

BURNING BRIDGES

Charles Ingrid

ACT II

TO stand in the throne city of Sshen was to stand in the midst of a province walled city, filled with cacophony and culture, to be overcome by a vast, dark tide of peoples. In its quarters . . . city-states, in actuality . . . of peoples and classes, threaded throughout by the military presence of the Sshen and emperor. To go within the inner walls of the city, into the palace complex itself, was to stand in the wash of the radiance of the greatest civilization the world that called itself Lunavar. It was to want to be inside the palace, to study, to become one with its greatness and mystery. To be admitted meant submitting oneself to the mage standing before the emperor, to be examined and memorized before being allowed into the museum and library of knowledge, antiquities, and beauties. And, while studying, being studied.

To go inside meant days of kneeling in silent petition. No one was quite sure what would see the petition granted but scholars were allowed within by the handful. He wanted to go inside. He had to get inside. He had a blood debt that could only be paid by getting inside.

So Brennan wrapped himself in black and knelt on the steps of the palace by the museum wing and fasted and meditated and keenly observed the doors, windows, floors, walls, balconies, and guards through the veil gauze masking his face. He left at night, as the others did, and broke his fast, but unlike the others, Brennan made sketches of what he had observed, dictated and copied what he had to his mainframe server, and when he returned in the morning he knelt in a different place to expand his observations. He would not be denied.

But midway through the third morning, the eldest of the elders "approached him quietly. They have been watching you, scholar. Come with me."

He rose to his feet silently, knees barely aching, his stomach complaining more than anything, and unwrapped his face and followed the emperor's mage. They went through a portcullis that Brennan had marked and into the spice-scented shadowy interior of a study chamber. He looked up, sensing that the antechamber leaned against what was a high tower, and he scanned the interior, looking for evidence of that. There, before he could anticipate a protest, the elder took his wrist, slashing it with a sharp stinging knife and allowing blood to splash into an earthenware basin. Brennan moved away without a word despite his surprise, applying pressure, and the mage nodded as he wrapped the wound carefully, rendering it invisible within his sleeves. The mage of the Emperor of Sshen returned his ritual knife to his forearm sheath that Brennan had not marked before, hidden within faded crimson robes.

"Follow me," the elder said, without apology or explanation. As he stepped from the antechamber, he put the bowl onto a rack, the coppery aroma of Brennan's blood mingling with that of clove and sandalwood, the pungent scents assailing his heightened senses. They could not mask the animal odor that began to seep through the chamber and Brennan thought he heard a heavy, impatient body moving behind the walls with a dull thud. A shuttered enclosure behind the rack of bowls rattled heavily as the walls were hit again. He smelled . . . not a . . . but reptile before the elder moved him through an arched doorway.

They moved into an inner courtyard where lesser mages sat on cushions, reading, books and parchments, pots of dipping ink and styli at their sides. Almost as one they looked up at his entry, and the elder turned to him.

"Remove your head scarf."

Brennan did so, unwrapping the black gauze that had concealed him. His dark, glossy hair tumbled free to his shoulders, his thin fine goatee revealed on his chin, and his dark eyes watched all of them as they sketched and noted his presence. "Barbarian," one of them muttered to himself, stylus quickly skritchng across the paper. He did not try to hide the surprise in his eyes as he looked at the monk-mage. They would render what he intended, the facial features, the foreign look of him. If it were he, he'd be using a universal recognition graph, vectoring his face and neck into quadrants noting features that would be recognizable no matter what apparent disguise. And *he* was a barbarian.

After long moments of sketching at a furious pace, the pens were lowered. Heads nodded. "You will be allowed three days' passage," the elder said. He gave Brennan a fired porcelain pass, hanging on a tightly braided crimson cord. It was but a sample of the delicate china ware of the province, colors glazed skillfully, the porcelain so fine it could be seen through. It was hard and fragile. "Show this and you will be admitted. We trust you will not abuse the emperor's hospitality."

He bowed low. "I thank you."

Behind him as he left, he heard the sanding and blotting of sheets, his image memorialized. They would make a detailed Wanted poster.

Screeches and Sailings of something winged being fed beyond the inner walls followed him after his footfalls.

He had every intention of exploiting that hospitality as far as he could.

Outside the palace and back on the streets, mingled into the crowds, he turned and looked back at the vast palatial complex, its turrets and wings and walls. A shadowy thing crouched on one of the high turrets, before letting out a screech and launching itself into the air. The raptor's silhouette was highlighted by the late afternoon sun, with formidable tearing beak and claws. It winged in slow, lazy circles before returning to its perch on the tower. It had to be one of the famed bloodseeker nyrrl, and he understood then the ritual bowls and the bloodletting.

Back at the inn he'd chosen, he unwrapped his outsider garb, discarded the expended sword from the one wrist and unbound the unmarked one from the left, the thin intestine bulging with fresh blood. The unfortunate donor was no doubt still asleep in a tavern gutter. His silver earring, a crystal drop held by a silver claw stud, whispered softly in his ear. "DNA markers. They'll think they have you."

"But they do not," he murmured back to his mainframe server. He had noted the signs of leaving, wrists bound, one or two nearly swooning at the sight of their own blood, and he had squibs ready on either wrist. "Luckily for me they chose the wrist instead of the jugular, eh?"

"That is perceived as a joke and is not found humorous." He did not expect her to find it that way. Her existence depended upon him, and his existence depended upon his survival on this world.

He sat down with his ceramic pass and sketches and contemplated the evening's work ahead, absently peeling off the wax nose and then the itchy goatee. He need not worry about the bloodseeker; the bloodseeker would have another prey once loosed, but still he would avoid trouble he could. He needed to get inside the interior vaults and then out, to meet Mannoc's man make the exchange, and be gone. A treasure of the emperor for a treasure of forgotten wastes deep in Jaahtcaran territory ... a fair exchange, even if it did mark him. The blood debt would follow him all his days, regardless. The Jaahtcar had made him an enemy he could not refuse.

"Do you ever think about it?" his earring spoke again. "Think about what?" He was distracted by her, staring at his sketches, planning the vectors of assault. He could not take a moment of gear with him. He needed to be free-moving, undetectable, and had to be able to shed whatever he must. "Being abandoned here."

"Missions are aborted out of necessity. Your problem is that you don't know what the necessity was, and it confounds you. It affects your computing, your decision making. That's why they still send human teams out, as well as your kind. Flexibility." "You are the only one of your kind on this world." "As are you, Rose," he reminded the mainframe. He had intended to breach the depths of the Sshen palace vaults sooner or later, if only to ease his own curiosity. Physical laws misunderstood or undiscovered became the foundation for magic and he did not hesitate to exploit that in any way he could. The stylus moved easily over the parchment as he sketched out a breach and no fewer than four exits. He needed an adrenaline boost, nightsight, and his overall sensory perceptions raised, grappling hooks, and a few other implements. He could do it with a minimum of supplies, he thought. A fiber-optic lock pick would be the most essential item. That and climbing equipment.

Brennan lay down on the thin, hard cot that the inn called a bed, and he reviewed his night plan, the potions and tinctures

I would need, the ropes and pulleys, the phosphorescent light-bar and sundry other items he had at hand to break into the Sacred inner vaults. Although he should fear the Emperor Sshen, he did not, for the emperor was steeped in mysticism and would not know Brennan for what he truly was. It was the Jaahtcar he feared.

She whispered in his ear. "Brennan. This is a world where all cultures have the same values for war, and for warrior. Think about that anomaly. Your father is gone, and we're abandoned."

"We are not abandoned! Sleep mode." He sent her into oblivion, which was perhaps kinder to the mainframe than staying awake through the brief night while he rested. She had no control of pain but she had an implanted fear of being nonoperative. He practiced his breathing, and let the stress go. Sleep claimed him for a short while.

In the deepest part of the night, he arose, wrapped himself in three layers of cloth, replaced his goatee and overlying wax nose, loaded his pockets with his tools, coiled his rope about his shoulders, fastened his harness snugly in place, pulled his cloak over and about himself, and laid out his tinctures, potions, and powders. He woke Rose but told her not to trouble him unless he asked her a specific question. She grudgingly acknowledged.

The nightsight tincture would improve his night vision tremendously, the allquick pump would increase his adrenaline reactions, and the powders would affect the neural lingual reactions of anyone inhaling them. The lightbar, when its interior was broken so that the chemicals might

would give him more than enough illumination without heat so that whatever the mages had might sense heat in the inner vaults would not give him away.

He shrugged out of the fiber-optic net he'd worn as a baldric and placed it in a washbasin along with other incriminating evidence, and set a trip for a contained fire with a bit of striated candle stub, and other odds and ends. Losing the net would be a waste, but he had more, and that was better than leaving it behind. No one in Sshen would be able to decipher it, but he was sure about a Jaahtcar. No, he was not at all sure about the enigmatic Jaahtcar. His father, wherever his body and soul had gone, had left him with a warning about Lunavar. "Be warned," he'd said, "of a world where the word for war is universal, and appears to have come from another nation."

They were a team: man, son, sentient computer system. They had journeyed to Lunavar when he was only ten years old. The crown city of Sshen was the biggest city he could remember seeing, although he'd known others before. He no longer remembered them as entities. He'd been brought to train, and to work alongside his father as he'd grown up. Lunavar, its people, its languages, its ways, and mores. His father would be the anchor, and he'd be the assimilated. Unfortunately, the mission had been aborted after only a few years, and his father had gone out to retrieve their homing equipment, and never returned. Rose watched as he grew and she slept for long periods, as he aged slowly into maturity as well as his knowledge. He stepped out of his crystal caverns when necessity demanded, and when he needed to learn what he could, so they could return home. What his father had meant, and Rose had warned, Brennan didn't fully understand.

When dark had got as deep as it would, and most tortured souls were either asleep or drugged beyond sensing anything, he stepped out to do what he'd come for.

Inside the inner walls, he tucked the ceramic pass into his sleeve, firmly against the inner side of his wrist, in case he might have to return. Then he stepped past the public rooms and vaults open to all the scholars and headed for the Forbidden. Lightbar in hand, he uncoiled a length of rope and gauged the walls as he moved into the velvet black interior of the famous maze of inner chambers. Up and over, catlike, pausing now and then to look in cases or on pedestals. Before traversing the next chamber walls, Brennan made his way inexorably through Sshen's legacy. The allquick set in as he increased his breathing, and he moved rapidly past the obstacles, glimpses of treasure catching his attention here and there.

He lingered, despite misgivings. The vaults were too captivating to pass through without looking at what the emperor and previous dynasties had hidden away. There was a plain sword that sat in a spiked box to prevent its theft. He did not have to read the sign to feel the powerful electromagnetic aura it cast. Then there was the anklet of the slave empress Mahrdin, which had united the walls of the early Sshen empire. There was the baton of the ArchMage, its gnarled wood etched and inscribed. There was no logical reason for the hairs on the back of his neck to prickle as he passed that one, yet they did.

He paused for more than a moment at a simple wooden bowl large enough to curl a corner. Resting inside was an opalescent shard of an eggshell. A dragon's shell, the sign said. It needed no further explanation. He pondered the plausibility of it, then moved on, running now. The maze brought him back to the baton, and Brennan smothered a curse, wondering how he had missed a turning.

His skin crawled again. But not in aversion. No. He craved to hold the short staff. It came to him. He broke his cardinal rule. This was not what he had come for, but he took it anyway, sliding it up the left sleeve on the inner side of his arm. It fit neatly along the span from wrist to his elbow, and immediately warmed his skin though it was made of wood. Continuing on, he swung his hook and rope coil, and went up and over the tall walls, rather than misnumbering the maze yet again. His lightbar fluttered slightly as the chemicals began to dissipate away. Brennan moved as swiftly as he could for he needed enough light to get out.

He did not pause again until he stood at the great case wherein rested three amber jewels known as the Eyes of the Dragon. Like the egg shard outside, they were rumored to be the actual item. He did not know. All his intelligence on Lunavar had not indicated Dragons. Quiet peoples of high intuitive ability, perhaps even telepathic abilities, but never Dragons. Quietly he gathered up the fist-sized shapes and arranged them in a lined, black velvet pouch he had made to carry such things.

He would be out much quicker than he came in, the allquick fiery in his veins lighting his berserker fury. He needed speed now, not finesse. "I've got everything," he informed Rose. She did not affirm. A faint crackle sounded in his ear. Something in the air interfered with the transmission. Of no import. His task was done.

Brennan turned around slowly to spot his position in the maze and reconcile it with the maps he'd drawn earlier and memorized. Something tall, dark, carapace-hard in the shadows stirred. The Sentinel moved out, into the cold spill of light from Brennan's hand, and it looked like nothing he had ever encountered. The lightbar shivered in his hold, illumination spreading over the thing erratically, making it difficult to know what he was looking at.

Not mortal or mechanical. His heart did a quick jump in his chest. Brennan circled quickly, fleetly, faster than mere flesh, on an adrenaline high. He would pay for it later, but he had no choice now.

The thing moved with him. Heat seeking? No. Perhaps.

His hand flashed, powder motes drifted on the air with the gesture. If it inhaled, it would be affected by the hallucinatories. He had an immunity to them, but the creature facing him still did not. Brennan circled again.

It moved on inexorably.

Not breathing. Not animal. Not flesh.

Brennan leaped to pass it. The Sentinel reached out and caught his arm, pulling him down to earth with a crushing grip. Only the ArchMage's staff prevented harm to his flesh, teeth, and bones. But he was caught, well and truly, and by something he did not think existed. Something that stank of magic.

It was at this moment that he wondered how he had got there.

ACT I

Brennan took advantage of the slowness of the carriage approach to check himself over carefully one last time. Ear transmitter, in place. Chest camera, good. Clothing . . . just slightly out of style and season as befit the impoverished scion of a scion of a poor holding and wife . . . of questionable quality as well as faddishness. Good. There would be polite looking few jabbing remarks, but all in all, his clothing would be far more remembered than his

He checked his cuffs again, and made sure his pants were tucked neatly into his boot tops, ran a hand over his face. The salve, a pleasantly scented unguent, kept his body as hairless could, with the only side effect being a tendency to sunburn a little too quickly if he did not care. His outfit also included a pardskin hat, with the appropriate feather and be headband.

His carriage bumped to a halt and the doorman quickly opened the cabin door and le step down. Brennan got out leisurely, surveying the grounds as he did. He disliked transmitter as it interfered somewhat with his own preternatural hearing, but it couldn helped; he needed recording beyond what he could catch. Something was stirring here, and needed to know everything he could.

He moved down the carriage step, kicking the edge of his cloak out of the way, and he toward the front gardens where music and the inevitable milling of people indicated he arrived fashionably late. The strains of a few strings, a percussion or two and a handf woodwinds reached him, all more or less in tune and imparting a merry song. These late sp parties always seemed to be aimed at matchmaking and merriment, although a serious am of diplomacy and negotiation, as well as gambling, took place in the back rooms. That where he would head after being ingratiatingly social.

He stood in the small line, awaiting his announced arrival, picking up the murmurs a him.

A low-pitched, vibrant voice caught his attention. "Mannoc is back again. I don't like Jaahcar one bit. He's too swift in his negotiations."

"He has better information than we do, I suspect."

"Aye. That, and more." A slight cough then, as if noticing that others were a little too listening. Boots shuffled restlessly as the murmurs trailed off.

Brennan spent a bit of time correcting the epaulets and his cloak, fussing with the line hang of it, as though quite unaware anyone about him could be saying anything of any intere all. He stopped only when the herald put a palm across his chest, halting Brennan on doorway threshold, and called out, "Brennan anj'anj'Risalavan."

Brennan straightened, smiling and bowing slightly as a room full of faces glanced br his way, eyed him, dismissed him, and went back to their springtime gossip. He ste through to let the next pair in and went straight to the sidebar for a libation. The sprea bottles and decanters and jugs was impressive, and he took a moment or two deciding would please his palate and quench his thirst and interfere least with the potions he had t this morning. Although already ingested, they were designed to stay relatively inert unt began pumping extra oxygen into his system. Brennan smiled around the room a poured himself a snifter of S'shen imperial brandy and carried it to a patio corner.

The breeze held the raw edge of winter not quite gone, with the dampness of an imper rain, perhaps shortly after nightfall, although he could not see clouds on the horizon. Cl built up quickly on the eastern ridge, though, and Brennan was fairly certain most o afternoon would be under a leaden sky. So he took in a ray of sun now, and enjoyed it, th his newly un-guented skin was a bit tender and would soon burn if he wasn't careful. W subtle gesture, he pulled the brim of his hat down a little to shade his face, and took a sip o excellent-smelling brandy.

It rolled off his tongue and sent a warming fire down his throat before pooling nicely in his stomach. Brennan smiled at the flavor of it. An excellent vintage, even for the Throne's pricey and very far from home, where vintages of this kind were usually reserved for wedding or naming days for sons of substantial holdings.

Such a naming day as an anj' of an anj' of Risalavan would not have, Risalavan being impoverished and backwater. Not that the anj' of Risalavan had had an heir; he had not. The sire of Risalavan had had hopes for his son, regardless of the stable accident, an ill-placed kick, which had left his heir with one shriveled testes and the other of dubious abilities. He had sent him off to the southern provinces of his holdings in hopes of expanding both his wealth and his issue. After years of waiting, instead, he had received home a box containing the preserved severed head of his anj' after a fatal hunting accident. In bitter tears, the fortress had been set up and the sire had retired to meditate and pray for his son's soul.

Brennan had disliked disturbing the vigil of the sire of Risalavan's mourning, hidden in the shadows as the box was set on the altar, and the candles and incense lit, and a veil put over the box's contents. The older man stayed, head down and shoulders bowed, muttering to himself at the altar as everyone else left, not seeing Brennan in the corner shadows. It was of necessity that he waited, then drew his breath in slowly, and stepped out of the shadows.

"Turn if you wish but do not shout. Listen to my offer. Your son had a son, for your purposes. You will receive a handsome stipend from his estates, as long as you accept the offer; if you do not, I understand, but I will bring no disgrace upon your name." Or at least, he hoped the sire would not, for it was certainly not his intent. Brennan waited quietly for the man to turn around and look at him, and either deny or confirm him.

Silence reigned for a very long moment. Then the sire of Risalavan said, "You have a young voice."

"I would have to be young, to be an anj' of your anj', would I not?"

"You would have to be a miracle."

"Perhaps. Your son was a whole man once. It is not beyond speculation that he dallied with a village maid or the daughter of a passing merchant, or that there was issue neither he nor you knew about, till recently. You can look at me if you want, if that will help you to make up your mind."

The older man shook his head. "No," he said. His voice was choked. "No." He put his hands on the altar, on either side of the veiled box, and gripped it tightly. The muscles across the back of his shoulders tensed greatly. "Why?"

"Because I must. More than that, I cannot tell you, and it is best if you do not wonder."

"Yet I will wonder."

"I won't blame you for that. A yearly stipend is nothing compared to your grief or your anger, but it will help. We both know it will. All I ask is that you announce when appropriate, in a few weeks, that you have been presented with evidence of your son's anj'. Will you do that?" He watched the man's back, unable to read very much into his stance or musculature.

Then, finally, "As long as you're not Jahtcar, and I don't hear it in your voice."

"That, I will swear upon my life. I am not Jahtcar." Nor of any other race of this world, he added silently, and did not let the thought shadow his eyes.

The man turned then, surveyed him with a face etched in grief and regret, then gave a

"You," he said quietly, "could hardly bring more shame to the name than I have. I will dispute your claim to be the anj' of my anj' but neither will I embrace you. You understand that?"

Brennan bowed. "Understand and accept." He took a purse from his belt and laid it on the stone floor of the chapel, near the door. "The first stipend for this year. The others will be brought by messenger, as is appropriate. I will honor your house, and your name, and your daughter and their heirs."

"And if you have an anj'?"

Brennan smiled faintly. "He will be of the line of Risalavan and make you proud." It was not likely, but he needn't disclose more than he already had.

The sire of the house of Risalavan bowed his head, turning back to his altar and grieving. Brennan had paused but a moment longer, whispering words of mourning for his own father, and then he'd left.

Brennan slipped through the arched doorway quietly and departed the holding much the same way he'd come in, by shadow and unlocked door, and night. He still found the quiet more comfortable than such fanfare as society demanded of him today, but today was another matter altogether. Today he knew being unseen was out of the question, which was why he had purchased a shell of a life to use. The faint stirrings which had led him to Risalavan had grown louder, were now rumbling—the mystery of the nation that called itself the Jaahtcar. They manipulated trading lanes and quarrels, financed wars and uprisings, and prospered. They were like leeches looking for a bloody wound to feed upon, constantly.

And now Mannoc was here. Could his luck be any greater? This was his chance to find out what the Jaahtcar wanted, what they believed their manifest destiny to be. Brennan savored another swallow of brandy, a bare sip lest he disturb the chemistry of the potions he'd ingested earlier, as he surveyed the patio and hoped for a sighting. A low growl of a voice near the outer edge of his hearing range caught his attention, and he pivoted slowly, languidly, toward his interest.

Mannoc stood head and shoulders above the general population, even though he was slightly in conversation with the wealthy merchant standing next to him on the patio, slightly veiled in blue-gray smoke from the gambling rooms which opened onto the end of the gardens. As though by unwritten rule, despite the monied and eligible men milling around in that part of the grounds, there were no females nearby except a few servants who did not linger but came and went with quiet efficiency. Although matchmaking seemed to be one of the main intents of this gathering, the gambling room and its gamblers were not to be disturbed. Even more important liaisons of men and money were taking place therein.

Without seeming to, he watched Mannoc. The register of his lower voice made it difficult to catch what he was saying from this distance, although the others were fairly easy to pick up. He would have to go through the recorder later for the nuances and what he flat out could not hear.

"More brandy, sur?" someone said at his elbow, and he looked down smoothly and immediately swapped glasses. She faded off with her tray, and the first sip told him that he had given up half a glass of good drink for a full glass of a vastly inferior brandy. Brennan frowned in irritation, of half a mind to chase his original drink down to the kitchen and retrieve it.

To hide his annoyance, he turned back into the manor proper and was promptly swept a dance, glass in hand and all, and his senses reeled in a swirl of color, laughter, perfume motion. He bowed out after two dances to stand quietly in the vast doorway which had thrown open to the afternoon breezes while he brought both his pulse and breathing qu down to norms before anything could be unleashed. A little sweat peppered his forehead u the hair that had fallen forward, and the breeze felt cool against it, and he could smell the faint hint of brandy in it as it passed through his pores, carrying with it the even fainter hi the tonic he called allquick and other herbs.

"Anj' of anj' of Risalavan."

He swung about at the very feminine voice, saying, "Please, call me Brennan," even be he saw her. This was probably a good thing for she had large eyes, a soft bow of a mouth skin, and the most incredible bosom delicately hinted at by a low and lacy necklace, a momentarily took the words from him. He was grateful for the nonchalant tone in his voice managed to hold onto it as he faced her.

"Master Brennan, then. No more dancing?"

"Afraid not at the moment."

She held a bulging coin purse up to him, pouting slightly. "I think this fell from waistband, then, and I was going to claim a dance as my reward."

He took it from her slender fingers. "I would be very remiss for not rewarding you."

"Perhaps a cold drink and a sandwich in the gardens?" She brought up a fan, wavi slightly, soft tendrils of hair ruffling along her forehead.

"Allow me, then." Fie put out his hand to escort her, and she took it with barely a t between them as he tucked his coin purse back into his jacket. He had intended to drop i chided himself for not catching that it actually had fallen. "I'm afraid I did not catch your m'lady."

She blushed slightly, answering, "Please . . . I am syanji' Gryden."

"Terribly formal." He escorted her through a trellis gate into the gardens whe refreshment area had been set up and a canvas canopy rippled in the afternoon bro gilt-threaded G neatly embroidered on every scallop. He was escorting his host's daug then. "Do all your friends call you that?"

"Oh, no. Please. Call me Fyleen."

"It would be my pleasure." At the stand, he ordered two chilled fruit drinks w looking promisingly clear and not cloy? ingly sweet with nectar and pulp and two sandwi of fowl and chutney, and carried them to a small table. Fyleen, to his delight, did not eat l bird pecking at the bread, but rather ate heartily and with enjoyment.

The drinks were as good as their promise and he enjoyed their mild sweet-tart cool. They had been watered down, he was certain, but that was not undesirable as far as he concerned. He let Fyleen chatter away, answering her pleasantries amiably, and he waited.

They had all but finished when someone came up behind Brennan and tapped on shoulder. Fyleen blinked and looked down, a faint expression running over her face so qu Brennan could not quite catch it. He made a note to see what the camera recorded, later. H his shoulder flinch slightly but showed no more surprise than that.

"Anj'anj'Risalavan?" A pleasant, deep voice, rolling out of the man behind him, sme

faintly of green beer and tobacco.

He twisted about in his chair to face the greeter. "Aye, that would be me. And you . . . He looked up into the broad, portly face of a man who really needed no introduction, at least in this part of the world, the very moneyed and important merchant Balatin. Balatin's weathered face showed the years he'd traveled with his caravan, not only as merchant but as guard. His hands gnarled and scarred with the signs of combat, three heavy lines etched deeply into his forehead.

Balatin bowed deeply. "Humble Balatin, trader, at your service. Forgive me for interrupting, Sy'Lyleen, but my partners and I thought anj'Risalavan might enjoy a game or two of chance." He tugged his fashionable waistcoat back into place about his formidable torso. He straightened and stood, smiling, waiting for Brennan's response.

Trap baited and sprung. But he could not have asked for lovelier bait, he thought, standing. "That would be most enjoyable!"

Lyleen's soft lips parted as if to utter a small complaint, but she never got it out as Balatin grunted, saying, "Let me lead the way, it's like a jungle in here," and Brennan fell in dutifully behind, noting that although the trader had grown older and prosperous, it was mostly composed of muscle under those fine clothes and he grunted, not because of exertion but more of exasperation with the fineries that had been forced upon his frame. His supple boots were made for walking and riding rather than dancing, and he moved accordingly. Brennan sized up the trader, almost as much as they had undoubtedly sized up him and his coin purse earlier. With a smile just at the edges of his mouth, he counted his victory as he headed to the gambling room where Mannoc the Jaaht-car and others waited for fresh blood.

Upon entering the room, and suffering a hearty round of introductions, Brennan took a look at the three games going. Qwill was being played at two tables, and the third seemed to be a sophisticated version of bangar dice, the bangar table surrounded by throwers and bettors. Brennan could do well at either, but preferred neither game, particularly, and his purpose here was to watch. Mannoc sat playing Qwill, holding the paint-and-gilt cards in one hand, tapping the other on the table idly, seemingly contemplating the mix he held.

As if hearing Brennan's unconscious wish, a balding and spindly player at the Qwill table threw his hand in and stood up, saying, "I think it's time to change my luck."

Trader Balatin pulled the chair out with a gnarled hand, indicating Brennan should sit. "Don't worry, I have new blood."

Mannoc looked up, barely smiling. "Good." He had the darkest eyes Brennan had ever seen, pools of night that made the whites around the pupils look like freshly fallen snow. His skin was uncommonly fair with the purple-and-blue tracings of his veins seen easily on his neck and wrist. The pallor might have looked unhealthy on another, but his entire aura was one of strength and vigor, belying any thought of illness. He was simply a very pale man. Like what Brennan had seen of most Jaahtcar, they all were.

He wondered at the lack of tanning pigmentation and if they were originally a snowbound people, perhaps. To hide his examination of Mannoc, Brennan fussed a bit with his waistcoat and trousers as he sat down.

Mannoc smiled thinly. "By all means," he commented, "make sure the family jewels are comfortable. We'll be here a while."

Brennan placed his hands on the table and, while smiling, raised an eyebrow at Mannoc.

"My jewels," he said amiably, "are quite in order and well taken care of. My father should have been so lucky."

A muffled snicker ran around the table as the dealer gathered up the cards and began to shuffle them. The lace at his wrists hid the motion as he mixed the cards and quickly dealt them, and then there was a pause. Balatin put his heavy hand on the shoulder of a young man at Brennan's right. "How are we doing, Nedo?"

"I've been keeping your cards warm," said the affable young man. He stood then, bowed, giving up the seat to the trader. Balatin sat down, throwing his markers into the table's center without even looking at his hand.

The dealer quickly sold Brennan a fair number of markers, tucking the coins away in a common leather purse branded with a stylish G. The first card went out face up to all the players, and the qwill landed in front of Brennan.

"Auspicious," Mannoc murmured. He did not stir his dark gaze from his cards, though he'd known the qwill would land where it did.

Brennan quickly made his choice of draw cards, and the dealer took the qwill, buying Brennan the discards. There were three more to be had, but no others would show as the remainder of the cards would be dealt facedown. He won quickly, heard no grumbles, and kept winning and on through most of the afternoon. The anj' of the anj' of Risavalan was not a good win in that he gloated a bit, and remarked how the day's work would add to the nest egg he had for his trade of antiquities, the lifework of his heart. The markers piled up steadily in front of him, gamblers dropped out and new ones came in, and Mannoc remained seated across from him, nearly silent, and almost as good at winning.

"Trader, are you?" Mannoc noted as the day wore into dusk, and servants quietly lit lanterns about the room as well as an overhead chandelier, and opened a window for a breeze to clear out the smoke. Balatin sat in the corner, at a table, partaking of a dinner which had been brought in.

"Only in oddities. Antiquities, rare artifacts, remnants of long ago," he answered absently, arranging his hand. The qwill lay in front of Mannoc, and he'd seen the Jaahtcar use it in startling ways several times today already. An interesting opponent. "I am barely a passing scholar in the Fallen, but I find their usage of metal for adornment intriguing. Their creations, while scarcely fathomable, have a certain charm."

"Charm is about all they had, and little good it did them." Mannoc paused long enough to tap the ash from his smoker, and then inhale another gray-blue flume slowly. "Do you find a market for your oddities?"

"Oh, yes. There is a small but interested group of buyers. A few are scholars, some are merely collectors." Brennan paid a great deal of attention to arranging his cards. "I dabble for card money, and my card money keeps me dabbling. It's the pastures that keep my hooves going. I came down to the city for a bit to look at the new shearing scissors and place a few orders, see what the winter looks like. My beasts bore well, my staff is carding now, and it looks like there will be a cold winter coming. We'll have the yarn for it. I should do well."

Mannoc tapped the ash off again. "It will be," he said quietly, "very, very cold. I'd like to get onto that yarn of yours a while."

Balatin looked up sharply from his bread bowl of stew, a gleam in his eyes.

"Think you so? That might be a wise idea, then. What omens have you read? My her-

tell me the caterpillars tell them that."

A slight smile cracked the Jaahtcar's face as he fanned his cards out, closed them into his palm and then placed a few markers in the pool, betting. "I have slightly more reliable methods," he answered slowly.

Brennan nibbled on one lip slightly, eyeing his cards before saying over his shoulder to an anonymous servant in the background, "I think we'll need a new deck, after this," and went on to staring morosely at his cards. He knew just how long he could draw out his response before betting before Mannoc would get restless and demand to see the hand. The Jaahtcar was good at remaining still, but his right shoulder ticked ever so slightly and Brennan knew he was going to reach for the qwill, in effect demanding a resolution whether Brennan was ready or not, and in answer, Brennan fanned his cards down, putting his bet on top of them.

Mannoc stared but a moment, then rocked back in his chair. "Winner," he said, nodding toward Brennan. "And I could use some fresh air, and some advice from you."

"Of course," he answered smoothly, standing. It had been a long afternoon, but it seemed the wary prey had finally begun to take the bait. He followed Mannoc out of the rear of the room onto a private patio. The hour had grown late, and the party could be heard somewhat inside, music, laughter, the sound of drinking and eating.

A servant wheeled out a cart heaped with covered plates and backed away quietly, then returned with a second cart of glass decanters and clay jugs, and a capped skin. Brennan reached for the iced juice before Mannoc could pour him a glass of much, much stronger than he wished to take in. The sap he'd drunk in the morning to render his normally deep voice into a pleasant tenor had begun to ease, his larynx returning to its normal size, and he felt the hoarseness from the smoke, roughening his tones. He strode across the flagged terrace, listening to and enjoying the light strains of music reaching them.

A third person joined them, half shadowed, taking a seat on a stretched hide hamper stool. The leather creaked as he sat down in the dusk, all but hidden except for his heavy striking boots pushed out in front of him. Mannoc poured a thick amber-red drink from the capped skin, and Brennan recognized it for what he thought it was, lyhur, the coppery smoky drink with the added blood in the liqueur reaching him. It was a drink of pure savagery and he could not stomach it, although he'd had to, once or twice. It would play havoc with his senses and his stomach and he was only too glad to avoid it.

He could see from the other's pupils that the true purpose of this break, the card game indeed, the whole day, was about to unfold.

Mannoc spread open the hedge surrounding the terrace, revealing Lyleen's blood-soaked crumpled body. "She hasn't been seen since she stepped into the garden with you earlier. Her blood might be construed as being on your hands." He then proceeded to make Brennan an offer he could not refuse.

ACT III

The Sentinel shook him like a terrier seeking to break a rat's back. Red streaks of lightning flashed across the backs of his eyes and the maze reeled about him, leaving him completely disoriented. Even if he could break free, his senses reeled in vertigo. There was no up or down . . . no escape. He cried out. Brennan went suddenly limp in the Sentinel's hold as

had succeeded in breaking him and its jaws relaxed the barest of a fraction. Brennan kicked hitting it hard in the throat. His boot cracked . . . something. Hard-ridged shell? Armor was not sure as he used his momentum to flip about and somersault back onto his feet. The world righted itself, and he leaped away. He was gone, but it came after him with a grunt.

Brennan sped through the maze, no time for ropes and harness, jumping and catching on the wall's top edge if he could, or vaulting onto an exhibit or cabinet if not, and then leaping again. It pursued him, soundless, breathless, heatless. It came over the wall tops or around corners, anticipating his every move until it was obvious to Brennan. It knew he was fleeing, getting out. It could cut him off at any moment. It was toying with him, exhausting him.

He paused in a corner to catch his breath, pulse roaring in his ears. Certainly he heard something lunge past, headed toward the main doors, armored feet rattling on the wooden floor. Brennan threw his head back, staring up. And up. A faint spark of light from the vaulted ceiling caught his eye. A break. An exit.

In moments he had his spikes and rig set to climb. The hardwood held each spike tight. As he ascended, drawing his ropes after him, going as fast as he dared, knowing the thing would sense it had missed him and double back. He climbed, fast but not fast enough, though his pulse pounded in his temples. What was it? He knew he couldn't outrun it. Could he stop it if it caught up with him again?

His weight brought a spike out of splintering wood and it fell away, clattering far below. His harness held, kept him from a similar fate, and he shook another spike loose to anchor himself with a handful left. He looked up at the spark of light which had grown to crescent size. Yes, he could make it. He dared to breathe a moment, feeling the beginning ache and fatigue as the alien metabolized out of his system. In a few moments he'd be as weak as a newborn.

Brennan drew himself up, set his spikes and ascended as quickly as he could, till one reached the cup of the crescent opening, and he pulled himself onto a ventilation hatch and punched out the oxidized grille. Fresh night air roared in as he wiggled through, body starting to ache in earnest. He straightened on the roof, nimbly crossing tiles, eyes on the street far below, gauging the time. He was dangerously close to missing the rendezvous. Springing across the slanted roof, he paused at the edge for a jump to the next wing. Catlike, he sprang and made it, with ease, and yet his legs felt like lead as he straightened.

A heavy thud sounded behind him.

Brennan whirled, bringing a dagger to hand, knowing it would doubtless be of no use. The thing was on him before his heart could skip a beat, bowling him over, but he let it, rolling it, bringing his boots up into the center of the thing's gravity and sending it tumbling over. He scrambled about into a crouch.

It did not look much better in moonlight than it had in the maze. Enamelled black, immense suited being, perhaps even hollow from its quickness. Animated? Yet . . . how could it sense no transmissions from it, knew of no technology in Sshen that could do it.

It moved with him as he circled.

"You will not leave," it said flatly.

Hearing the voice left a faint, coppery flavor in his mouth. Brennan licked his dry lips and discovered a minute cut, and sucked on it a moment.

He had every contingency covered except for this one.

And it would be the death of him.

He felt sweat under the wax appliance of his fake nose, and it crawled down his skin into the gluing of his goatee, itching horribly. His breath rattled slightly in his lungs and back of his neck and his shoulders were beginning to knot up. Perhaps if he dropped the baton and moved away . . . but then, no, he would not get what he needed from Mannoc and he would as well be dead if he did not.

Brennan drew the baton of the ArchMage out of his sleeve. The thing's attention riveted on it.

"You sense it, then."

"It burns brightly even on my plane," the Sentinel said.

Its voice vibrated flatly. Without breath, how could it talk . . . transmit? Perhaps he thought he heard what he heard.

Perhaps.

Brennan circled. "Will you take it and let me go?"

"No. You have done that which is Forbidden, and the penalty is Death."

Brennan felt for a cloth tucked into his waistband. The Sentinel had fixated on the baton with its eyeless, featureless face, and followed every movement of his outstretched right hand. It never saw, if it could see, what Brennan drew clear.

"Let me go, or I will destroy it."

"Blasphemy!"

Brennan snapped the null cloth over the baton. Like whisper-soft silk, it tented over the baton and settled into place. The fine, electronic screen enmeshed within the cloth dampened whatever fields existed and set up its own, decoying.

The Sentinel let out a screech of horror and dismay, leaping at him and his outstretched hand. Brennan sidestepped, snapped a wrist dagger into his palm and aimed for the center of the thing's forehead.

The carapace and the dagger cracked as they hit. The impact drove shocking vibrations throughout his arm, into the elbow, and even the shoulder. Brennan let go and staggered back. The Sentinel flailed, then fell over onto his back, arms and legs hammering for a moment. The knife vibrated inexorably, eating into its target until its charge evaporated.

By then the Sentinel had stilled, melted dagger sunk into its skull.

Brennan slid the baton back into his sleeve, null cloth still wrapped around it, shuttering its emissions. Whatever they were He needed the cloth to deal with Mannoc's man, but the baton seemed to be in better use where it was. He had no wish to attract another Sentinel.

Soon, he was hanging off the rain gutter of the roof closest to the street and dropping clear. Lightly. Brennan trotted around the square till he reached the side road he wanted, and took a carriage.

A coach sat motionless in the street. The restive horses tossed their heads as the carriage approached, and got in, the carriage rocking under his added weight.

"You got the items," the Jaahtcar said, and Brennan was faintly disappointed and noted his contact was not Mannoc. "And more." The envoy frowned slightly. "This was not part of the deal."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You know exactly what I mean."

Brennan grinned in spite of himself, on the edge of his resources. "I was hired to do a job."

exchange items, and make a delivery."

"You have a blood debt to fulfill. Hiring is scarcely the word to use."

The envoy leaned over, the plush carriage seat squeaking slightly with his movement, tugged off Brennan's beard. He tossed the stringy goatee out the window, grimacing. "Fine thing. Do you think us so simple we could not see through it? You have needs and we have needs. All this . . ." and he waved a winter-gloved hand about lightly, "was to persuade you to work with us."

Brennan made an impatient movement. "Get to it."

Reaching under the seat, Mannoc's envoy drew out a wooden crate. "This is the payment, then."

"Inspection?"

"Take it or leave it. Hand over the pouch. I wish to be through the city gates before the gates are loosed." The very pale Jaahtcar watched him. Unlike Mannoc, he had light gray eyes, but they watched Brennan carelessly.

Fingering the pouch tied at his waist, Brennan seized the rope handle on the crate, threw the lid open. Lying on its side, illuminated by the carriage lamps guttering low on oil, was the object he had nearly died for. Would die without. He dipped a hand inside the crate, confirming. The wreckage of the thing, that is . . . His heart sank. The weariness that washed over his body had already begun, weakening him, washing like a dark tide over his senses.

Once it had been a homing beacon, made to withstand weather and time and the vagaries of the wilderness of an alien world. Not made to withstand deliberate deconstruction. Lying on the straw bed next to the metal and glass shards was a stiff, bloodied glove.

"The glove," the Jaahtcar said, with satisfaction, "is a bonus."

The glove had belonged to his father. No doubt the blood did as well. They knew they handed him his prize, deliberately wrecked, and they knew they handed him a last remnant of his father. Brennan looked up, smiling, and the smile disconcerted the envoy. He realized they knew him far better than he knew them. He would not make that mistake again.

The matching glove, no doubt, could be found with Lyleen's remains, and the bloodhounds of Lunavar, the nyrll, would ID him as the killer, absorbing his own DNA markers along with those of his father. Mannoc had never had any intention of freeing him from that trap. Jaahtcar would use him as long as they could, as long as he gave them a leash to do so.

He snapped his left arm and his last remaining dagger slipped into his palm, and he drove it into the Jaahtcar's chin from below, and jammed it higher, twisting, when it met resistance, scraping against bone. Blood spurted.

The man fell over, gurgling.

"No deal."

Brennan gathered up the crate. He might be accused of burning bridges with that act, but satisfaction rolled through him in a warm wave. The trap had been sprung by the anj' of the city of Risala-van, but it had been meant for the mage thief all along, so they knew just who he was. Perhaps even knew what the beacon had been.

He took a deep breath. Brennan stepped out of the carriage, waving up at the driver. "We're finished here. He wants to be through the gates at dawn's first light."

The driver nodded, as if he had been given his orders earlier. He gathered up his reins.

Brennan tucked the crate under his elbow, found shadows to slip into, and disappeared.

the backways of a world where the word for war was the same in all languages, realizing
did so that it was the Jahtcar who'd brought that word to Lunavar. He did not know why
he would find out, for within that question's answer, he would find a way home.