongue, not assuaging her thirst. Then she needed to do something with the woman. These smaller problems helped her delay the big decision: in which direction would she walk?

The first problem was solved for her when she moved back to look at the body. As she steadied herself on the bole of the tree, she felt a slick dampness skirt around her fingers. She looked for an indent in the bark in which she could slot the rim of her bowl, hoping that the water running from the canopy to the roots of the tree would divert itself. Long minutes passed as she watched the vessel fill. It took her four gulps to drink the collected liquid; she barely noticed the woody, sour taste.

As she repeated the process, she looked around more critically at the ground. The old man had been right, she decided. The floor of the forest was mainly dead leaves and brittle branches, seed pod husks. She dug her toes into the soil around the tree roots, stubbing them on rock before the soil reached past her ankle.

'What am I going to do with you, woman?'

She wondered how far away she was from the river. In the earlier part of their march they had walked near the banks of the Taete as it wound its way in great loops northwards. The soil had been deeper there, she remembered; deep enough to inter a corpse, perhaps?

The plan took her away from the trail, though. She wasn't sure she wanted to leave the trail – it was the only thing that connected her to other people, either south back to the city or north,

following the laggards. What if she couldn't find the trail when she came back from the river?

She drank half of the new water collected in the bowl as she considered this conundrum, then added some of the cassava flour to the rest to make a paste. Chewed with a strip of dried pork, it made a strangely satisfying meal. She wondered if she should cut strips of meat from the cat, but decided against it: she didn't have time to prepare it, make it safe from rotting.

She could tell the sun was well advanced on its journey to the west – even within the gloom cast by the tight-laced canopy above her, the great trunks cast darker shadows. She came to a decision, packed all her provisions back into the bag. Once it was slung over her shoulders, she reached down to the woman and started dragging her back to the trail.

Dignity demanded she buried the body. She'd follow the sun, deal with finding the trail again later.

The realm of tall trees failed before the light, less than a kilometre west of the trail. As the canopy above broke into clumps, an underbrush of smaller plants began to cover the ground, decorating the soil and detritus in a jumble of purples and rusts, malachite and black: the colours of the Creator's first great work of life.

She was exhausted, and for some reason her throat was tingling.

While she had struggled to haul the woman, the body had started to settle and stiffen within itself. By the time she reached the edge of the tall tree zone her dead companion was becoming very difficult to carry or even pull behind her.

It was still raining. Clear of the canopy, the heavy drops fell straight to the ground. She dropped the body, watching it slowly tumble from its side onto its back, the hand she had used to pull it now reaching out as if waving to the clouds. Un-shouldering her backpack, she pulled out her bowl, rinsed it in the steady downpour and held it above her head to collect water. Three bowl-fulls slaked the worst of her thirst and eased the acid heat in her throat.

There was a rock nearby. She made her way over to it and sat, closed her eyes for a couple of minutes to enjoy the feel of the rain against her face, the ease of her joints at the lack of movement.

'Can't be sitting around,' she told herself. 'Things to do, Julyeis! Things to do!'

She opened her eyes and looked around her. In the near distance was a low roll of rock, stretching away from her. She could see familiar tree-forms perched around its crest, their broad, pinnate leaves waving and shaking in the rain. Looking behind her, she saw a similar, smaller hill with three, no four, of the same trees – much closer this time, less than a couple of minutes walk away.

A grove of jungle gods.

She didn't know the details of surviving the jungle, but she understood the ways of the barby rats and their trees. She fought her tiredness, forced herself to stand and investigate.

The hill behind her seemed to be an outcrop of rock, almost a small cliff, facing west. The trees were evenly spread along much of its length. Considering the scene, it occurred to her that there was space for more trees at this end of the hill. Perhaps there had been, at one time, she thought. Slowly, a plan evolved in her mind.

She climbed the low slope of rock, saw that she was right. Barby rats liked to keep their trees on rock, where they could quarry a bolt-hole for their boles. She could see the outlines of two such holes near to where she stood, the only indication that once they had each housed a barby rat tree. The nearest one seemed to be larger. Carefully, she moved out onto the level rock, keeping the living trees and her body on opposite sides of the small boulders scattered across the hill.

It was big enough, she decided. The woman – whom she had begun to hate – could be laid to rest in the hole, and then covered with some of the smaller boulders to keep the scavenging barby rats away. Checking the level of the sun, she saw she had less than an hour to complete the burial. But first she needed protection: movement in the nearest tree warned her that the guarding queen had noticed her.

She moved back off the cliff, back to the stiffening body. With a sigh, she realised there

would be no burial this evening. To bury the Servant on her back would be – wrong.

Nevertheless, she decided, the delay would give her more time to obtain the protection. These were not the little gods that lived on Bassak Hill. Their songs could well be different – she had seen the bloodshed when a person got the sequences of tones and rhythms and purrs wrong. She could spend the evening observing this grove, learning their songs – that was the safest thing to do.

A flash of light caught her eye from the west. Turning, she saw a ribbon of salmon fire in the distance – no further than a kilometre away: the reddening sun's reflection on the river. Most of it was hidden, but in a few areas the twists of the river's course left stretches of water arrowing towards her.

For the first time in more days than she cared to remember, she felt a flicker of hope beat in her chest. She wasn't dead yet!

Up close, the barby rat tree looked very intimidating: its eyes, low on the bole just above its four stumps, as wide open as its nostril cavities. She kept her approach slow – no loud movements – trusting the breeze not to change direction.

She had been right to study the song before attempting this task. These barby rats sang a subtly different melody to those that lived on Bassak Hill. She had woken before sunrise and worked her way downwind to listen to the chatter of the little princes, each trying to coax the tree to feed them. The sequence of sounds seemed the same, but the intonation was higher, more jagged. It took her a good half hour of sub-vocal practice before she felt the cadences click into her sore throat, by which time the sky had started bleaching.

She repeated the song, edged a little closer. The queens were still out foraging, leaving just the one at the far end, nearest to the intended grave, on guard duty. Most of the princes were now playing over the edge of the cliff, joining their voices to the dawn chorus.

Another step, another verse. She was almost within touching distance of the enormous beast crouched in its hole.

She felt the sun rise more than saw it: the air warmed as the first rays touched the wisps of cloud slowly processing southwards, coppering their diffuse shapes. The arrival of daylight seemed to distract the tree – she watched as it shivered its muscles along the length of its tall, helixed trunk, loosening the leaves currently wound around its core in a defensive column.

Another verse, another step closer. Slowly, gently, she reached her hand out, palm up, in an imitation of the princes' supplication. Still they eye closest to her watched her, unblinking in its gaze. But it didn't scream a warning. It couldn't smell her: all it could hear was the song; all it could see was a small queen come looking for gifts.

She touched it with a finger, stroked the baky skin slowly, crooning the song over and over again, faster now. And it responded to her! A crack at the base of the trunk where the stumps split away opened, showing the deep red flush of flesh. She eased her stroking finger towards the crack, let it rub the length of the moist sides before penetrating into the cavity beyond.

And then she felt the prize. It wiggled as she touched it, but she was quicker. She'd learned this trick as a child, learned how to whip the slug from the crevice with just the nail of her finger. When it came free, she caught hold of it in her palm, squeezing just tightly enough to prevent it squirming away.

The danger wasn't over. A new song came from her throat - similar to the first, but lower in tone, with different inflections at the end. A song of thanks, a song to say: *you have fed me, now close yourself and spread your great leaves to the heat in the sky*. The tree responded with a blink, shut the crack so the bark once more seemed seamless. Slowly, slowly she repeated the song, backing away, backing away until she was out of reach of the spines on the basal leaves.

And then she turned and scrambled away. She had to be quick now, because the other queens were somewhere in the jungle beyond the cliff. As she walked at a crouch she used her thumb nail to slit the bright red slug from top to tail, searched for the sac she needed. 'There you are,' she murmured as she brought the gritty blue tube from the entrails. She snapped it at one end and squeezed the pasty substance it contained into the palm of her hand. Using her finger she

dabbed just a little of it across her forehead, along her arms and shoulders, across her belly, her thighs and legs.

When she reached the corpse she repeated the process – as if anointing the woman. Now both of them carried the communal scent of the grove: she could lay the body to rest without triggering an attack by the queens. In fact, if they were as curious as their Bassak cousins, they would probably come and watch her work. They were dangerous buggers, but she had always had a liking for them!

In the end, it took her over two hours to manoeuvre and position the woman appropriately in her stony grave, and then place enough small rocks and boulders over her to deter the barby rats from scavenging. After the last boulder was rolled in place, she sung the dirge of the dead: *stay buried, dear heart; stay dead in your grave; keep still in the arms of oblivion*. Two queens attended the improvised funeral, sniffing the air, commenting on every part of the act.

Then Julyeis walked away to retrieve her supplies.

Her intention was to head back to the trail, follow its course through the giant hall of woody pillars towards the city. With any luck she could get back within the city walls, claim that she had been hiding in a cellar, too scared of the plague to venture out. There would probably be questions, but not many she guessed. The scale of the horror in the Western Quarter would be enough to blunt even the most inquisitive of neighbours. And Varoul, too, deserved a commemoration song.

She looked back at the glints of river as she was departing – and stopped. Was there a boat on the river? She couldn't be sure: the water was a fair distance away, and her elevation here was not great enough to gain detail. But there was definitely something on the river, a dark slash on the silver water close to one of the banks – the near bank, she realised.

It took her moments to discard her plan and start walking downhill towards the river and the life that floated upon it.

Boats on the Taete

Delesse was counting the days, or rather recounting them. Since the moment of boarding the boat she had felt queasy. She let people believe she was suffering from motion sickness. But deep in her thoughts she could imagine other possible causes – causes she did not want to confront.

She had been given a spacious cabin aboard the Emperor's pleasure boat, almost as large as the Beloved Courtesan's, which lay opposite hers. Loken had been assigned a room at the opposite end of the boat: *'we have to maintain decorum, dear, even in this most testing of seasons,'* her aunt had told her.

The rest of the crew included the surviving soldiers from Feyn's honour guard, and two other passengers.

That her father had ordered Tuuke to accompany them made sense. The Bassakesh Guardsman was a former soldier, and represented the Clan's honour and reputation. He had not argued against the order, though it was plain on his face that he thought he should stay in the city.

That her mother had allowed Maeduul to come was, on the other hand, astonishing. Feyn had suggested the little Servant should travel with them to the Old City; Temis had argued long and hard against the idea. But in the evening the woman and her Servant had spent time together, alone, after which her mother had dropped her objections. When the boat had left the city docks Temis had stood on the pier, watching them, until Delesse had lost sight of her in the rains.

'She's only loaning me to you,' Maeduul had said. 'She will want me back soon.'

'Do you think it will be soon?'

'I don't know, my Lady.' When Delesse looked at the tiny woman, she saw an emptiness in her eyes. 'I feel as if my story is tired. It wants to pack itself back onto the shelves in my head and let a new story start.'

'You talk too strangely, Maeduul. Always with the riddles and word-tricks. You sound as if

you're never coming back!"

Maeduul hadn't responded. Instead she looked back towards the pier and the city long after the river had turned and switched them from sight.

It had taken her a while to get used to the swaying motion of the boat as it moved upriver against the current. Most of the soldiers had gone below deck – apparently the vessel didn't need many people to operate it. Soon afterwards she had made her own way down. She had sat for a while with Feyn in the grand stateroom, but there was little to discuss now they were underway. She was relieved when Feyn's old Servant had shown her to her cabin, after which she had kept mostly to herself, using her rebellious stomach as an excuse not to socialise.

Feyn's plan was simple enough: get to the Old City as quickly as possible then, once there, convince the Emperor to turn his anger and fear on Clan Arallo rather than the jungle cities. Proving that the brothers Puusen and Loetopas were traitors would be difficult, but the attempt had to be made. Loken, the Arallo heir, was as certain on that issue as Feyn herself.

She considered her betrothed for a while, distracting herself from tallying days. Loken of the Arallo was far more complex than she had expected. His revolt against his family seemed to be complete and, for whatever reason, the Beloved Courtesan had decided the man's intentions in this respect was genuine.

Delesse couldn't imagine any scenario which would turn her against her family.

And yet he struck her as an essentially good man. His arrangements for the funeral of his friend had not been a political statement: she had witnessed the grief in his face as he struggled through the ceremony – his determination to pay homage to Sheslan, a man of little honour and no rank, in such a profoundly public manner.

Thoughts of the funeral reminded her of the other time she and Loken had visited the top of the hill together. She still felt guilty about the trick she had played on him, but at the time she had been driven by a quiet panic. Remembering his hasty, urgent entrance within her returned her to other thoughts, other encounters with the horned Servant, and – inevitably – led her back to the counting of days.

A thirst for juice eventually drove her from the safety of her cabin and its over-soft bedding. She had just settled down to a light breakfast with the Beloved Courtesan in the grand stateroom when she heard soldiers shouting something above her.

'Ah,' said Feyn. 'It seems like we're to enjoy some excitement on this journey after all!'

Delesse decided to practice her courtly manners. 'But surely, Aunty Feyn, there are sufficient amusements within these planks of wood to keep anyone excited for many weeks?'

'So you would believe, my dear. But an excess of opulence can often jade the palette, if abused. Eat the eggs: they'll help settle your belly.'

'Your concern for my welfare is a gift beyond the price of jade. I feel humiliated for demanding the slightest moment of your time.'

Feyn smiled. 'Careful, my dear. You're beginning to sound like Loetopas. While he is no doubt worthy of emulation, he does insist on over-polishing his declarations of worthlessness.'

'How do you cope with it, Aunty?'

Feyn raised her eyebrow. 'With people like Loetopas?'

'No, with all this etiquette. The right words, the right dress, the right hairstyle, the right deportment, the right words spoken in the correct order over the most appropriately shaped pots of the most efficacious face-paint ... how do you manage to deal with it all?'

'Oh, the Courtly way of life. Well, I was born to it, my dear. For many years I was exquisitely good at it. As was your mother. We had to be: it was our only defence against those who wanted to harm us.'

'She's tried to teach me, Aunty, but I know I'm going to fail as soon as I step through the gates of the city ...'

Another smile greeted her words. 'This worries you, my dear?'

'Shouldn't it worry you? My mistakes will surely reflect poorly on you!'

'Oh, I doubt it, Delesse. Most of the Courtly etiquette nowadays is just something I make up as I go along. I am the Beloved Courtesan, after all.'

'Aunty Moesser said you were a good woman.'

'Moesser?' Feyn sipped at her juice. 'Yes, she would say that. But I can't possibly allow such a malicious rumour to propagate at Court.'

'Mother was convinced the imps had got to Moesser's mind.'

'Your mother is far more intelligent than Moesser ever was. Temis knows me too well.'

Delesse decided to risk a more difficult question.

'Was that why Mother was so angry with you?'

The stare she received was deliberate and long.

'Temis and I have a long history, girl. We endured much together. Some of the things I did hurt your mother – deliberately so! And I will not apologise for my actions. But remember this: our father sired eight children in his three marriages. Temis was the youngest, I was the eldest. The others all succumbed to God's stern embrace before they reached their twentieth year.'

She took another sip of her juice. 'The Courtly game is a deadly game, Delesse. People die: sometimes violently, more often quietly, but still they die. Now try some of those mushrooms – they're a delicacy, so I'm told.'

But the answer had driven any desire for sustenance from Delesse's once more unsettled stomach. As if on cue, Feyn's Servant – named Iwact, she had learned the previous evening – opened the doors and walked over to them both.

'Beloved Courtesan, there is a need for your presence above. The Guardsman of Bassakesh begs for your permission to investigate another boat.'

'Another boat! This shall be exciting. Tell the Guardsman he has my permission, and I shall be with him shortly. We shall go and see this boat together, Delesse, yes?'

She recognised the boat as soon as she saw it – it had been part of the Arallo flotilla that had arrived in Bassakesh so many days – could it really be little more than three weeks? - ago. Not Lord Loetopas's floating office, nor the supplies barge that had caught fire just before the contract ceremony, but rather the troop boat: a narrow vessel with gaps in the side planking for a bank of oars. Loetopas had brought a company of forty men with him, though she didn't know how many of them had survived their visit to the city.

The *Pride of Lachlasser* had been anchored less than three metres distant, further out into the river, A rope bridge dipped between the two to provide an access point. She moved to the deck rail to get a closer look. The boat seemed empty now, abandoned except for the forms of Tuuke the Guardsman and a couple of Feyn's honour guard moving across its decks.

'Where's Loken?' she asked the man standing nearest to her.

'He's already gone below deck, my Lady,' the man answered, indicating with a nod of his head that her betrothed was also part of the boarding party.

'Can I go and look, too?'

'Best wait for a while, my Lady, until we know there's no danger.'

She watched Tuuke and the men go into the ship, listened to the speculation that swirled about her. After a while she grew bored of waiting and walked across the deck to give herself some distance from the others.

There was nothing to see here. Nothing except the dark hues of the jungle and the muddy brown of the river. A few clouds were scattered across the blue bowl of the sky, but none of them looked thunderous. It was going to be an afternoon without rain, she decided.

Shouting alerted her to activity on the other boat. She hurried over to watch as two soldiers brought up another man – he looked ill, even at this distance. She didn't recognise him.

Then a woman appeared, walking in front of Tuuke.

'I know her!' The words had blurted themselves from her mouth – only the questioning looks that others were giving her made her realise she had spoken out loud.

'Who is she?' asked someone.

But Delesse chose not to answer. She had felt a small hand grab hers, felt a warning squeeze. When she looked down, she saw Maeduul standing next to her. *No need to tell people yet*, said the hand squeeze.

As Tuuke led the woman across the rope bridge, she called out to him: 'Where's Loken? Is it safe to go across?'

Delesse could see the man was struggling to keep a burning anger away from his eyes and lips. But the set of his jaw told the truth of it. Delesse waited for an opportunity to open, then quickly stepped to the bridge and crossed it. She ignored the shouts and warnings that followed her actions, headed straight for stairs that led into the heart of the boat.

The interior was much darker than she had expected. No lamps had been set, and the oar holes were too small to let much sunlight enter. Stepping away from the steep, ladder-like stairs she paused for a moment, squeezed her eyes tight shut to hasten their adaption to the lack of illumination.

When she opened them, she could see the ship was a midden, as if it had been ransacked; the smell of shit and piss was sharp on her sinuses.

She went looking for Loken, checking the open area before investigating the various doors and passageways. Despite her care, she stumbled over the first of the dead bodies – she had assumed it was just a bundle of old rags, but the pressure of her knee landing on its chest released a putrid cloud of gas.

She vomited.

'Here, use this to clean yourself,' said a familiar voice.

'Maeduul?'

'Do you want me to lead you out?'

'No,' said Delesse. 'We're here now. Let's find Loken.'

They found him a few minutes later, sat on a bunk next to another dead body. The room was too dark to see his face.

'Lord Loken, I was worried when you didn't come back with the others.'

If he sniffed before he answered, she chose not to notice it. 'Lady Delesse. Why are you here?'

'Looking for you.'

'Well, you've found me.'

'What happened here?'

He didn't answer. In moments, she had sat next to him on the bunk, pushing the dead man's arm out of her way. She reached out to Loken, found his shoulder and tracked his arm down to his hands. When she gripped his palm with her fingers, he responded in kind.

'They're all dead,' he said. 'Seventeen bodies I've counted.'

'Not all of them are dead. At least one man survived. And a woman.'

'Jassael, yes. He's alive, though God alone knows how. They took everything edible, by the look of it.'

'Who took everything?'

'Whoever wrecked this boat. Whoever tried to set it on fire with dying men inside it.'

'Pirates? Bandits?'

'I don't know who did it.' His voice sounded bitter. 'But I know who might have ordered it done. My most honourable fucking uncle!'

She didn't say a word, let the silence roll over them as she felt his struggles to control himself, control the rage tightening muscles across his frame.

Minutes passed.

Finally the grip of his hand relaxed a little. She brought her other hand over to grasp his, moved closer to him. But she didn't make soothing noises: this moment was too important.

'What did they do to you to make you like this?'

For a moment she felt him tense. She rubbed her hand across his, until he loosened, slumped forward a little.

'What did they do to me? That's a funny question, my Lady.'

'We're almost married, my Lord. Wives get to ask funny questions.' But as soon as she said it, she regretted her words. 'I'm worried for you, Loken. I see you like this and I don't know how to help you, how to comfort and support you.'

He accepted her words, remained relaxed. Another minute passed in silence.

'You know ... Did you know I had a brother, Delesse?'

She shook her head, then remembering he could barely see her said: 'No, I didn't know.'

'Just as my father and Loetopas shared their mother's womb, so I shared my mother's womb with my brother. He was born before me.'

'I've heard that twins sometimes run in families ...'

He gripped her hand tighter, stroked his finger across her palm. 'Let's hope that curse is broken by our marriage, yes?'

She didn't answer.

'My brother was born before me, but his birth was difficult. He tangled with his birthing rope – he lived, and so did I, and we grew up together as two boys should.'

'He was the elder, the Arallo heir. But the accident left him weak: he walked with a limp, spoke a little slower than me. Father did not appreciate this laziness. He forced my brother to exercise harder, study harder. What came easily to me was a struggle for him. I helped him whenever I could – we were a team, him and me, against the bastards my father hired as tutors. Many times I pretended my work was his, and took his beatings.'

'I loved him, you see? He was my brother. He could do no wrong.'

Another pause, and then: 'You asked me what was it they did to me to make me like this. What could a father and an uncle possibly do to a child to make him hate them so much that he would willingly break all his oaths and loyalties to see them suffer.'

'They murdered my brother, Delesse!'

She felt her muscles stiffen in shock; made an effort to relax herself, fearful that her reaction may have offended him. A long moment of silence passed, then he continued with his story.

'Puusen the Great decided that my brother was not fit to be the Arallo heir. So shortly before our tenth birthday, he took hold of my brother and put a pillow over his face until his body stopped twitching and he was dead.'

'And Uncle Loetopas – ever the loyal sibling – held me fast as they did it, forced me to watch my brother's murder. Kept whispering in my ear: *'we cannot suffer weakness: the Clan is more than just one person. You'll understand one day – you'll understand'*.

'I understood then; I understand now ... I understand hate!'

In the darkness, she felt him shiver as the first tears liberated themselves from his eyes.

Tighter, she held him, and tighter.

The Pride of Lachlasser

'I've been there before. Have you, Guardsman?'

Tuuke nodded his head without looking at the tiny woman. Instead he kept his eyes on the river ahead, watching the dark jungle walls parade past the boat as it sought the slower flowing streams between the mud flats.

'I liked the place,' said Maeduul, 'though we were only there for a couple of days. *Luetsa-ten* was most disappointed when she arrived at her new Lord's city – she thought it would be more like Viyame.'

'What made you like it?' he asked, against his better judgment.

'The sparkly lights in the streets reminded me of the Old City. I was feeling a little homesick for the towers and spires ...'

'Maeduul, have you managed to talk to the woman yet? Julyeis is her name, yes?'

Maeduul gave him an intelligent look. 'She's been very ill, Guardsman. But yes, I've talked to her. She has a good story to celebrate: the Servants headed north when they left the city – she told me about walking through Sama-Lovare's Halls ...'

'Whose halls?' He watched the prow of the boat edge into a new channel, closer to the western bank. He had argued against this policy: it was too slow for his taste, and took the boat too close to the jungle walls, but the boat's store of electricity was limited – even with all the sunlight sails hoisted; motoring upstream through the deeper channels took too much power.

'Ah, yes. That's our Servant name for the baeldock groves – I've always wanted to visit one. This one was very long, she said: two or three days they spent walking its length.'

'I know the one you mean. It's been growing towards the city for decades. Is that why she's ill?'

'Yes. "Never drink the pillars' sweat," we say, but she must have forgotten. Her stomach has stopped bleeding, but she's still in a lot of pain.'

He could imagine: he'd walked through baeldock groves when he was a soldier – corridors of vaulting, silent wood winding through the jungles, slowly killing everything within their path. Someone told him once that a grove was a single plant, but his imagination couldn't accommodate such a fanciful idea. Whatever the grove was, it added something to the rain that trickled down its over-long, grown-from-the-canopy trunks, making the water acidic. Drinking the fluid often led to blisters in the throat and stomach.

'Has she told you anything else? Anything that could be of help to us?'

'Useful, Guardsman? Everything is useful to us, yes?' She laughed, a quick sound to tone her mood. 'She talked about feral Servants – her words, not mine – who were in charge. Some of them carried guns. She said they were not very nice people.'

The thought of Servants armed with guns – where could they have possibly got those, he wondered – somewhere out in the jungle wilderness sent a shiver of worry through his guts.

'What about the Arallo commander?'

'Jassael? He's recovering well. Lord Loken told me his friend wants to speak with you.'

'Does, he?' said Tuuke, suddenly interested. 'Yes, I'll talk to him. I've got some special questions for that man!'

Jassael had the look which Tuuke now associated with plague survivors: flesh shrunken within skin, as if drained of fluids; glassy, slightly unfocussed eyes fighting to comprehend the fact of continued breath and relief from pain.

'Loken, go upstairs and keep a lookout, yes? Commander Jassael and I are going to have a chat.'

The young man gave him a quizzical stare. 'What are we watching for?'

'Anything dangerous – your uncle, for instance. And don't let the river hypnotise you!'

'Go, Loken.' Jassael's voice was rough from the coughing, but contained enough command within it to gain compliance from the man. 'The Guardsman won't harm me – not yet, anyway.'

Tuuke waited until the younger man had left before settling himself on the bed facing the patient. For a while the two men just looked at each other.

Jassael broke their silence first. 'Where are we going?'

'Why do you want to know?'

With an effort, the sick man pushed himself half-upright. 'I don't know, Guardsman. It was just a question ... I have nowhere to go, not now.'

'I have a place for you to go. I have a special pyre to warm your feet by.'

Jassael's smile surprised Tuuke. 'I'll not beg for my life.'

'Why not, Commander? Is the gauze of guilt around your heart so complete?'

'Guilt, Guardsman? Yes, I feel the guilt. There are things I would do differently if I could re-stage the past few weeks. How much do you know?'

'I have most of the story: the what of the special gifts; the who of the burning supply boat; the how of plague. Poor Sheslan. He told us some of the facts while he breathed, and his body

furnished many details afterwards.'

Jassael nodded. 'He was a good man, Sheslan. Did you torture him?'

'No!' Tuuke didn't bother to hide the disgust from his face.

'Yet you burned his corpse ... that was a good move, involving the barby rats. Was that your idea?'

'Why did you do it, Jassael? Why did you bring plague into my city?'

'I followed my orders, Guardsman. I transported the Petezbarre illness to Bassakesh ...'

'It wasn't the same illness.'

'Lord Puusen told me it was.'

'How many people died in Petezbarre? Dozens?'

'I don't know ...'

'I know how many died in Bassakesh, Commander!'

For a moment, Jassael looked away, swallowed. Tuuke was impressed when the man looked back into his eyes to ask the next question.

'I know how many of my men died on the boats after we left, Guardsman. Was it as bad in the city?'

All he could do was nod. The figures themselves, the tallies on sheets, the sums and averages – such numbers were too evil to be given breath and voice.

'More survived than succumbed,' he said finally.

'The reverse of the boats, then.'

'Why did you attack when you left the city?'

Again a smile, this time more rueful. 'Lord Loetopas separated us into two groups; the sick and mutinous were barricaded into a dockside boarding house, the rest were sent to the boats. Then he ordered us to fire on the hostel – he said he was doing it to save us all, Clan and city alike. But some of the men were not keen to murder their friends – their aim with the cannons was ... a little wild. Can you blame them?'

'Yes,' said Tuuke. 'They didn't have to follow their orders.'

'Now that's a dangerous idea, Guardsman! No, blame me for that atrocity, blame Lord Loetopas. Blame the Empire for making duty and obedience such central virtues!'

'It sounds like you've lost your faith, Commander.'

'Then it's the least of my losses, Guardsman.'

The exchange unsettled Tuuke's thoughts. Such ideas were ... dangerous. Before he had arrived in Bassakesh he would have considered them heretical

'Was Lord Loetopas still well when he ordered your boat to be sunk?'

It was a guess of a question, but a good guess. He watched Jassael close his eyes, slowly nod his head.

'Thirty of us left Stal, you know. No more than a dozen of us were living by the time I fell ill.'

'I should hate you,' said the Guardsman. 'You slaughtered my city ...'

'But?'

Tuuke sighed, patted the man's leg. 'I don't know. So many strange and dangerous ideas are suddenly floating around the aether. Maybe a new devil has found a home in my skull.'

'Or maybe an old devil has left it.'

'Yes,' said Tuuke. 'Maybe.'

By his calculation, the boat was about a day's journey from Viyame – even at its current slow pace. After his interview with Commander Jassael, Tuuke had no stomach to return to the top-deck; instead he went to the galley to find some food and retired to his small cabin to be alone with his thoughts and memories.

Viyame was not a compact place, like Bassakesh, he remembered. Instead it sprawled across both sides of the river and along the Western Highway with its massive bridge over the Taete's wandering sandbanks and mudflats. The locals called their city the gateway to the jungle, which

Tuuke considered to be a stupid name as the place was surrounded on all sides by the ever-encroaching vegetation; without a wall to define the limits of the city, it had grown haphazardly over the centuries – more a series of connected settlements rather than a single conurbation.

The Beloved Courtesan had been adamant that they avoid Viyame entirely. Her plan was to leave the boat a few kilometres downstream of the bridge, skirt around the city until they reached the Western Highway and the Imperial Estates that lay to the north of the road. Tuuke argued that their need for information was too great, that they should stay on the boat and travel through the city by river. She would not listen to him: the memory of losing that debate still rankled in his guts, though he was careful not to show it.

A shudder ran through the hull of the boat, interrupting his reminiscences of the bars he had frequented when the Ninth Clade had been stationed in Viyame. A muffled shout reached his ears.

Without thinking, he sat upright on his bed, reached down for the rifle he had stowed beneath it. He was clear of his cabin and almost at the foot of the stairs when the first shot cracked through the air.

Two Clade soldiers rushed into the passageway, weapons cradled in their arms as they ran.

'You!' he said, pointing to the closest man. 'Guard Feyn. With your God-scum life! You,' to the second, 'find Delesse and hide her. Go!'

For a moment he was scared they would not obey him. A second shot made up their minds for them: they turned in unison and dashed to protect the women.

The door next to him opened suddenly. He was already swinging his rifle towards the sound when he recognised Jassael's blanched face in the widening space.

'Are you expecting visitors?' he asked.

Jassael shook his head.

'Tell me what you need done.'

'Barricade yourself into Feyn's reception room. Let nobody enter – use a knife to gut the first one through.' He didn't wait to watch Jassael comply; already he was heading to the foot of the stairs.

Not for the first time he found himself wondering who had designed the boat, what its real purpose was. The main staircase to the open deck was richly furnished with carvings and decorative hangings. Anyone walking down the stairs would see nothing more than an ostentatious display of Imperial wealth. What Tuuke saw, looking up to the rectangle of pearly sky, was a series of places for a defender to conceal himself.

He had no interest in a glorious death. Taking the steps three at a time, he dashed for a columned arch halfway up the stairs, trusted in his fate to reach the small door hidden behind the base of the column and its secret, tight spaces beyond.

He was working the door open with his foot when the outline of a man appeared at the top of the stairs. A single, fluid movement brought the stock of the rifle against his shoulder, finger hooked around the trigger.

He assumed the man would not be friendly, squeezed the trigger home. Before the smoke of the discharge could mark his position he had scrambled through the small door feet first, dropping the iron bar into its latch as he crawled backwards away from the stairs.

He'd discovered the boat's secret spaces on his first night on board when he noticed that the ceiling of his cabin was not as high as it should be, assuming the ceiling and the open deck above were part of the same surface. Once his eyes were alerted to the possibilities he had quickly spotted other discrepancies. A concealed door in the galley led into a shaft which reached up to the open deck, but didn't breach it. Instead, it opened onto a low corridor just beneath the decking planks and struts. The passage skirted around the side of the boat, enclosing a series of storage rooms. Other shafts led down – to the engines and the bilge space, he'd assumed, choosing not to investigate. He'd stumbled upon the hatch in the stairwell an hour into the exploration; he didn't know why he'd decided to unlatch it before heading back to the galley, but that hunch had probably saved his life.

The passageway was less than a metre high, requiring him to bend almost double as he

worked his way towards the rear of the boat, heading towards another of his discoveries - a trapdoor in the floor of the steering house, immaculately concealed unless a person knew exactly where to look.

Old skills allowed him to reach his destination silently. Sounds of fighting percolated through the ceiling, but he heard no further shots, just the bumps and groans of hand-to-hand combat. It took him less than a minute to get to the trapdoor, by which time the noise above him had died down.

The latch on the trap was well oiled, though he had to test this by touch as the fit of the wood in its hole permitted no light to reach him. There were footsteps above him: the steering house – a glass-and-wood structure hosting the rudder controls – was occupied.

'Report!'

The voice, directly over his head, sent a chemical shiver through Tuuke's spine.

'The top deck and main corridor are secure, Sir. The boat is ours. We've located most of the known passengers.'

'Who's missing?'

'*One ...*' counted Tuuke in his head.

'We haven't yet found the Beloved Courtesan. And the Guardsman is missing.'

'*Two ...*'

'God's own entrails! I want a thorough search – strip the boat to its ribs if you have to!'

The trapdoor was still falling open as Tuuke surged through the gap, bringing his rifle in line with the groin of the man above him.

'Hello, Behin,' he said as the barrel made contact with flesh beneath the armour. 'How good of you to come and meet us!'

Tuuke knew that nobody moved for at least two minutes: the count in his head had continued without his willing it, and he had always had the knack of accurately counting the seconds.

He doubted the positioning of the trapdoor was down to luck. He had risen through the space expecting to be shot, but when his eyes adapted to the sudden daylight he found his head and torso protected on all sides from sniper fire. The only person who had direct sight of him was the Commander of the Fifteenth Clade, and he was in no position to shoot.

Managing to place the business end of his weapon close against the big man's groin was, however, an act of pure, blind luck.

To his credit, Behin wasn't shaking. Nor was he smiling at his old friend. Their eyes were locked on each other, willing the other to speak first.

Finally. 'It seems we have reached an impasse, Guardsman.'

The victory was small, but gave him satisfaction. To celebrate it, Tuuke chose to take a risk:

'Behin, pog do delau poliso? Agizrux don gziy suu djocpanti?'

Why are you here? What are your orders?

His decision to put his questions in the shared language of their childhood seemed to shake Behin. Speaking one's hearth-tongue in front of strangers was uncouth, demeaning to both speaker and stranger; at this point in time Tuuke was not in the mood for civil discourse.

'Uljaz bekasuu. Polase te delau ... brois tcu delau pololjk puzase ... truegan te. Sneklizmu telaa sekasu gziy?'

The words were spoken slowly, haltingly, as if recalled from a long distant memory: *my orders are unchanged. I am here because I choose to be here. What is this game?*

Tuuke smiled. 'I'm not the one who's playing at being the river pirate, Commander.' Slowly, he pushed the rifle deeper into the big man's groin.

'I ... remember that game, Guardsman. Believe me, I'm not here for my pleasure.'

'That is a shame. We used to have such fun playing together.'

'Tuuke, before you ruin me, there are things you ought to be aware of. Information. You've always liked information, yes?'

'Talk to me.'

'I know what happened in the city. We saw the smoke over Bassakesh; we watched the graves being dug.'

'This isn't news to me, Commander. I was there.'

'Would you like to know if other cities are suffering?'

'No.' And suddenly he realised he didn't want to know. 'My only interest at this time is catching and executing the bastard who killed eight thousand of my people!'

'Eight ...' Tuuke watched with interest as Behin came to terms with the numbers. 'Who would ...?'

'You're an intelligent man, *aoslo-ten*. Why don't you go sit in the jungle and work it out while I get on with my job!'

'Tuuke ... by all that's holy, man! Eight thousand people dead? That's almost half the city!'

'One in four. Tell your men to get off this boat, Behin.'

But the Commander was shaking his head. 'I can't do that, *aoslo-ten*. There's bigger things going on. We need to find the Beloved Courtesan. I have my orders.'

'I'll just pull the trigger now ...'

'He's dead, Tuuke! Pull the trigger: don't pull the trigger. It doesn't matter. The Emperor's dead!'

The information didn't particularly interest Tuuke. 'How?' he asked, more out of politeness than necessity.

'Who knows! The Emperor is dead. My orders ...' he took a breath, glared down at Tuuke. 'My orders are to find the Beloved Courtesan and arrest her. They're saying she's cursed the very Empire itself!'

He only looked away for a second, maybe less. He never saw his old friend's fist heading towards his face.

The Feral Life

Shapeis came across Akambue the morning after leaving Sama-Lovare's halls – they must have been walking near each other for many days but neither had spotted the other until then. Since that fortuitous event the bearded man had not left Shapeis's side, taking his turn to carry the child when her weight became too much for him to bear – though in truth she weighed very little.

Akambue was good company. The long walk seemed to have affected him little, neither physically nor socially; Shapeis had never seen the man downcast or withdrawn – worried at times, yes, and angry too. But never moody. Even now, Akambue seemed to be treating the trek as if it was an afternoon jaunt, looking forward to the next meal, the next story. Being near the man made it easier for Shapeis to smile.

For the moment, the girl was walking in front of him. He guided her between the jungle detritus that littered the ground with a hand on her shoulder, squeezing her to the left or the right when necessary, propelling her straight ahead when the path became clearer. Akambue was walking ahead of them, kicking husks and fallen leaves out of their way, pushing low-hanging branches back.

'I should have brought my big knife with me,' he said, not for the first time.

'I don't think the ferals like the idea of us city folk having weapons,' replied Shapeis. Everyone seemed to be calling Kebezzu's friends "the ferals" now.

'I don't understand why not. We're all on the same side, yes? I said to one of them the other day: I can help you find goats. But he wasn't interested – looked at me as if I was some feeble old man not capable of wiping my own arse ... watch out for this one, it's a bit springy!'

Shapeis caught the branch as it bounced towards his head. A touch on the girl's left shoulder steered her to the side of some bushes pushing into the animal track.

'They don't want to waste time teaching us how to survive – Kebezzu says that can come later, once we've reached the hidden settlements.'

'Kebezzu says many things,' said Akambue, the distrust in his voice made obvious.

'We're still alive, yes?'

'Not all of us need teaching, is all I'm saying.'

They walked on for a few minutes in silence. Shapeis could hear groups of people ahead of them and behind, and to both sides too – there was more than one trail heading north between the trees.

The canopy in this part of the jungle was thinner, allowing more of the late morning sunshine to dapple the ground. While the feel of sunlight made the walking more bearable, it also encouraged the growth of bushes and grasses. Every branch above was draped with lacy gardens, the deep purples and greens of mosses forming a backdrop for a carnival of bugs, worms and the (occasionally spotted) larger creature. Shapeis had even caught sight of some barby rat colonies – miniature versions of the beasts that guarded Bassak Hill, their colourful trees balanced precariously like candles in the forks and clusters of boughs and twigs.

'Something does worry me, Akambue,'

'Talk to me, friend. Let's spend some time solving each other's worries.'

'Have you seen Julyeis lately?'

The big man in front ducked to pass beneath a low branch.

'This is a worthy worry, I think. No, I haven't seen her for a long while – not since the early part of the journey.'

'Nor have I. How far back do you think she is?'

'If I knew the answer, then the Corn Bird has stolen it from my mind. A day behind, perhaps, or two?'

'She didn't want to leave the city, you know. She had – misgivings – about Kebezzu.'

'But she came with us, yes?'

A rock caught the girl's foot, tripping her. She made no attempt to shield her face with her body as she fell; Shapeis's attempt to grab her failed to break her tumble.

Looking back, Akambue said: 'She's tired.'

He nodded his agreement, reached down to pick her up and carry her.

'I've never seen her cry,' he said. 'Not a single tear.'

'We've seen her upset, yes? She gets fearful when the crowds gather too close.'

'That's more like ... well, I don't know what it is, but I don't think it's fear.' He settled her onto his right hip, draping her left arm over his neck and shoulder which she gripped with an automatic curl of her fingers.

'Her lack of tears is not your particular worry at the moment, though ...'

'No,' he said, biting his lower lip as he balanced her weight and started to walk again. 'There seems to be fewer of us now – have you noticed that?'

Akambue nodded as he walked ahead. 'It's to be expected, yes? Not everyone can walk as fast as us.'

'But there doesn't seem to be fewer ferals. I've been counting them – they come and go, but their numbers at each resting place seem the same.'

'Your point is?'

'If the ferals are walking at our speed, who's looking after those who walk more slowly?'

'Hmm,' said Akambue. 'How many city folk can a single feral look after, yes?'

'Sort of. We don't know what's happening to the folks behind us. I asked Kebezzu's cousin – if that's what he really is – when I saw him last night, but he just shrugged his shoulders and told me to keep walking.'

'That one's taken against you for some reason – did you refuse to fuck him?'

Shapeis ignored the assertion. 'I'd like to know what's going on, what's being planned for us. I'd like to know when this journey's going to end!'

'I want to know when we stop for lunch,' said Akambue, smiling.

Kebezzu found Shapeis and the girl while Akambue was relieving himself away from the crowds. The ferals had called a halt to the walking just after midday and were busy distributing meagre quantities of cornbread and water to those gathered in the clearing.

'We're making good time, my friend,' she said as she handed him some herbed dough for the child.

'You know where we are?' He was sitting on the ground, looking up at the woman in front of him as he massaged some soothing cream into the skin of his toes and feet.

'I've been this way before.'

'And?'

She gave him one of her customary sharp looks, as if balancing a judgement between his need to know and his trustworthiness to be told. It was a good two or three seconds before one edge of her mouth twisted up in a bare half-smile.

'We're not far from the Western Highway – the road that links the jungle cities to the coastal regions. If we keep heading north we should cross over it sometime tomorrow, after sundown.'

'And the hidden settlements are beyond the road?'

She nodded her response, as if not wishing the trees or the mosses to steal her words.

Shapeis rolled a small portion of the dough into a ball and slipped it into the girl's mouth.

'This is good news, then.'

A second nod of her head was contradicted by her words. 'We need to discuss our plans – somewhere a little more private, perhaps?'

With the sigh of an old man, Shapeis levered himself onto his knees and then his feet, followed Kebezzu away from the clearing into the shadows of the jungle's undergrowth. They did not walk far: within a minute the woman had found a fallen log and settled herself onto it. He sat on the damp earth before her, drew the girl to his knee to continue feeding her.

'She's been no trouble, then?'

'Trouble?' The question confused him – the girl was little more than a living doll, an automaton made flesh. He'd learned the few commands required to steer her and care for her within days of being first introduced to her: shoulder pinches to turn her; chin tickles to make her chew. She sat when put on a chair and stood when lifted off it again. Placing a hand on her belly when she was crouched on her thighs dealt with other daily rituals of life. In fact, the only thing she seemed to care about – notice – was the presence or absence of rock when she was laid on her side to sleep.

Kebezzu refused to answer the question in his eyes.

'You've looked after her well, Shapeis. I am in your debt for it.'

He felt his brows form into a frown. 'I enjoy looking after her.'

'You like her?'

'She reminds me of my little sister.' The words had emerged from his mouth without thought, yet as he heard himself utter the syllables he felt the truth in their sounds.

'Ah,' said Kebezzu. 'You've never mentioned a sister before. Where is she now?'

'I don't know. I only knew her for a while. She was sold before me.'

The woman smiled. 'You have a strange way of speaking, my friend. You say 'buy' and 'sell' as if they apply naturally to people. You'll need to learn a new language, I think; new words for a new way of life.'

He concentrated on inserting another small ball of dough into the girl's mouth.

'Everyone is bought or sold, Kebezzu,' he replied. 'Everyone owns or owes other people, yes? In the widest sense of the words. Why does it concern you that my ownership was settled in coin?'

Again the refusal to answer the question directly. Instead, she asked: 'How much did you cost your owner, Shapeis? How much was your little sister worth to the Tall Ones who traded her flesh?'

'We were expensive, Kebezzu. Very expensive.'

'Did she have horns like yours, this little sister? Is that why she was expensive?'

Shapeis snorted, lifted his eyes to look directly at the woman. 'You think I was born with these horns?'

She widened her eyes a little. 'Yes – that is what I have always heard about ... recreational Servants.'

He had grown used to the pause that people introduced before the word "recreational" as if they thought it would be an insult for his ears to hear it.

'Tell me, Kebezzu. What *do* people say about recreational Servants? That the Tall Ones breed us like goats for longer wool, or dogs for petting?'

He could see the embarrassment his suggestion was causing her. He broke off another dab of dough and pushed it between the girl's lips.

'Such are the stories that are told,' she agreed.

'Wouldn't it be marvellous if they were true! My nub would be the size of a cart, yes?'

'Enough of this, lad!' The words were abrupt. 'We have more important things to discuss.'

The order hit him like rotten fruit; he could feel them stir an anger in his stomach.

'Kebezzu, what makes you think you are any better than the Tall Ones who pay for my services? You talk of "freedom" yet you control your feral friends like an officer commands his soldiers. Since the day you arrived in the City people have done your bidding, and those who have disagreed with you – or doubted you – have been sidelined, dismissed. We know nothing of your plans for us, except that we shall be "free" when we reach the hidden settlements.'

He hadn't expected an answer, though he left her a pause to give one. After a moment he continued: 'Your feral friends treat us like goats to be herded through the jungle!'

He rolled the last of the dough between his palms, offered her a smile. 'You say that you wish to "discuss" important matters with me, but we both know that you will talk and I will listen.'

'I'm listening,' she said, quietly. 'What is it that you're saying to me, Shapeis?'

'Secrets fester, is all I'm saying, even in the skulls of those who know their shape but not their taste. It wouldn't hurt to tell us a little more – where we're going, what we'll be doing. It wouldn't hurt you to learn about the skills we bring with us.'

She nodded. 'I hear your voice. I wish that events had been different: we never planned to walk so many Servants to freedom in such a short time. The thought that you still see a separateness between your friends and mine – it pains me.'

Kneeling before him she reached out to the girl, turned her to face her, examined her face and her feet as she continued to speak.

'I can't promise that things will be easier for your friends once they reach the hidden settlements; there will be hard times and grumbling stomachs for everyone, for a while at least. But I do promise that things will be different. We are all Servants, equal in each other's sight. Leaders in the hidden settlements are chosen, not born.'

He reached his hand out to the girl's head, helped the woman brush tangles from her hair with his fingers.

'I still trust you, Kebezzu,' he said. 'You mentioned plans, yes?'

She nodded, crouched the girl to toilet her. 'You have a choice, Shapeis. You can continue north with the others to the hidden settlements ...'

'Or?'

'I still have work to do. In Viyame, to start, and then further west in the other jungle cities. The Burning Woman's message – it's too important, especially now. The Servants in those cities need to hear the truth of these matters.'

She stood up, held out her hand to help him to his feet. 'I would welcome your company on our journey.'

His smile as he stood up was enough to let her know he would stay with her.

'Thank you,' she said, turning to head back towards the clearing. 'Out of interest, if you were not born with those horns, can you remove them? It would make our tasks easier if you weren't so – identifiable.'

'Oh, Kebezzu,' he replied with a mocking tone in his voice as he followed her, pushing the

girl before him. 'Wise you may be, but there is so much more for you to learn ...'

'What did you mean when you said you weren't born with horns?'

Akambue had been waiting for him when he returned from his meeting with Kebezzu, and had quickly signalled to him that he had overheard everything: 'Can't even have a shit in the woods without someone disturbing your peace,' he had commented.

They had resumed their journey soon afterwards, and now it was raining. Rather than risk the girl slipping again, Shapeis was carrying her on his back, her hands clasped to the horns on his head.

'I'm as human as you, Akambue,' he replied. 'My horns are an ... addition, I suppose. Something given to me to make me more valuable.'

'When did this happen? When you were a baby?'

'Oh, no. I was still a child, but closing in on my manhood.'

'So what are they? Goats horns?'

'You're good, my friend! Yes, they're goats horns, grafted into my skull. But they're a part of me now: my blood feeds the bone.'

'Did it hurt, this grafting?'

'Yes,' he said after a short pause. 'But it was a worthy pain, I believe.'

'You welcomed this operation?'

'I chose the goat that donated its horns!'

Akambue laughed, a short bark breaking through the patter of raindrops on the muds around them.

'But still you had little choice in the matter, no?'

Shapeis's memories of his home Farm were largely warm ones – a place of comfort and good food, people around him who cared for him, looked out for him as he grew tall and learned the ways of the world around him.

'Our owner came to me one day. I was sitting with my mother and my sister in a shelter on the edge of the fields – we had been busy planting yams that morning and the midday sun had been very hot. I did not enjoy planting yams, I can tell you.'

'I can understand,' said Akambue. 'Go on, what happened?'

'He said the time had come to make decisions about my future. He said I was a good labourer, an asset to any settlement, but there were alternatives I might wish to consider ...'

'He let you choose?'

'It was his way – he was a good man, as far as these things can be judged.'

He had been sitting with his mother and little sister, and maybe a few other Servants – he couldn't recall. He remembered his mother had been wearing her favourite working smock with its many pockets while he and his sister had been dressed in shorts and spatters of mud. Their owner was an old man, regal in his way, rarely seen outside his manor house except on feast days and celebrations, when he'd come down to the communal buildings and watch the entertainments – though even then he smiled only when he thought he was being watched; the old story keeper had told him that the man had lost many of his relatives in the Clan strife a few years before.

'So he gave you a choice, this owner of yours?'

'He talked about apprenticeships – learning various crafts. He mentioned the possibility of becoming a recreational Servant as part of the list of other trades – few of us were offered such an opportunity, understand? It costs a lot of money to train a recreational, though our Farm had a reputation for producing the best ...'

'Ah,' said Akambue, his tone encouraging Shapeis to continue talking.

'So I became a recreational, learning how to dance and massage, picking up the tricks of controlling and leading the client, how to fight, inflict pain and take it – many, many skills. The horns were his present to me for doing well at my lessons.'

'Was he part of your ... training, then?'

Shapeis punched his friend in the shoulder as they walked. 'That's dirty talk, that is! No, he

took no part in my physical training. Mostly I learned from the old women – retired recreationals that he bought back when their owners tired of them.'

'And your mother didn't mind?'

'Of course not! She got ten percent of my sale price – more than enough to pay for the operations she needed; her eyes were poor and her bones were brittle before their time. Many people on the Farm benefitted from my sale.'

'Such generosity from a dutiful son. What does it feel like, to be bought and sold?'

'You've never been traded?'

'No,' said Akambue. 'I was born in Bassakesh and assigned to the City lists soon after I reached my manhood.'

'As is the way in Bassakesh – how many Servants have you met who have been traded?'

'Not many. Well, there's you. And I suppose Maeduul. My parents, of course. They came from the Old City, I think – or one of the estates nearby - and got traded to Bassakesh during the Clan strife. But that was the City buying them, not a single owner.'

'I chose Varoul: my owner knew him, knew of his reputation, said good things to me about him. Others had offered more money for me, but he wasn't so keen on them – bad sorts, he called them, but he knew we needed money so gave the choice to me.'

'You know,' said Akambue, lifting a stray branch over his head as he moved forward, 'I'll never understand the Tall Ones. I wonder what Kebezzu has against them to make her hate them so.'

'Now there's a good question, my friend,' said Shapeis, reaching around to shift the girl onto his hip.

At the Estates of the Emperor (Deceased)

'I never realised they grew so big!'

Loken reached out and took Delesse's hand in his, guided it to the pepper-grey flank of the beast in its stall.

'She's a beauty, yes? She must be at least two hands taller than my horse back home.'

'Hands?' She punctuated the question with a raised eyebrow and a slight smile. Rather than answer, he spread his hands wide and placed them on the mare's shoulders, one beneath the other.

'Ah, I see. I remember you telling me you had horses, but you never said you had one all to yourself.'

'Magrhis – she was a coming-of-age present from my father. Or rather the responsibility for keeping her, breaking her, was his gift to me. He said it would help build my character: leading a Clan is like breaking and riding a horse, he told me.'

'Is she the same colour as this one?'

'No, Magrhis is brown, with a white star between her ears. I – well, I miss her more than most other things from my old life.'

He watched Delesse stroke the horse, running her hands along the muscled neck and tangling her fingers in the mane.

'Have you ever ridden a horse?' he asked.

She shook her head. 'I've never seen one before – Bassakesh has many things, but no room for cultivating pasture.'

'So no horses; no cattle ...'

'Not even rabbits. Plenty of goats, though, and pigs. Dogs and cats and rats. Chickens. Uncle Devisek had a parrot.'

'Parrots are rare,' he agreed.

'Almost as rare as grass,' she said, offering the horse a farewell pat and heading towards the stable doors. 'So much greenness – it hurts my eyes to look around for too long.'

The Imperial Estates were vast, over fifteen hundred hectares of pastureland and orchards

cut squarely into the midst of the jungle like a great emerald tablecloth hugging the rolling hills. Clan Arallo owned nothing on such a scale – the estate where he had grown up cultivated 20 hectares of grass: maintaining that small patch had taken a lot of work, and workers. Maybe larger tracts of grass needed less labour, he thought; he hadn't noticed many people working on the estate since they had been escorted here five days before.

He followed her to the doors, snagged his arm around her waist and looked out at the scene. The living walls of the jungle were just visible from here, a straight, dark line traversing the landscape in the distance. He was glad to be away from it.

'We ought to get back,' she said. 'Aunty Feyn has 'requested' our attendance for lunch.'

'You know, I can't get used to calling her 'aunty', or even 'Feyn' – she still scares me!'

'She scares me too.'

'Lunch isn't until after midday – we have a little while yet, yes?'

'Yes,' she agreed, lifting her head to brush her lips against his.

They had arrived at the Estate after dark, after the heat of the day had squeezed the last moisture from the thick thunderclouds. They had travelled by boat through Viyame, though Loken had not seen anything of the city. He, along with Delesse, Tuuke, the Beloved Courtesan and the others, had been confined below-deck by the Commander of the Fifteenth Imperial Clade.

That first night on the Estate had been uncomfortable. Loken had been placed in a room on his own, not permitted to talk to anyone. Later he learned that all the Bassakesh party had been treated similarly, though only Feyn and Tuuke had been locked in their rooms. The solitude had almost broken him; the news of the Emperor's death sent him spinning back to the void that had first taken hold of his heart when plague had conquered the streets of Bassakesh.

The Emperor ... he was like the mountains; he'd always been part of the political scenery – he had been Emperor before his father and uncle had been born and, as far as Loken knew, the Beloved Courtesan had always been by his side.

For most of his life Loken had been taught to envy the Emperor and despise his mistress. The brothers Puusen and Loetopas had centred their ambitions on gaining as much power and influence as they could; much of the courtly game, he knew, derived from their determination to sideline the Beloved Courtesan, replace her mouth with their own at the Emperor's ear. As he grew older, Loken had begun to suspect that his father may have been planning something more audacious – more treasonous – than seeking influence. Such suspicions had driven the young man to the gaming tables and drinking rooms scattered through the Old City: the less he knew, the safer he felt.

And now the Emperor was gone. Dead.

All through that first night Loken had struggled with skull demons, not knowing what was going to happen, what he should do if his father succeeded – or failed – in his certain attempt to gain the throne. He felt paralysed, unable to pull together a single organised convoy of thoughts. As the hours of darkness spent themselves in useless delusions, one idea kept returning to him: he needed Delesse. Not because of what she represented, nor what she brought with her to the courtly game.

No, he wanted to be with her because she was the only person he felt he could trust.

That thought had scared him more than the sum of all others.

Soon after sunrise he had been taken to meet Commander Behin, the first of several interviews he had with the man during the next couple of days. Each interrogation followed the same format: questioning his actions in Bassakesh; seeking proof of the Beloved Courtesan's malfeasance. From the start Loken kept to the same story – the true story. Yes, he had chosen to stay in Bassakesh. No, he wasn't aware of any plans to destroy the city or interfere with the dye harvest. No, he had not seen nor heard of any evidence that could implicate the Beloved Courtesan in the disaster.

'I cannot believe your story,' Behin had told him at one point. 'I refuse to believe you would commit such a treason against your own father.'

'Is Lord Puusen the new Emperor, Commander?'

Behin had shaken his head.

'Then surely I cannot be guilty of any treason. My differences with my father and my uncle are Clan business, not yours!'

On the third day of his captivity, he had been allowed to see Delesse. Her refusal to be parted from him from that point on had broken him as effectively as he had once broken his horse; he in turn had not left her side for one second, nor had he wanted to. Only when he could see her, hear her, touch her, did he feel complete.

Lunch was a cosy affair. Commander Behin had not yet allowed Lady Feyn to leave her quarters, though he had agreed to move her into a new, more comfortable suite of rooms that morning. In addition to Loken and Delesse, only the little Servant – Maeduul – was permitted entrance.

If Feyn had suffered during her confinement, Loken could see no sign of it in her face or her voice. He was happy to sit and listen as the women discussed recent events, helping himself to a slice of corn bread to accompany his watered-down juice.

'It could be worse, dear,' Feyn was telling Delesse. 'Given the circumstances the Commander has treated us very well!'

Delesse looked unconvinced. 'Twice he's questioned me, and always the same questions, over and over.'

'You've told him the facts, I hope?'

'There was a point yesterday morning when I was tempted to tell him what he wanted to hear ...'

'But you didn't, did you.' Beside him, Delesse shook her head.

'My stomach cramped at that very moment – I was in too much discomfort to say anything!'

For a moment Feyn said nothing, instead flicking her eyes at Delesse's belly, breast, hands.

'It is a common interrogation technique – the repetitions can be quite hypnotic. If it continues long enough even a strong person can find themselves agreeing with their inquisitor without realising it. Your cramps did you a great service.'

'Do you think he's listening to what we say now?' asked Loken.

'I'd expect nothing less of a competent man – and make no mistake: Commander Behin is highly competent! Have you discussed matters with him yet, Loken?'

He nodded his response and held up four fingers.

'Oh, he'll have people watching us, too. What did you tell him?'

'I told him what I knew, as far as I can see it, Beloved Courtesan.'

Feyn smiled. 'You'll be happy to hear that I am no longer the Beloved Courtesan, just a humble Noble Courtesan. You outrank me, Lord Loken!'

'You assume I haven't been disowned by my Clan.'

'Do you feel as if you've given them reason to disown you?'

'I certainly hope so, my Lady. I was wondering if you've heard any word on how my cousin, Jassael, fares?'

'And Tuuke,' Delesse added quickly.

'No,' said Feyn. 'My conversations with the Commander have been distinctly one-way. Have you heard anything Maeduul?'

The tiny woman looked up when her name was mentioned, letting the hollow grass straw she had been fiddling with drop back into her juice.

'The big man only sees Tall Ones, Lady, as if only they have stories to tell.'

'He hasn't interviewed you?'

Maeduul shook her head. 'Silly of him, yes? But then he doesn't understand the ways of the Servant, nor of our city. The Guardsman is fine – he hasn't been disturbed by questions.'

'He and the Commander share a history, I think,' said Loken. 'I heard Tuuke use a hearth tongue when he confronted the Commander on the boat.'

'The Guardsman has many histories, I think,' said Maeduul. 'Lord Jassael is recovering well, and has been treated with some respect – at least until this morning. He was being questioned for the first time when I had to come down from the roof to share food with you.'

'Poor Jassael,' said Loken. 'I don't think he deserves whatever God, or Tuuke, has planned for him.'

'What of the others, Maeduul?' asked Delesse. 'What of Julyeis and the old Servant?'

He watched her pick the straw out of her drink and sip at its tip.

'Iwact pines to serve his mistress,' she said, turning to face Feyn. 'He's been fretting over your treatment, my Lady.'

'Will you tell him that I am unharmed? Unfortunately I can't command him not to worry.'

'I can. Julyeis is fully recovered, and will be honoured to hear that you asked after her, Lady Delesse. But she has other worries – worries that I share.'

'Worries about those who left the city with her?' guessed Loken.

'Indeed, my Lord.' The look that she offered him warned him that it would be in nobody's interest to talk further about Servants, not at this point in time.

'I'm sure you can offer your friend comfort and good advice, Maeduul,' said Feyn. 'But has anyone comforted you?'

'For him?'

Feyn nodded, reached out her hand and curled her fingers around the woman's wrist.

Beneath the flanges of her cheek's deformities, the little woman's mouth turned sad.

'It hurts that I will not be able to sing him a song of departure. He was a harsh man in many ways, though his heart was honest. He kept his word when it would have been so much easier for him to abandon his plans.'

'We are on his land, little one. He would appreciate a song from one who understood him.'

She shrugged her shoulders, let her fingers twist to grasp Feyn's thumb.

'Aunty Feyn,' said Delesse after a short pause. 'Why exactly have we been taken prisoner?'

The answer was immediate. 'Politics, dear. The Emperor is dead – Behin told me he died in his sleep, possibly a seizure of the heart, though some of the soldiers have been whispering that he may have choked on his food. But however God claimed him, he left us without naming his successor.'

Delesse sat upright suddenly. 'So his plan was never announced?'

Feyn's stare at Loken's betrothed was cool, commanding. 'There was no proclamation, as far as I know. I expect his Council of advisors will be searching for written instructions. Though I'm fairly certain he never wrote anything down concerning that matter.'

Delesse struggled to keep her face expressionless. Loken could understand how she was feeling: he himself felt as if his body had suddenly lost ten kilos, such was his relief at this news.

'So who rules?' he asked.

'I believe that if no instructions are uncovered, then it will be up to the Council to decide who ascends to the throne.'

'Are you not a member of the Council, my Lady?'

'Don't be silly, Lord Loken. A woman holding such an exalted and honourable position? God himself would strike us to dust for even thinking such a thing could be possible!'

'So who currently sits on the Council?'

Feyn took a moment to reach for her juice, wet her lips with the smallest of sips.

'The Chief Elder is the senior member, as is only right and proper, of course. The Chief of the Imperial Clades ...' she started telling off the membership on her fingers '... and his deputy. The Governor of Stal has a place at the table, the Chief Minister, the Chief Administrator – who knew the Empire possessed so many chiefs! Oh, and the leaders of the three Honourable Clans. But you know that already, Lord Loken.'

He grimaced at the reminder. But even as he felt the weight of intrigues snuggle back around his neck, a new thought occurred to him.

'Of course,' he said, 'No candidate could hope to take the throne without substantial support

in the Council. Unanimous, even?"

He waited for Feyn to nod her head before continuing.

'And without that support, the issue would have to be settled by other means ... I wonder who Commander Behin is taking his orders from?'

'Now that,' said Feyn, placing her tumbler back on its dish, 'is a very interesting question!'

How Ancestors are Honoured in Viyame

Finding the Servants of Viyame was proving to be problematic.

When Tuuke had asked Maeduul how many Servants lived in Viyame the tiny woman had shaken her head. As far as Julyeis knew the numbers could be as scant as a few dozen, possibly a few hundred – why should a Servant stay in harsh Viyame, with its insistence on collars and hand-tattoos, when escape to Bassakesh, down the winding Taete river, was such an attractive alternative?

Nobody mentioned it, of course. There had always been a trickle of Servants arriving at the city docks, sometimes in small boats and rafts, sometimes stowed away on the commercial craft that profited from the river trade. A few probably walked to the city through the jungle. However they arrived, they were quickly rounded up by the city guard or the Port Master's people and – if they were strong, skilled, willing to work – they soon became part of the city workforce, no questions about former owners asked, all enquiries about the runaway denied. Bassakesh was the only city in the Empire permitted to own Servants, and always in need of good workers.

Julyeis had been born in the city; her parents had both escaped to the jungle during the Clan strife. When she came of age she had been given a choice to register as a Servant. It had not been a difficult decision: the wages were little more than pocket money, but housing and food could be found cheaply and a registered Servant had free access to medics and apprenticeship schools. She signed the registration papers eagerly. She had even paid good coin to have her own, traditional-style Servant tattoo tapped into the skin of her thigh.

'Are you ready? You know what needs to be done?'

She nodded at the dark shape beside her in the skiff: 'Yes, don't worry about me,' she whispered back.

Tuuke had escaped his captivity on the same day that the Imperial Commander had visited the Servants in the long, high barn they had been allocated on their arrival at the Estate. Maeduul had planned for their interrogations, instructing her and Iwact on what to say to Behin. As he had chosen to interrogate them together, they had been able to hand talk during the long session – restricted to a sign here, a suggestion there, but it was enough to get them through the afternoon unharmed while also planting new doubts in the man's mind.

The Guardsman had knocked on their door within minutes of the Commander leaving, looking for their help. He had left them later that evening, returning twice in the days afterwards to discuss plans and problems with the Story Keeper.

His third visit had been earlier this afternoon, walking across the Estate and trusting the heavy rains to hide him from the lookouts.

'Behin's getting lax,' he'd complained as he clambered through the window. 'There's a guard posted not fifteen metres from here and still I break in unnoticed!'

'A man who likes a risk is a man who's destined to enjoy an interesting life,' Maeduul said; Julyeis was sure it was a quote from one of the stories – perhaps the one where Sama-Lovare taught his sons how to steal bones from the great hounds Hyn-Rhouwe and Gwa-Rhose?

Tuuke had news for them. He'd found out where the Viyame Servants gathered.

'How many are there?' Julyeis had asked.

'My man tells me there's more than three hundred Servants registered to permanent residents, and maybe a hundred more living on the various estates beyond the city.'

There was other intelligence, too: 'I saw Loetopas on the bridge,' he told them. 'He had a retinue of bodyguards so I couldn't kill him.'

'Do you want me to tell Lord Loken?' asked Maeduul.

Tuuke thought for a while. 'Tell him, yes. But wait for a good moment. Better still, tell the Beloved Courtesan and let her choose the time.'

'She probably knows already,' said Iwact. He was probably right, too, thought Julyeis.

Tuuke's news suggested that Viyame's Servants gathered for their story tellings on the nights when the red moon failed in the sky. His explanation of how he had worked this out had fascinated Julyeis; he'd spent the morning riffling through arrest records, seeing if there was a pattern to where and when Servants might be picked up for unauthorised movements. When he'd uncovered the data, the answer appeared obvious.

'The red dog won't be out to play tonight,' Maeduul had commented, 'the white rabbit has the sky to himself.'

'Will they definitely meet tonight?' asked Julyeis.

'They'll meet,' said Maeduul. 'The myths are more important to these Servants than they are to the folk in Bassakesh. Attending the story telling is their only way to demonstrate their Service to the Creator.'

'Shapeis told me that the ferals had contacts in the city,' added Julyeis. 'If we can find them, we may be able to find out what's happened to our friends.'

Commander Behin had waited until the Guardsman had left before paying a second visit to the Servant's barn.

Julyeis had heard of a 'Mechanism' before – a temple device for stealing voices and sending them great distances across the sky. The idea of a tiny listening Mechanism that used the aether to carry people's words to hidden ears without their permission or knowledge seemed – wrong – to her. The Commander had arranged for his secret Mechanism to be concealed in the rafters of the barn on the day of their arrival; everything the Servants had said out loud, he knew.

'So you know about the Guardsman, then,' said Maeduul. Of the three of them, she looked the least shocked. Julyeis had felt her face blanch as the meaning of the Commander's words had sunk into her skull.

Behin had nodded. 'I'll not ask you to keep the Mechanism secret from him. I think the time for secrets is beginning to pass.'

'What happens now?'

'I need your help – Story Keeper. I need all of you to help me.'

'I'll do nothing to harm the mistress!' Iwact's intervention was sharp, decisive.

'There'll be no need for that sort of help, old man. In any case, I've negotiated an "understanding" with the Lady Feyn – she's no longer my prisoner. She hopes you've enjoyed your rest from work, and wants to see you within the hour.'

Iwact made no attempt to hide his relief and joy at the news, letting tears roll across his cheeks unhindered. Maeduul treated the information more warily. A flick of her left wrist told Julyeis that she wanted her to ask the man the obvious question.

'This is welcome news, Commander,' Julyeis said. 'We are Servants, born to Serve the Creation and all things within it. What aid do you need from us?'

He cocked his head to one side as he looked at her, as if assessing her abilities: 'You are fully recovered now?'

'Yes, Commander.'

'The Guardsman says he's found out where Viyame's Servants meet for this "story telling" – they meet tonight, yes?'

'It would seem so, Commander. If I may ask, why do they interest you?'

He laughed. 'If there's one thing I've learned from my old friend Tuuke, it's to be interested in everything – however mundane it may seem at first glance. I've been talking to the Arallo Commander, Jassael. An interesting conversation about a number of things, including a meeting

Lord Loetopas had with a woman – a Servant by the name of Kebezzu. I believe you know this woman?"

Julyeis felt her hands rush to cover her mouth before she could stop them. The Commander smiled at her action.

'When I was visiting your city,' he continued, 'Tuuke asked me about the "Burning Woman" though he offered me no reasons for his questions. And now I discover that Clan Arallo also has an interest in this apparition. Like I said, I think the time for secrets between us all has passed. I need to talk to this Kebezzu – will you help me do this?'

For several seconds, silence. When Julyeis saw Maeduul slowly nod her agreement, she could see all colour had leached from the Story Keeper's cheeks.

The meeting place was somewhere near the old Temple, which stood just beyond the commercial docks downriver from the deep spans of the city's bridge. The soldier, named Yarassok, rowed the two of them past the wharves, dodging around the local river traffic of night fishermen and ferry-skiffs until they reached a small pier – ancient by the look of its crumbled stone.

Julyeis was quick out of the boat, scraping her knee on the steps as she pulled the mooring rope behind her. Only when the craft was secure did Yarassok follow her onto dry land.

'You're not showing any marks, are you?'

He meant her tattoo, she guessed. She shook her head in the dim flame-light, pointed to the top of her thigh, now covered by loose tambelskein pantaloons and a rough cotton blouse; a risk, she knew, given that she had no information on what the local Servants were likely to wear to the story telling. In Bassakesh, people rarely bothered to dress up for the occasion, but she had heard rumours that Servants in other cities took great pains to look their best.

The man was also dressed in tambelskein, though his clothes had more colour to them than hers. He looked decidedly uncomfortable in them.

'You shake and itch like a man who wants to be back in his uniform,' she told him.

He scowled a response.

'Do you know this place?' she asked.

'Your Guardsman believes they meet beneath the Temple, yes?'

'That's what he told us.'

'I've been down there before – catacombs. There's at least half a dozen main passageways leading from the shaft steps; each has its own level. If we wait a while it will make finding them easier, I think, what with all the noise they'll be making ...'

'I doubt they'll be making much noise – can you guarantee that these catacombs will be deserted, even at this time of night?'

He shook his head to acknowledge her point.

They probably have access to a secret passage or room – why else have they not been discovered before? If we don't know where it is I doubt we'll be able to find it, which suggests that we're going to have to follow a Servant ...'

'Which might be dangerous – for you, I mean.'

She smiled at him. 'Why, Yarassok. You sound like you care.'

'Don't be stupid, woman. I'm under orders to keep you safe.'

'Ah,' she said. 'Are there places near the entrance where we can wait and watch?'

He looked up the hill towards the Temple on its crest, a dark outline against the veil of stars.

'The catacombs have a certain reputation, a place to find ... companionship, if you understand me. Maybe we could watch the entrance from the street – though it's riskier, I think; easier to loose the quarry once she gets to the stairwell.'

She made her mind up. 'We'll wait inside. We'll pretend we're looking for companionship.'

'Are you certain?' Staring up into his face, she realised he looked quite nervous.

'I used to run a brothel, lad: I know how to play the part. Let's go and check out these catacombs and see if you know how to play too!'

'So how do they manage to get here without being stopped?'

They had found themselves an alcove on the first landing down the spiralling stairs. For a while they had pretended to engage in affection as they watched people coming and going, then for a shorter while they had laid aside the pretence. Now they were playing dice on a narrow ledge jutting from the curved wall.

'Servants have their ways,' she told him. 'If you're going to get caught for wandering the streets without your owner, then you might as well be caught for not wearing your collar and covering your tattoo with hand-cream.'

'I always thought Servants were supposed to be honest.'

'You'll probably find they prefer to be human – I know I do.'

She saw him then, at the top of the stairs. One of the electric side-lights screwed to the wall illuminated his face within his hood as he looked around. He was carrying the girl on his hip, her short cloak made of a much finer material than his.

'Kiss me!' she whispered to the soldier. 'Quick, before they notice us.'

She endured his rough embrace, his over-probing tongue, as she listened to the sounds of steps as the Servants walked past them – three pairs of feet? Risking a peek over Yarassok's shoulder she saw that four people were descending, keeping to the stairwell's perimeter where the steps were wider. Shapeis was in the lead, with the child, then two women – she couldn't tell if Kebezzu was one of them. Quickly she whispered a description into the man's ear, and a few seconds later he was – quietly, casually – following them down.

The plan was for her to go with him, but a sudden doubt kept her hidden within the alcove. Shapeis had appeared changed, as if his face had been drawn thinner, older. For a moment, a feeling of fear for him blanketed around her form, keeping her still.

To stay still, she realised, would increase the danger for him; she shuddered the foreboding from her body and left the safety of the alcove.

As she descended the electric lights became further spaced out. She could feel no air-draughts, which suggested that the catacombs were not well ventilated, explaining the expensive choice of illumination. She, too, kept to the outer wall of the shaft, realising that if she could see other people across the stairwell's void, so they could see her.

With each completed turn of the great spiral she could feel the roughness of the steps increase through the thin bark soles of her slippers – these must be newer, less well travelled passages, she decided.

The lowest level was still being constructed, but she could see no sign of a new tunnel. Quickly she went back up a level, just in time to see the receding shape of the soldier as he passed under a ceiling-lamp in the distance. He looked back at her, signalled her to move towards him. She followed quickly, keen not to be alone in the pools of underground darkness.

The main passages housed no bodies; rather they appeared to be conduits to side rooms where the city's corpses and bones could be stacked in their eternity sacks. It was the Tall One way to build themselves rock tombs; Servants much preferred to have their bodies buried at the side of the cultivation, returning their flesh and fluids to the fields that sustained them during life.

Yarassok was standing in the entrance to one such room, and as soon as she reached him he pulled her through the short corridor into it.

'Where?' she whispered, unconsciously signing the question with her hand as she uttered it.

'Next room down,' he whispered back, bringing his mouth close to her ear.

She looked around. All four walls, including the wall with the corridor entrance, had deep recesses carved into them, and on each recess were piled people-sized sacks, neatly stacked and labelled.

'It doesn't seem very ... reverential,' she murmured.

'It's not supposed to be – they use the lowest levels to let the bodies degrade. The air down here is good and dry – rich people have powders added to their sacks to help draw out the fluids and make a better death body.'

'Why?'

'So they look good for the relatives when they come visiting, I suppose. These bodies will get moved to their final resting places further up once the smell goes.'

He moved to the rear wall, paced out the dimensions of the room. Then he leaned into several of the alcoves to check the rock into which they were dug.

'You said they were in the next room.'

'Yes, but I don't know where. Most of the rooms are of a similar size – how can you spot where a room is different if you don't know what it's supposed to look like in the first place?'

'Ah,' she said, pleased to see that the man was thinking. 'But if they've got a hidden room, maybe they have a way to keep watch– they wouldn't want to risk leaving the story telling place when others were nearby.'

He pulled himself out of a low alcove, straightening the body sack before he stood up.

'My orders are to capture the Burning Woman's keeper. It'll be easier if she's cornered in the secret room, yes?'

'Assuming that room only has the one entrance.'

He gave her a questioning look.

'Temple workers aren't the only ones who know how to dig through rock. The story telling room might be connected to several catacomb rooms. There could be a whole warren of passages ...'

'Buggery! What else do you suggest?'

'We could always grab her when she leaves, after the meeting.'

'Here?'

'Or further up, nearer the main entrance.'

He considered the idea. 'Attempting the capture on the stairs could be risky ...'

She smiled at him. 'You're a brave man, Yarassok. I'm sure you'll be both courageous and safe!'

She was beginning to get a reputation. Several times she found herself rejecting the subdued advances of strange men, and twice she had confronted women angry that she might be stealing their business.

It had been necessary for them to split up once they were back in the stairwell; the volume of human traffic had lowered considerably as the evening grew older, making them more obvious to those who remained. Yarassok had left her for half an hour to relieve himself and get food, which they ate on the Temple portico. Then he had returned to the watch while she wandered the streets for a while, partly to stretch her muscles but also to plan her next actions. It was approaching two hours to midnight when she returned to the catacombs.

'You took your time!'

'I see you've found yourself a friend.'

'She's just leaving,' he said, staring at the woman leaning at the edge of the alcove. 'She doesn't talk much, anyway.'

'Let's go somewhere else, then. See if I can win some more money out of your purse.'

He nodded his agreement, stepped out of the alcove and headed down towards the next level.

'How much longer do you think they'll be?' he asked.

'Kebezzu liked to start meetings around about this time, and they'd usually go on until after midnight. So they've been down there for what, almost two hours now?'

'Less, say an hour and a half.'

'So it could be another hour – maybe a little longer.'

'Good,' he said. 'That gives me time to show you something.'

'Too risky. Anyway, I've seen the dead bodies.'

'Not these dead bodies, you haven't. Come on!'

Reluctantly, she followed him into one of the broad passages. The quality of the stone carving at the tunnel's mouth was far more ornate than elsewhere in the catacombs, and the expensive artistry extended towards the first few sets of rooms.

'Let's make this quick,' she said.

'That's what that last whore said to me,' he answered. 'It's not far.'

True to his word, he soon turned left into one of the rooms.

The sight took her breath away.

The room was decorated in the form of a grand reception room, with heavy tapestries hung over the walls and a deeply woven goats-wool carpet covering much of the floor. Tables and chairs had been set around the space, each item richly carved from the finest wood. On the tables were embroidered linens and silver cutlery, freshly polished, and even plates of cold food and finely blown glasses holding a liquid that smelled of wine.

But it was the corpses that kept her attention. Six people were seated: three men, two women and a child – all dressed in the finest cloth, each with ostentatious warding jewels and ribbons around their wrists and necks, woven into beards and tresses.

There was no denying that they were dead – the desiccation powders had left their skin deeply bronzed and wrinkled. Where eyes once sat in their sockets there were now voids, lips had shrunk away from teeth to leave permanent smiles.

'This is the Governor's tomb,' he explained. 'Did you know they pass the post from father to son, just like Emperors? The current man rebuilt it about twenty years ago.'

'Does he not like his family, then?'

He gave her a strange look. 'He honours them – the tomb is tended and cleaned daily, with fresh food given to them each morning. The little boy is his own son; he died in an accident when he was four – they say his death triggered this display of devoted grief.'

Julyeis ... had nothing to say. All she saw before her was a sickness of the mind. She couldn't bring herself to look at the child.

'A lot of the tombs have been refurbished like this now. Do you want to see more?'

She shook her head, turned away and walked out of the room.

When it finally happened, it was thankfully quick. Julyeis was leaning against the wall in their original alcove when she spotted the woman climbing towards her. She drew herself back into the alcove, signalled to Yarassok who was lounging near the entrance to that hateful, over-decorated passage across and down from her.

Kebezzu was talking with a strange woman, her head down. Shapeis was following a half dozen steps behind, still carrying the child. Their pace was quick, but not hurried. As Kebezzu passed the passageway Yarassok walked out, blocking Shapeis. He bowed his head in apology, turned and started to follow his quarry.

Julyeis waited until Shapeis had passed her hiding place before emerging to follow them out.

As soon as Kebezzu was clear of the entrance Yarassok struck, using his fist to smack her hard in the side of her head; the woman didn't stand a chance: she crumpled like a sack of yams as she dropped to the pebbled dirt of the road.

But Julyeis was not watching. Even before the soldier had raised his hand she had reached out to tug at Shapeis's cloak.

'Listen to me, boy,' she said as he turned. 'If you value your life – if you value the little girl's life – you'll come with me. No! Don't look, don't shout. You can't help her! Come with me – no words! It's me, Julyeis. Shapeis – would I lie to you, lad? Come! Come with me now! We've got to get away!'

Diplomacy

'This mess is your doing, brother! I trusted you to act in our best interests. This – this disaster – has come at the worst possible moment. We need the boy now, here at Court!'

Loetopas watched his brother's crackled, attenuated words emerging from the wire grill of

the Mechanism, shaking his head at them even though he knew there was no way for Puusen to see his denials.

The argument was stale already in his mind. Every exchange with his brother over the past week had ended in this accusation. As ever, he chose to let the words ride over his shoulders, let them dissipate into the tapestries hung around the small room.

Once again he put his mouth close to the paper bulb of the speaking cup: 'If Loken is alive, we shall find him. I dispatched troops downriver two days ago.'

There was no response beyond a sharp crackle – a ghost of a storm somewhere between Viyame and the Old City.

'There's other things we could be doing here,' he continued. 'Opposition to you in the Council can be subverted in a number of ways, and some of these opportunities can be dealt with by me, yes? If there's one lesson I've learned from the tests our vengeful God has set us this season, it is that the Empire is more than just the Court, and the Old City. I can work on bringing the city Governors on board, and the various merchant guilds all have substantial presences here in Viyame ...'

More static from the grill stalled his arguments. He cast a quick look at the Mechanism operator sat in the corner of the room; the tongueless, shaven headed man was already busy tinkering with dials and tubes, attempting to maintain the link.

Loetopas let loose a sigh of exasperation: 'I know, I know. The storm's arriving. Try to click a message through saying I need to talk with Lord Puusen tonight. Preferably before he entertains any guests.'

Not that his brother would be drinking after sundown, he thought as he left the hidden room at the top of the town house. Puusen was working all hours to make the most of this last, best chance to grasp the supreme power.

And Loetopas was doing everything he could to support his womb-twin's plans. No doubt he could have been far more effective if he was in the Old City by his brother's side, but God had decided otherwise, and he couldn't waste time travelling when he needed to be working on more immediate tasks.

Such as finding Loken.

Loetopas had taken care with his words when describing Loken's loss to Puusen, choosing to make no mention of the boy's treachery. Instead, he'd hinted that the fault lay with Lord Gelleris, playing on the man's reputation for caution, and on the Beloved Courtesan: Puusen was always willing to believe the worst when it came to that woman.

As he entered his offices, he checked the great clock in its alcove – sprung driven and thus, in Loetopas's view, safer and more reliable than any electrical device. He quickly removed the additional wards he always wore when he paid a visit to the secret Mechanism at the top of the house, consulted with his secretary on his afternoon schedule.

'And still no word from our agents concerning the feral woman?' he asked the man. A shake of his grey-fringed head was enough of an answer.

'Send word out to them. She needs to be found. I desire it to be done quickly. Has that oaf Burrame arrived yet?'

'My Lord, he arrived by sedan a few minutes ago, and is still preparing himself for the meeting. He came alone, as you suggested.'

'Good. We have a gift ready for him? He likes ornaments, if I recall correctly.'

'A vase, my Lord, by an artist the Governor much admires. We'll place it in the hall ready for you to present when the meeting concludes.'

'I may extend the meeting by a half hour or so – I have additional matters I wish to broach with him. Have some finger food ready to be brought in when I call for it.'

'As you wish, my Lord.' But already Loetopas was leaving the office, heading towards his own rooms to change into more formal attire, and more appropriate wards.

Surprisingly, flattery was not working its usual magic on the Governor of Viyame. Perhaps,

Loetopas thought, the man already knows how ridiculous he looks, spiking his hair in that fashion and wrapping his corpulence in striped cloth.

'I cannot imagine a circumstance,' he was saying, 'where the Imperial Council's decision could possibly harm the good running of the country. And Lord Puusen is a great man, a leader of the first order. He will no doubt guide the Council to the obvious conclusion.'

'I will of course pass on your words to my brother as soon as I have the opportunity.'

'I can only thank you for such a kind act, Lord Loetopas, though I'm sure there are far more important things for his ears to be bothered by.'

'I'm sure Lord Puusen's ears will be eager to hear your name alongside a declaration of support for his candidacy.'

And there was the nub of it. He watched a bead of sweat form on the Governor's over-oiled temple, watched his eyes lose focus as he tried to construct a sentence in response to his open invitation.

'My Lord,' he continued after the pause, 'I can understand your desire to do what is best for your city ...'

'Thank you, Honoured Courtesan. Please understand that Viyame is my only passion. For me to even think of meddling – commenting on – such grave and weighty matters ... it would be a presumption of the first order!'

'... and yet Viyame is an integral part of our great Empire. Please! Do not protest. How can the Gateway to the Jungle not be taken seriously, safeguarding as it does the passage of so much wealth – such essential goods – to the coastal cities.'

'We perform our allotted tasks, my Lord, as God and the Emperor desire.'

But Loetopas had spotted the Governor's tell, the grasp of his hand at the mention of the word "wealth". This was not about honour and status, he realised.

'And your family has performed them impeccably for generations, Lord Burrame. Not one person could fault your work here. It is a vital work, one that cannot be interrupted by the grime of Courtly politics. In fact ...' he reached out and took a pastry dainty from the plate set by his side, held it in the air for emphasis. '... I believe the work *must* continue. And I'm sure my brother would agree with me that it behoves those of us who care for trade and commerce to make sure the work does not cease.'

'How, my Lord?'

The nakedness of the question shook Loetopas; he had to check that his face muscles had not semaphored a hint of his reaction. He had been away from civilisation for months, and still he could not get used to the abrupt natures of the simpletons who chose to hide amid the muds and mad imps of the jungle.

'Maybe there's some practical arrangements we could help you with ...'

At least the Governor was happy with his vase; Loetopas chose not to waste time watching the man leave with his prize. Instead he headed in the opposite direction, back to the comfort of his offices and the stack of work awaiting him: reports to review; contracts to finalise; orders to issue.

He was surprised when he heard the voice of the housekeeper, a conversation in low tones with his secretary. When the man appeared at his office door he gave him a short look.

'This had better be important!'

'My Lord, I believe it could be. Commander Behin of the Fifteenth Clade is here, requesting an urgent audience.'

Behin. Another common man who had somehow wheedled himself into a position of influence. Loetopas had been suggesting a meeting with him, through channels of course, for the past two days; the Clade commanders were proving to be as non-committal as the city Governors.

'Has he indicated the matter?'

'He says he has news that will interest you greatly, my Lord.'

The decision was instant.

'I'll meet him in the audience chamber. No food, but make sure there's juice available – I

believe he's partial to garfruit, yes? Let him know I'll be with him in ten minutes – don't bother to apologise.'

And he was away once more to his chambers. For this meeting, he chose to wear functional clothes of a simple, military-style cut, along with a pair of well-worn leather road sandals he kept specially for such occasions. His choice of wards, too, was discrete: no more than three, each of stone set in metal hung from short, straight ribbons pinned to his left lapel.

The Commander was already in the audience chamber when he arrived, standing away from the small table with the juice. A quick glance told Loetopas that the man had not taken a drink.

'My deepest apologies, Commander Behin, for keeping you waiting.'

'No apologies necessary, Honoured Courtesan.' He bowed his head, though his feet remained apart, not moving to attention. As usual the Commander's uniform was immaculate. 'I must apologise for not giving you more notice.'

Looking at his own face reflected in the chest plate, Loetopas decided to abandon Court etiquette; he felt certain that such nuances would be lost on the big man.

'I am told you have some news for me?'

'Indeed, Honoured Courtesan. Good news. We have located your nephew; he is safe and well.'

'I was not aware that he was ill, Commander.'

The lie came naturally to his lips. Behin chose not to respond to it, instead keeping his gaze steady and level. For some reason, Loetopas felt his stomach tightening. As the silence continued, he felt a compulsion to speak further.

'Though I haven't seen him since I left Bassakesh – has anything happened? I heard that city docks had been damaged by a fire ...'

Loetopas had ordered that all aether messages from Bassakesh be monitored as soon as he had arrived in Viyame. The continuance of routine bulletins to the Old City had not surprised him: it was exactly what he would have done in the circumstances. People were beginning to gossip about the lack of boat movements, he knew, though Behin had left Bassakesh before the disaster struck. The Commander couldn't know ...

Unless Loken had told him.

No. Loetopas dismissed the speculative thought with a mental shake of his head. Loken was bred for loyalty – the boy might be stupid enough to publicly disagree with his uncle, but the Clan was more than mere family.

'He has his betrothed with him, yes?'

Behin nodded. 'They were travelling upriver, aboard the *Pride of Lachlasser*.'

He had to ask the question, not to do so would be ... impolite.

'And the Beloved Courtesan is well?'

Again the nod. *God's own gizzards on a rutting stool!* As a space of silence again opened between them, Loetopas felt his own stomach complete its knot.

'This is excellent news, Commander. Has the *Pride of Lachlasser* docked yet? I am eager to see my nephew, and his betrothed of course, as soon as possible – the current circumstances being what they are.'

'Indeed, Honoured Courtesan. The boat has passed upriver already, and is docked at the Imperial Estates. Lord Loken has asked me to convey a message to you.'

'Then he dishonours you with such a trivial task ...'

'His message is: "I repudiate you."'

What ...?

'I do not understand, Commander. I thought you said he was well?'

'I don't understand either, Honoured Courtesan. But then it is not my job to understand, only obey.'

'And you're taking your orders from whom? From the Beloved Courtesan?'

'I take my orders from the Clade leaders, Honoured Courtesan. They do not understand this apparent rift in Clan Arallo. My orders are to mediate between you and your nephew. The Clade

leadership is keen that the situation should not complicate itself further - the current circumstances being, as you say, what they are.

Little Sosunda

As far as Delesse could tell, Feyn was at her happiest when she was plotting. Today she was plotting the theft of the vacant throne from under the noses of those who would see themselves as Emperor. To make the task more interesting, she was conducting this escapade in a mansion some 600 kilometres – at least four days by fast carriage – away from the source of all intrigue, the Imperial Court in the city of Stal.

She could only marvel at her aunt's audacity, even if failure would see them all roasted over an executioner's pyre.

As Feyn continued to interrogate Commander Behin on tactics, alliances and manoeuvres, Delesse glanced at Loken slumped most uncourteously in his chair. She wanted to reach out her hand and touch his fingers, let him know that she, too, felt frustrated and overwhelmed. But their overpadded, overdecorated seats had been positioned just far enough apart to forbid such an action.

'What would I do as Emperor?' he had asked her before this latest meeting.

'I don't know.' She shrugged her shoulders and offered him a wide stare and a flash of a smile. 'What are Emperors supposed to do? Rule?'

'I always thought the point of being the Emperor was to tell other people what to do, go hunting, that sort of thing.' His hand had reached out to her face, his fingers pushing a few strands of her hair back into their braid, and she had taken the chance to let her cheek rest against his warm, dry palm.

'But she makes it sound a lot more complicated,' he continued. 'Politics and religion; diplomacy and trickery – I've always avoided that sort of thing.'

'Because it reminds you of your father?' Quickly she caught his wrist within a circlet of her fingers and thumb as he moved it away, keen not to lose touch with the smooth heat of his skin.

He hadn't answered her question; the unbalanced cinch of a muscle in his cheek was enough to semaphore his distaste.

The current conversation meandered around them both. Not able to reach out for what she wanted, Delesse returned her gaze to her aunt, sat opposite.

'What other assurances do the Clade Commanders need?' Feyn was asking.

'They want a unity of purpose, my Lady.' The big man had chosen to stand, ignoring the offer of refreshment. 'The information I've gathered concerning Clan Arallo's activities in relation to the Bassakesh incident has sown some doubt concerning the Clade Chief's decision ...'

'You've told them the full truth of what happened?' Loken was suddenly alert, straightening himself in his chair.

Delesse felt her belly clamp tight as the purpose within Loken's question unwound from the words. She, too, sat up, almost rising from her chair.

Behin noticed her movement. She watched him take a moment to compose his response.

'I have chosen not to reveal all the details of the incident to my colleagues for the moment, Lord Loken. In this, I am following the course set by both Lord Loetopas and Lady Feyn, and indeed by the Governor of Bassakesh himself ...'

'You've spoken to my father, Commander?' Delesse made no attempt to hide the need in her voice.

'Yes, my Lady. He is well, as is your mother and brother. Lord Gelleris tells me the city is beginning to recover, though the docks remain closed and all boats travelling past the city are being boarded, their crews taken into custody.'

'Though people are beginning to talk, Commander,' Feyn added, letting her thoughts be voiced. 'It may be the case that the immediate need for secrecy has passed ... no, Delesse dear, hear

me out. The threat to the city was always the Emperor's fear of disease ...'

'Lord Gelleris says there have been no new cases for over a week,' added Behin, 'and my agents agree. It seems that the imps have returned to the jungle.'

'It could be to our benefit if the truth of what happened were to become more widely known – from the right source, of course.'

Loken was shaking his head. 'My father would pounce on this news in an instant – I know how he works, Feyn! He'd use the news to unite the Empire against the city, whip them all with the fear of plague to do his bidding ...'

'Which is exactly why the news must not come from us, Loken.' Feyn's eyes were now centred on the bulk of the Commander. 'What happened in Bassakesh is too important, too vital to the safety of the Empire, for its veracity to be fought over by courtesans and cliques. The city must be seen as the victim in all this – and it is a victim, Commander, you know this! It must be seen as a victim, not a threat.'

Delesse watched Behin consider the proposal, though when he nodded his head in agreement she felt no relaxing response from her belly.

'Aunty Feyn,' she said. 'Please forgive me, this talk is making me feel faint.'

Was there the briefest flick of concern in her aunt's eyes? She chose to believe so.

'I'm sorry, my dear. Forgive me – I forget your age sometimes! Of course you should withdraw if you feel unwell. Perhaps Maeduul will be able to rummage out some more of those soothing herbs, yes?'

Loken was already standing, not bothering to conceal the concern in his face.

'No, Loken,' said Delesse, 'I'll be fine. You're needed here; I'm not. I'll be much more comfortable in my room.'

'Maybe some fresh air and exercise would help,' suggested Feyn. 'We need you healthy, dear, if only to keep your betrothed's mind focussed on the issues.'

The heat of the day had never bothered her before; now it oppressed her. There was no movement of air in her rooms, however widely she opened the slatted window shutters. The heat penetrated her body in waves, counterpointing the rise and fall of bile in her throat, upsetting her attempts to concentrate on reading or writing or even embroidering.

And the place was too quiet. When she had been younger she had craved peace and solitude; now that she had it in abundance, she loathed it.

Those thoughts led to a memory of Arbelle: she missed her sister desperately, the way she could talk about anything and make it seem interesting, if only for the moment. She missed her mother and father. She even missed Velledue, her old tutor – a man she had never particularly liked while he lived.

She craved the safety of familiar faces almost as much as she craved the taste of flinty earth on her tongue. After an hour she abandoned her chamber, went searching for Maeduul.

The tiny woman was being elusive: none of the staff had seen her since breakfast. Unsure of what to do next, Delesse headed for the grand veranda – an expanse of covered planking extending from the back of the mansion – more in the hope of catching a gust of air than anything else.

The stables were visible from the veranda. Delesse had not been back to see the horses since she had let Loken take her in the sacks and stalks five days before. The memory of the great beasts seemed to quieten the storm in her stomach.

'Aunty Feyn did tell me to go for a walk,' she announced to nobody in particular as she set out across the cropped expanse of grass.

There were other people in the stable. Delesse heard their voices before she reached the door. She halted, not certain whether she wanted to disturb their work.

How many people? She moved to the side of the wooden shed, making a game of the situation. Two voices – no, three: the woman who had just interrupted the other two was Maeduul.

Something grabbed her leg.

She let out a yelp in surprise, turned quickly to see what was touching her. Then she laughed.

'Who are you, little one?'

The girl was thin – painfully thin, she could see – though her dark olive skin looked clean and her straight, her black hair had been carefully combed to form a sheet to hide her ears and neck. Her eyes were dull, the green flecks within the brown foundations seemed to highlight her vague confusion.

'She won't answer you,' said a voice behind her. 'She can't talk.'

The voice spun her around like a command. The sight of the man brought her hands to her mouth.

'Oh, my ...'

'My Lady Delesse – it is good to see you looking well.'

He, too, had changed – as far as she could tell. She had only ever seen him before by shaded lamplight. The skin on his face looked more worn and lined, showing the remnants of healing abrasions within its muddy-coloured depths, and his hair was lank, with curls dropping further across his forehead and the short horns jutting from his brow.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I'm staring. It's the – I never expected to see you here. Why are you here? Did you walk? I heard that the Servants had left the city ...'

He smiled. 'My Lady – so many questions! I should be the one to apologise. We are trespassing on you time and territory. We shall leave now.'

'No, don't ...'

She stopped talking, took a deep breath to try and collect herself, her suddenly rushing thoughts and the returning knot in her belly.

'I was looking for Maeduul – have you seen her? I thought I heard her voice.'

'Yes,' he said. 'She's with us – she's showing us the horses ...'

'Do you require my services, Lady'

She watched Maeduul step from the doorway and walk towards her.

'No, Maeduul, nothing in particular. I was just – lonely. I thought we could talk ...'

'There's too much talk going on in that big house for my ears,' said the little woman. 'Go hide yourself, Shapeis. Can't you tell you're frightening the Lady! And take little Sosunda with you; I think she enjoys touching the horses.'

He moved forward with a sheepish grin, reached round her to take the girl's hand in his.

'I swear I left her sitting on the doorstep – were you planning to kidnap her, my Lady?'

'What? No! She grabbed me!'

He frowned, shook his head slightly as if he didn't believe her words.

'She grabbed you, my Lady?'

Julyeis, too, had appeared through the stable doors. Her frown matched the one that Shapeis wore, though hers seemed more puzzled than disbelieving. Delesse nodded her response, suddenly uncertain of what was going on.

'She doesn't move,' said Shapeis. 'She never moves.'

'She's a strange child,' said Julyeis. 'Who knows what she's capable of doing, yes?'

'Or what may have been done to her,' added Maeduul. 'Shapeis, I think you and Julyeis should take her back to the barn now, perhaps feed her some of that stew Iwact cooked up this morning. And I shall sit here in the sun and discuss great issues with the Lady Delesse, if that is what she desires. Do you know, my Lady, that they have *ants* in this great field? I had always believed they were some sort of imp, but they're as real as you and me! Who would have thought such a thing was possible!'

'Actually,' said Delesse, 'the mention of stew has made me quite hungry – would you be willing to share a bowl of it with me?'

It was not the first time that Delesse had eaten as a guest of Servants, though that had been some years ago, before she had begun to grow into her womanhood. If her presence was making the

others uncomfortable, then they were being kind enough not to show it. Even so, the conversation was fragmented, with neither the horned Servant – Shapeis, she remembered – nor his friend Julyeis contributing more than a few words each.

Maeduul asked her something. She had been so lost in her own thoughts as she consumed the food she missed the question.

'I asked,' said Maeduul, wrinkling her nose, 'how you felt about the Lady Feyn's plans for you and your man.'

'I'm sure she means well,' she answered carefully, 'but I don't know what to think about it all. If her plans work then I'll be the Empress – that's just silly, no?'

'Why would being the Empress be silly?'

'Because I'm not an Empress; I'm me, Delesse, daughter of Gelleris and Temis from Bassakesh.'

'Yet it may soon be so, my Lady.'

'I don't even know what an Empress is supposed to do – the last one died before my father was born!'

'Then nobody will remember how an Empress is supposed to behave, will they? Maybe you should treat it like a great gift, an opportunity for you to shape the world around you, make it a better place.'

Delesse frowned, scraped the bottom of the clay bowl with the wooden spoon she had been given. The others had used dough to scoop the broth from their dishes.

'I don't want change,' she said. 'Unless I could change the world back to the way it was.'

'You would bring back the dead ones, yes?' Maeduul let her eyes close for a moment. 'I am not so sure I'd like to meet some of my dead ones.'

The discussion was making Delesse feel uncomfortable. A movement beneath her stomach – gut-breath, she hoped – reminded her that in a few months her world would be changing again.

She had counted days – so many times, counting and calculating – and she knew without the help of any medic or midwife the truth of her womb. The thought of a baby within her scared her, scared her badly. But there was no-one she could talk to, nobody to share her fears with – not now Arbelle had abandoned life.

Please don't cry again, she whispered silently in her head.

Then change the subject, the memory of Arbelle suggested.

'All this talk has been about me,' she said, forcing herself to look directly at Shapeis. 'Yet your adventures must have been as scary as mine. Why did you leave the city so suddenly? What happened in the jungle?'

He was shaking his head as if to bat the questions away from his ears.

'Many things happened, Lady, but mostly we walked. Would you care for a report on each step taken?'

'What about the girl? Where did you find her?' The little girl intrigued her. 'Is she this mysterious "Burning Woman" everyone's been whispering about?'

'What ...?'

Shapeis looked stunned, as if Delesse had walked across the room and physically slapped him. His mouth was open, waiting for the rest of his exclamation to voice itself, but no sound came. Instead he glanced at Maeduul, then Julyeis, forcing the question to utter itself through his eyes.

'Ah,' said Maeduul to nobody in particular.

Julyeis, too, looked shocked. Delesse felt a rising flutter in her chest as she realised that maybe she had asked a very nasty question.

Arbelle had always maintained that in such a situation you might as well ask more embarrassing questions – on the grounds that if you're going to be punished for stealing one mango, you might as well be punished for stealing the whole tree along with the parrots sat in it. The memory was a happy one, and her urge to laugh through her discomfort was strong, but she resisted it.

'Maeduul, I apologise if my questions are inappropriate, if I've caused you and your friends

distress.'

'What do you know of the Burning Woman? Who told you?'

Shapeis had quickly overcome his initial shock, the tone of his question hinting at anger bubbling deep in his guts. She chose to answer him honestly.

'Not much. Except that she exists – existed – and that her words have caused some people ... problems.'

Maeduul heaved herself out of her crouch, moved towards the man to stand between him and Delesse.

'I was going to talk to you about the little one,' she said, addressing the man directly, 'but there's never seemed to be a good moment. I almost spoke to you at the story telling circle that last time, but I heard something – someone – in the darkness; I couldn't risk sharing my fears with strange ears, not at that delicate time. And then the world fell apart and you went away and since you came here, well, things have been busy ...'

Shapeis had also stood up, allowing his anger to bundle into his shoulders. 'Who? Who, Maeduul? Who told them about her? Did you ...?'

'Shapeis! Control yourself! There is no blame here. Keep your rage in your groin and wake up your brain!'

These words came from Julyeis, and somehow – Delesse knew not how – their sharp inflections diverted the man's face away from confrontation.

Maeduul reached out her hand towards him, but didn't move closer.

'Where to start ...' she muttered to herself.

'Tell me – tell me if the girl's in danger?'

'She was,' Maeduul admitted, testing each word before giving it to the air. 'For a while there were people – dangerous people – who needed the Burning Woman to be dead. And it seems that there were other people who wanted her to be alive.'

She sighed, then continued. 'When I say "dead", I mean the ideas and beliefs that the Burning Woman represents. Nobody expected that someone would appear claiming to be the reincarnation of the Burning Woman.'

'You knew about it, though,' said Julyeis. 'You said there would be people coming; you asked me to look after them – her, remember?'

'It seems so long ago! Yes, I remember the night. But even then I had no idea of the girl's existence. I knew you were a good, sensible woman and I needed to know the detail of the threat. You can't defeat an enemy if you don't even know their name.'

'Why was she – Kebezzu I mean – why was she a threat?' asked Shapeis, now intrigued. Delesse was impressed at the speed at which his feelings could change his face, so different to her own training to suppress all show of emotion, whatever the cost.

'She threatened schemes and plans which had been brewing for over thirty years, my friend. A plan to change the very world we live in.'

'Go on,' he said. 'Who would dare to make such a plan? Who would want to, apart from us Servants?'

'He did,' she answered.

'Who?'

'The Emperor. I used to be his ornament, remember?'

He nodded his understanding before asking a new question.

'How?'

Maeduul sighed again; Delesse got the impression that she was not the only one in the building having to deal with uncomfortable memories.

'You were there at the meeting where I told Kebezzu about the Burning Woman. I remember seeing you there, watching you grab the girl as she rocked on her legs. He agreed to her execution – the execution of the real Sosunda – and even came to witness it, though he had no desire to see it.'

'I didn't believe you when you told us that. Why would an Emperor attend a Servant's execution?'

'Because she had been his lover, for a while.'

'You lie!'

The accusation bounced between the barns rafters and its earth floor.

'Oh, I have no proof,' admitted Maeduul. 'Just his word that this was so. I told him my stories, and he told me his – would you like to hear this story?'

She looked around at the other people in the room, her glance lingering when she looked at Delesse.

She wants you to hear this story, said the memory of Arbelle. *She only ever told the stories for you.*

'I can't give this drama the justice of a full telling – a bad habit I seem to have acquired recently. Maybe it's time for you all to find a new Story Keeper! But I shall give you the skin of the tale, and hope you have enough bones and scraps in your heads to make my puppets act.'

She had chosen to speak standing, Delesse noticed, as if she was being tested.

'He was young when he came to the throne, he told me, and not secure on its cushions enough to take a wife of his own choice. So he took a Servant lover instead: at first in secret, then later not so secretly.

'It was a good relationship. Barren, of course, as any child could have been used as a weapon against them both. But they had each other – two people from distant worlds who discovered they could speak the same language. And in many different ways, or so he implied. I was very young when I first became his ornament, so he spared me the details of their liaisons.

'But it was not destined to last. Those were difficult times, harsher than we've known for most of our lives, and he had an empire to balance on a pole, hoping to keep people and places from falling and smashing on the rocks of chaos that lie hidden in the shadows of strife.

'It was the religious men in their pointy hats that finally forced him to abandon her. Ever since, he's never bothered to give the God-men the full measure of respect they believe is their right – he's punished them in many subtle ways for their treachery back then; I doubt that they'll cause an Emperor – or even an Empress – any great problems for many years to come.

'They wanted her scourged for daring to pollute his body. Instead, he arranged for her escape into the jungle. He had Servants trained in the arts of brewing the soil and sent them away with her to build a better world beyond the walls of cities.'

Delesse was astonished at these revelations. 'Did Aunt Feyn know about her?' she asked.

'Oh yes,' said Maeduul, 'though Feyn, like me, came into his life much later. It was soon after your Aunt's arrival that a day came when secret allies became secret traitors, threats became actions. We all know the results, as many, many folks – Clansmen and Freemen and Servants alike – were affected by the Clan strife. Perhaps the Servants suffered more than most, because we were slaughtered: harvested and rendered as waste.'

'It was a terrible time,' agreed Julyeis. 'It drove my parents to Bassakesh.'

'Aunt Moesser lost her first husband at that time,' agreed Delesse. 'She told me he died protecting Servants from marauders. He was a Courtesan, too.'

'In such times do men and women throw off their skinny masks to show the world their real faces. Yes, I've heard talk of many Tall Ones who despaired of the stupidity of others and paid dearly for their humanity. But tell me, Julyeis: why did your parents choose to run to Bassakesh? Why choose a small, forgotten city in the middle of the jungle when there were much better places to run – north, for instance, or west beyond the borders of the Empire?'

'I don't know,' admitted the woman. 'I never asked them. Though Bassakesh has always had a reputation for being different from other places, even by the standards of the other jungle cities ...'

'No, Julyeis. For most of its history, the city was like any other city in the land. That changed after the Lord Gelleris's grandfather discovered the secrets of the dye. My Emperor lost many battles, many friends, in his fight to keep his pretty throne. But he never let any of his enemies take control of Bassakesh.

'He owed her that, you see. When she cursed him on the pyre, he wanted to die with her – but he kept on breathing. She was granted the ease of oblivion; he was punished with the

tribulations of existence. Bassakesh – the city we know – is his way of apologising to her memory: it is a city apart, a city where Servants and Tall Ones can learn to live and work together in a new way. It is his promise to her memory, set in stone, that things can be better.

'Your family, Julyeis, went to Bassakesh because it offered them one thing they couldn't find elsewhere: hope.

'Kebezzu doesn't believe in hope; she believes in magic. She believes in twisting the words of others to make them work for her own vision – a vision where men and women live as animals in the jungles, free from responsibility, free from any necessity beyond filling the bellies of her followers and keeping them happy with half-remembered stories.'

'But she's not a bad woman!' protested Shapeis. 'She believes that what she's doing is right!'

'You think she believes the child is truly the reincarnation of the Emperor's lover?'

'Yes, I do!'

'You believe the spirit of Sosunda was so overwhelming to the child that it left her without any will of her own to do anything? Not even chew? Not even piss or shit without being directed to do it?'

'I ...' But Delesse could see the shadow of doubt in the faint crease of his brow. And so could Maeduul.

'It is good that you choose not to believe everything, Shapeis. Because you're going to need more than blind faith to find out why the little one is knelt behind you now, with tears on her cheeks!'

Delesse watched the cascades of shock hit Shapeis and Julyeis as they turned to see little Sosunda crouching near to one of the large, central beams that supported the roof of the long barn. She had not noticed the girl moving towards them, but the fact that she could move without being directed seemed to distress the others severely.

Shapeis couldn't contain his anger and worry any longer. Spinning back to confront the tiny woman, he shouted: 'I don't understand! What's going on?'

'Hush,' said Maeduul. 'You're frightening her. Tell me, did Kebezzu feed her separately from the others?'

'Yes,' said Shapeis after a short pause. 'She had a special dough to eat – nothing else. Normal food made her sick.'

'But you've been sharing your food with her since you came here, yes?'

He could only nod his head.

Julyeis had her hands to her mouth. 'Oh, sweet Creator take me now! She was drugging the child?'

Maeduul shrugged her shoulders. 'Maybe we ought to ask her,' she said.

[The Guardsman Investigates his City's Ruin](#)

'So who is she?'

'We don't know who she really is – not yet, at least. She's not being very cooperative.'

If the Commander of the Fifteenth Clade was proud of the way he had outwitted Tuuke over the past few days, he was keeping that pleasure to himself. For his part, the Guardsman had decided that a professional approach to the situation was best; he no longer trusted his instincts when it came to dealing with his oldest friend.

'Does anyone know?' Tuuke asked. 'Jassael?'

'Have you not heard? The Arallo Commander is not a well man; a new imp has found shelter in his lungs'

'He's dying?'

Behin nodded, though there was no trace of satisfaction in the set of his face. Tuuke took a moment to consider his own feelings and was surprised to realise that he, too, held little in the way

of happiness to hear that the man who had transported the plague to Bassakesh would soon be on his knees before God Himself.

He gazed once more through the small window that looked down on the woman's cell. She was sat on her heels in the corner of the damp, cramped room, a scrap of cloth covering her shoulders.

'Have you encouraged her to talk?' he asked.

'No, *aoslo-ten*,' said Behin. 'Questions without fists. Though her interrogators have not allowed her to sleep much these past few days.'

'And she's said nothing? Nothing at all?'

'Oh, she has plenty to say, that one. She's a true believer in this Burning Woman of hers ...'

'But nothing that could help us?'

The Commander was shaking his head. 'The only way to stop her diatribes is to mention the child. Then she shuts up, refuses to talk.'

The child – Sosunda, the Servants were calling her – was a puzzle to Tuuke. He'd heard the bones of her story from Juleis, though the Servant had not been able to tell him anything about who she was, or where she came from.

He needed to know more about the child, he decided. If Kebezzu wasn't talking about her then perhaps the horned Servant, Shapeis, might prove to be more helpful.

That thought led to another. 'Can you tell me if your reconnaissance teams have found the other Servants she was with?'

He watched the Commander consider the question. Behin was still trying to play the role of diplomat between Loetopas and Feyn, though Tuuke could tell from the way he narrowed his eyes each time he talked of Loken's uncle that he didn't like the man.

'They've found some older Servants just north of the Great Road, apparently abandoned – left to die, they say, and a number of them were dead. But no sign of your ferals. It's rough country north of here, mostly limestone outcrops and plenty of caves and blind valleys.'

'So the Servants could be right; space enough for a few settlements to develop unnoticed.'

'The possibility is there, yes. My men will keep hunting – it gives them something to do, after all.'

Tuuke considered the news. 'I'm worried, Behin. I refuse to believe that these ferals have managed to survive – managed to move so many Bassakesh Servants through the jungles – without help. Where did they get their weapons?'

'What are you thinking, Tuuke?'

'Somebody is helping them – but I can't prove it! Is there any way the Clades could do some investigating? Check movements of goods between settlements? See if there's a record of wagons not reaching their destination – particularly between Viyame and the coast.'

Behin was smiling at the suggestion. 'Even if such records existed, Guardsman, I doubt my colleagues would consider the work to be a priority at this time.' He started to walk away for the window and its cold cell, his arm outstretched to invite Tuuke to accompany him. 'Talking of which, Lord Loetopas has requested a meeting with Lord Loken. He's suggesting it be held on neutral ground.'

'I know,' said Tuuke. 'He's asked that they meet in the City Palace, with the Governor of Viyame as host.'

Behin glanced at his friend, and chuckled. 'You look like you're chewing on soured garfruit, *aoslo ten*. Has Lady Feyn reached a decision yet?'

'She will tell you before she tells me – she knows what I think of the idea! Talking of which, I don't suppose you could get me the plans of the Palace, could you?'

Tuuke had heard of Shapeis, of course: Varoul's purchase of the horned Servant for his bordello had been the centre of some bawdy gossip at the time. But he had never had reason to speak at length with him before.

Neither the man nor the girl was in the long barn that had been converted into the Bassakesh

Servants' new home. He was surprised to see more Servants – the rescued survivors, he surmised – already here, most sprawled between bales of hay. Juleyis confirmed his suspicions that these were survivors: the 'laggards', she called them; she was busy tending to their needs. She directed him towards the stables with barely a glance across her shoulder.

He saw his quarry as soon as he entered the stables, perched on one of the stall gates.

He didn't bother to introduce himself, instead launching his questions at the lad while still approaching him. 'When did Kebezzu ask you to look after the girl? Why did she choose you?'

Shapeis took his time to look up at him; he seemed to be more interested in watching the girl crouched in the stall beside the horse.

'Maeduul said you'd be asking me questions,' he replied as Tuuke drew level with him.

'Kebezzu didn't choose me. She often left Sosunda at Varoul's place when she had meetings; I'd take care of her when I had time between clients.'

'Did she care for the girl? I mean, did she ever hug her or talk to her?'

He looked to the ground for a moment, as if considering the question against his memories.

'She always cared for Sosunda, yes, but much like a tradesman cares for his most useful tools. She even called her a 'tool', once. I think she saw her more as a vessel than a person.'

'A vessel for the Burning Woman?'

He nodded his agreement. 'At times she seemed to be a little in awe of her, now I look back on things – of the Burning Woman, I mean.'

'And you believed in this reincarnation claim?'

'I don't know – I think I did, for a while. She ...' His gaze returned to the girl, balanced on her haunches watching the pepper-grey horse eat some hay. '... Well, I'd never met anyone – anything – like her before. It was difficult to see her as a person when she was in that state; it was easy to believe Kebezzu when she talked about the Burning Woman while watching the little one. Her hands ...'

Shapeis shook his head, as if he had just said something he shouldn't have.

'I know about the hands,' said Tuuke, guessing at the problem. 'I know about hand speech – we use something similar in the Claves, though we call it "signing".'

The young man offered him a rueful grin. 'It seems like Servants have no secrets – at least from you, Guardsman.'

'What of the drugs, Shapeis? Tell me about the drugs.'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'There's not much to tell. She always prepared food for Sosunda herself – said it was her duty. Sometimes she'd use cornmeal, sometimes cassava or yam. She told me it was important only to feed her what was prepared for her, and not to eat any of it myself.'

'And did you?'

'No.'

'Did you ever lick your fingers after feeding her?'

Again, the quick, sad smile. 'Maybe. Usually I fed her using a leaf to shape each morsel. She always insisted on charring the leaves afterwards - to the memory of the Burning Woman, she told me.'

'Can you remember how you felt after licking your fingers?'

He shook his head. 'There's a lot I don't remember. One time – I think there may have been less pain in my feet, but also an emptiness in my head; it lasted a whole afternoon, perhaps longer.'

Tuuke questioned him for a few more minutes, but knew already he had offered all the useful information he had; Shapeis told him Kebezzu had held many meetings with different people, but he had only been invited to the evening gatherings.

When they finished, he remembered to thank him for his help, asked him to let him know if there was any further improvement in the girl's state. Then he went looking for Maeduul.

He found her within a minute of leaving the stable, or rather, she found him. She was sitting on the stable roof watching the clouds beginning to collect in the sky for their afternoon performance. Only when he had started walking towards the barn did she call him back.

'I need to ask your advice.' He had to shield his eyes from the sunlight to make out the shape of her sat astride the roof's shallow tip.

'Advice is for Emperors, but I'm always happy to hear my own voice. There is a fine feast of landscapes to be had from this perch: will you join me?'

He smiled in answer, looked for a place to clamber up alongside the tiny woman. Surprisingly, the roof seemed to be inaccessible from the ground. Eventually, he had to stack a couple of crates together and clamber up.

'I refuse to believe that you managed to get up here yourself,' he told her once he had reached the broad, wood shingled expanse overlooking the painfully green pastureland.

'I'm disappointed in you, Guardsman,' Maeduul responded. 'Normally you can work these things out very quickly!'

He looked around him, spotted the carefully coiled rope towards the rear of the building. 'I see,' he said. 'Thank you for reminding me not to make assumptions.'

'This is turning into a productive conversation already! What else can I do for you today?'

'I take it you heard what we were saying just now?'

'Of course. I'm not deformed. Unlike young Shapeis, I was bred to look like this; an acute sense of hearing was one of the traits encouraged in my bloodline.'

'Good ears and a prodigious memory for remembering what you hear – like a living listening device? Maybe you should not have shared that detail with me, Story Keeper.'

'I only tell people what they need to know. I am a device with purposes of my own.'

He acknowledged her point with a slow nod of his head.

'Commander Behin and I have been to visit the woman, Kebezzu. She remains ... a mystery to me, as do the Servants who follow her.'

'Did the Commander tell you what I said to the Lady Delesse yesterday?'

'He gave me a summary of the conversation, yes.' Though in fact Behin had done more than that. The whole discussion had been recorded through the spying Mechanism in the barn onto a taping cylinder: together the two men had listened to Maeduul's claims, for his part in stunned silence; afterwards they both agreed not to discuss what they had heard until they had had time to digest the implications.

'Then I think you know as much as I do already.'

'No,' he disagreed. 'I don't understand this woman. I don't understand what she hopes to gain from her actions, her preaching.'

Maeduul gave him one of her penetrating stares. 'You're not a particularly religious man, are you Guardsman,' she stated after a few seconds.

'I might not attend the temple as often as I should, but I know all the rites.'

'Yet you wear no wards.'

'Neither do you.'

The little woman shrugged her head into her shoulders – an act which he had long ago learned to interpret as her sign for amusement.

'I do not believe in a wrathful God, Guardsman. I am, after all, a Story Keeper of the Servants. Servants have no need to fear the Creator, nor ward against His actions. Yet you forego the protective wards as if you're challenging your God.'

He smiled at her observation, acknowledged its truth.

'I've never been able to see how a few coloured ribbons and stones, or a feather plucked from a chicken on a particular night of the year, could help ward me from whatever fate God has seen fit to deliver to my shoulders. But I still believe in God. I still believe we are here for a reason.'

'I was not questioning your belief, but rather your attachment to the rituals surrounding your belief. You asked about Kebezzu, and I'm trying to answer your question. Kebezzu is, I think, a person who believes deeply in the rituals which shape our lives.'

He considered the tiny woman's words for a while, letting his eyes wander aimlessly around the vast meadows. He could see the validity of her point.

'I know very little about Servant beliefs and Servant rituals,' he said eventually. 'I've learned

more about Servants in the past few weeks than I thought I would ever need to know. And yet I understand so little.'

She clapped her hands at his response. 'Already you have the essence of a Servant's understanding in your skull, Guardsman. Recognising how little we know is the first step to accepting our limits.'

'So, Kebezzu believes herself to be a leader among Servants?'

'Yes.'

'But she doesn't understand the limits that true leadership imposes on her. You are also a leader among Servants. When I heard you tell that story about the death of Sam Lover ...'

'Sama-Lovare – so it was you hiding in the bushes to hear my words that night!'

'Yes, I was there. My point is that you were not trying to tell people what to do, but rather trying to make people think about what they should do. I remember your words at the end, that bloodshed and strife were not the answer, that we should find a better response.'

'Your memory has not been damaged by recent events.'

'Kebezzu's answer was to lead the Servants away from Bassakesh – away from the place of safety the Emperor had made for them, as his atonement for condemning his lover to the flames of the executioner's pyre.'

Her smile was broad and pure. 'She did just that, yes. And she led a lot of Servants away from the ravages of the plague, though not until the worst of the plague had hit the Western Quarter, I think.'

'Did she know the plague was coming?'

'Her interpretation of the prophecies would allow such a possibility, perhaps. Can belief be knowledge, Guardsman?'

'No,' he said. 'Belief is not the same as knowledge. I'm asking the wrong questions.'

Again, he let his eyes wander among the greens of the meadow grasses, let them follow the course of a horse galloping across the gently rolling expanses.

'It takes a lot of effort to maintain this place,' he murmured to himself. 'A lot of effort to cultivate enough land to support a settlement. Behin told me he was sent into the jungle, once, to destroy Servant settlements – probably the settlements this original Sosunda had established with the help of the Emperor.'

'I like your thinking,' commented Maeduul. 'It colours my ears pink.'

'He also mentioned that in all his time in the jungle since then he had not come across any other Servant settlements. Yet Kebezzu led – how many? a thousand? – she led a thousand people out of Bassakesh.'

'That is a lot of people.'

'Where was she taking them to? Not to another city – the Clave informers would have discovered such a plan long ago. But she was planning to take them somewhere – somewhere substantial enough to be able to absorb a thousand new stomachs ...'

He turned to face the Story Keeper. 'It can't be done. Not even if there were a dozen secret settlements scattered across the hills to the north of this city, they couldn't hope to absorb a thousand people in one go. Not without help from outside.'

The tiny woman chose not to answer, instead offering him a steady, warm look – as if proud of her pupil.

'How did you know she would be coming to Bassakesh?'

'Servants are a chatty bunch, always exchanging gossip. I knew someone was coming to visit us, and I knew when she would arrive. Kebezzu was not the first feral to visit our city, Guardsman.'

'Shapeis just told me that she had many meetings while in the city, but he didn't know who she was meeting. Do you?'

Maeduul shook her head. 'You want me to tell you if she met any Tall Ones? I have no answer to that question, Guardsman. If it was done, it was done beyond the eyes of gossips. But why are you not voicing the questions you've really come up on this wonderful roof to ask me?'

For a moment, Tuuke let his eyes wander away from Maeduul's face, let them slowly trace along the distant line of the jungle border.

'Am I really that easy to read?' he asked.

'Yes,' she replied. 'Do you want me to speak the words for you?'

He sighed, looked down at his hands clasped between his knees.

'I don't know how to stop this meeting, Maeduul. If the lad gets harmed in any way ...'

'... there will be war?'

He nodded, still not looking up.

'I think it is too late already, Guardsman. Do you think your *aoslo ten*, your hearth tongue friend, would ever be willing to take orders from men such as Puusen and Loetopas?'

'Probably not,' he conceded. 'Behin would rather resign.'

'He would do more than resign. The Commander is a little in love with Lady Feyn, I think.'

'You joke me! His tastes have never favoured ...'

'She is a warrior. She has the command of him, and through him his soldiers and his friends, and their soldiers too. Whereas you ...' unexpectedly, he felt the touch of her hand over his own clasped fists '... you are a planner. This meeting could be to our advantage, yes? It could answer many questions about many things.'

He realised the Story Keeper's words were somehow making sense to him. He could feel the prickles of frustration stretching the muscles across his shoulders, a tension that he knew could only be eased by answers, by plans and strategies.

'Loetopas knows about Mechanisms and listening devices. He will have countermeasures in place before the meeting.'

Maeduul was laughing as she withdrew her hand, her head shrugged deep within her bony shoulders.

'Your Lord may know about mechanisms, Guardsman, but does he know about me? My needs are simple: a clear view of a window where they meet. Make sure they meet in a room liberated from its clutter and tapestries – those weaves do enjoy the eating of words.'

Parlay

'We need to consummate the marriage.'

'That's what I thought we'd been doing.'

'Formally, I mean. We need to consummate our marriage in front of God.'

Loken turned his head away from the view out of the carriage window to concentrate on his betrothed. They were dressed in courtly fashion for the meeting with his uncle, which for Delesse meant piling her hair on top of her head to expose her slim neck. In the past few weeks he had discovered that he adored her neck, its even blush of brown across the unblemished curves of her skin.

'It will be difficult to reach Stal at the moment.'

She cut his words short with a smile. 'Why would we need to go to the Old City? There's a perfectly good temple in Viyame.'

'Emperors are supposed to marry in the Old City.'

'We're not Emperors, not yet.'

She had a point, he conceded. 'How long have you been thinking about this?'

She cocked her head to the left, pretending to consider the question. Then more seriously: 'It's been worrying me for a while. I don't like being in this almost-married state.'

'Have you talked with Feyn?'

She pursed her lips. 'She's quite romantic, you know. I think there's ways to persuade her in principle.'

He reached out, put his palm to her cheek, taking care not to smudge the lines of her

makeup.

'Then yes, I agree. We'll put it at the top of our list of things to do, if we survive this meeting.'

'Of course we'll survive the meeting,' she said, smiling. 'We've got a plan, remember?'

'I love you, Lady Delesse.'

And she blushed, letting the radiance sweep from her throat to her jaw, her cheek beneath his hand, letting it touch the edge of her eyes bright in their skim of moisture.

For Shapeis, the excitements of their early morning activities – breaking into the Governor's Palace, scrambling up walls and across roofs – were now souring to a dull ache of boredom and sore joints. Maeduul crouched a metre above him and five metres forward, her head steadily directed towards the room where the meeting was to take place.

'Is anything happening yet?'

'People setting up chairs with their little side tables, polishing – Tabeed would never have left it so late to prepare a reception room.'

There was little wind to help carry the Story Keeper's voice, even at this height; he had to strain to catch her words. He checked again to make sure Julyeis was in position, handspoke her a quick question. She was sat far below on a bench with one of Commander Behin's soldiers; if she saw his signal, she was ignoring it.

'Our Julyeis has found herself a fancy man.'

He hadn't heard Maeduul move. The little woman's climbing skills were becoming a revelation to him.

'I think he's the one who hit Kebezzu.'

'That's right,' said Maeduul. 'She's been sneaking out to meet him when she thinks nobody's watching.'

Shapeis turned his head, his glance over-long and arched.

'I never took you for a gossip dealer, Story Keeper.'

She smiled, letting her head fold into her shoulders.

'We are all born from the Creator's own hand, Shapeis. Gossip is the thread that keeps us human, yes?'

The smile he returned her was non-committal.

'So how is it you can hear through walls?'

'It is a gift, Shapeis, from the men and women who made me. They shaped my bones – just so – so I can hear the tiniest quip of noise. They also taught me to read lips, hands and postures with my eyes; did you know I can see in the dark?'

'Did you choose to be this way?'

She looked away from him, towards Julyeis and her man.

'No. There was no choice.'

'I'm sorry – I shouldn't ...'

When she looked back at him she was smiling.

'There's no worry, *loif-rjaicko ten*, I have the stories to keep me warm at night.'

Tuuke was not happy with his uniform. It had been many years since he had donned a Clave trooper's uniform; this outfit was a little on the large side for him, and a touch too ornate. The marks of the Fifteenth Clade bothered him more than he cared to admit, making him feel as if he'd betrayed his old Ninth Clade comrades.

'Bunch of peacocks!' he muttered to himself as he took up his position to one side of the wide granite stairs sweeping up to the pillared entrance to the Governor's Palace.

He checked to make sure he could still see Julyeis from where he stood guard. He had spent a long time poring over maps and blueprints, and touring the Palace (in civilian clothes, another indignity) to determine the best placements and sightlines for this operation.

He would have preferred to have been at Loken's side, but it had taken all of Feyn's

diplomatic skills to secure a place for Delesse at this meeting.

Well, the time for planning was gone. Directly ahead of him lay Broad Lane, Viyame's main thoroughfare connecting the Palace to the temple on the next low hill. He watched the long, straight, crowded road, waiting for the appearance of an Imperial carriage being pulled by two horses, its wheels raising a dust of destinies in its wake.

Their host for this meeting was the Governor of Viyame, corpulent in his age; his skin was a little lighter than the current fashion, but he made up for this deficiency through a detailed attention to the style and cut of his attire – ruined, in Delesse's view, by his choice of cloth (deep red with hand-stitched, horizontal gold stripes) which clashed with his blotched face and highlighted his waistline to its disadvantage. He was a sweaty man, too, with perfumed oil spiked through his receding hair; he seemed to control his nerves by touching and rearranging the strands every couple of minutes.

She watched Loken shake the proffered hand resolutely, making a point of not wiping his own hand clean; she herself chose to curtsy to the man, even though she outranked him.

'Please do follow me my Lord, Lady. We are using a room on the second floor, as both parties requested. Our privacy is guaranteed!'

The room they were led to was austere; she could see hooks and outlines on the walls to mark where tapestries had until recently hung. The painted ceiling plasterwork looked gaudy in comparison.

She couldn't help but glance out of the window as she settled herself in the chair assigned to her, though she managed to keep her eyes level, not looking to the roof line. The window space was impressive, a net of mullions and transoms to hold an acreage of clear glass across an entire wall. The courtyard beyond was lush in its verdant growth; a breadfruit tree heavy with crop dominating the centre.

'Lord Loetopas,' said Loken, bowing to his uncle. Delesse was thankful that he managed to keep both his voice and the expression on his face tightly neutral. 'It is good to meet you again under such pleasant circumstances. Governor Buramme has promised to delight our palates with a series of local specialities.'

Loetopas was already seated, his back to the windows as agreed. He offered no smile to the greeting.

'Lord Loken, Lady Delesse. Forgive an old man for not rising to greet you.'

And so the games begin, whispered the voice of Arbelle in Delesse's mind.

'Talk to me, Maeduul. What are they saying?'

'Pleasantries, nothing more.'

'I don't understand you.'

Above him, Maeduul turned her head – the briefest of glances that told him to be quiet.

'They're playing the Courtly game, Shapeis. They bat fat compliments between them, all the while searching for less tasty meanings in the flavour of the other's words.'

'Why?'

'It is their way. The Clan folk like to twist a word to torture it into carrying a different meaning. The trick is to smile and nod when you do it, I think.'

'And you understand this? You can tell what their words say and what they mean?'

'Oh, yes. I went to many meetings with the Emperor. He would explain it all to me afterwards.'

'So what are they saying?'

'At the moment Lord Loken is complimenting the Governor on the care he takes to honour his dead ones.'

Shapeis remembered the story Julyeis had told the other Servants on the night she had first brought him and little Sosunda to the Imperial estates. He had seen nothing of the upper galleries, nor looked closely at the bodies in their bags of herbs stacked in the lower chambers.

'Now they discuss the propriety of differing methods of treating the dead.'

'But what do these words mean?'

'Oh, that's easy. Lord Loetopas is reminding everyone of the arrangements Lord Loken made for his friend's funeral, though he makes no mention of the ceremony. I think he tries to convince the Governor that while some variation in these things is tolerable to him – such as the Governor's own tribute to his dead son – Loken's approach to such matters is rash and dangerous.'

'Should I tell Julyeis this?'

'Probably not. Now they've moved on to the Clans. Lady Delesse hints to the Governor that Clans are a recent innovation. She does this by complimenting him on the marriage arrangements he has made for his daughters. The Governor will be reminded, I expect, that his family has never been awarded Clan status.'

'I'll never understand the ways of the Tall Ones,' sighed Shapeis. 'Life was a lot simpler when all I had to do was fuck them.'

'I hear you have not been well, Lord Loetopas. It is good to see you looking fit.'

'Ill, Loken? No, no. You have been misinformed; I am in excellent health, thank you.'

So far, Loken had not taken any of the food or juice laid out on the small table beside him. But for this matter, he risked a small sip of watered mango juice.

'Then it is good to hear the truth of it from your own lips, my Lord, for the imps have been busy these past few weeks and I was worried about your condition.'

'I don't know about imps, Loken, but there does seem to have been a festival of devils in the jungles this summer.'

'It is our curse that devils celebrate the death of an Emperor.'

'Oh, these devils – and demons, of course - were abroad long before our blessed cousin left this world to nestle in the foreboding arms of God. I have been worried for your health, to be honest, nephew.'

Loeken ignored a bunching snag that was beginning to grasp at his stomach; his uncle's reference to demons was designed to remind him of the madness that overtook him after being forced to watch Puusen – his own father! – smother his brother.

'There is no need for such worry, uncle. My wards are secure.'

'You seem too sure of yourself, Loken. A subtle devil can roost most comfortably in the skulls of the living. Who wards your ears from deceit?'

Loeken had argued hard against this meeting: only when Feyn, and Loetopas, had agreed that Delesse could attend had he relented. Still, he was certain he would lose any Courtly "discussion" he attempted with this man. The turn of the conversation did not raise his hopes for a different outcome.

'My ears have been ringing with the peals of truth, uncle. It is hurtful to hear the truth, yes?'

Loetopas suddenly clapped his hands. 'You show the classic symptoms of Kach, my nephew, that devil of familial doubt! All these things that have occurred to you ... classic symptoms, lad! But the good news is that the Temple elders are well versed in the rituals to banish Kach.'

'You would heal me, Lord Loetopas?'

Loetopas allowed the muscles in his lips to relax into a soft smile.

'A healing is possible, Loken, yes. Even at such an advanced stage of infection. But you must want to be healed.'

'And these rituals – they would require a lengthy stay in one of the remote temples, I expect.'

As they had before; Loken had no love for those memories.

'I believe a period of solace and guided reflection is part of the cure.'

'Away from my wife, perhaps?'

'Kach is an invidious devil. Dare I suggest that he might have a claw hooked in the flesh of your betrothed, too? But with a successful recovery you would not need to be separated for long ...'

Loeken shifted in his seat; the ache in his belly was beginning to heat. Surely the old man would not be stupid enough to attempt a poisoning, he thought.

The idea made him rash: 'Was it imps that stole Commander Jassael from you, Lord Loetopas, as you travelled upriver? Or was that, too, the work of devils?'

Julyeis was finding it hard to maintain the role she had been assigned. She was too old to act the part of a woman being courted by her young suitor; she had a decade on Yarrasok, though the sweet nothings he kept whispering in her ear could, under other circumstances, have persuaded her differently.

'We ought to get married,' he whispered.

It took a couple of seconds for the words to penetrate her mind. Their effect was to tear her eyes away from the Palace roofline and into the deep green depths of his gaze.

'You're raving,' she said.

'Why? There's no shame to being a soldier's wife.'

Somewhere inside her chest the idea appealed to her, warmed her in places that had been kept cool for too long a time.

She shook her head. 'You're a handsome man, Yarrasok of the Fifteenth, in your own way. But you'll not find me swooning over the polish of your chest plate. Let's enjoy what we've got, and hope we'll live to see a few more years. Now stop distracting me.'

She returned her gaze to the roofline, not bothering to assess the effect of her words on her man. She could just make out the shape of Shapeis hunched by his spire, his hands and arms swaying in exaggerated gestures midway through a message. She raised her arm above Yarrasok's head, as if stretching: *Start again*.

'Anything interesting?' asked Yarrasok, his face set in the direction of the palace entrance and Tuuke, ready to relay the message in the Clade's own version of hand speech.

'No. Discussions continue. They're arguing about whether Commander Jassael lives.'

'He died last night.'

She formed a question in fingers and wrists, waited for a response.

'Lord Loetopas has claimed that Jassael is healthy and doing the work his Clan Lord has assigned to him,' she interpreted. 'Which could be of interest to the Guardsman – it's a directly provable lie.'

'But not a threat,' said Yarrasok, taking advantage of Julyeis's position to tweak the flesh of her bosom. She turned to scowl at him. 'The Guardsman is only interested in hearing about direct threats – the rest can be reported later.'

'Be happy I've not agreed to marry you, soldier,' she said as she returned to watching the palace roof. 'You'd not be able to get away with that sort of thing if we were really courting!'

'Lord Buramme – these tooth-treats are superb! Are they all local dishes?'

Delesse watched the Governor hesitate, as if waiting for the serving staff to leave the room. Courtly decorum, however, required an answer from him; she enjoyed the brief spectacle of conflicting thoughts flit from line to line across his forehead.

'Yes, my Lady Delesse,' he said, the need to answer winning the battle. 'As I promised you, these are all local specialities. We eat more vegetables and creams in Viyame, less of a meat diet and little in the way of squid.'

She lifted one of the dainties from the plate placed beside her, admired its pastry case before placing it whole in her mouth. She smiled at the Governor as she chewed, lips closed.

'I recognise some of these spices and herbs – my view is that an over-reliance on hand-squid can overpower the delicate beauty of a meal.'

Loken had picked up a fancy, was peering at it with some suspicion, she noticed. Neither the Governor nor Loetopas had started on their plates.

'I can certainly understand your point, my Lady,' said Burrame, 'though I would hesitate to suggest that our jungle fare is better than that of the coastal cities ...'

'Oh, certainly not, my Lord! I would suggest the word "different" could be employed in place of the word "better". Hand-squid is an essential trace within our diet, after all.'

'One thing our jungles lack, my Lady, is a plentiful supply of salts, I have to agree. Yes, "different" is a fine word to use under the circumstances.'

A swift glance told her that Loken was now chewing his morsel. She took a second – this one a biscuit base with a mound of whipped cream and herbs atop – and popped it in her mouth.

'Certainly a different flavour, I agree. Though I apologise: surely we have more interesting things to discuss.'

'Your observations on the local cuisine are a delight to hear, Lady Delesse.'

This comment came from Loetopas. She watched him move the pastries around his plate before opting to sip from a long-stemmed glass of juice. Sat almost opposite him facing the window, she found it difficult to make out the detail of his face against the backlighting sunshine.

The Governor was asking Loetopas a question, which he was then answering. She noticed Loken was making a point, something about road building. A brief silence pulled her line of sight away from the sway of the breadfruit branches beyond the window and to her betrothed. There was a look of confusion on his face. She offered him a smile.

'My father has never been keen on roads, my Lord.' She looked first at the Governor, then Loetopas. They were – not very interesting to look at, she decided. Their forms lacked a pleasing rhythm. 'If there were roads to Bassakesh, the plague Clan Arallo gave us as a contract gift – it would have spread across the Empire ...'

Loetopas was not looking at her; he seemed to be staring at Loken, his cheeks knotted in a grin. When he turned his head round to look out of the window she followed his example, letting her eyes rest on the sway and the sway of branches and breadfruit, so round, so ... intense.

'Something's wrong!'

The sharpness of Maeduul's statement made Shapeis turn in his crouch to face her.

'What's happening?'

'Loetopas – he's stood up. He's leaning over Loken, putting something in his mouth.'

An image triggered in his mind, a thumb on a little girl's chin, easing it down to allow access for another morsel of dough.

'Is he moving? Is Loken resisting?'

The woman was shaking her head.

'They've used that drug on him,' he said, answering his own question. He didn't wait for her response, turning back to sign the news to Tabeed.

'He's seen me! No, he's looking elsewhere, waving ...'

'What?'

'Shapeis, there's someone else on the roof. A man. He's standing up now – how did I not spot him before? He's moving away.'

A cold fist gripped at Shapeis's belly. 'Where is he? We've got to stop him – he might be signalling ...'

'Too late: he's waving. Now he's turning, looking back to the room. Loetopas is signalling something ... he's turning again, moving towards us. Oh, bugger Sama-Lovare's cow! He's got a gun!'

It took Shapeis a second to clamber up to where Maeduul crouched. The man was in clear sight, looking around as if searching for something.

'Hide, woman!'

His legs moved without thought, dropping him back down beneath the crest of the roof, moving towards the man, the flat of his belly keeping close to the baked shingles – like the wildcat hunting the goat in one of the peasant dances he'd performed oh so many times for middle aged clients high on lutestran: foot here and hand and foot move and pause and knee to the chest ...

And leap!

Too late, the man had seen him. He was still turning, still bringing his hands and his gun into line with Shapeis as he grabbed at him, pulled him down to his knees. The man was smaller than Shapeis, thinner and lighter. He had him now, had him enfolded in his arms like a client before the

rut ...

A noise like the Creator's own handclap erupted between them, clubbing his leg backwards, out and away. Shapeis felt himself stutter, fall backwards, tumble over and under and over the man in his arms. The man was struggling, but he would not let go ...

'Maeduul!'

They were rolling faster now, slipping down the slope to the space beyond. Suddenly Shapeis realised what was happening, where they were heading. He unclasped the man, stretched arm and wrist and finger to grasp for a hold: none came. Still they were sliding, pulling, kicking each other, their course now accompanied by loosened tiles ...

And then they were flying free like Kaya-Brishe, Prince of eagles, as he tucked into a swoop for the rabbit.

That sound I can hear, decided Shapeis, that must be me screaming ...

Disaster

Loetopas looked down at his nephew, silenced at last.

'You've cleared this floor of people?'

'As you requested, my Lord, though ...'

He turned slightly, offering his host the merest glimpse of contempt.

'It's too late for doubts now, Governor Burrame. You're doing the right thing, and if "the right thing" bothers you, keep on thinking about the tolls you'll be able to levy once the road to Bassakesh is built.'

'Of course I have no doubts, my Lord.'

The fat man was brushing his fingers through his hair – an irritating trait that deserved an amputation of fingers, in his view.

'And the stairwell and passages to the north entrance? I want nobody seeing us leave.'

'It has all been arranged already, my Lord, though of course I shall double check. How many of my people will you be needing to help you carry your nephew and his betrothed?'

Loetopas returned his gaze to Loken's inert form, let his hand trail through the lad's hair.'

'We don't need the girl, not anymore – fetch someone to hide her. I'll manage Lord Loken myself. Now go: time presses on us all!'

He watched the Governor bustle from the room. As soon as the door was closed, he leaned over his nephew, let their cheeks kiss bone to bone.

'I know you can hear me, Loken,' he whispered, a breath of command. 'This nonsense ends now. Stand up! Walk as I tell you. You're coming home with me!'

Julyeis was running as soon as she saw the men on the roof tumble.

'We have to stay here!'

She ignored the command. She was already twenty metres closer to the palace walls when Shapeis's roll took him beyond the eaves and into the air, grasping at phantoms and shadows, already screaming, following the stranger to the soft-dug earths that separated the wall from the street.

Someone was running beside her: Yarrasok, abandoning his post, his arms pistoning in time with his legs as he drew past her, sprinting to the place where the men would land.

Too slow! At the last moment he turned, held out his arms to shield the sight of the impact from her.

'Get out of my way, oaf!'

And she was past him, running still, not knowing if she breathed in or breathed out, her eyes stuck fast on the heaps of limbs planted in the earth.

They had landed apart, separating from each other as they dove. The nearest was a man she

had never seen before; she ignored him, forced her feet a few steps further to the form of Shapeis, his arms spread at angles, his legs folded beneath his twisted body.

Someone was screaming. Julyeis had no care whose voice was piercing the mid-morning clatterings of city activity; it didn't feel like her own. She was on her knees, her hands touching the mess of Shapeis, fluttering between chest and brow and her own mouth.

'What do I do? Shapeis! Talk to me, lad!'

Shadows around her, a hand on her shoulder.

'The other one's dead – a broken neck.' Yarrasok was talking; it must be Yarrasok's hand on her shoulder, she decided.

'Fuck him!'

She felt him tighten his grip on her shoulder. And then: 'Give me some room, woman! Let me look at him!'

'Why?'

'He's breathing. He's not dead yet!'

Not dead?

Not dead! She saw a bubble of blood form at the edge of her friend's mouth, watched it pop as another began to form.

'Get the healers, Julyeis. Go find a healer now! If we're quick we can save him, yes?'

Someone else was pulling at her, dragging her arm up and away. 'No need for that,' a voice was saying. 'I'm here already. Let me look, yes? I'm a healer; I can help, but I need room.'

And Julyeis found herself standing, looking around at the scene: Yarrasok and a young man crouched around the form of poor, broken Shapeis, a gathering crowd of onlookers half encircling them and the blank wall of the palace rising up and up ...

'Maeduul?' The name was beyond her lips before she could catch it. She looked up to where the line of the wall met a lilac of cloudless sky, searching, searching – she was too close to see ... no, there!

An outline of a head made too wide by its deformities.

'Maeduul! He still breathes! Are you safe?'

A nodding of the shape, the shadow of an arm signalling: 'I'm safe'.

Then more signals. Julyeis couldn't follow their blur – dammit! Her eyes were flooding. She wiped them clear of tears as she pushed through the crowd, heading away from the wall to get a better view of the woman still on the roof.

When she looked up again, the handsigns Maeduul was making resolved into a message: 'save Delesse'.

Palms up, arms ahead, shoulders high, mouth round: 'how?'

'Go inside. Second floor. Any room with a window looking east. I'll direct you from there.'

She looked back at the crowd, saw more people running towards them – they wore the flattened peaks of healer's caps, carried bags and a stretcher.

There was nothing more she could do here. She turned away and began trotting towards the far corner of the wall and the palace entrance beyond it, refused to let her lungs sob.

As soon as he saw Julyeis and her soldier running, Tuuke abandoned his post. Lunging up the broad steps, he surged towards the grand palace doors, rounding the entrance columns at a sprint. None of the Clade guards moved to intercept him: they were under orders, he knew, neither to stop nor assist him.

The doors were large, ornate, heavy wood and iron. And open. As he reached them, he slowed, giving his eyes a few seconds to adjust to the dimness within. When he reached the first of the palace guard checkpoints a few metres within the grand hallway he was trotting.

'Where's Commander Behin? I have an urgent message for him.'

Both guards were large, he surmised from a quick glance, but the axes in their hands and the pistols in their belts were more ornate than necessary; both were bringing their axes to bar his path like props, not weapons.

'You dare threaten to impede an Imperial soldier?'

The man on the left hesitated. It was enough for Tuuke: he snaked a sidekick into the shins of the more eager guard, twisting on the rebound to bring his elbow into the face of the slower.

'Be learned! Don't interfere in Clade business,' he called out as he continued to trot into the expanse of the central hall.

He had to swerve to avoid the mess of statuary and officials strewn through the room, but kept his pace quick enough to stay ahead the growing voice of commotion behind him. He had memorised the palace blueprints Behin had given him: the central hall ran half the length of the building, with courtyards on either side. A single stairway gave access to the upper levels; he located it easily to his left by the glint of its polished stone balustrade. The parlay venue was on the second floor, above the central hall overlooking the eastern courtyard to the right.

Nobody tried to stop him as he wove his way to the staircase; he took the steps in threes, this time bent double, keeping low.

He guessed there would be two guards manning the lobby to the first level: he was right. He barrelled into the first without slowing, ricocheting him into his companion before either had a chance to react; the first he disabled with a fist to the temple, the second with a steel trimmed heel in the groin.

Beyond the curled, creeling man and his bludgeoned companion, a second stairway to the next floor. These steps Tuuke took in fours.

When he noticed the change in Delesse, Loken knew that his uncle had decided to play a more dangerous game. Already he had pretended to eat one of the delicacies set at his side; now he reached out with deliberate calmness and picked another, mimed the act of placing it in his mouth.

Loetopas was watching him closely from the side of his eye. *You told me all those days I spent at the gaming tables were wasted, old man*, he thought. *I learned more than just how to lose money!*

He followed his lover's lead, let himself slowly disengage from the conversation – his last act the pocketing of the unconsumed morsel as his arm slowly fell from his lap to dangle free.

What if it's not the same drug they used on the little Servant girl?

He was assuming it was; he had no plan for this situation, little idea what he would do next. If he could convince his uncle he was drugged then maybe the man would drop his guard, maybe he could reach for a knife or blade ...

Loetopas was standing over him. It took all of Loken's will to relax his body as his uncle levered his mouth open with a thumb and dropped another morsel onto his tongue. He didn't chew when his chin was pushed back up, instead letting the creams and herbs settle within his teeth.

He remembered to breathe, not daring to glance around the room. His uncle's form cast a shadow on the floor as he stood at the window; the shift of light and dark across the parquet woods seemed ... mesmerising. Then:

'You've cleared this floor of people?'

It's the drugs, he told himself within his skull. *Keep alert! Listen to what they're saying. Don't drift, now. Keep thinking. I can beat him ...*

'... Of course I have no doubts, my Lord.'

Hearing the Governor's supplicant voice answering his uncle's questions helped him, helped form a knot of anger in his chest.

Whatever else, decided Loken, *I shall see your guts strung from the walls of your palace before I draw my last breath*. The Governor of Viyame's choice of loyalties were no longer in doubt.

Loetopas was leaning over him, his body blocking his sight. Their cheeks touched: 'I know you can hear me, Loken.'

And he was walking, being guided by the elbow. As they approached the door Loken almost failed, almost turned to hit his uncle. *I'm not abandoning you, love ...*

It took the deepest remnants of his determination - his courtly skills - to keep his eyes from

watering, to force his feet forward, and forward again.

Before Tuuke lay a labyrinth of corridors and security points - the plans for the second floor had been less detailed; many of these rooms were no more than spaces between the support pillars, marked off by lightwood and plaster, constantly erected and dismantled to meet the needs of the day.

Nobody was around. The quiet, compared to the confused bleats below him, kept him wary and alert.

He took a moment to unsling the rifle carried over his back, check that a bullet lay snug in the breech, unhook the safety catch.

He knew there would be no time to reload should he find more trouble; he had deliberately chosen an older weapon with a solid, iron-rimmed heavywood butt – a club and a staff as well as a gun.

The parlay room should be towards the northern end of the palace. The corridor northwards stretched emptily for fifteen metres before junctioning left and right. He ignored its invitation, moved to the south, and then left, and right, and left again for ten metres into a long space.

A pair of swing doors, closed, were set midway along the northern wall. Before him, windows overlooking the courtyard. He strode towards them, taking deep breaths; a quick check of the roofline confirmed that Maeduul, too, had deserted her post.

He had no time for conjecture. The doors were the obvious way forward; he accepted their invitation with caution, edged towards them in a crouch, eased the nearest open with his rifle's barrel to squint into the space beyond.

Doors paired their way along each side of the corridor: offices lay beyond him, he assumed, any of which could hold concealed dangers. Two guards were visible some twenty metres ahead at another corridor junction; they stood easy with weapons cradled in their arms.

So far the palace guards he had encountered had shown little skill at their job. People with any aptitude for fighting generally joined the Imperial Clades; not many of them chose the career of a city guard after their contract was completed.

'Might be worth trying an ambush,' he whispered to the empty space behind him.

Julyeis could see that people were spilling from the palace as soon as she turned the corner of the building. She took a moment to scan for the Guardsman, but could not find him.

Keeping close to the massive wall she walked as fast as the crowds allowed towards the steps that spread like congealed candle wax from the arches and pillars of the over-ornate facade.

She saw palace guards - at least four, their backs to her as they directed people out. Someone was starting an argument with one of them on the far side: 'How long is this nonsense going to take?' he was asking, obviously impatient to return to his work. As she reached the first of the steps the argument growing louder, drawing in a second guard, and then a third.

She lowered her head, kept the wall close to her right side as she pushed up against the knots of humanity, no longer keen to stream in one direction with the possibility of a fracas to observe. When the fourth guard turned his face to the argument, she took her chance, keeping her head low as she pushed on up and past the great, half-closed wooden doors.

Inside, the scene seemed quieter. The central hall was a massive space, lit extravagantly with cascades of electric crystals hung from the high, painted ceiling. Julyeis took a moment to admire their artistry before looking around. Medics and guards were clustered around prostrate forms, ministering. A second cluster of guards were running towards her: 'Get those doors secured,' one shouted.

She could see statues scattered across the expanse of expensive wood-and-stone parquet, their positioning making no sense to her mind. One was conveniently close; she hid behind it as the guards trotted past. Then onto the next, looking and checking, making her best effort not to be noticed.

She needed to find a way to reach the second floor. It took her a short time to locate the

grand staircase; she was relieved to see it unguarded once she had spotted it. Another flit between statues, and another, and she reached its foot. A few people were still descending; none wore a guard's uniform, all seemed to be talking to each other – continuations of meetings interrupted mid-decision.

She had no choice. She took a couple of deep breaths to settle her nerves a little, then started to climb the stairs, not looking around, not trying to hide; a woman amid men with work to attend to.

Another cluster of guards and medics greeted her at the top of the stairs. Someone had been cleaning blood from the floor, their bucket and mop abandoned in the rush to evacuate the palace. Without thought or hesitation she walked over to the equipment and picked it up.

She remembered to curtsy to the men as she walked past them to the second set of stairs.

Slowly, Tuuke pushed at the nearer door, watched as it silently swung back into place. Happy that either springs or hinges would magic it shut he carefully inched the rectangle as wide as he dared, reached around to the back of his belt to loosen a water canister from its pouch. He drunk the water in four gulps, positioned the empty can in the gap, let the door swing.

He was already crouched low against the wall when the jarring clang of wood on tin announced his presence. The answering shouts from the corridor were immediate.

One, he counted in his head. *Two ... three ... four ... five ... six ...*

He timed his move perfectly, crashing into the door just as the guard behind it was about to push it open. Then back to the wall, the windows behind him, the floor to his belly, his legs cocked ready for launch.

A guard smashed both doors wide – Tuuke could see the butt of a rifle being used as the ram. Then he and a second man, blood on head, surged into the room, each with their rifle shouldered – their barrels signalling their lines of sight.

As the first swung to the windows Tuuke leapt forward, still low, curving his shoulder into the hips of the other, trusting in the guards' stupidity not to leave a companion at the doors to cover them. Even as he was tumbling, his rifle was clubbing towards the first guard's shins, placed too close together to make for good balance.

A tumble onto his feet, a dart forward to land the metal of his rifle but in each face: once here, once there, and a second for each.

He wasted no time admiring his work, instead pulling air into his lungs in time with his strides as he retraced his route: right, and left, right again, lifting his legs high for speed as he passed the stairs northwards, and right once more and ... another space.

Some tables and chairs were set out in this windowless oblong; a row of small side tables for meeting snacks along a wall; several doors, all open. The corridor itself continued eastwards from the corner diagonally opposite him.

Tuuke recognised the ample face of the Governor of Viyame as soon as the man walked out from the room opposite. His rifle came to his shoulder as his knee dropped to the floor behind a convenient stack of chairs.

It took a moment for Burrame to register his presence.

'What's going on here?'

'You tell me, my Lord. Aren't you supposed to be mediating a meeting at the moment?'

Tuuke watched the man's eyes widen slightly as he recognised him, swiftly followed by a frown.

'You have no right to be here, Guardsman Tuuke!'

'Yet I am here, and so are you. Why have you started to sweat, my Lord?'

Burrame didn't answer. Instead, he signalled with his hand to someone inside the room.

And Delesse walked forward into view, guided by a guard wearing a more ornate uniform than those Tuuke had encountered so far. The man had one hand gripped tight on Delesse's shoulder, the other wrapped comfortably around a pistol aimed straight at Tuuke's head.

The long corridor along which Loken was guided ended in a large lobby area where corridors from the eastern and western wings of the palace converged on the central offices. Loken knew this because the floorboards changed direction: where they had lain from left-to-right, each dark join a mark to be counted on his journey, now they sped ahead of him – a fan of lines inviting him towards the far wall.

He stopped putting one foot in front of the other when the hand on his shoulder pulled him back.

Voices. People were speaking. Within his head Loken observed a battle of thoughts, the calm insistence of the need to count and follow and assess the cracks of the floor slowly overwhelmed by a shrill insistence to attend to the sounds and words swirling around him.

'You dare bear arms in my presence?'

He remembered this voice, knew it was important to him. As his eyes continued to register the polished knots of the floorboards, a ghost of a play grew from the grains of planks: a boy in a bed; a man with a pillow; a hand on his shoulder, solid, insistent. A voice - *'we cannot suffer weakness ...'*

This hand. This voice.

He knew he had to fight ... something. He had to fight the voice.

No, that wasn't right. He tried to shake his head, felt a swell of – surprise? – as his body failed to comply.

There was a glue across his tongue, a taste of bitterness-in-cream spread among his teeth. A ... drug?

'I shall bear arms as and where I see fit, Lord Loetopas. Your presence here with your nephew is not part of the protocol you agreed to.'

My name is ... Loken.

The thought sapped his energy, brought the lines of the boards around his feet back into focus.

I cannot suffer weakness.

Slowly, deliberately, Loken concentrated a pain of strain in the orbits of his eyes, lifted them away from the ground to the source of the other voice.

'The meeting is over, Commander. I am leaving with my nephew, and you will not stop me.'

'You dare *order* me, Lord Loetopas?'

The man in front of Loken was tall: his legs in their sandals and muscles reached up for an age before they met beneath yarn; his hips narrowing through an encircling belt; his chest expanding into plate in which sat a face – his face?

My face. The face of Loken. Me.

'I do not expect you to understand the nuance of politics, Commander Behin. What I do now, I do for the safety and security of the Empire ...'

Still his efforts continued. Sensations were beginning to break through a static of nonsense – such as the cool sharpness pressed into his throat. He ordered his eyesight to reach higher, to move above the face in the chest: a neck; a chin; a mouth.

Eyes. The eyes of a man who wanted to help him.

Now Loken knew what to do. Around him things were resolving, each with a name, some with a purpose. These were his hands by his side. That was a knife at his neck. The voices were ... communication.

He needed to communicate. He had a plan.

Slowly – deliberately - Loken winked at Behin, forced muscles in a cheek to contract a side of his lips upwards.

And Behin, looking straight into his now-steady eyes, winked back.

As soon as she passed beyond the sight of the men in the lobby, Julyeis dumped the bucket and mop, balancing them carefully on a step so they would not clatter back down, before continuing her climb upwards.

Near the top, the stairway curved to the right before ending in a plain corridor running left and right, door-less and windowless, lit by sparse racks of electric crystals - each line of light bearing cheap, factory-produced wards for the protection of those who walked beneath them.

Her mouth was dry as she peered beyond the stairwell.

It was empty. To mark her relief, Julyeis swallowed, let her tongue moisten her lips. There was no doubt she needed Maeduul's help. Which meant she needed to find a window looking onto the Story Keeper's roof.

Left or right?

Neither way offered her any clues. She chose to go left on a whim, trusting her guts.

She reached a junction, remembered to crouch low before checking round the corner. Still no doors, no people. She stood, picked up her pace as she turned left, repeating the procedure twice more as the corridor jagged in its nonsensical path.

On the third turn, she found her quarry – a window with sunshine beyond it. A need to run shuddered through her body; she ignored it, instead gripping one hand in the other as she walked towards the light.

When she saw the guards prostrate on the floor, her hands flew to her mouth. The nearer guard was groaning, a low growl of concentrated pain. He, too, had his hands to his face. The other lay still and silent.

She almost vomited as she crept past them to the window, refusing to let the bitter taste of her fear loose in her mouth.

A shiver stealthed along the line of her spine as she turned away to scan the roofline.

There! There was Maeduul. The tiny woman was sitting astride the peak of the roof, moving her head along the line of the building opposite her.

Maeduul! People will see you. Julyeis signed slowly and broadly as soon as the woman's eyes reached her position.

The woman shrugged her head into her shoulders, though her face remained pale and serious.

They've left the meeting room, she signed back, her arms and hands quick and tight. *Loetopas has Loken, Burrame has Delesse. They took Loken first; I think they went in different directions.*

Where?

I don't know. Follow your ears.

Have you seen Tuuke?

The tiny woman opposite shook her head. *Go!*

Julyeis needed no further goad. A second siren of groans had joined the first behind her. She turned to look at the guards. The first was beginning to move, trying to roll onto his side.

She knew she couldn't walk past them again: her bladder would not permit it. Looking around, she spotted a pair of swing-doors to her right. She wasted no time reaching them.

Beyond them, another corridor – this one came equipped with doors on each side and paintings hung from hooks on the walls. Even the wards dangled from the light bars seemed to be of a better quality. The one thing it lacked was people, or noise.

'Use my ears, huh?'. She whispered the words to herself as if to combat the surrounding silence, push away its menace of absence. Yet time was growing short. As she approached the first door, the one to her left, she took a deep breath, held it as she nestled her ear to the wood.

Nothing.

She reached out her hand to the door handle, was glad to see no shake in her fingers. Almost at the grasp, she snatched the hand back.

'I can't do it!'

And a voice seemed to answer her own!

'What's going on here?'

Sweat sprang from her temples, a damp shock of terror. But the voice seemed diminished:

there was an echo to it, a timbre of distance.

'You tell me, my Lord. Aren't you supposed to be mediating a meeting at the moment?'

Tuuke! She was sure of his voice.

There was a junction up ahead. When she peeked her head around the corner the voices gained in volume, though she could not see either speaker.

Calm yourself, she told herself. *You're not a chicken dodging dogs in the street!*

She crept forward; as she reached the corner she crouched to her heels before carefully peeking into the space beyond.

Tuuke was furthest away, his weapon held almost casually in one arm, its barrel aimed at the head of a heavy man dressed in fine clothes. Close in front of him stood Delesse, her gaze caught by a warding of stones and feathers hung from the ceiling crystals. A third man – a guard – stood closest, with his back to her. He too had a rifle, aiming it the Guardsman.

'We seem to have reached an impasse, Guardsman,' said the Governor. 'If you withdraw, now, I shall not have charges pressed against you.'

Julyeis watched Tuuke smile. 'It's an interesting proposition, Lord Burrane. May I suggest a different outcome? Tell your man to put down his weapon and then you and he can walk back into that room while I escort Lady Delesse to safety. If you do this, I shall not have charges pressed against you.'

The Governor was sweating, Julyeis noticed.

'What possible charges could you mean, Guardsman? No crime has been committed here.'

As the Governor spoke, Tuuke flicked his eyes around the room: there, and there, here, there, and back to the trio before him.

'This reminds me of a story I once heard,' he answered, 'where a man who called himself the Lord of Wood went searching for riches and immortality.'

Julyeis could see her own confusion mirrored in the Governor's face. What was Tuuke talking about? It could only be one of the stories leading up to the death of Sama-Lovare. But the Guardsman wasn't a ...

Or maybe it was a message for her.

He must have spotted her.

She looked around, saw a stout pole with a brass hook at one end propped against the wall opposite, just a little forward of her position - and more importantly beyond the scope of the guard's line of sight.

Without thought, she reached out to the pole, took it in both hands as she stood and swung it into his head.

Tuuke was already charging towards the Governor as the guard jerked his finger on the trigger, a reflex reaction as he collapsed.

Tuuke had no idea where he was running. Julyeis had shouted something as he sprinted past her about Loken being taken in a different direction, but his feet had already made the decision for him. In seconds he was heading north along the long corridor, not caring about traps or potential guards hiding in the offices spaced along the sides of the passage.

The shot had shattered the crystal light, making it easier for him to hammer his fist into the Governor's face. He had no doubt that the second floor would soon be flooded by palace guards, scared and armed and trigger-happy.

'Take Delesse and hide yourselves,' he'd shouted back to Julyeis. 'Only come out if someone calls your name!'

At the far end of the corridor, a silhouette appeared. A large man, possibly holding a club or a rifle. Before Tuuke could think of taking evasive action the form was gone again.

Still he ran, pounding past doors to his left and right, moving between the bright pools of light from crystal wands hung every twenty metres or so from the ceiling.

He was almost at the corridor's terminus when the silhouette reappeared.

'Behin?'

His old friend had a large grin across his face.

'You can slow down – you'll pull a muscle dashing round like an idiot.'

'Loken ...?'

The Commander waited as Tuuke slowed down to a jog, drew alongside him.

'Loetopas has Loken. They've just taken an elevator down to the ground floor ...'

'A what?' His breaths were coming hard and fast now, his chest protesting at the treatment he'd just forced on his body.

'It's a box that travels between floors.'

'We've got to stop them, Behin!'

But already the big man was waving his protests down. 'They're not going anywhere, *aoslo ten*. My lads have all the entrances secured from the outside.'

'There will be passages, rat runs ...'

'I said *all* the entrances. And anyway the lad operating the elevator is one of mine, too. But you're right – Loetopas has a knife at Loken's throat; we'll have to take the stairs down. Are you fit?'

Tuuke didn't bother to respond. Already he was heading for the polished stones of the stairwell to his left.

He took the steps in pairs, not bothering to wait for Behin. As he turned and descended towards the first floor lobby he saw a cluster of palace guards preparing their weapons and courage before investigating the disturbances above.

Without thought he launched himself at the closest guard, barrelling him into his companions. A quick shoulder roll brought him back to his feet. He gained the safety of the stairwell before the men could react to his attack.

This stairwell was not as ornate as the one he had run up only a bare few minutes previously. They swept down to a much smaller space than the grand hall at the south of the building.

Loetopas was almost at the entrance.

'That's far enough, my Lord!'

At the sound of Tuuke's voice the man spun on the spot. As he saw the danger, he stepped behind Loken, brought a blade to the boy's throat.

Now Tuuke slowed.

'Why in God's own inscrutable rage do you people continue to vex me?'

Rather than answer, Tuuke walked towards the men. He noticed he was no longer holding his rifle – he must have dropped it as he tackled the guards above.

'My Lord, this action solves nothing. You do not need the lad, and he has no love for you, nor his father.'

Loetopas continued to watch Tuuke as he slowly circled around them both, keeping his distance, keeping his hands level and palm out. Placing himself between them and the nondescript rectangle of the palace's northern entrance.

A guard appeared on the stair, then another.

Somebody clubbed them each in turn.

Behin. Loetopas couldn't see the Commander, his back was now to the stairwell.

'What have you done to your nephew, my Lord?'

'I have done nothing, Guardsman! Lord Loken took ill as we met ...'

And Loken collapsed, as if hearing his name uttered by his uncle's lips had unstitched his muscles.

He fell vertically, letting the knife cut into his throat, his neck. As the first spurt of blood arced through the air Tuuke was already rushing forward, Loetopas stepping back, his eyes wide open in genuine shock.

'No!'

Tuuke was already halfway to his knees when the knife caught in his side. It felt ... sharp, like a barby rat sting, and hot. He ignored it, forcing his hands to cup towards Loken's neck rather than to his ribs. But his hands ... they shook.

A body was falling towards him. He looked up, saw Behin behind the tumbling form of the

Arallo man, the barrel of Tuuke's rifle in his hands, the butt cutting an arc through the air to mirror a second spurt of blood from Loken's nicked artery.

'Save him, Behin. Save the boy!'

Did he say those words? He must have said something, because Behin was already leaning towards Loken's stricken form, his hand busy ripping the sleeve of his tunic from his arm.

He pulled in a breath, was surprised when only his right lung responded. Now Tuuke looked down to his side, saw the plain utility of the knife poking between the sheets of his chest and back plates.

Noises behind him, around him. Men shouting – soldiers, wearing armour like his own. Someone was pulling him, laying him to the floor. Another blocked his sight of Loken.

A taste of salt and iron around his tongue, on his lips. Warm and moist. He tried to raise his arm to wipe his lip, but the action seared pain across his side.

And the man in front of him was thrust aside.

'Behin?'

'You've fucked yourself this time, *aosle*. Let's get this sorted ...'

'Loken?'

'He should live. Medics are on their way.'

Tuuke nodded. This was good.

'Loe ...'

He couldn't finish saying the name, had to fight another breath into his lung. A determination took hold of him. Ignoring the pain, he reached out to grasp his old friend's shoulder, his neck. Pulled the man close.

'Tanuikstumubz ye dosixe ... floy tuezaa ...' and another burning breath '... î ce sadx rofano ... do nets te.'

Make sure that bastard burns in the market square, make sure for me, yes?

He wondered why Behin was screwing the muscles of his face into knots. Suddenly it seemed funny; a choke of a laugh helped him take another breath.

'Tcisates cise ... matc uicpietane ... ke! Tcisavopces ... ten!'

He must scream for me. For my city!

Behin was a good man. He was nodding. He would do as he was asked, Tuuke knew.

Satisfied, he let the light around him flicker, let it fade.

Epilogue

He heard them knock on the door together before pushing it open to come in.

'Very plush,' said Julyeis. 'Who thought you'd end up sleeping in a room like this?'

Shapeis watched the woman and the girl as they moved closer to him. The pillows supporting his back and neck were firm – wool stuffed, or perhaps feathers. Not that he'd had time to investigate: any movement pained him.

'When did you get here?'

'They brought me here by carriage this morning. I thought the journey would kill me!'

'I can imagine,' agreed Julyeis. 'I've never trusted wheels.'

The girl was smiling at him, a shy grin. Gently, he reached out his arm in its splints towards her.

'Look at you. You're grinning! Has Julyeis been caring for you properly?'

Rather than answer, Sosunda nodded. Watching her smile widen, feeling her hand grasp around her fingers – he could feel his eyes moisten at the contact.

'So where's the others? Where's Maeduul?'

'She's gone to watch Delesse and Loken consummate their marriage.'

'Why?' The idea of performing sex in front of an audience – for no pay – still bemused him.

'I don't think she wanted to go. But Lady Feyn and Delesse both asked her to. She told me she'd only agreed so she could visit Tuuke, sing a song to help him complete the leap to oblivion.'

'I heard. Did they bury him?'

'A service with full Clade honours in the Temple. Commander Behin would have it no other way.'

'That's good.' He closed his eyes for a moment as a spasm walked the length of his healing spine. 'He was a good man, I think.'

There was a new pain in his arm. Opening his eyes again, he saw Sosunda tugging at his fingers.

'Best not do that, little one. I ache all over.'

She was pleating the skin across her forehead, as if struggling to remember something.

'When you fine ...'

The words came cautiously, the first words he'd ever heard her speak.

'... you be my dad?'

She couldn't remember how much of her time had been spent worrying about this moment. Arbelles, of course, had speculated about little else, even before God's tormenting gift first coated her thighs in blood.

'Do you know,' she whispered to Loken as he lifted his lips from hers, 'that my little sister had to tell me about the facts of life?'

He was leaning half back, one arm behind him to support their weight as she straddled his hips. 'Tell me about it,' he whispered back.

'One evening we had an argument about – well, about this.'

She could feel the sweat of their exertions trickling between her breasts. She eased herself up and down on him, enjoying the sensation.

'Go on, tell me more,' he whispered.

'She said she would show me what it was all about. We sneaked out of our room and went down to the kitchens.'

'And?'

'It was Tabeed, our housekeeper – you remember meeting her?'

He breathed an assenting smile through his teeth at her.

'She was enjoying the chef, most intimately, on the table he used for chopping the vegetables. I thought he was killing her at first, with all the growling and grunting she was doing!'

'On the table? In the kitchen?'

'Right in the middle of the kitchen! I couldn't believe it! She was always so prim and proper, too.'

'You never asked her what she was up to, then?'

'God's teeth, no! She scared me, that woman – though she was never unkind to me.'

'It's a better story than mine,' he grunted.

'Really?'

'I got taken to a bordello and shown the ways of how to pleasure a woman. They even had me naming the parts!'

She bit her lips to stop herself from laughing, leant forward onto him to lick the skin stretched along the line of his jaw. She was thinking of the barby rat who had watched them, once, when Loken finally hoarsed and whooped his way to the consummation of their marriage.

Polite applause reached beyond her exhaustion to her ears. Somebody lay a blanket around her shoulders, covering their naked forms from the gaze of the crowd gathered at the edge of the broad altar-block.

'Congratulations, my dears. May your marriage be long and fruitful!'

Delesse looked up into the face of her aunt. 'Thank you, Feyn,' she breathed.

'Now don't worry about a thing, dear. I'll clear this mob out and make sure nobody else tries to disturb you. And I've hidden some extra blankets and furs over there in the corner so you can

make yourself more comfortable.'

She kissed both of them on the forehead, then pulled the blanket over their heads. Together, the pair of them giggled as they heard her imperiously commanding people to leave.

'Long and fruitful, eh?' whispered Loken, still propping their weight up with one arm.

'Fruitful, certainly,' she whispered back. She took a deep breath: 'I'm pregnant already.'

He gripped her tighter with his free arm. 'I know.'

They kissed again, a prayer for the growing life within the walls of her womb.

Let's hope it's born without horns, added Arbelle, secure within her sister's skull.

THE END

For more information on the Kalieda world, visit the Kalieda Encyclopaedia at
<http://www.rikweb.co.uk/kalieda/index.php>

Maps of the Vreski Empire and the city of Bassakesh:

[The Gods in the Jungle - Maps](#)

Additional information on the Vreski Society

[The Gods in the Jungle - Appendices](#)