

# **The Bookster's Apprentice**

**by Greg Wilson**

*YA fantasy novel*

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*Take a squat pyramid of rock, four gallops square and two gallops tall. Lift it into the air, then tilt it back like an old man looking up at a passing cloud, so that its leading edge rises gently to the central peak, while its stern drops so steeply that only goats, birds, and a small village called Aft Landing can find a foothold. Put a town of some ten thousand souls on its bow, and smaller towns (not villages—their inhabitants are quite definite about that) on its port and starboard flanks. Bash its underside against the peaks of a few ordinary earth-bound mountains, then let rain, snow, and windblown sand weather it for a few thousand years as it travels around the world. That is Avaunt.*

*Now put it in motion. Eight months north from Mau Ngapcha to Gandan Berth, with half the world's chocolate in its warehouses, along with cinnamon, cloves, silk, and cured bamboo as tough as stone. Two weeks on the ground, while merchants from all over northern Cherne elbow past each other to make bargains, and then another eight months in the air with grain, cider, wool, and steel for the south.*

*When the Pilots ruled the world, Avaunt roamed the world over. After they destroyed themselves, it was taken over by wild-eyed tinkers with a fascination for the Pilots' strange machines. They called themselves the Hett, and as the years passed, the people who lived below them regarded them with growing suspicion. Stories spread of the Hett's hoarded wealth, and of the plots they must be hatching to one day rule the world as the Pilots had.*

*Eventually, an ambitious young prince with few prospects at home decided to do more than mutter. The next time Avaunt landed at Gandan Berth, the rag-tag army he had recruited attacked. Most of the Hett were slain. The rest were driven off the mountain with nothing but the clothes on their backs. It was barely spring, and bitterly cold. Few survived.*

*The Hett's storied wealth turned out to consist of goats, scrap metal, and books no one knew how to read. Undeterred, the prince retitled himself the Captain of Avaunt, made his least untrustworthy followers his bosuns, and gave the Hett's houses and farms to rest. Most of them smoked, drank, or gambled away their gifts, but the rest settled down to trade, raise families, and watch the world slip past beneath them.*

*Now, look closer. There, in Starboard Town. Four hundred years have passed; it is Redsdag, the 11th of Peridot, 1261. A girl is running for her life. She just felt the mountain shake for the first time in centuries, but that's not what she's afraid of. She's afraid of what*

*the boy chasing her will do to her if he catches her...*

Erileine raced down Slip Street twenty strides in front of her pursuer. She paid no attention to the frightened looks on the faces of the people she hurtled by. "What just happened?" they asked one another. The ground had shaken—had there been an avalanche? But then why hadn't there been any noise? No one had noticed yet that the sun lay fifteen degrees away from where it had been. No one had realized that for the first time since the Pilots fell, the flying mountain had changed course mid-flight.

Past Donaïen and Armaend's; past Fraederiq's house, where his father Gaeston was just coming out onto the street, looking for someone to blame for the bottles that had fallen off his shelves and shattered. There—Mamaere Mayeule's tavern. Erileine cut right into the little alley that ran between it and the smokehouse next door. She ran blindly for a second, her eyes useless in the deep shadows after the brightness of the morning, praying that Mamaere Mayeule hadn't left any barrels out to air.

Fraederiq was only a dozen strides behind her when Erileine burst into the little courtyard behind the tavern. She startled a cat, jumped over a stool, banged her knee against a second without stopping, and pulled herself over the stone wall at the rear of the courtyard. The mountain wasn't quite as steep there as it was around most of Starboard Town. It was one of those places children were definitely not supposed to play, which meant that she knew it as well as her tongue knew her teeth. There was a narrow ledge thirty strides below that led to her papaere's cottage. She'd be safe if she could get there. Safe for the moment, anyway, and she could worry about afterward once she was she sure had one.

Fraederiq hardly broke stride as he flung himself over the wall behind her. Erileine glanced over her shoulder as she slipped and slid down the slope, scraping her hands as she grabbed at bushes to slow herself down. Stones clattered past her as Fraederiq did the same. It was going to be close...

"Whoa!" she cried, almost sliding past the ledge before her sturdy boots found purchase. She grabbed hold of a strangle vine for balance, yanked her arm away before the hungry plant could wrap itself around her, and quickstepped along the narrow shelf.

Fraederiq slid to a halt two heartbeats behind her. A trickle of bloody spit made a dark wet track through the dust on his face. "You little lump of nose wax!" he shouted. "I'm going to throw you over the side!"

The ledge was barely a handspan wide. Pursued and pursuer both had to shuffle, left foot to right, then right forward, hands grabbing bushes, branches, roots, and outcroppings of rock for balance.

Erileine stumbled on a loose chip of stone. "Go on, jump!" Fraederiq yelled. "Save me the trouble!"

"Jump yourself!" Erileine shouted back without turning her head. There was nothing between her and the plains below but a gallop of empty air. Left foot, right, left, right... She could see her papaere's cottage. Just a few more steps, and—

Fraederiq's hand caught hold of her collar. "Gotcha!" the older boy said triumphantly.

"Let go! Fraederiq, let go! I'm going to fall!" Erileine wriggled and tried to twist free, her shirt pulling free of her trousers as Fraederiq yanked her back.

Fraederiq's ugly grin widened. He let go of the roots he was holding and pulled his hand back for a punch.

As he did so, the mountain shuddered again. Fraederiq's eyes widened in sudden terror as he lost his balance. He let go of Erileine and windmilled his arms.

"No!" Fraederiq shouted. He reached out desperately, but Erileine was frozen against the mountainside. Off balance, his arms still flailing, Fraederiq toppled backward into space and plummeted toward the dry earth below.

Erileine clung to the mountain. "No, no, no..." she moaned, squeezing her eyes shut so hard that speckles swirled beneath their lids. Her arms tried to drive her fingers into the rock, to root her in the mountain so that she wouldn't fall too. This couldn't be happening. Fraederiq couldn't be gone, not like that. How could he just *fall*? And why hadn't she reached out to grab him?

She bit her lip, her body shuddering as she tried to control her sobs. She had to tell someone. She had to get out of there before the mountain shook again. And all of a

sudden she needed to pee, badly.

She took a deep, unsteady breath and forced her hands to relax, only then realizing that they were sticky with blood. She had scraped her palms and fingers raw on the mountain. Her forehead too—she must have ground her face against the cliffside.

She turned her head to see how far it was to the end of the ledge. Twenty strides, maybe less. She couldn't do it. She couldn't move, but she had to.

She stood there, the wind of the mountain's passage ruffling her hair, until she stopped shaking. With her face and chest pressed against the rough, indifferent rock, she edged toward her papaere's one step at a time. Each time she moved her feet, she had to force herself to peel her hands off the mountain. The air around her was filled with the trills and caws of panicked birds. She felt oddly disconnected, as if her body was moving itself and she was just watching.

The ledge finally merged with a steep hillside littered with sturdy deep-rooted shrubs for her to hold onto. Without warning, the last of her breakfast rose in her throat.

A minute later, she spat in a vain attempt to clear the taste from her mouth, then wiped dust, sweat, blood, and tears from her face with the tail of her shirt. Saints and their creations, what was she going to tell Fraederiq's father?

Erileine stumbled shakily toward her papaere's cottage. Pine branches slapped her face in silent reproach. She had been right there. Why hadn't she just put out her hand? He might have pulled her off the mountain with him, but that would be better than—better than— She doubled over, heaving again.

Vurt was on his verandah, cursing in a flat monotone when his granddaughter stumbled out of the trees. "Eri!" he exclaimed, dropping the old crossbow he'd been trying to reassemble onto the scarred table beside him.

Erileine collapsed into her papaere's arms. "Eri? Eri!" Vurt shook her. "Frogs on stilts, girl, you look like you've been a ghost! Are you all right?"

Erileine shook her head. "I— we— Papaere, he fell. F-F-Fraederiq fell. When the m-m-mountain..." She buried her face in her papaere's chest, her body racked by sobs again.

"What?" Vurt took Erileine's shoulders and gently pushed her back to study her face. "Who fell?"

"F-F-Fraederiq. We were—" Words failed her. She jerked her head back the way she had come.

"*Saad*," Vurt cursed. "Are you sure? Maybe he only slipped down a ways."

Erileine shook her head miserably. "No, I s-s-saw him. He *fell*." She wiped her nose on her sleeve. "Papaere, what happened to the mountain?"

"I don't know," Vurt said grimly. "But it knocked me right over. And look." He pointed at the sky. The sun was almost hidden behind the roof of his cottage. "We're off course. I'm guessing it's about a quarter of an arc. If your paere didn't still have my weeping-be-damned sextant, I'd know better." His face darkened. "Now, tell me what happened."

A flock of plausible lies flew through Erileine's mind. "We were on the ledge below Mamaere Mayeule's," she confessed miserably. "He was chasing me, and I thought if I could get here I'd be all right, but he w-would have caught me if I'd come straight down Slip Street, so I—" She broke off, unable to meet her papaere's eyes.

Vurt waited, his face expressionless. "I went over her back wall," Erileine finished dully. "He came after me. We were halfway here when it happened."

Vurt studied his granddaughter's face. "You know you're not supposed to go there."

"I know," Erileine said wretchedly. "I'm sorry." Suddenly her eyes widened. "What about maere and paere? And Queçenne?" She turned to run up the stairs that led from Vurt's cottage to the lower end of Starboard Town's single street.

Vurt caught her arm. "Hang on a heartbeat. You can't go up there looking like that—you'll give your maere a fright. Go inside and clean up a bit. There's water in the jug." He pushed his granddaughter toward the cottage's front door, then stooped over to pick up his crossbow, wincing as his knee cracked.

A moment later, the old brass wash jug clanged down on his kitchen table, empty. The door opened. "You ready?" Vurt asked.

Erileine goggled at him, her dark face scrubbed clean but her eyes still red from

weeping. "Papaere—what are you doing?"

Vurt frowned. "What does it look like I'm doing?"

Erileine looked at the sword slung at her grandfather's side, the loaded crossbow in his hands, and the polished teak fangs of the ankle-biter sticking out of the worn leather pack on his back. "Starting a war?"

Vurt's frown turned to an angry scowl. "Funny girl. I'd rather have it and not need it than need it and not have it, that's all. Now come on." He turned toward the stairs.

Erileine hesitated. "What's wrong?" Vurt asked.

"Papaere—what am I going to tell Gaeston?"

Her grandfather's mouth twisted. "I don't know, love. Never have. Now come on—your maere will be fretting herself sick."

\* \* \* \* \*

*A few hours earlier...*

The day started like any other. Sunshine meant it was morning. Morning meant Erileine had to get out of bed. She rubbed the grit from her eyes and rolled over, luxuriating in a last few moments of warmth.

The gumminess in her mouth told her that she had read past midnight once again. The book responsible sat on the stool beside her low-framed bed; the thumb-sized piece of dayglass that had been her nightlight when she was little lay on top of it, still glowing faintly with the remains of the previous day's sunlight.

She yawned and sat up, wrapping the quilt around her shoulders. Vaszlav would arrive soon, if he wasn't already in his usual spot outside Mamaere Mayeule's. Erileine groped under the quilt for her pants and shirt, then slipped the book she'd borrowed on the peddler's previous visit into her satchel and went downstairs.

"Morning," her father Laeuc said.

"Morning," Erileine replied, yawning again. Her father had already been up for hour or more carving fine curlicue details on the shaft of a bamboo flute.

"You going to see Vaszlav?"

"Mm hm." Erileine eyed the heel of potato bread that lay forgotten on a plate at her

father's elbow. "Are you going to eat that?"

"No, go ahead." Laeuc scored a quarter circle in the flute, then held it up and squinted at it critically. "Don't forget you have to finish the fence today."

"I won't." Slipping the bread into her pocket, Erileine headed out the front door.

She stood blinking for a moment in the sharp light of the mountain morning. It was earlier than she'd thought—Slip Street was almost empty. She was tempted to go back inside to sit with her father and watch him carve, but then she heard a rooster crow from Armaend and Donaïen's yard. Wood smoke and the ever-present tang of pine trees hung in the spring air. Her mother would be up soon, and would undoubtedly think it was a fine day for doing chores. Erileine grinned. If her sister Queçenne was the only one in the house to do them, so much the better.

Slip Street ran the length of Starboard Town, as crooked as a dropped piece of string. It was paved from top to bottom with rounded gray cobblestones, each as large as Erileine's two hands put together. Weeding between them was the bosun's favorite punishments for minor offenses, which meant that Erileine had pulled up more burlicks and snowdelions than any two of Starboard Town's other children, invariably muttering, "But I didn't mean to," under her breath.

The houses crowded shoulder-to-shoulder on either side of the street had steep roofs for the snows of northern winters and large shuttered windows to let in the breeze during the hot southern summers. Their whitewashed walls held brightly-painted doors, each unique: orange and gray, blue and red, a diamond pattern of black on gold. Wooden soldiers half Erileine's height stood guard beside the doors in matching uniforms sewn from scraps and rags. Every storyteller on the mountain had a different explanation for the custom; all anyone really knew was that they made them because their grandparents had, and their grandparents before them.

Above the narrow street flew the town's kites. The townspeople launched them when the mountain left Mau Ngapcha, with wishes written on their bamboo cross-struts. A few had already fallen, or been blown away by storms, but most still dipped and swayed in the steady breeze of the mountain's northward journey.



Erileine touched two fingers to her lips and pointed them at the blue, orange, and yellow paper diamond holding station downwind from her family's chimney. "Next year in Gandan," she whispered. Next year in the greatest school in the world, surrounded by books and scholars, a place where no one thought you were strange if you knew what "loquacious" meant...

A cream-and-chocolate goat bleated at Erileine from a nearby rooftop, then lowered its head to nibble the moss between its feet. Two startled irvings fluttered away like leaves in a sudden hurricane, returning a heartbeat later to peck at the goat's leavings. Hitching her satchel's strap higher on her shoulder, she ambled up the street to Mamaere Mayeule's.

Vaszlav was just starting to set up when Erileine arrived. "Clear day, young *sra*," the old Hett tinker puffed, slipping his heavy pack off his shoulders and ducking his head respectfully.

"Day, Vaszlav," Erileine replied. "Did you find the other Farberre book?"

"Ah, that..." Vaszlav shrugged apologetically. "I'm sorry, but the fellow wouldn't lend it out. Offered him half a quarter-ring, like you said, and promised he'd get the full worth of it if there was so much as a smudge on the back page, but he said it was the only copy he had."

"Oh." Downcast, but also somewhat relieved that she wouldn't have to spend a week's allowance on something she would probably read in a single evening, Erileine leaned against Mamaere Mayeule's and watched the old man take his pack's bamboo frame apart with a speed born of long practice.

She turned at the sound of footsteps on the cobblestones to find a second Hett had come up behind her. "Clear day," Erileine said politely.

The Hett nodded. "And to you." He was younger than Vaszlav—perhaps in his twenties or early thirties. Where the older Hett was wiry, the newcomer looked as sturdy as a cart ox, with the top two buttons of his shirt undone and a sleeveless vest over top of it instead of the full coat that Vaszlav wore no matter what weather the mountain was flying through. His curly hair and dark eyes were as unremarkable as his homespun

clothes, but there was a stillness about him that unsettled Erileine.

Vaszlav cleared his throat. "This is Jaromir, my new apprentice. And this *sra* is Erileine Saedanne é Laeuc, the most voracious reader on Avaunt."

The Hett nodded. It was definitely a nod, not Vaszlav's deferential dip of the head. "Shall I set up here?" he asked the older Hett.

"Please." Vaszlav handed his apprentice two pieces of bamboo. "Here. Idiot things must have warped with the wet. See if you can sort them out."

A small knot of people gathered while the two Hett put Vaszlav's stall together and set out his wares, each explaining to the next who Jaromir was. Bored, Erileine counted the cobblestones beneath her feet. Two, four, six... eighteen, twenty—Slip Street was twenty cobblestones wide. She frowned. How many there were on the whole street? Her papaere or the bookster would have thought it would be fun to figure it out with her. Not the townspeople around her, though—they would just roll their eyes and trade amused looks with each other.

Or worse. Her stomach sank as she saw Fraederiq and Niquolas coming toward her. The three of them had been friends when they were younger, but then Fraederiq's mother had run off, intoxicated (some said) by the whispered poetry of a Bantangui cinnamon merchant, and weary (said others) of her husband's endless dissatisfaction with everything and everyone. Now fifteen, Fraederiq hadn't just grown taller and stronger: he'd grown angry too, angry at the whole world. As always, Niquolas had followed suit, rolling up his sleeves the way Fraederiq did, throwing stones when Fraederiq threw them, and sneering at whatever stirred the older boy's displeasure that day.

As the only other child their age in Starboard Town, and with a head full of odd facts, Erileine was resigned to being their favorite target. Lately, though, it had seemed as if Fraederiq was trying to be nice to her. That worried Erileine more than the surreptitious trippings and knucklings she'd grown used to. She slid behind Armaend and Donaïen, who were lost in one of their interminable discussions about cooking, but it was too late.

"Day." Fraederiq's greeting was just a grunt.

"Day." Erileine stuck her hands in her pockets. The less she said...

Fraederiq jerked his chin at Vaszlav's stall. "Anything better than the usual junk this time?"

Erileine shrugged. "I dunno."

Fraederiq's eyes narrowed. "Who's he?" he asked, pointing at Jaromir.

"Vaszlav's apprentice."

"Huh. Another stupid newcomer. My paere says there's too many new Hett on the mountain."

Erileine shrugged again. Fraederiq's father Gaeston said many things, few of them kind. She was saved from having to think of another noncommittal answer by the ringing of Vaszlav's chime. "Clear day, good morning, *mingala ba*," he said, as he always did. "Please, good *sra*, how may I help you today?"

Erileine cast a quick eye over the odds and ends on display, seeing nothing she hadn't seen before. As she turned to go, Fraederiq caught her arm. She stiffened, waiting for a knuckle-twist in her ribs. Instead, Fraederiq nodded brusquely at Vaszlav's shelves. "What do you think of that barrette?" he asked.

"What?"

"That barrette," Fraederiq repeated impatiently. "Think it's any good? My paere says a lot of what the Hett sell is junk. I don't want to waste good money on junk."

Bemused, Erileine looked at the little barrette. It didn't look like much of anything to her, just two fingers of polished wood held together by a bent tin spring. "I guess it's all right to me."

"I think it's junk," Niquolas sneered.

Fraederiq silenced him with a look. "You think someone like Queçenne would like it?"

Erileine blinked. "Um... I don't know," she said weakly.

Fraederiq scowled. "Come on. She's your sister, you ought to know."

Erileine shrugged helplessly. Sharing a house with Queçenne didn't mean she

knew how her sister thought. "I don't know," she repeated. "Why don't you ask her?" *Or jump off the mountain*, she added to herself. The thought that Fraederiq might care what Queçenne liked and didn't like was deeply unsettling.

"Pfah. You're useless." Fraederiq let go of her arm and slipped past Armaend and Donaïen, who were still arguing about the best way to chop onions when making curry. "How much is that?" he asked Vaszlav, pointing at the barrette.

"This?" Vaszlav handed it to Fraederiq. "It's quite the pretty, isn't it? Thindi, not Bantanguï—on my blood, that's real mahogany. I could let you have it for three quarter rings."

"What? For this trash?" Fraederiq scowled. "It's not worth half that. Here." He pulled a string of coins out of his pocket, untied it, and held out a pair of quarter-ring coins. "I'll give you half a ring for it, how's that?"

Vaszlav spread his hands helplessly. "I am sorry, *sra*, but I cannot. I paid two quarters five pence for it myself, and—"

"What about goods in trade?" Niquolas interrupted. He elbowed Fraederiq. "We've been doing some carving, haven't we? We figure they'll fetch half a ring each. Give you three now, that's..." He paused, his fingers moving against his trouser leg.

"A ring and a half," Erileine supplied automatically.

Before Vaszlav could reply, Jaromir spoke up. "What kind of carvings these are?"

Niquolas glanced around. "Heads," he said conspiratorially. "For door soldiers. We're making them out of coconut shells. They're really scary—still have all the hair on and everything. People are going to pay a fortune for them, you'll see."

"That sounds interesting," Jaromir said, his tone saying more than his words. "Perhaps we could take a look at some before making any agreement?"

As Niquolas opened his mouth to reply, Fraederiq cut in. "Why? Do you think our work isn't good enough for you?"

The burly Hett shrugged. "How can I know until I have seen them?"

"Well, they're better than most of the junk *you're* selling!" Niquolas protested.

The Hett shrugged again. "Then perhaps we should be more careful in general."

Erileine caught her breath. Hett didn't talk that way to Avauntois, not if they knew what was good for them.

Fraederiq scowled. "Hells, keep the damned thing." He tossed the barrette at Jaromir, deliberately throwing it too low to catch. It bounced off the Hett's knee and fell to the cobblestones. Without saying a word, Jaromir stooped to pick it up and replaced it on the stall's shelves.

The corner of Fraederiq's mouth curled up. "Nice catch," he said. Without another word he turned and walked away, whistling, with Niquolas hurrying along behind him.

Erileine's heart sank. She knew that look and that whistle. They meant that Fraederiq had a plan, and that was *never* good news.

*The scene below takes place 1/3 of the way through the book.*

It took Erileine a moment to realize that she was awake, and that people really were shouting. Men and women struggled to their feet around her, unshuttering dayglass lanterns and asking one another what was going on, who was yelling, was there a fire?

There was. Erileine could smell the smoke. But the sounds outside the hostel's narrow window weren't the sounds of people organizing to fight it. They were angrier. And that crash—that was glass being shattered.

A glance told her that Razi's hammock was empty and his pack was gone. She shoved her feet into her boots, ignoring her father's, "Stay here!" and ducked through the crush of grownups trying to get dressed and find their belongings and get out of each other's way all at the same time.

Downstairs, around the table where she had eaten dinner a few hours before, out the door into a stream of people. "Come on!" someone shouted, maybe at her, maybe at themselves, maybe just to shout. The sting of smoke was stronger now. Another crash of breaking glass. More shouting up ahead, too far away for her to make out words, angry and exulting.

A lone bosun's mate tried to stem the tide. "Get back in your beds or I'll arrest the lot of you!" She stepped in front of a bare-legged man in a winter-weight coat, reached for his sleeve, was knocked aside by someone else. "Hey!" She spun around, helpless and seething. Erileine hurried past her, head down, her heart in her throat. She didn't know what was happening, but something told her it was bad—very bad.

Up a dozen broad, shallow stairs, past a man kicking and kicking to work cobblestones loose for other people to snatch up, around a corner and only then realizing that the flickering light two stories above her was flames reflected in windows. There, on the other side of the waist-high marker showing where Forecastle had once officially ended, the Hett house was burning.

"Bring 'em out! Bring 'em out!" the crowd chanted. Cobblestones flew, thumping

against walls or sailing through windows already emptied of glass. A tall man with a shaved head wound up and ran forward three steps and flung his stone. The crowd cheered as it sailed up, up, up, and groaned as it dropped again just a stride short of the top-most window.

A dozen bosun's mates stood in a line between the mob and the house's front door. Erileine swallowed. The ones anchoring each end had spears, and one of the mates in the middle had a bow. They wouldn't—no. They *couldn't*, not their fellow Avauntois. This couldn't be—

She shrieked and jumped as a hand came down on her shoulder. "You should not be here," Razi said, low and urgent. "It is not safe."

"But—what happened?" She flinched as the fire *whoomped* in a downstairs room. "Are they- The Hett— Did they—"

"*La*, they are out, if not safe," the bookster said, looking past her at the burning building. "They have seen such as this before, and were ready for it." The green glass bottle that had been strapped to his pack hung from his belt, the sword hilt still jammed into it. His eyes were hooded like a hunting bird's.

"But who..." Erileine faltered. These were her people. How could they do something like this?

The bookster shrugged, his hand on her shoulder pushing gently to guide her back away from the crush without her really realizing that she was moving. "Someone had too much to drink. *La*, or someone has a debt they think they should not have to pay, or perhaps one of the Hett didn't step out of the way on the street quickly enough. It is like asking which drop of rain makes the dam break."

A shout cut through the night. "Let go of me!" Erileine and a hundred others whirled around. Three men were dragging a struggling fourth through the crowd. It was Klaues, Erileine realized, bloody-faced and frightened.

The crowd whooped. "Throw him in! Throw him in!" A hundred voices picked up the chant. The men holding the hapless Hett were beaming as if this was a goat-shearing contest and they had just won first prize.

"Stop!" the bosun's mate with the bow bellowed. He notched an arrow, raised, aimed, and staggered back as a cobblestone hit him in the head. "Throw him in!" the crowd shouted, pelting the lines of bosun's mates with whatever they could grab.

Razi's hand tightened on Erileine's shoulder. "Enough," he said in a voice that frightened her in a way the scene in front of her hadn't. Stepping away from her, he slipped a hand inside his *deel* and pulled out a small blue vial. "You will go back to the hostel," he ordered. She nodded jerkily, but he had already cocked his arm and thrown.

Nobody in the crowd noticed the little vial sail through the air. Nobody heard it shatter on the stones two strides away from the men holding Klaues. And for the first vital heartbeat, nobody noticed the darkness billowing out of it, blacker than a starless night.

But then they did, and shouts turned from anger to panic. What was happening? Had the Hett worked a spell? People stumbled back as Razi charged light-footed into the inky cloud.

"Line advance!" the chief bosun's mate shouted, seeing his chance. He and his squad marched forward. The crowd swirled and broke, the anger of a moment before now confusion.

Erileine turned and ran a double dozen strides, then pulled up short in the lee of a pushcart someone had left outside their front door overnight. There! Even as the patch of inky darkness began to thin, Razi emerged on its far side, one arm around Klaus, the Hett's own arm over the bookster's shoulder. Erileine waited a moment longer for the last of the magical darkness to dissipate and reveal the prone figures of the three men who had been holding Klaues. One tried to sit up, thought the better of it as the line of bosun's mates reached him, and slumped back to the cobblestones.

Razi and Klaues disappeared into an alley. Erileine swallowed the ache in her throat and joined the stream of people—no longer a mob—hurrying back to their lives.