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Brendell: Rogue Thief

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By Patrick Welch

## Hannis Bay

I held my breath and willed myself still as a tree when I heard the clicking sound come from somewhere. It was faint but clear as glass, and for the thousandth time I reconsidered why I was here. But there was no going back, not now. I pressed myself against the wooden wall, trying to disappear into it as I heard the sound again. Then I heard a scratching noise followed by a muted squeak and I slowly relaxed. It had to be a mouse.

Not what my nerves needed this evening, not when I was breaking into the Thief's Guild offices in Hannis Bay. Difficult enough climbing up to a third floor balcony and through a window, then creeping down the stairs while trusting the residents would remain asleep and unconcerned. Worrying about traps magical and mundane. Even a loose floorboard could be enough to ruin me. Slinking through an unfamiliar building at night with no light. Finally reaching the downstairs office. And now this.

Could it be a magical mouse, enhanced for sentry duty? I wondered inanely, then chuckled. *Don't be a fool Brendell.* I strongly doubted the Guild would protect itself with magic, not when there were many more effective methods available. A contingent from the Assassin's Guild would suffice ... and be more dependable. But I was counting on the Guild's own reputation and confidence in its power; after all, who would dare steal from the Thief's Guild?

They were going to find out. And it was all their fault for what they had done to my family and me.

This had all started when I returned to Hannis Bay from my home in Mismourning to learn who had stolen from my father. It had to be a rogue thief, something my Guild would not tolerate.

The Guild Secretary proved me wrong. "It is a legitimate contract, Brendell," she had told me after I lodged my complaint. "We shall not interfere." Once I recovered from my shock, the rest of our meeting proceeded downhill at a rapid pace. I finally bid her leave and stomped out of her office. Later, over my campfire at my camp outside Hannis Bay, I stared at the flames. Only appropriate, since I saw my entire life being consumed by the fire. Throughout my career as an honored member of the Thief's Guild, I had obeyed their rules ... most of the time anyway. I had been taken advantage of more than once during my apprenticeship, so like a puppy eager to do the bidding of its master. But I had done everything they asked, fulfilled every contract they had often foisted upon me, to reach my goal of journeyman.

*Journeyman.* All my time, effort and hopes summed up in one word, in one document I used to carry proudly. I now knew beyond any doubt my Guild status meant next to nothing.

*Nothing.* I sighed as my small fire continued to consume my dreams. Someone had taken a contract out on *me*. With the Guild's blessing and approval. Someone had gone to my father's home and stolen everything I had sent him, money meant to help him enjoy the last few years of his life. And one of the few things I had learned at the Thief's Academy I still believed was this: you do not steal from a thief. Not without frightful retribution.

I tossed another limb on the fire and gnawed tastelessly on a haunch of hare. They had given me no recourse, I tried to reassure myself. And, for once, that was relatively easy. I had already broken Guild rules before. Now I planned to shatter them beyond recognition.

Soon I would go back to my father, help him get his home and affairs in order. Then I would complete my very personal contract on the Guild member who had taken a contract out on me. But first I had to learn who that was. Which meant a return trip to Hannis Bay, but this time at night when the Guild offices were closed.

So now here I was, breaking my code of honor by stealing from my own Guild. Still my caution was mixed with regret as I began to search the office. Nearly ten years ago I had left my family and Mistmourning to attend the Thief's Academy. I had believed—then—in everything they had taught me about my chosen profession. We were committed to serving our clients and fulfilling our contracts. Upon graduation, we were to become honored members of the Thief's Guild, following their rules and regulations religiously as we advanced the honor and stature of thievery. We would respect our membership and merit respect from them. If we were successful, we would move from apprentice to journeyman and, eventually, to the most valued of titles: Master Thief. I had been trained to embrace those ideals just as thoroughly as I had been trained in picking locks, counterfeiting documents and other items, creating disguises, breaking and entering, discovering and avoiding traps and pitfalls, reconnoitering and so much more. And I had eagerly believed all of it.

No longer. Not after what I had learned upon my return to Mistmourning and my lonely father. What I was doing—what I *had* to do—would surely result in my banishment from the Guild. Or worse. I withdrew my dagger and wedged the blade in the locked door on the desk, then paused. It was not too late. I had not been discovered. I could still escape and no one would ever know.

I shoved down, breaking the lock irreparably. The drawer slid open easily but I had no interest in its contents. But that action also unlocked the larger drawer on the side, the drawer which held all the contracts released and approved through the Hannis Bay office. One of those contracts, I was certain, had my name on it. And I had to know who had taken it out.

I did not want to risk a candle or spend any more time than necessary, so I removed all the files and dumped them into my satchel. Under different circumstances I would have arranged to replace the original with a counterfeit, or just read them here. Neither option was feasible. Since the robbery was obvious anyway, I left the office window open when I crawled out. I hope it doesn't rain, I thought as I made my way down the empty street to where my horse was waiting. Then I changed my mind. They had already done nearly everything possible to ruin my life. If a storm damaged their precious furnishings, so much the better.

There would be no inn for me tonight. The Academy had always taught that one leaves as quickly as possible after a successful theft, especially an overt theft such as this. That was among a handful of lessons I considered valid in the real world of thievery. So I made my way out of Hannis Bay as quickly as possible to the hills and forest beyond ... and the camp I had already set up. Although I would not be staying there long, either. As soon as my mount was fed and the campfire lit, I sat down and began reading what I had stolen.

Most were routine contracts and I set those aside for later. I waded through a stack of contracts, invoices, standard bookkeeping records and so forth until I finally found what I was searching for.

As I stared numbly at it in the firelight, I felt my world crashing completely into some black abyss of hopelessness. A standard contract except with one noticeable difference: there was no name for either the employer or employee, just mine as the contract.

I shuddered as I set it aside. I had heard of open contracts of course, had even been involved with one during the last Thief's Rally. But I had never seen one before. A typical contract held the name of the employer, the thief and the unwitting donor. Only a Master Thief could take out contracts on his or her volition, but even those had to be signed and filed.

An open contract could only be initiated by the Guild itself.

I tossed it into the fire and watched it burn, and with it my career as an honored member of the Thief's

Guild. They don't want me, I realized. Perhaps they never had.

I continued to stare at the flames while I recalled the myriad of times the Guild had used me for their own purposes. Assigning me contracts that were considered impossible, such as stealing a ten-foot-tall statue. Forcing me to return to the Academy to assist a professor in maintaining his own standing in the Guild. Refusing to recognize me when I succeeded at winning the Rally. Finally granting me journeyman status only when I accomplished what two master thieves had not.

*Why?* That was what I longed to ask but would probably never receive an answer even if there was someone I *could* ask. Could it be because I had defied the Guilds and ensured that not all of the inventions by the mad genius Ensten would be buried and forgotten? I suspected not; indeed, the Assassin's Guild would have already dispatched me if that bit of information were learned.

One thing was clear: my task had become a thousand times more difficult. I had expected to have one person with their hand raised against me, not the entire Guild. But it mattered little. If they were going to steal from me, then by the gods I was going to do the same to them.

So I started reading the other contracts. Each was typical, bearing the names of the employer and so forth. I committed each to memory as, one by one, I tossed them into the fire. When I finished with those, I threw in the remaining documents as well. If somehow the Guild did find me, I wanted nothing to suggest I had been involved. That would come later.

Only when all the papers had been reduced to ashes did I douse the campfire and scatter the remains. Then it was on my horse and a long ride through the night and early morning to my father's home in Mistmourning.

"You have to leave so soon, Brendell?" My father spoke the words without reproach, only resignation.

I reached across the table and patted his hand. "Yes, I'm afraid so." In the darkness I could barely discern his features, but I was certain he was crying. He didn't require light, having become nearly totally blind. "I have arranged for someone to help you. They will stop by each day and cook and clean for you."

"That isn't necessary. You can't afford that."

"Yes, I can." I could afford *much* more if it became necessary, but I wouldn't tell him that. If the Thief's Guild had not taken out a contract on me, the money I had sent my father would have been more than enough to keep him in comfort until the inevitable. But they had, and it was long gone. "You will keep the money where I told you, yes?"

"Yes."

"I have to contact Mesol, Kyra, Fenz and the others. Do you know where they are?" Those were my brothers and sisters and they had to be warned. Although the contract contained only my name, the Guild had already proven it would endanger my family.

"I believe so." He rose and made his trembling way to a small table. He opened a drawer and removed a small box, then brought it back to the table. "I don't hear from them often," he said as he handed it to me. Again his voice held no recrimination.

I nodded slowly as I opened it. Several letters from my sisters, nothing from my brothers. Or me. We had all left Mistmourning for varying reasons and none of us had desired to return. But at least the letters mentioned the towns they lived in now. If I could get messages to my sisters, they might be able to pass

the information along to my brothers. I wrote the town names on a scrap of paper and placed it in my satchel, then returned the box to the desk. "It would be best if I leave now."

"You can't stay another day?"

*I don't dare. For both of us.* "I have a very important appointment to keep. I must be in Banik's Cove within the week."

He stood and offered his hand. "Come back when you can."

"Of course." *If* I can. I shook his hand, then hugged him. "Don't trust any strangers. *Any* strangers." And I left him to his solitude and memories.

## Banik's Cove

I had told my father the truth; I *was* going to Banik's Cove. That was the location of the businessman Galus Norr, who had a contract placed on him by one of his competitors. Once, the Thief's Guild had used me as a security consultant for one of their valued customers. I was going to become one again. But this time I was going to prevent the completion of a valid contract.

But first I had to contact my sisters. Unfortunate, I thought, that I couldn't use birds like I had seen Ensten use, the deranged genius whose death I had accidentally but irrefutably caused. Instead I found a shipping company which assured me the small packages would arrive at their destinations ... someday. Expensive to be sure, especially since each package contained only a letter warning them, but I didn't have the time to visit each personally. Someday I'll see them, I vowed even as I knew that promise was as hollow as a bell. Then I caught the next ship to Banik's Cove.

This was going to be a far more difficult task than any I had undertaken before, and I was as tense as the drawstring of a bow as my ship journeyed east. Before, I had always had the aegis and resources of the Guild to help me. Even the Assassin's Guild, with whom we were often at odds, would honor a Guild member even if caught in the act. The gallows may await, but they would not place the noose around our neck. And the Guild Archives, despite the expense of using them, had proven invaluable in planning thefts or occasionally disposing of unwanted or dangerous items. This time, for the *first* time, I was truly on my own.

Thus I left my ship like the abandoned orphan I was and strolled into Banik's Cove. It was the largest city in this province, and I noted with no small amount of trepidation the number of guards and Assassin's Guild members patrolling the streets. Being the only port, it was the center of commerce and travel, justifiably deserving such alertness. The crowded streets, however, were actually of benefit if I was of a mind to lift an occasional purse or bracelet. Under normal circumstances—that is, if I was under a contract—I could not have done so as Guild protocol forbids freelancing while on assignment. I was under no such restrictions but I had more important concerns, such as finding and ingratiating myself with the merchant prince Galus Norr. The man who was an unknowing target of another thief.

So I found a room at one of the lesser inns, had a bite, then made inquiries until I found myself in front of the store the merchant operated. It was unassuming on the outside, but once in the door all that changed. The merchant dealt in jewels—something I would have known if I dared consult the Guild archives—and the interior was filled with table after table of rings, bracelets, necklaces and other precious wares. Clerks manned each one, assisting the small crowd of customers. I was more interested in the guards, who tried, but failed, to remain unobtrusive. Assassin's Guild members? I wondered. Not that it mattered. I had every intention of introducing myself.

So I walked to a table in the far corner and pretended to admire some imported bracelets. It only took a few seconds before one of the clerks greeted me. "May I be of assistance, answer your questions?" she asked and gave me a warm smile.

"Perhaps," I said, giving her only the slightest glance. "This necklace here," and I held up particularly ornate silver and onyx piece, "where is it from?"

"Byranyra. As you may know, their silversmiths are among the finest in the world."

"And its cost?"

"80 gold coins. For that quality and workmanship, it is indeed a bargain. One your loved one will treasure for years."



"Indeed." I made a great show of replacing it, ensuring she would be distracted from my real concern. "More than I can afford, I'm afraid. Perhaps a ring."

Her smile flickered briefly. "Of course. This way." She led me to a nearby display of finger ornaments. "Is there a certain stone or setting you are seeking?"

I ran a finger across my lips. "Gold becomes her. It brings out the green in her eyes." I pointed to a ring on a tray on the lower shelf. "That one looks interesting."

She dutifully lifted the tray and set it before me. "Which one?" I pointed and she removed it. "Gold and jade, a most intriguing combination. Especially since, as you say, she has green eyes."

I held the ring to eye level. "I don't know," I said after a few minutes of study. "If the stone were darker perhaps. Her eyes are more the color of kelp." Again I made a big show of returning the ring. "I don't wish to take up any more of your valuable time," I apologized. "Let me browse a bit and if I find something, I like I'll let you know."

This time her smile faded completely. "If you wish." I lingered a moment while she returned the tray and went off to service another customer before I left as well. I roamed from display to display, chatting with clerks, the occasional customer, admiring one piece of jewelry after another. I even bought an innocuous trinket to appease a particularly frustrated clerk and the guards, who were beginning to pay more attention to me than I desired. For now at least. So I made my grand, slow circuit through the store until I finally found myself near the entrance. Time to get to work, I decided.

This close to the entrance, I knew the guards would be especially vigilant. I caught the attention of another clerk and pretended to be interested in a necklace. My real interest, however, was the well-appointed older lady examining wares at a nearby table. The gold bracelet encrusted with emeralds that dangled from her left wrist particularly interested me. There was a similar one on the table in front of me. I picked it up to admire it. A clerk arrived seconds later. "A most beautiful piece," he said and smiled. "Gold and emerald, wedded together to bring out the unique beauty of each. A bauble sure to delight the most discriminating taste."

"Indeed. Quite expensive I would imagine."

"But worth every coin."

I returned it to its resting-place. "Thank you for your help."

The man's smile quivered noticeably as I walked away. I was now ready to introduce myself to the merchant Norr.

One of the guards straightened as I approached. "May I help you, sir?"

"That woman," and I pointed at the lady bent innocently over a nearby table, "stole a bracelet. I'm sure of it."

He frowned. "Madam Izadora? I think your eyes are betraying you. She comes here frequently."

"And probably steals frequently as well. That bracelet she is wearing. She switched it with one just like it."

He frowned. "And why would she do that?"

It was time to educate him on *some* of the tools of my trade. "She switched the real bracelet with a fake.

I've seen thieves do it in the past." That much was true, as *I've* done it in the past.

He frowned. "I do not believe you. I have watched her and she did nothing of the sort."

I shrugged. "If I'm wrong, then I apologize to you and will to her. But if I'm *right*." I gave him a moment to consider the possibilities. "I suggest you talk to your master."

"Wait here," he said gruffly and stormed to the back of the store. I leaned against a wall, crossed my arms and whistled softly. Sorry, I thought as I watched the woman go about her business, unaware her day was going to be permanently ruined. The guard returned in good order with a tall and reedy man. Neither bore pleasant demeanors.

The newcomer stood in front of me, studying me severely. "I am the owner of this establishment. You claim that one of my best customers is a thief?" he asked coldly after completing his evaluation.

"Yes. I saw her switch a fake bracelet with your real one."

"And yet Merkin here," and he placed a hand on the guard's shoulder, "saw nothing."

I shrugged. "She is very professional. It happened in a matter of seconds."

"And what do you know about professional thieves?" the man who I now knew was Norr asked.

"Because I was one."

The merchant took a step back and frowned. "You are a thief? Of the Thief's Guild?"

"That is in the past. I have resigned and am now no more than an ordinary citizen."

"But he's still a thief," said the guard as his hand dropped to the sword in its scabbard around his waist.

Norr turned to his employee. "And has he stolen anything?"

The man blushed. "Not that I could tell."

"Excuse me," I interrupted, "but it looks as though yon lady is ready to leave."

"I'll handle this," Norr said. He intercepted the woman, held a brief discussion, then nodded as she left. "That is settled," he told us upon returning. "But you." He studied me again. "What is your name?"

I decided to use an alias I had used in the past. "Bikken."

"Bikken. Come with me." He turned. "Merkin, you may return to your duties."

The man nodded and resumed his position near the door. I followed the merchant to his offices in the rear. It was a rapid journey and I could only surmise Norr was upset. Which proved to be an accurate assessment as soon as he closed the door behind us. "How *dare* you accuse one of my best customers of thievery!" He shoved his fist in front of my nose and I wondered briefly if he meant to hit me.

"When I saw the fake bracelet among your merchandise and noticed she was wearing an identical one, it was the only assumption I could make." I kept my voice calm although I felt anything but.

His hand moved back several inches from my nose. "You are an expert on fake jewels?"

"One of the many subjects I was taught at the Academy. But then, you know the one you are offering for sale is fake as well."

He paused, and I could see a tinge of admiration in his eyes. "And how do *you* know?"

"The stones. There is a slight green cast to their reflection. From the copper used to make them. Real emeralds would not do that."

He glared at me, then slowly smiled. "It has been known to happen that an occasional fraud will slip by our inspectors." He walked to his desk and sat, then bid me take the chair across from him. "It wasn't necessary to libel the lady to gain an audience with me."

"Perhaps," and I shrugged. "I just felt it necessary to establish my credentials. Oh, before I forget." I reached in my pocket and set four rings on his desk. "Those *are* real gems, by the way. Quite valuable merchandise." I leaned forward. "Your guards and assistants are a bit lax in their vigilance."

Norr looked at them, then at me. He quivered slightly from the anger he was fighting to control, but his voice remained level. "So what are you doing here, Bikken?"

"Looking for work. Honest work for a change."

"I have enough guards."

"But not," and I pointed at the rings, "the most observant."

He cupped his chin. "So it would appear." He stood abruptly. "So you are offering to train my staff on the ways of master thieves?"

I tried not to blush. "Not 'master' perhaps. But I can certainly make them more effective."

Norr glanced once more at the rings I had placed on his desk, then nodded. "So be it. Be here tomorrow at sunrise. You shall begin with my guards."

I rose, bowed and left his office. As I made my way through the shop, I noticed several of the guards conversing together. They favored me with dark glares as I strolled past. I paused before the one who had summoned Norr. "You might need this before you leave tonight," and I handed him his purse, which I had lifted previously.

"What?" He gazed at it, then at me. "How did you..."

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. "Tomorrow. You'll learn everything tomorrow." With that I walked out of the store.

I looked at the sleepy scowling faces of Norr's guards staring back at me. They were as pleased as I was to be standing within Norr's shop while the roosters had yet to finish their morning song, and I was reminded uncomfortably of my short tenure at the Thief's Academy as an assistant to one of my professors. You're doing well, Brendell, I congratulated myself. In less than one day you've made mortal enemies of every guard in Norr's employ.

But, I tried to console myself, it shouldn't matter as I didn't plan to stay here that long. I forced a smile. "Good morning." A chorus of grumbles and muffled curses rose in response. "Your master has asked me to instruct you in the ways of professional thieves. After yesterday," and I gave each man a withering stare, "it appears you need it."

Their gazes shifted from me to the guard whose purse I had lifted. I suppressed a smile; best they take their righteous anger out on him. "So," and I clapped sharply, "let us begin. What do you look for when trying to determine which customer might indeed be a thief?"

Their responses were amusing but predictable. Customers with oversize coats and satchels, customers with children (which would serve as distractions), customers who lingered overly long at a display, customers who appeared tense or nervous, customers who exited quickly, customers who didn't purchase. In other words, amateur thieves.

"Why didn't you stop me?" I asked them when they had run out of ideas.

"But we did!" one tried to protest, then stopped when I chuckled.

"Only because I let you," I told him. I pointed to the guard who had taken me to Norr. "Ask your comrade."

The man blushed but nodded reluctantly. "I was going to let him leave," he said softly.

"A professional thief knows what you are looking for," I began. "In all likelihood they will use their first visit to reconnoiter. They will be looking for you just as surely as you are looking for them. They may visit two or three times, make several small purchases, wear nothing to attract undue attention. Almost certainly they will come alone and quite often in disguise, especially after their first visit. Now here are some things you can do to frustrate them."

I told them that only a few guards should remain at their posts near the doors and more valuable displays. The others should wander around the store pretending to be customers. "You should change your clothing several times during the day," I told them. "Rotate shifts with your fellow guards. Even, on occasion, wear a false beard or some other disguise. If a professional thief doesn't know you are a guard, you have a much better chance of stopping him. Or her." I emphasized the latter.

"We have never done that," one protested. "It is a lot of extra work."

"If you are reluctant to do your best to protect the interests of your master, then I am going to recommend Norr replace you with Assassin's Guild members. They, at least, know how to follow orders."

To their credit, they didn't take long to consider their options. "If Master Norr deems thus, we will do as you recommend," one said.

"Good. Then that is all for now. I have some matters to discuss with your master myself. I will let you work out the details on rotating stations and so on. Now if you'll excuse me, I could do with some breakfast."

I left them to question my parentage in peace while I searched for an open inn. It would be several hours before Norr arrived at the store himself, so I enjoyed a leisurely breakfast and bandied playfully with the serving wench. When I finally returned, the establishment was open and the guards were already dutifully following my instructions. Their attempts at appearing inconspicuous were, however, still painfully obvious. My main interest was not the store in any event, so I made my way quickly to Norr's office in the back.

"You've caused quite a stir, Bikken," he greeted me from behind his desk when I entered.

I shrugged. "Couldn't be helped. I'm afraid I'm going to roil the waters even more."

He frowned. "How so?"

"I recommend you reposition your stock every week or so."

His nostrils flared. "Impossible! Do you realize how impractical that is? My customers would become hopelessly confused. They'd never find what they were looking for."

"Which is exactly the point." I explained to him how a professional thief would reconnoiter an establishment several times to determine exactly what and where he wanted to steal. "If he can't immediately find what he is planning to steal, he may become frustrated and leave," I finished.

"I see." He nodded reluctantly. "Unfortunately, that makes perfect sense." He smiled wanly. "Congratulations. You have managed to anger my entire staff in just one short morning."

"I'm not finished. Now that we've improved the security of your store, perhaps we should examine your home."

"My home? I hire the Assassin's Guild to protect me."

"They are susceptible as well." I shrugged. "What harm could it possibly do?"

In actuality it could cause considerable harm ... *if* I were under contract to steal from him. But I had more important considerations than merely increasing my own wealth.

Norr sat back and cupped his hands. "This goes against my better judgment. But you may come this evening during dinner hour."

"I have a previous engagement. Would tomorrow night be satisfactory?"

"Tomorrow then."

"And with that I bid you goodday."

I had told Norr the truth; I did have a previous engagement. After a leisurely meal, I spent the afternoon admiring his manor. Norr lived on the outskirts of the city, his home nestled snugly among others of the wealthy. There was a steady stream of carts making deliveries to the various homes, servants coming and going, a contingent of Assassin's Guild patrolling the area. Because of all the activity, however, the watchmen were lax in their supervision and could easily be avoided by someone bent on mischief—or a professional thief. I could be inside waiting for Norr to arrive after work, but I desired a more dramatic entrance. Which meant I would have to visit later that evening.

So after a late dinner, I made the slow journey back to Norr's manor. The streets were just as busy as the day, although this time I assumed the people were there to visit various residents rather than conduct business. The Assassin's Guild maintained their overt presence but they allowed the people to move freely. They were easily avoided and the others were preoccupied with their own concerns so I had little difficulty entering Norr's courtyard.

From there it was even easier. The merchant relied overly on the watchfulness of the guards outside—who were far from that—and had his own staff otherwise occupied inside his home. A simple matter, really, to climb up to an open window on the second floor and enter. I knew the treasure that was contracted for was in his library as the contract had been very specific in the details. I found the room relatively easily as well. There was a fire blazing in the hearth and a decanter of wine nearby, almost as if Norr had been expecting me. I poured a glass, found a comfortable seat, then took the bell resting on a nearby table and began ringing it.

Almost immediately there was the sound of approaching footsteps. "I am sorry, master. I did not know..." The servant stopped abruptly at the doorway as if he had run into a wall, then pointed an accusing finger. "You aren't the master!"

"No, I'm Bikken." I smiled to calm him. "I have an appointment with Mr. Norr. Would you summon him please?"

"An appointment?" He continued to study me as if I was a boot snagged accidentally by his fishing line. "You didn't come in the front door?"

"No reason to trouble you." I pointed behind me. "The window was open."

"Robber!" he screamed suddenly and ran back down the hall. Seconds later he returned with guards. "Robber!" he yelled again, pointing at me.

"My name is Bikken, not Robber. I am in the employ of your master." I took a calming sip of wine. "Ask him if you will."

"Summon the master," one of the guards said, then approached me with sword drawn. "This one is going nowhere."

"I have no need to. I'm already where I want to be." I took another sip of wine. "You can put down that sword; it must be getting heavy right about now."

He merely grunted and continued to glower at me as we waited. Soon enough we heard more approaching footsteps and a cacophony of voices. Norr's rose above them all. "You found a thief in my home? This is impossible! What am I paying you for?" He entered with his entourage and glared at me. "Bikken. What are you doing here? Our appointment was for tomorrow night."

I shrugged. "My previous engagement was unavoidably cancelled, so I thought I would drop by early." I looked around his well-appointed library. "Very nice. Only befitting, I suppose."

My off-hand manner angered him further and he stood over me, glaring. "How did you get in here? My servants said you never came through the front door."

"There was no need. It was just a short climb to an open window."

"He's here to rob you," the guard standing next to me said. He had yet to take my suggestion and sheath his weapon.

I looked at him over the rim of my glass. "If that were true, I would already be gone with whatever I wanted and no one the wiser." I returned my attention to Norr. "I wanted to see how secure your lodgings really were. This was the best way to do so." I crossed my legs and nestled back in the chair. "I would suggest your security methods are sorely lacking."

Norr glared at me for another moment, then turned it on his guards. "This man is indeed a thief. Apparently a very good one. *Much* better than any of you!"

The outrage of the guards was almost immediately replaced by fear. "We knew he was here," one tried to excuse themselves.

"Only after I summoned the servant." I decided I had pushed my luck far enough and set down my glass. "Your master hired me to counsel his guards at his business. It would appear each of you could benefit from additional training as well."

Norr nodded. "Leave us. Bikken and I have much to discuss."

"I should stay," said the guard still hovering over me like a concerned mother. "You could be in danger."

Norr was unswayed. "Bikken speaks correctly. If he were here to rob me, I would already be robbed. Leave us."

The guards hesitated, then, one by one, reluctantly sheathed their swords and started out.

"Hold," I called out. "How many guards do you have, Master Norr."

"Four. Why?"

"Assign two to outside patrol."

"That should be unnecessary," one of the guards said. "There are Guild members patrolling the streets."

I shook my head. I knew I was just creating more enemies, but you can't make an omelet and all. "If they are so effective, than why am I here? If you really want to protect your master, do as I say."

Norr glared at them. "Do as Bikken says." He dismissed them with an angry wave and walked to his desk. "You are trying my patience," he said after sitting and pouring himself some wine.

"I would think I was earning my wages."

He sat back, put his bare feet on the desk and smiled. "That I will not argue with. But this could have waited until tomorrow."

I favored him with a raised eyebrow. "Are you sure? Do you really think I am the only professional thief in Banik's Cove?" I pointed out several items in the room. "I could have any one of them if I wanted. So could any competent thief. Or the items in your safe."

He frowned. "Why do you assume I have a safe in here?"

I laughed. "Show me a rich man's library and I will show you a hidden safe. It's the most practical room to hold one. When perusing important papers and whatnot, you don't want to be wandering all over your manor now, do you?" I studied our surroundings briefly. "Behind that painting of wolves hunting an elk I would presume."

Norr watched without comment as I sauntered over to it. I admired the portrait and the ornate gold frame for a moment before pulling on one of the corners. Nothing happened, but it swung open easily when I pushed on it. And, behind it, a wall safe awaited. I turned. "Would you like me to open it?"

"No. I believe you, Bikken."

I returned the painting to its original position, then to my seat. "You keep your important documents in there?"

"Those are elsewhere. That is really for my business. My most valuable jewels."

"A bit impractical, isn't it? Wouldn't you want those at your store?"

Norr sipped his wine before replying. "Only the most wealthy customers can afford those. When someone expresses interest, I meet them here."

"I see." And I did. Quite a bit, actually. I was now certain how my fellow Guild member planned to fulfill his contract. "Do you have any appointments scheduled?"

He frowned. "I fail to see how that concerns you but, yes, I do. A regent from Qudir is expected within

the week. Apparently a scion of the royal family is to be married. They are seeking something appropriate for the bridal gift."

"A bit of a distance, I would think."

He smiled. "They have requested a most unique item. I am one of the few to possess it."

*But not for long.* "A large gem, I take it. A broach?"

"Again, this doesn't concern you." Then he yawned. "You have interrupted my evening long enough, Bikken. I must get some sleep."

"Of course." I stood and bowed. "Would you mind if I stay a bit longer. I want to investigate what other security procedures you have in place within your home."

"This can't wait until morning?"

"Better I investigate at night. Your guards are now alerted, of course, but they may not expect me to do more this evening."

He considered my offer, then shrugged. "I will inform my servants you have my permission."

"Better you don't. My entire purpose is to discover how observant they are. If I am caught," and I forced a smile, "try to prevent them from harming me."

He laughed. "I'll make sure your time in jail is a short one. Good night, Bikken."

I followed him out but went the opposite way down the darkened hall. I had to return to his library, but not immediately. Instead I ducked into a nearby empty room and bided my time while lurking in the shadows. By having two guards stationed outside, I had made my task more difficult, but not overly so. They would be looking for anyone trying to enter, not leave. Especially by a window.

So I waited. Twice I heard the footsteps of the men patrolling the interior. The first time they even opened the door, but didn't venture inside. After their second pass, I knew it was time. It would take them a good hour to finish their journey through all three floors and return, more than enough time for me to do what I had come to do.

I opened the window and went outside onto the small balcony. Another few minutes and I was back in the library. It was dark this time, the fire having been extinguished by a vigilant servant. There was enough light from the outside, however, for me to easily make my way to the painting and the safe behind. I paused as I started to open it. Had Norr set any traps, or perhaps set a magic spell to protect it? I decided not. If he used it for business as he claimed, he would not want to deal with unnecessary delays in removing a spell and so forth if a prospect unexpectedly arrived.

The safe opened easily and I removed a heavy wooden box. I set it on Norr's desk, opened it ... and gasped at the collection of unset jewels resting inside. I could easily buy a manor like Norr's if I stole these. Instead I reached inside my jerkin and removed a carefully wrapped package hidden inside. It looked like jade streaked with gold, as smooth and large as a robin's egg. At first glance it was a near twin of a similar jewel inside the wooden box. Although the one I held was worth far less than the real stone.

I switched the two, put the real jewel inside my jerkin, and returned the box to the safe. Fortunately, I thought as I shut the safe and then closed the painting over it, that the contract had been so specific in its description. With just a cursory inspection Norr would know, but I was certain the approaching thief



would not. Not before it was too late at least.

Now it was time to leave. Again I went out the window, pausing only long enough to hide the real jade egg behind several books. I had noticed dust on the covers while waiting for Norr, so I was sure it would remain undiscovered until I retrieved it. Once on the ground, I casually sauntered toward the front gates. The guards intercepted me almost immediately, but after a rough search—one I'm sure they enjoyed—they finally let me go. Then to the streets and the long walk back to my inn and a well-earned rest.

Three days later, the entourage from Qudir arrived. I had requested to be present during the meeting, and, while reluctant and suspicious, Norr had agreed. Now I was waiting with Norr and two guards in his library. By all appearances I was a mere servant assigned to provide refreshments to the guests.

We heard them arrive so the announcement by a harried servant was unnecessary. Norr told the man to bring them to the library, then glanced at me. "Are you sure this is necessary?"

"I merely wish to observe your security precautions. It's what you're paying me for."

He nodded and bit into an apple as we heard the approaching footsteps. The servant again entered. "The regent of Qudir," he announced, then quickly stepped aside as four men entered.

They were led by a short man dressed in flowing, beribboned robes while the three who followed were clad less ostentatiously. The medals he wore jingled as he walked, and between the clothing and his constant nervous movements, it was almost impossible to keep one's eyes off him. Which, I suspected, was the entire point.

Norr stood and walked from behind his desk. "I am Galus Norr," he said and bowed. "I am most honored you have come to my home."

The short man waved his hand aside. "No time, no time for pleasantries," he said in a high, thin voice. "Very busy, very busy. Duty calls and our ship for Qudir leaves within the hour. We are most eager to see the gem."

"Of course. Please seat yourself and I will show you."

The regent took the chair in front of Norr's desk, his men fanning out behind him. Norr walked to his safe and in moments was back carrying a wooden box. "A most difficult voyage, most difficult," the regent said as Norr returned to his desk and set the box in front of his customer. "Besieged by pirates. Storms for three solid days and nights. Most troubling, most troubling indeed. The jewel is in here?"

"Among others." Norr opened the box. "I believe this is what you requested."

I held my breath as he removed the jade stone and held it out to the regent. *Would he notice it was fake?* If he did, he showed no sign.

The regent wiped his hands on his robe, then accepted it. "Not as large as I expected. No, no." He turned to the man standing on his right. "Persanus, your opinion." He glanced at Norr. "Persanus is an expert on gems."

While Persanus studied the gem, the regent continued his endless repartee. "And the inn! Most unworthy of our patronage. Our rooms are not much larger than this room!" He slammed his fist on the desk, which succeeded in attracting nearly everyone's attention. "That is an affront to the honor of Qudir!"

Only I kept my eyes on Persanus. And I suppressed a smile as he calmly but expertly switched the gems.

"This will not be sufficient for the lady," the true thief said when the regent paused in his continuous diatribe. "Beautiful, true, but not beautiful enough." He returned the jewel to the regent.

The regent glanced at the stone as if it had been transformed into manure. Which, in a sense, it had. "I agree, Persanus. We have made this treacherous voyage for nothing!" He tossed the gem back into the box to show his frustration.

"That is exactly what you requested," Norr said, trying to hide his own anger. "But if that is not sufficient, perhaps there is something else that will be satisfactory."

"I think not." The regent rose and shook himself. "We have wasted enough time here. Come." He turned and stormed from the room, his entourage following closely behind.

"This is ridiculous," Norr said after the door stormed behind them. "I have never been so insulted!"

"They got what they wanted," I said.

Norr frowned. "What do you mean?"

"They switched gems."

"Impossible! My men were watching the entire time!" He looked at his guards. "Did you notice anything?"

They blushed but shook their heads.

"You were all distracted. Let me show you." Before Norr could respond, I took the faux jade from the box, then smashed it on his desk.

Norr nearly jumped from his chair. "What are you doing, Bikken? That jewel is worth a small fortune!"

"Not this one. Look." I pointed to the gem. It had cracked open from my blow. And the interior was dark brown, not the rich green and gold that it should be. Norr stared at it as comprehension slowly dawned. "While the regent distracted you, his assistant switched the jewels. As you can see, this is merely colored glass and dirt. Cheap and easy to do but good enough to deceive you for the time they needed."

Norr sat silent for another moment before rousing himself. "Bikken, you have earned your keep this day." He closed the box and quickly returned it to his safe. "Guards, come with me. We must get to the docks and stop them!"

I watched as they stormed out of the library, forgetting all about me. Yes, I had earned my keep, I thought as I walked quickly to the bookshelves. I removed two books, then the true jade jewel resting safely behind them. Whatever its cost, Norr would retrieve it just from the tricks I had taught his guards in his store. Right now I had more use for it than he did. I put it in an inside pocket of my jerkin and left.

Norr was already on his way to the waterfront when I got outside, and there were no guards to intercept me as they had gone with him. They wouldn't find the "regent" there, I knew. By now, Master Thief Persanus and his band had changed their disguises and were either toasting their success at another inn or were on their way by horseback to a nearby village. As soon as I had read the contract and learned who the thief was, I had suspected he would use such an approach. At the Thief's Academy, we had studied the methodology of many successful and famous thieves. Pernasus had always eschewed break-ins and similar tactics. He preferred stealing literally in front of his contracts. Except for my interference, he would have been successful again.

But I couldn't linger either. My mount was waiting for me at a nearby stable. Within twenty minutes I was leaving Banik's Cove. I had to get to Parsimmieon and Pernasus' client.

"You claim that Pernasus has defrauded me? Why would he do that?"

It was more than a week since I had left Norr's residence in Banik's Cove. Parsimmieon was not that distant, but I had not wanted to arrive until after Pernasus and his troupe had come and gone. Now I was in the home of the merchant who had placed the contract for the theft. He was not greeting my tale with any enthusiasm. "Because he could," I replied. "My master believes Pernasus decided he wanted to keep the gem for himself."

"That has not been my experience with the Thief's Guild in the past, Antholos," Gafney Hyd, Parsimmieon council chief and prosperous importer, said. "I have used the Guild often in the past, and they have always honored our contracts."

Antholos was the name I had adopted for this meeting. I decided I still might have use for "Bikken" later. "All I can tell you is what my master told me. And sent me to tell you."

"And who is your master?"

I gave him the name of another thief, one who, like Pernasus, had long ago attained Master Thief status.

"And why would your master get involved in this?"

"For the honor of the Guild. We are duty-bound to police ourselves rigorously. It is why he went to Banik's Cove and stole your gem before Pernasus arrived. Pernasus had informed him of his intent before he carried out the contract. What you now own, and paid dearly for, is the copy we left for Pernasus to steal."

"Really?" He gnawed on a fingernail as he went to his desk. "What you are telling me is most troubling. If true."

"There is an easy way to find out." I reached in my jerkin and held up the jade jewel I had taken from Norr. "This is the real gem. Let's compare the two."

Hyd pondered, then opened a desk drawer and removed a wooden box. "Show me," he ordered as he set my counterfeit jade on the desk.

I set the real jewel next to it. He studied one, then the other, held them up to the light. "They are nearly identical," he said after a few minutes.

"We had studied the real prize carefully before making the duplicate," I lied. I couldn't tell him that his detailed description on the contract had been adequate for making the copy.

"Why didn't Pernasus suspect?"

"He was in a hurry." This time I said what I thought was the truth. "I doubt he would have studied it carefully as he was eager to get here after the theft."

He played with the fake gem for a moment. "Still. I do not have an expert on gems in my employ. I doubt there is one in Persimmoon. The nearest is Graf Norr in Banik's Cove and I *certainly* can't ask him."

"No need. May I?" I took my copy from him. "When making this, we purposely weakened one area." I placed my thumb over an intersection of gold leaf. "If one exerts pressure here," which I did, "the surface

will break.” When I returned the copy to him, there was now an indentation and cracks on the surface. “This is definitely the copy Parnasus sold you.”

The astonishment on Hyd's face slowly gave way to red rage. “This outrage is uncalled for!” and he hurled the imitation against the back wall. “I have *never* been cheated by the Thief's Guild before!” Then he looked at me. “What do I owe you for this?”

"Preserving the honor of our Guild is repayment enough. My master only hopes you bring your complaints to the attention of the Guild."

"That I most surely will. Thank you, Antholos. And thank your master."

I hurriedly left him sitting at his desk and staring at the real gem. Hyd would be making his dissatisfaction known in the strongest terms, I was sure of that. And two master thieves would have much explaining to do.

## Riazan City

My first sighting of Riazan City, capital of the kingdom of Riazan, nearly took my breath away. I sat on my mount high on the cliffs overlooking the Riazan valley as the morning sun painted it in shades of brown and blue. The Riazan River flowed aimlessly through it, bisecting the valley and the city. The city itself spread throughout the valley aimlessly as well, almost like a stain on green linen. There was wealth here, much wealth, and had I other interests I was sure I could obtain enough contracts to keep me happy and busy for months.

Such was not to be. I urged my tired mount back down the steep mountain trail to the more practical and common route into the valley. I had chosen to come here because it held the nearest contract to Banik's Cove. Still it had been almost a week on horseback, fording rivers and negotiating mountain passes to get here, and I wasn't sure I might not be too late. But there was only one way to find out.

The sun was nearly overhead when I finally reached the main road into the city. Farmholds, varying from squalid to spectacular, were everywhere as I progressed. Traffic in and out increased as well, as did the presence of the Assassin's Guild. In one sense that was a relief: as a fellow Guild member, I could expect a modicum of fairness if I had to deal with them. Assuming, of course that I was still a fellow Guild member.

The city proper was surrounded by a tall, well-protected stone wall. The guards at the massive wooden gate, however, were unconcerned as people entered and left in a steady stream. I joined the throng and earned no notice as I made my slow way into the city.

My career has led me hamlets, castles, fiefdoms, ports of all sizes and more, but never had I seen a government so firmly established. The well-paved and maintained road led straight to a massive stone building in the very heart of Riazan City. An impressive statue of someone—the founder of the dynasty perhaps—stood in front as if protecting those who labored within. There was no place I could tie up my mount, but city planners had prepared for that as well. A signpost proclaiming “stables” pointed to the east, and it was a simple matter to follow another stream of riders until reaching them at the city outskirts.

How considerate, I thought with admiration as I made arrangements for feeding and bedding my animal. Out here, the inevitable aroma of manure would cause the least discomfort for those within the city walls. By now I was tired and hungry myself, but I still needed some information, so I made my way back to the square and the government building which dominated all. Inside, the horde was not as large, and I suspected the offices were nearing their close for the business day. I entered one and approached a clerk. “I was hoping you could help me,” I greeted him.

He looked up from his desk and frowned slightly. “Are you here to pay your assessment?”

“No. I just arrived. I am seeking the residence of Janizen Phrine.”

“And why is that?”

“I was sent by my master to give him an important document.”

He returned his attention to his work. “In that case, your master must have provided you adequate directions.”

I smiled shyly at the top of his head. “Indeed. But while traveling I met with an accident fording a river. That particular document fell from my satchel and floated away.”

"Careless of you." He refused to look at me.

"Then perhaps you could direct me to someone who can help. Your city is large and confusing and I must get the information to him as quickly as possible."

He sighed and pushed himself away from his desk. "This office does not normally give out that information. That office is on the third floor." Then he looked at the large ledger on his desk. "But I might be able to help. What was the name again?"

"Janizen Phrine."

"Spell it."

I did so, then watched silently as he turned the pages of the vast ledger. "Here we are," he said after several minutes of turning pages. Then he looked at me with a distinct lack of trust. "I suppose I should write this down." He took a quill and wrote an address on a scrap of parchment. "That will be three copper coins."

"Three..." I bit off the rest of my comment. I could have obtained that information from a merchant or innkeeper for free, but it was too late for that. I handed him payment and he gave me the parchment. "Thank you."

"Don't lose that," he said as I started to leave. His tone told me he fully expected me to do just that.

"I won't. Could you direct me to any lodgings?"

"The signposts outside should suffice." His attention had already returned to his ledger.

"Of course," I mumbled and hurried out. From now on, I decided, I would have no dealings with the Riazan government. It could prove too expensive.

But the clerk had been helpful and so were the signposts. Still it was a long walk before I reached the area reserved for inns. They lined both sides of the broad street, brick and wood and gaily-painted to attract travelers. I made my way down the street until, near the end, I saw one showing obvious signs of disrepair. Their prices would be more reasonable, I decided and walked inside.

I began to reconsider immediately. What little furniture was in the lobby was seriously worn, the floors dirty, and I could only hope that the shadow that darted into a corner was a mouse. And it smelled. This was not going to be a pleasant stay, I thought. But I expected to be a guest of Janizen Phrine on the morrow, so I forced a smile and made my way to the desk.

It took several minutes of knocking on the desk before a tired and surprised clerk came from the back. He studied my ragged appearance and frowned. "What?" he asked with the warmth of an icicle.

"This is an inn, yes? I would like a room."

He looked at me like I had left my senses in my other pants. "A room?"

"Yes. For the night."

"For the night? We usually don't..."

His reply was interrupted by a woman's voice coming from upstairs. Seconds later, two women appeared from a hallway. Their attire revealed much more than what a lady normally offered in public, and I finally realized that I had not stumbled into an inn, but a brothel. "I'm sorry," I apologized quickly.

"You are quite right. I do not want a room."

The women must have heard me because they broke out in laughter. "You don't even want to visit for an hour?" the shorter asked, her hand fluttering over her ample cleavage.

The brunette leered at me. "You look young enough." Then she whispered loudly to her friend, "Maybe there's something wrong with his equipment."

"My 'equipment' is operating fine," I said coldly.

"You don't have time for any other engagements," the clerk interrupted. "You two are to be at Master Phrine's residence within the hour. Marna, you've never been to one of these, so do what Filiia tells you."

The taller woman nodded and the two women headed out.

I followed a few steps behind. *Phrine?* My original plan had been to approach the merchant as a merchant myself, but now there might be a more direct way. "Hold, ladies, if you will," I said once we were outside.

The shorter, Filiia, turned to me a bit upset. "You. What do you want now? There are other women inside who will service you. We are already commissioned."

"Of course." I smiled at each. "I had hoped to meet Master Phrine, a matter of grave importance. Perhaps if you would let me accompany you, you could help me in that regard."

Filiia shook her head. "Our job is not to be chaperons."

"I will make my own introductions. I will make it worth your time." I opened my purse and counted out three gold coins. "For your assistance."

Marna looked at the money, then at me. "We're already making more than that."

"Six, then," and I counted out more coins. "And you won't have to share with anyone."

"And what excuse do we use for you?" Filiia asked. Still she took the coins. "Phrine obtains his males from other proprietors."

"You're going by coach, correct?"

Marna laughed. "Of course. It's much too far to walk!"

"I'm your driver."

Filiia frowned. "I doubt Master Phrine would allow you into his estate that way. Servants remain outside."

"That's my problem. Agreed?"

Since they had already taken my money, they already had. We boarded a carriage waiting for us at a nearby stable and we were on our way. "You'll have to direct me," I said from my seat in the front.

"Straight east, through the town and beyond. You can't miss it." Then Filiia sat back and relaxed, enjoying this unexpected boon. I could only assume they would have had to drive themselves. With a flick of the reins we were off.

She was right; it was impossible to miss the manor of Phrine. A stone wall topped by metal spikes stretched from the boundaries of his property to the gate and beyond. Several guards patrolled the front, swords unsheathed. This was a man who took his privacy seriously. I rode up to the gates and was immediately intercepted by an armed guard. "Your business?" he asked harshly.

I pointed to the women in the back. "Guests of Master Phrine."

He suppressed a chuckle. "Ladies, come with me. You, drive this carriage to the back and wait. They will take care of your there." He helped the giggling pair out of the carriage and up the broad walk to the front door. I followed the path around the right to the rear, where other horses and carriages were waiting. Then I got out and joined the men, other drivers presumably, standing under a large tree. "This is it?" I asked when I arrived.

One shrugged. "What would you expect?" He was holding a goblet, which I strongly suspected held water.

I nodded as I casually looked around. Phrine clearly "took care" of his guests, but the hired help were another matter. There were several guards watching us, but they were standing near the entrance to the manor. It was apparent that as long as we kept our distance we would be ignored. "I've never been to one of these," I said, the first words of truth I had spoken in several hours. "How long will this last?"

He half smiled. "Master Phrine is known for his hospitality. We could be here until the roosters call."

That was fine with me. As the night went on, the guards would become less observant. I took a cup of water—the only amenity we were afforded—and found a comfortable tree to lean against.

So the evening went. Other carriages arrived, other servants joined our band. Being one of the few strangers, I was left to my own devices while the others engaged in conversations and several games of chance. The guards, unfortunately, remained at their posts. After a few hours, I decided it was time to get them away from it.

So I wandered over to the group playing cards. Many had brought their own wine, knowing full well that Phrine would provide none. By now, quite a few, both players and onlookers, were well under its influence. I stayed on the periphery, just observing. After about a dozen hands, I knew who my unwitting assistant would be, so I made my way around to the far right, where a particularly large and drunk man was losing consistently. I managed to get behind him just in time to watch him lose another hand. He took a hearty and angry swig of wine before throwing in more coins for the next hand.

I crouched behind him, watching the game. He drew the worst kind of hand, one good enough to play but almost certain to lose. He played anyway, tossing in his coins foolishly as the others steadily dropped out until only one player remained. As I expected from the deal, he lost. "Damn the gods," he said as he threw down the cards and watched his coins being collected by the winner.

"That had nothing to do with the gods," I whispered.

He turned and for the first time noticed me. "What do you mean?" he asked with a heavy tongue.

"I'm pretty certain that man cheated you. It looked to me like he dealt off the bottom."

"He what?!" Then he jumped to his feet and pointed his finger at the winner. "Tamrath, you are cheating!" Almost immediately a knife was in his hand.

The other gamblers were standing within seconds. I ignored the righteous yells of innocence from the accused as I hurriedly backed away. This shouldn't take long, I thought as I scurried around the ring of



yelling men.

I was right. The guards were immediately drawn to the uproar, which had now degenerated into pushing and shoving. They had all they could do to prevent a fatal duel, which gave me just enough time to slink unnoticed into the manor. The conversations and clang of cutlery told me the kitchen was to the left. I went to the right. Not that it mattered. I soon found there were people everywhere and trying to avoid them would have aroused suspicion as well as been nearly impossible. Fortunately I was not dressed in the livery of a driver, so both the servants and the guests just assumed I was just another visitor, even if not as well-dressed as most. I even managed to liberate a glass of mead from a passing servant and made my way around the outskirts of the horde, nodding greetings when required but avoiding all conversation.

Eventually I made my way to the second floor. Here the trickle of visitors slowed, although didn't stop altogether. The mien of several men leaving side rooms convinced me that the women were working here. I made a leisurely stroll down the hall, searching for the library. According to the contract, that was where Phrine kept his most valuable possessions, including the gem that was to be stolen.

The double doors were a dead giveaway. I leaned against one door, appearing as if I was just resting. Actually I was listening, but I heard nothing moving within. I turned the handle lightly but it was locked. Now convinced, I pulled a pick from my vest pocket and within seconds had the door open. I ducked into the room and locked the door behind me.

The room was unlit and curtains covered the windows. It took me a moment to adjust to the darkness. The bookcase at the far left wall, the contract had said, the gem hidden inside the fourth book from the corner on the third shelf. I reached the left wall soon enough and understood why that would be an effective hiding place. The entire wall was lined with shelves, which were in turn filled with books. Without such specific instructions, it would take hours to go through every tome.

This should be simple, I thought. I had an inexpensive gem hidden in an inside pocket. I planned to replace the real gem with it. After an appropriate wait, I would return the real gem to the merchant. And another licit contract would have been foiled. Like I said, simple. You'd think I'd learn.

I had almost reached the proper tome when I heard a soft click. Someone was opening the door. Cursing softly, I ducked down and crawled along the wall to the massive desk in the center of the room and hid beneath.

Was it a guard? I wondered as I heard the door close softly. No, it couldn't be a guard, I realized. They wouldn't be that concerned about making noise. I watched from my hiding place as a shadowy figure walked to the left wall, then down the bookshelves. It paused at the very end and reached up to remove a book. Then the figure turned and opened the curtains slightly to allow some light into the room.

And I recognized the thief. I watched as Marna removed the jewel, dropped it in her ample cleavage, then returned the book to the shelf before leaving. I cursed silently as I heard the door close and lock once again. In one way I admired her; a prostitute was the perfect disguise for her, one that would be nearly impossible for me to use. Nor would I want to. But now she had the gem, and she would surely be leaving the city in the morning. Which meant I had to obtain it tonight.

But I couldn't do it here. I waited several moments before venturing from the library. From there it was a leisurely stroll down the hall and the stairs to the floor below. The crowd was thinning noticeably, so I casually left with some of the guests, then ambled to the back where the carriages awaited.

I was almost immediately greeted by a very large, very angry man. "You. You're the one!" and he waved his fist before my nose.

I put a fingertip on his knuckles and moved his hand aside. I recognized him, the losing gambler. "The one what?"

"You told me Tamrath was cheating."

"I did? Cheating at what?"

He remained unappeased. By the swelling under his left eye, he must have paid for his actions. "Cards. You were sitting behind me and said Tamrath was dealing from the bottom of the deck!"

I scratched my chin. "I don't recall saying any such thing. Was he?"

"You're going to pay," and he grabbed the front of my vest.

"Enough of that, now," and a guard approached us. "You," he pointed at my accuser, "you have already caused enough trouble this evening. Back to your carriage."

The man reluctantly released me, gave me a withering stare, then stalked away. The guard now turned his full attention on me. "Where have you been? I haven't seen you around the fire."

"I went for a walk. Use the outhouse. I knew I would be here until early morning so I found a quiet place to take a nap."

"Who are you with?"

"A pair of entertainers. Women."

He pointed. "You just came from the front of the manor."

"I took a walk. Nice place your master has here."

He took out his knife and admired the blade briefly. "You were supposed to stay here with the other drivers."

I forced an apologetic smile. "This is my first time here. I don't know all the rules yet."

"Here's the first. Raise your hands."

I complied and he did a rapid but expert search. But he found only what I wanted him to find, so after a moment he grunted and shoved me toward the other waiting drivers. A few, surely acquaintances of the man I had befriended, gave me withering glares, but the guards were now more alert so they wouldn't trouble me here. Still I avoided them as I found a place to sit and plan.

I was fortunate I had watched Marna steal the jewel, not fortunate that she *had* the jewel. So how was I to stop her? I was only given a few minutes to think and plan when I heard a commotion, then a woman's voice call out, "Where's my driver?" I looked up to see Marna standing among a group of appreciative men.

"Right here, my lady," I called back and stood. The other drivers made way reluctantly as I approached. "How may I serve you?" I asked when I reached her.

"We're leaving now. Get our carriage."

"It's this way. Come," and we started toward the rear where the conveyances waited. "Where is Filiia?" I asked as we walked.

"She's staying until morning," Marna said sharply. "You can come back for her later."

"As you wish, my lady." I suppressed a smile as I helped her into our coach, then took my position behind the reins. Of course she would want to leave as soon as she had stolen the gem. Just the way it was taught in Acquisition 101 at the Academy. Now I was going to discover just how thoroughly she had learned her lessons.

We started down the long brick road leading to the front of the manor and beyond. "You've had a successful night?" I asked cheerfully.

"I'm tired. Please don't talk, just drive."

"Of course," I said, pretending to be properly chastised. A few guards approached but were only giving us a cursory glance. Which wouldn't do at all.

We were nearing the gate when, from somewhere, a voice rang out. "Robbery! Robbery! We've been robbed!"

The lounging guards snapped immediately to attention. "What was that? Who said that?" one of the nearest to us asked his companion.

"I don't know," the other said, drawing his sword. Then he looked at us. "You. Stop. Now!"

"Of course," I said, immediately reining in the team. I smiled as he approached. "Is something wrong?"

"There's been a robbery. Get down here."

"If you wish." I disembarked, then approached Marna. "It seems these gentlemen wish to question us," I said and offered my hand.

"This is ridiculous. I've been working all night," she said coldly, ignoring my offer of assistance.

"Get out of the wagon," the guard said and pointed his sword at her.

"Fine," and she yawned expansively. She took my hand and climbed out. Her foot caught the bottom step and she stumbled against me. "Sorry. I'm very tired."

"Quite all right," I said. Which it was, as she had just passed the stolen jewel on to me. I turned my attention to the guards. "Could we hurry this along? The lady needs to return to her home."

"We will send you on your way as quickly as possible. Now stand still."

"What are you looking for?" I asked as one of the guards began searching me.

"Whatever was stolen," he said, one hand diving through my empty pockets.

You won't find it there, I thought as I endured the search. Marna had done just what I hoped she would: hide the stolen item if the theft is discovered. I happened to be the most logical place. If they found the jewel, I would be accused, not her. But she didn't want it found, either, and she had hidden it well. After a few more moments, they let me go and concentrated on her.

The guards must have enjoyed searching Marna more because their efforts were much more thorough. She tolerated it stoically and after another few minutes they stepped back. "You may leave," one guard said crisply.

"Thank you," I said and nodded. I helped her back into the carriage and then once again we were on our way. I looked back as we neared the gates. The guards were busy searching all the other guests, angering most, inconveniencing all. And they still had no idea what they were looking for, or who had given the warning.

Which just happened to be me. Ventriloquism had been one of my electives at the Academy, but it was a talent I hadn't used for years. Fortunate I was that it was night and no one had been watching me for I was certain I had moved my lips.

I maintained a leisurely pace as we returned to Riazan City. Marna was asleep, or at least pretending to be, so I said nothing until we arrived in the city. "Wake up, my lady," I said. "We'll be at your inn soon."

"Not there," she said quickly. Too quickly. As I suspected, she hadn't been asleep at all. "Take me to the stables, then you can go back for Filiia."

"The stables? Not your inn?"

She laughed bitterly. "After what I went through tonight, I will never work for them again!"

"Still. Shouldn't we return to the inn? Get your belongings?"

"There's nothing there I need. Just do as I say."

"If you wish." Her request didn't surprise me; she wanted to leave Riazan City as quickly as possible. Once again, standard Academy procedure. I pretended to scratch a nagging itch as I made my way through the nearly empty streets. Not that I expected her to be paying attention, but in the event she was, I didn't want her to suspect I was really swapping the jewel she had stolen with the one I had brought with me. So on through the city streets to the stables.

"Help me out," she said when I stopped the wagon.

"My pleasure." Once again I offered my hand; once again she stumbled against me. Once again she possessed a jewel.

"Thank you," she said and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek. "Now hurry and retrieve Filiia."

"Of course. And thank you."

She frowned. "For what? Oh. I hope you met Master Phrine."

"I'm afraid the guards would not let me."

"Maybe when you pick up Filiia then. Good night."

I nodded and watched her enter the stable, where I suspected a horse was already saddled and waiting for her. I was whistling cheerfully as I started back to the Phrine manor. Chances were she would not look at the jewel until she was well on her journey. Even then she might not know the gems had been switched as the library had been dark and she wouldn't have seen the real one clearly during the theft. But her employer would. Sorry, Marna, I thought, but it had to be done. Nothing personal.

I completed my obligations as a driver and the following afternoon left Riazan City. But not before I had a package sent to Janizen Phrine. It contained a most valuable jewel and a note signed, "Compliments of a friend."

## Houff

This was one time I would have used the services of the Guild Archives. They provide—for a substantial fee—detailed information on contracts put out on the rich and famous. Floor plans, staffs, habits, descriptions of various treasures, warnings on traps and other dangers; all helpful information when breaking into a castle or manor. Or the offices of the Chancellor of Vrallik.

I've had some unusual contracts over the years, albeit most were thrust upon me because of my apprentice status. Stealing a 10-foot tall statue. Robbing a baron of his peace of mind. Unwittingly obtaining a demon for a magician. Once again, like so often during my apprenticeship, I was here under the orders of the Guild.

After leaving Riazan City, I had traveled overland to Klaahorn. I had planned to interfere with another contract, but since Klaahorn held a Guild office, I decided for appearance's sake that I should make one. Unfortunately, the secretary had been delighted to see me.

"You've arrived at a most propitious time, Brendell," and he greeted me with an eager handshake. "A most unique contract has come our way and you are just the person to fulfill it."

"And why is that?" I asked, trying to keep frustration from my voice. I had only intended to maintain my guise as a Guild member in full standing, not do real work for them.

He smiled as he opened a desk drawer. "No false modesty, please. Your reputation for achieving the—unusual—precedes you. Yes, I think you are just the man for this assignment. Read this," and he handed me a stack of papers.

I glanced through the contract. Everything was official, every "i" dotted and all that. "But why?" I had to ask when I returned the pile to his desk.

"That is never our concern, Brendell. You know that."

Which was true. Greed was the common motive, but not always. Revenge, jealousy; selfish reasons all. "It's only an official seal. Surely it would be just as easy to counterfeit one."

"It's not what the client wishes. He wants this within the week, and Vrallik is a three-day's ride from here. The Guild is counting on you, Brendell. Do not fail us."

*Do not fail us.* Those words echoed inside me as I left. The nerve of the Guild to engage me after what they had done! Yet perhaps this secretary didn't know ... or care, for that matter. And I was still nominally a member of the Guild, so I had at least to pretend to follow orders.

Still, the assignment bordered on the insane. Three days to Vrallik, three days back. Which left me one day to complete this assignment. No time to plan, no time to research the Guild archives. Ridiculous.

But if I was to maintain my charade so I could complete my real objective, I had to cooperate. The seal must have symbolic meaning, I decided as I rode swiftly albeit reluctantly toward Vrallik. Perhaps political importance, like the time I had stolen back a scepter for a rightful monarch.

So I was exhausted and angry when I finally entered the village. And then I became confused. Vrallik was small, just a few shops and what had to be the city offices resting at the end of the one road leading in and out. Now I wished I could have consulted the Guild archives more than ever. It had to be a farming community, I decided, under the rule of royalty living elsewhere. Travelers had to be few and far between, so staying at the local inn was out of the question since there was none. Instead I continued

through the hamlet and into the forest beyond before leaving the single path and riding into the woods.

While I ate I considered my options. I could think of no plausible reason to visit the city offices during the day. Their primary purpose was surely tax assessment, so my arrival would only arouse suspicion. I would have to enter at night, with absolutely no idea where I might find what I was seeking. Then back to my horse and a rapid ride through the darkness. Not a pleasant prospect and I immediately considered forgoing this assignment.

But that would only cause more difficulties. Sooner or later the Guild would suspect me. Best that day be put off as long as possible. "We're going to learn just how good a thief you are, Brendell," I whispered. With nothing else to do but wait until dark, I made my mount and myself comfortable and took a well-earned nap.

Judging by the moon, it had to be nearing midnight when I finally woke and roused myself into action. I left my horse where it was as I was in easy walking distance from my destination. If the village were that quiet during the day, it could only be more so at night, and having a mount tied to a hitching post would only arouse curiosity if for some reason anyone passed through. Besides, it was a good night for a walk, cool and slightly damp and I was actually feeling refreshed and eager when I neared the building.

The snapping of a twig, soft yet as ominous as a thunderclap, changed that. Almost by habit I had been approaching quietly. I stopped immediately at the sound and held my breath. Perhaps it was nothing, a small animal or even my imagination. I waited several more minutes until I was finally ready to attribute it to natural forest noise when I heard something else; the shuffling of dried leaves.

No doubt now, there were guards out there. *But why?* Surely there was nothing within that building to warrant the hiring of night guards. *Unless...*

The only possible answer froze me in my tracks. But they wouldn't do *that*, I tried to tell myself. The Guild wouldn't betray me like I was betraying them. Then the rustling grew louder, forcing me to crouch down in the undergrowth. The rustling turned into footsteps, muted but unmistakable. And coming my way.

Now I could even hear their conversations, whispered but clear in the still night air. "He should be here by now," one heavy male voice said. "Perhaps he's afraid."

"He'll come," said another. "For the honor of his Guild."

That caused the first man to laugh. "I hope I find him first. I don't like thieves much. Their Guild is an affront to all that is holy."

"But they do provide us employment, don't they?"

Another chuckle. "The world will welcome one less thief."

I could imagine him drawing his knife and pretending to slash his throat. Rather, my throat. It caused my real throat to swallow bile. No question now; I had been betrayed. Also no question that there were more than just these two members of the Assassin's Guild—they could be no one else—assigned to this detail. Others were surely searching the woods and sooner or later would find my mount. They would find me soon enough as well.

Unless I found them first. *This will never work*, I warned myself as I backed away slowly. I can't escape them anyway, I argued back. This is my only chance. *They'll kill you as soon as they see you. You've heard them*, my inner voice said. They don't know who I am, what I look like, my other half

replied. And on and on the arguments rang inside my head as I waited for the guards to reach a reasonable distance away. *Long enough.* "Chapper," I yelled suddenly, standing up and clapping my hands. "Come here, girl. Chapper, get over here now!" And I waded noisily through the underbrush.

The command rang out almost immediately. "Halt this instant! Step forward with your hands in the air."

"Who is that? How do I do that?" I yelled back.

"Do what?" There was puzzlement in the voice.

"Stop and then step forward. I can't very well halt and walk at the same time. And have you seen my dog?"

"No sass from you or I'll kill you where you stand." In the moonlight I could see two figures coming my way. I waited until they were close enough to see me. "I said put your hands in the air."

"You also said I had to step forward. But I decided to obey your command to halt instead. It seemed more reasonable. Have you seen a dog?"

"No questions from you." The men were roughly the same height. One held a bow, the other a sword. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I am called Gazwenth. As I have said repeatedly, I am looking for my dog. Now who are *you*?"

The bowman cocked his weapon. "None of your concern, peasant. Why would you be looking for your dog this time of night in these woods?"

I forced a shy smile, although I doubted they could see my sincerity in the darkness. "Chapper is my sheepdog. She gets out on occasion. For some reason she always comes here when she does. Maybe she was whelped here; it remains a mystery."

"Perhaps she's searching for romance," the swordsman said and they both laughed.

"Chapper is of high moral character," I replied stiffly. "You must be confusing her with city dogs."

"Get over here. Now!" the bowman said, waving his weapon.

I obeyed, making sure to nearly fall several times until I reached them. "You haven't seen Chapper?"

"Shut up." The one with the sword sheathed his weapon and roughly searched me. "Nothing," he said after a moment. "No weapons, nothing."

That wasn't true, but I had them well hidden. A casual search in the middle of a woods on a dark night would never uncover the set of lock picks and other tools I wore. "Why are you here?" I asked, trying to sound innocent and curious. "Are you with the assessors?"

"What do you mean?" the man with the bow asked roughly.

I decided to push my luck. I decided to assume these men were on temporary assignment, that affairs of government operated here much like in Mistmourning. "After the tax assessments, the Assassin's Guild always sends guards until the money is sent to the lord. Are you Assassin's Guild?"

The swordsman shook his head in disgust. "None of your concern. Now get out of here."

"Of course, your lord." I bowed and started backing up. "If you find my dog, please don't kill her."

They laughed as I turned and started walking away. I was just starting to regain control of my racing heart when I heard a new voice yell out. "Stop him, stop him now!"

Considering the dark and the distance, I didn't know if it was a good shot or bad, but seconds later an arrow whizzed by my ear and buried itself into the tree next to me. But that wasn't what made me freeze.

I stood still as I heard more footsteps, then the new voice raised in anger. "What are you doing? Why are you letting him leave?"

"He's Chapper. He's the local village idiot," the voice of the bowman rang out. "Out here looking for his dog."

"*You're* the village idiots! That's Brendell!"

I turned reluctantly to see three men hurrying my way. "Greetings, Algorph. It's been too many years." I had met Algorph several times in the past, first when he was a student in the class I was forced to teach at the Thief's Academy. I had admittedly treated him cruelly and he had yet to forgive or forget.

"So it has." There was no warmth in his voice, however, or in the smile he wore as he walked up to me, his sword drawn. He tousled my hair roughly as he stared in my eyes.

He wasn't doing that as a long-delayed greeting. "You're wasting your time. I don't keep my picks there anymore."

He grunted. "But you have them somewhere. Perhaps I'll strip you of all your clothes and then try again."

The other men were watching us silently. The way they stood suggested they were confused, angry and also alarmed. I returned my attention to Algorph. "Why are you doing this, Algorph? I have done nothing."

He smirked. "Nothing *now*. And nothing ever again. The noose is waiting for you, Brendell."

*Yes, thanks to my Guild.* But I couldn't let him know I suspected what was happening here, so I maintained my innocence. "And why is that? As I said, I haven't done anything. I was merely walking through these woods."

"Under Guild contract to steal from that building. We know that, Brendell."

*I'm sure you do.* "Then you also know I haven't stolen anything. And, obviously, I won't. So you can let me go. As one Guild member to another."

"You're no longer an honored member of the Thief's Guild or *any* Guild." He made a slashing motion across his throat. "You have no more rights than the ants I step on."

*No longer a Guild member.* That statement filled my veins with ice. After all the years and work I had put into the Guild, now I found I had been discarded as casually as dishwater. Then the despair I felt was totally replaced by rage. "Let me go, Algorph. I helped you and your Guild in the past. Or have you forgotten the Scepter of Zenora?" That had been one of my first contracts, one, like this, that was underwritten by treachery. But I had managed to save both a legitimate monarchy and the honor of the Assassin's Guild.

He stepped back. "The Assassin's Guild has short memories. It is the only way we can effectively do business. But *I* have not forgotten what you did to *me*. Have you?"



No, I hadn't. During my forced stay at the Thief's Academy, I had treated the pupils in my class quite harshly, especially Algorph. "I had hoped I had atoned for that by now."

"I will make that determination. Where's your horse?"

"Back in those woods," I pointed in the general direction of my camp.

"We'll find it later. You don't need it anymore. Take this man." He shoved me forward and I almost fell for real before being seized by the two guards.

They held me tighter than necessary as they marched me through the woods, clearly upset with my trick on them and their leader's anger. "I knew I should have run you through as soon as I saw you," one whispered as we made our way to the wide lawn surrounding the administrative building.

"I suspect Algorph wishes that honor for himself," I muttered.

"It would be an honor to clean his blade afterward," the other said.

I decided that conversing with them would continue to be unpleasant, so I kept silent as we walked to the front of the building, then to the flagpole. "Lash him to that," Algorph said.

His men complied eagerly and I was soon trussed as tightly as a fat woman in a corset three sizes too small. "Now what?" one asked as they all gathered to admire the knots.

"Leave him until morning. He isn't going anywhere." Algorph looked up at the sky. "Perhaps it will rain."

"I'll stand first guard," the bowman said.

Algorph studied me again. "No need. Not if you tied the knots right." He pulled on one and it held securely.

The bowman remained unappeased. "But he's a *thief*! What if he escapes? What if he has magical help?"

"Brendell doesn't believe in using magic." Algorph looked at me one more time. "Neither do I. Come, let's go to the fire and relax. He can't escape. Besides, we still have men patrolling the woods and the road. Where could he possibly go?"

They couldn't or wouldn't argue with their superior, so they walked away laughing and congratulating each other. I waited until they disappeared around the building before I straightened my back as best I could. Now, by exhaling and tightening my stomach, I could gain a bit of slackness in the ropes. They had tied my hands together, a mistake. I was able to reach the ring on my left hand and undo the stone in the center. Beneath was a pointed bit of metal. Those of a darker nature would put poison on the tip and use it as a weapon, but it was also sharp enough to cut through, albeit slowly, the rope around my wrists. Even if there had been a guard posted, I could have accomplished that much. Algorph had made it even easier. Once my hands were free, it was a relatively simple matter to release myself. Then I took my picks, opened the door to the building and went inside to wait.

I was relaxing in the administrative offices when I finally heard footsteps. "Where are you, Brendell?" I heard the familiar voice whisper.

"Room on your left," I replied. "Try to be quiet, and no light."

I heard a grunt, then a soft thud, as Algorph bumped into some furniture. After much longer than necessary he found me.

"You would have been an incompetent thief," I greeted him.

"That is your fault," he grunted as he found a seat.

"I never wanted to be Professor Grimmire's teaching assistant. But you are correct. Quite an elaborate plan just to talk to me. What if I hadn't escaped those ropes?"

"Then you wouldn't be as good a thief as we think you are. In the morning we would have given you over to the magistrate. This realm treats thieves most harshly."

*And my Guild had arranged all this so my death would appear to be a typical occupational hazard.* I shuddered at the thought. It took a moment to still my nerves before I could continue. "You've put your own career in danger, you know."

"Not mine. My men tied the knots. My men are still posted in the forest and the road. At most I am guilty of overestimating their competence. I am merely following orders in any event."

"Which are?"

"Convince you to work for us."

I sat back deeper in the chair and crossed my legs to make myself more comfortable. This was going to be a longer conversation than I had expected. "Work for you how? Train your men in the ways of my Guild?"

"Hardly. I am not the only member of my Guild who originally attended the Thief's Academy. We know all about your training methods."

*Not as much as you think.* "Theft?"

He laughed softly. "Of course. What other use could you be to us?"

I could think of several, but there was no reason to tell him that. "Why not just make contracts with the Guild?"

"We don't want them to know what we are acquiring. Or from whom."

*Clandestine theft.* Except for Master Thieves, who could take out contracts on their own discretion, that was totally against Guild regulations. The occasional purse or jewel, stolen to gain operating expenses, was ignored, but all other discretionary thievery was forbidden. Otherwise the honor, the very standing of my profession within the community, would be jeopardized. Of course, I mused, I now *had* no standing. "So I would be contracting directly with your Guild."

"Not contracting. You will be following our orders."

I grimaced. In one sense this would only help me in my clandestine attack on the Guild. But now I had merely been passed from one master to another. "And if I decline?"

Even in the dim light I could see him rise and withdraw his sword. "No one defies the Guilds, Brendell. Of course I could fulfill *my* contract."

I sighed. "Since you put it so eloquently. What do we do?"

"You spend the rest of the night tied to that tree. In the morning you leave as our prisoner. I will dispatch my men and take you to our guildhall in Nimand. There you will begin your new career."

So we did. Algorph lashed me with fresh rope and thoughtfully removed all my jewelry, including my special ring. I managed to get some uncomfortable sleep until a pre-dawn shower roused me from unpleasant dreams. I was thoroughly soaked and shivering when Algorph's men finally deigned to release me. They ignored my condition, indeed they made jokes about it as they threw me in the back of a wagon and we started out.

"Do I have to ride all the way back here?" I asked after Algorph had sent away the rest of his troops.

Only he and the driver now remained. He glared at me from his seat in front. "You're our prisoner. Or have you forgotten?"

I mumbled something and tried to make myself comfortable in the straw. *Abandoned by my Guild*. Of everything they had done to me, this was by far the worst. When I escaped from my current predicament, I would make the Thief's Guild pay like they could never imagine. That thought was nearly enough to distract me from the straw poking me and the fleas biting me everywhere.

I guessed it to be late afternoon when my transport finally stopped. "Time to start your new life, Brendell," Algorph said, shaking me roughly.

"I'm not asleep," I said, sitting up. We were in front of a single story brick building. It had to be the guildhall, and its starkness told me everything I needed to know. The Thief's guildhalls were always well appointed, always spoke of prosperity and success. Important when trying to convince new clients you could indeed procure any property they desired. This was utilitarian, its message simple and direct: We Get The Job Done. I crawled out of the wagon and jogged in place briefly to loosen my cramped legs. There was a small group of men outside engaged in swordplay. I could see an archery range in the back and beyond that another building, which I assumed served as quarters for the men assigned here.

"Quit gawking," Algorph said and grabbed my arm roughly.

"Can you undo the manacles now?" I asked as I shuffled beside him.

"Once we're inside. Appearances must be maintained."

True to his word, he released me from the irons once we entered the guildhall. "I suggest you show proper deference," he whispered harshly when he was finished. "Otherwise I take you back to Vrallik."

I nodded. I could appear obsequious with the best of them. He led me down the corridor toward the rear. Even inside, the hall was stark; no paintings or tapestries on the walls, no statuary, only the most utilitarian furniture. The Assassin's Guild brooked no nonsense apparently. Algorph stopped before a closed door and knocked softly. "Who is it?" a man asked from inside.

"Algorph. My assignment is complete."

"Excellent. Come in."

"Do whatever he tells you," he whispered to me, then opened the door and led me within. "Brendell, this is Guild Master Garoff Cistonarov."

I nodded shyly to the imposing man seated at an equally imposing desk. Once again, however, the room was nearly barren of creature comforts beyond a row of wooden stools in front of the desk. Cistonarov had gray hair, his face lined with wrinkles and scars. He stood and nodded at Algorph. "Congratulations, Algorph, on your success. And you," he turned my way, "the thief Brendell. The late and unlamented Brendell."

*Late?* Surely they hadn't brought me all this way just to kill me in their facility. "That is my name, Master Cistonarov."

"Not any longer. Algorph, how much did you tell him?"

"Only what was necessary."

He nodded. "Sit."

It was not an invitation. I suspected nothing Cistonarov said was merely a suggestion, so I sat. Cistonarov appeared more interested in some papers on his desk so Algorph and I remained silent. After my long ride in the back of a wagon, this was the last thing I needed; after about five minutes my legs started to ache, so I started crossing and uncrossing them to relieve the stiff muscles.

"Nervous type isn't he?" Cistonarov finally broke the silence. "Hard to believe he has the patience to be a professional thief."

"I did graduate third in my class," I said. "And I've succeeded in all my contracts. Which I'm sure is mentioned in the file you have there."

He pushed the papers aside and sat back in his much more comfortable chair. "Not always successful according to your Guild. Ex-Guild I should say."

"We've had our disagreements," I offered.

"Indeed. And that's what concerns me." He leaned forward and looked me in the eyes. "You seem to have difficulty following orders. That is not acceptable in the Assassin's Guild."

I was tired, hungry and rapidly losing patience. "A successful thief must be prepared to improvise."

"You may be right." Then he looked at Algorph. "You've had dealings with him in the past. Is he loyal?"

Algorph smiled without warmth. "Brendell's sole interest is Brendell. But he will do whatever is necessary to fulfill a contract."

"That is all we can hope for I suppose. So, Brendell, here are your options. One, you decline our offer."

"In which case you take me back to Vrallik to be hanged," I said.

"You're already a dead man, Brendell. It's up to you to decide when you are buried."

"I would prefer that be delayed as long as possible."

Cistonarov nodded. "I thought as much. So here is what we do. Algorph, you have the papers signed by the officials at Vrallik?"

"Yes," and he patted his chest.

"Excellent. Those should help convince the Thief's Guild that Brendell has indeed gone on to a higher plane." Then he put a finger to his lips. "But we'll need more. You have his possessions?"

"In the wagon. We also have his horse and saddle."

"Bring me his estate."

Cistonarov and I sat in silence while Algorph followed orders. By his mien, I could tell Cistonarov felt

uncomfortable around me, which gave me the only pleasure I had enjoyed that day. Algorph returned soon enough with a satchel, which he put on the desk. Cistonarov emptied it and sifted through my small pile of possessions. "Poisoned?" he asked, holding up the ring I had used to escape, albeit briefly, back at Vrallik.

"It could be."

He nodded and set it aside, where it was soon joined by two sets of picks, a small lodestone and a ball of string. Then he held up my dagger. I swallowed bile as he admired it. I had paid dearly for it and it had proven very useful more than once. "This is your sigil I take it?" he asked, pointed to the silver engraving on the handle.

I nodded. It represented a sleeping dragon, a sign I had chosen to ensure my continued good fortune. Everyone in the Thief's Guild would recognize it as each of us had one, as individual as our names and signatures. "This will be perfect," and he set it aside. "You won't be having any more use for it anyway, now that you're dead." He rose and stretched. "Now that that's taken care of, we can discuss your first assignment with our Guild. You'll be going to Houff."

I was still despairing of my loss so without thinking I asked, "Why?"

Cistonarov glared at me. "That question is never posed to me or the Guild. Ever! Algorph will tell you what you need to know when you arrive. Now leave us; he and I have to discuss this assignment."

I nodded and numbly walked from the room. There were guards waiting outside the door; two marched me to yet another uncomfortable chair and stood on each side while I sat, waited and seethed. What Cistonarov was planning should work; between the documents and my precious dagger, my former Guild would indeed believe I was dead. Or, at least, they wouldn't dare question the Assassin's Guild. Once I was out from under the Assassin's Guild, that deception could be of great help. *When* that would be of help remained the question. And Houff. I had never heard of it; a small kingdom I could only presume.

Worse, Algorph would be accompanying me. That bothered me the most. I had treated him—my entire class actually—most shamefully when I was forced to return to the Thief's Academy. Did he still hold a grudge? He certainly appeared to be enjoying this particular assignment. And would he be going with me the entire way? The few times I had worked with others had been disastrous at best. Was he there to ensure I did the wishes of the Guild, prevent me from fleeing? I sighed. Whatever his purpose, I knew he wouldn't tell me. With nothing else to do, I rested my head against the wall, closed my eyes and tried to sleep.

I was just drifting off when I heard approaching footsteps, then Algorph's distinctively high, thin voice. "Is that all you do, Brendell? Sleep?"

I opened one eye. "Seems like the best way to pass the time. It's not like you offer your guests refreshments or other amusements to while away the hours."

"Your comfort is the least of my concerns. Come, we have fresh mounts waiting. We must get to Houff as soon as possible."

And what could be that important? I wondered as I followed him back outside. There were six mounted men waiting, plus two other horses. "All for me?" I asked, trying to sound cheerful as I got on one.

"Just because we have a use for you doesn't mean we trust you," Algorph said. He turned to one of his men. "Tie his hands."

I couldn't help but feel like I was being ridden to the gallows as we set out. They set a brisk pace, which discouraged any attempts at conversation. My attention remained focused on staying on my mount, one not made any easier by our speed and my imprisoned hands. Even when we camped for the night, I was offered only a minimum of food and the cold comfort of a mute guard.

How do they expect me to help them? I wondered as I tried to sleep. A successful contract required planning. Even my admittedly unorthodox approaches were the result of careful consideration. If I was to be kept in the dark like a virgin's hope chest, I had no hope of succeeding. Somehow I was going to have to talk to Algorph.

Who remained determinably indisposed to cooperate. The next day I was once again secured to my mount and we were off. And the next and the next. We were making good time to be sure, and I could only assume our destination could be reached overland as our course remained inexorably away from the nearest sea. The landscape became progressively harsher, farms and estates fewer and farther between. A chain of mountains loomed on the horizon and our path became increasingly uphill.

We made camp that night on a cliff overlooking the valley below. A village was situated on the bend of the river bisecting it. "We've made good time," Algorph said as we all studied the scene below. "We'll be in Houff by early afternoon."

"Then what?" I asked.

"Then we ride in and fulfill the commands of the Guild, of course."

"Which are?"

Algorph frowned. "Why, to steal, of course. Why else do you think we've brought you here?"

I shook my head. "To steal what? I think it's time you explained your plans."

"I suppose you're right. Men, set up camp. Brendell and I have to talk."

While they scurried around doing their campsite duties, Algorph pulled me aside. "The leaders of Houff have thus far refused to enter into legal contracts with our Guild. They have instead engaged their own security force. You are going to show them the error of their ways."

"And how do we do this?"

Algorph sighed. "Sometimes, Brendell, you are as dense as these trees. You *steal*, everything you can find. Once their current army is discredited, Houff will rush to sign a contract with us."

That might work, I had to admit reluctantly. "And what if I get caught?"

He patted his sword. "I suggest you don't."

"So I go into Houff, grab whatever I can and then come back to you."

He frowned. "Hardly. We'll be with you."

I shuddered at the thought. "And exactly what is our disguise?"

"Just travelers."

"Just travelers?" I pointed to the men behind us. "Eight heavily armed men ride into a village and they are just travelers? You don't think our appearance might not arouse a little curiosity?"

He hesitated a moment. "Traveling merchants then."

"That could work," I said and nodded. "*If* we had any wares to sell. Which we don't. You're disappointing me, Algorph. Just how much planning went into this little expedition anyway?"

Algorph grimaced. "Commander Cistonarov planned for everything!"

"Where are the trumpets and banners?"

"Now what are you complaining about? Brendell, you're trying my patience."

"And *your're* trying *mine*! You're doing everything possible to make us as conspicuous as the wart on the end of your nose. I'd be lucky to pick a pocket with all eyes on us. Didn't you learn *anything* at the Thief's Academy?"

"If you had been a better instructor," Algorph began, his face turning red.

I waved him silent. Not an easy task since my hands were still manacled. "Cistonarov is not the one who will be dancing in the air if I'm caught."

"*Commander* Cistonarov."

"*Commander* Cistonarov is not the one who will be dancing in the air if I'm caught. And you're doing everything to ensure I am. If that's your purpose, just slay me here and quit wasting time."

Algorph's grip tightened on his sword, then relaxed. "What do you suggest, then?"

"We go in as simple travelers, as you said. But only two of us, you and I. Your men stay here."

"Those are not my orders."

"No wonder you flunked out of the Academy. Do you want to succeed or not?"

Algorph's eyes darkened. "Of course," he said softly.

"You do have *some* discretion?"

"I am the leader of this expedition."

"Then do as I say. Or," and I grinned, "are you afraid I can escape from you?"

Algorph withdrew his sword and ran his finger along one edge. "I hope you try."

*Good.* "Then it's settled. Tomorrow, you and I ride into Houff. I'll be the merchant, you my guard. We'll find an inn, do some reconnaissance. Then we'll get to work." I held out my manacled hands hopefully.

Algorph started to protest, then smiled and shook his head. "Tomorrow, Brendell. I wouldn't want anything to happen to your precious hands before then."

So the next morning the two of us made our slow way into the valley and the realm waiting there. Algorph refused to unloose my hands until we reached the main road into the city, making my descent more perilous than necessary. More than once I was nearly unhorsed, but Algorph ignored all my arguments until we were safely on the well worn trail running beside the river.

"I'll go first from here on," I said while rubbing my sore wrists. The ropes had left marks, but my sleeves were long enough that they should be hidden from inquiring eyes.

Algorph frowned. "Why?"

"Because I am the leader of this little excursion. Or have you forgotten our plan?"

He nodded glumly. When there was only one guard, such as now, his responsibility was to protect the rear first. Any other arrangement would arouse instant suspicion. "I will only be two strides behind you, Brendell. Don't try anything."

I had no intention to, not here at least. "Just follow my lead. Keep quiet unless you're asked to speak." With that I urged my steed onward.

We encountered no one on our way to Houff, which was not a good sign. The few farmholds we passed were in serious disrepair and I was reminded unpleasantly of my father's home in Mistmourning. Whoever ruled this realm was doing little or nothing to improve the lot of his subjects, which made me wonder why the Assassin's Guild would assume this realm could afford them.

The sun was high and I for one was hungry when we finally reached the city gates. A group of armed men approached us immediately. "Who are you and what is your business in Houff?" one demanded while the others eyed us over their drawn bows. All were dressed in severe black uniforms and hoods that, except for eye slits, totally covered their faces. What interested me the most, however, was that all save my interrogator were identical in height and build.

"That, my friend, is a good question," I said with a smile as I dismounted. "You may call me Bourherr Gastinell. My assistant, Algorph, and I are here to do exactly that. We just are uncertain what our business shall be."

"You speak in riddles," my interrogator said coldly.

I maintained my benign mien. "Not really. I am a merchant. I travel far and wide bringing to communities such as yours items that are nearly impossible to obtain anywhere else."

He pointed at our animals. "You carry nothing."

"Presently. Our goods are back at camp. Once I have determined what would please the citizens of your fair town most, then I shall return to my camp and obtain it. What good would it do me, for instance, if I was laden with silks and then discovered your village was a center of silk-making?"

"We are not silk makers."

I smiled even more broadly. "Then perhaps that is what I shall offer."

"We have no money for such amusements. Houff is not prosperous."

*So I can see.* "Perhaps clothing, then. Strong and durable to last through several harvests. Surely the peasants would appreciate that."

"They are hardly our concern." Then he pointed at Algorph. "Your assistant is armed. Why?"

I shrugged. "He is my guard. Members of the Assassin's Guild go nowhere without their weapons. No matter how often I try to convince him that is unnecessary, such as here in peaceful Houff." I winked. "You know how stubborn, if not unreasonable, they can be."

All weapons turned abruptly on Algorph. "The Guild is not welcome here," my inquisitor said.

"There is nothing to fear from him," I said. "He is totally under my control and will obey my bidding



without question.” I turned. “Algorph, our new friends have requested you disarm yourself. Remove your sword and drop it on the ground as a show of our good faith.”

I suppressed a smile as Algorph struggled with the concept. It took longer than I wished, but he finally did as I asked. I turned again to the guards. “As you can see, we are more than willing to obey the laws of Houff.”

"The penalties are severe for those who don't. You may enter."

I bowed. “For your assistance and vigilance, I will bring you and your men an appropriate gift once we have returned with our goods. Algorph, follow me.” And I rode slowly through the gates.

The poverty outside persisted within. Few people walked the streets, street merchants were nearly non-existent. The buildings were in poor condition and most appeared empty. But every village had to have an inn. And a stable. The latter at least was easy to find; we merely followed the scent of manure until we reached it at the end of a side street. The owner was quite surprised to greet new customers, but he eagerly accepted our mounts and told us where the one inn was located.

Algorph was seething as we walked back down the street. “You told them I was with the Guild!”

"So? You are, aren't you?"

"There was no need for them to know. Now I have no weapon!"

I stopped and glared at him. “Did you learn *nothing* at the Thief’s Academy? Lying about you would have served no purpose. Sometimes the best disguise *is* the truth. Surely you're not telling me you're unarmed.”

Algorph half-smiled. “Not totally.”

"Good. Let's find the inn."

Which we did ... and immediately regretted it. Our quarters were less comfortable than the tents we had been using while traveling here, although there was probably as much wild life sharing it with us. Instead of staying there and risking hundreds of flea bites, we returned to the eating hall and sat at a far table with a flask of plebian wine to discuss our plans. Which now had changed dramatically. “How well did you prepare for this, Algorph?” I asked as soon as the bored serving wench left.

"What do you mean? Master Cistonarov has never failed."

I pointed at the nearly empty room. “Look at this. You brought me here to steal. Steal what? A potato from a starving peasant? There is no wealth here. If I *were* a merchant, I would have absolutely nothing to sell anyone.”

"Then steal from the ruler."

"Who is?"

"Pipo Fess. She is reputed to be a magician."

I groaned. My experiences with magic have always been unpleasant. “When were you going to tell me that?”

Algorph shrugged as he sipped his wine. “If or when it became necessary.”

I nearly slammed my fist on the table but caught myself. Still it took a moment for me to continue. "You want me to fail, don't you? Do you know *anything* about magicians? They are protected by demons. They attach magical tethers to their property, which they can retrieve at anytime from anywhere. Believe me, I *know*! In all likelihood, Houff is protected by magic." I paused, recalling the men at the gate. "I would bet that only the guard who talked with me today was human. The others could have been magical constructs." I leaned forward. "Don't you understand, Algorph? Houff *doesn't need* you."

"You will do as you're told," he said stiffly. "Houff has defied our will long enough. It shall not continue."

I sat back and studied him over the rim of my glass. "This is not the only realm that does not employ your Guild. I have been in more than one, all more prosperous than this. Why are you not going after them?"

"They serve their purposes just as they are."

"You ignore them because their neighbors invest heavily in you for protection. But this, this kingdom is no threat to anyone."

Algorph set down his glass. "You have no right to question the Assassin's Guild. We protect *all* the Guilds. What has been shall always be. Remember, Brendell, you are alive only because of our intervention."

I grimaced. Alive, yes, but an indentured servant at best. His words echoed what had been said at the Guild meeting where the mad dreamer Ensten had been condemned to death. Because of me. Now I realized I had not only declared war on the Thief's Guild, but on *all* Guilds. "Leave me."

"Not very likely."

I grabbed his glass and drank it all, then poured the remainder of the flagon into my own glass. "I'm not going to run out on you; I have no place to go," I said as he stared at me in surprise. "But I have to totally rethink what I have to do. And I can't do it with you staring at me all the time like you're trying to find a soft spot where you can bury your sword. Go back to our room. Roam the city if you care to, visit a brothel. Just leave me alone."

Algorph rose slowly, then leaned across the table. "Do not even *consider* betrayal, Brendell. There is no place you can go we will not find you." Then he turned abruptly and walked heavily away.

"Betrayal. As if I have not been betrayed by everyone," I whispered. Then I stared into my wine. A *magician*. Just what I needed, to be stealing from a magician. I had no wards or spells to protect me—not that I was sure any worked—and I had no idea of Pipo Fess' powers.

Then I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. I looked up to find the serving wench standing next to me. "You must be from Houff. More wine?"

I forced a smile. "Why do you say that? About Houff, I mean."

"We all wear such faces. Great sadness, as if the very promise of our lives has been stolen from us."

"I am most sorry to hear that." I glanced around but the inn was bereft of other patrons. "Why is that so?"

She sat across from me unbidden, just as relieved as I to have someone else to talk to. "I was wrong. You are not from here to ask that."

"No, I'm not. Passing through, a traveling merchant. Although, to be honest, I suspect I carry no wares

that I could sell here."

"And we couldn't buy them if you did. I'm afraid you've made a long, unprofitable trip, sir."

"Bourherr Gastinell. You are?"

"Cordita."

"Cordita, a pretty name for a pretty young woman." I noticed her smile shyly at my compliment. She was not unattractive, but not beautiful either. Such comments were probably rare. "So, Cordita, if life is so unpleasant here in Houff, why do you stay? Marriage?"

She shook her head sadly. "Many of us have left. I must stay because of my family. This is our inn. I must help them."

I nodded. "Why are things so troubled? Is it because of your leader? Has Pipo Fess betrayed you?"

"Not her. The land. Our fields used to be ripe with grain every fall. No longer. The river that runs through the valley? By summer's end it will be little more than a brook. Worse, we have had droughts the last five years. The green fields will soon turn brown and sterile. We will have nothing to trade with others, little to eat for ourselves."

My upbringing in Mistmourning rose unpleasantly in my memory. Unfortunately, I understood and commiserated with her plight. "A curse, perhaps? Someone has cursed this land, your village? Is there nothing this Pipo Fess can do?"

"She has tried. She is as angry and helpless as the rest of us. It's as if the gods have turned their backs on us. But," and fire suddenly flashed in her blue eyes, "this is my home. I will not leave my home!"

I reached across and touched her hand consolingly. She was stronger than I surely. I had left Mistmourning because it had become too harsh for me to bear. Yet my troubles had never been as severe as those she faced daily. I felt a twinge of self-recrimination and I vowed to return to help my father when I was done. Assuming I survived. "I admire your courage. Perhaps there is something I can do."

"You could buy more wine," she said with the slightest hint of a smile.

"Of course. But only if you'll share it with me."

She nodded and a moment later had returned with another flagon and glass. "This is our best," she promised as she filled both our glasses. It tasted significantly better than the other vintage and I agreed heartily. "Your companion left you. Is he returning?"

"I sent him off to look after our horses. I would rather enjoy your company than his in any event. So, this Pipo Fess. She treats your people well, then."

"As I said, it is the land that treats us harshly, not her. She helps us during planting and harvesting. She does not burden us with taxes as I hear they do in other lands."

"She sounds like an admirable woman. I would like to meet her."

"I'm sure she would like to meet you. We get so few visitors." Then she clenched her hands in frustration.

"The guards who greeted us were not the most friendly," I said.

"That is necessary, I'm afraid. There are thieves and blackguards who know we are weak. We have tried to hire the Assassin's Guild to help us, but they demand too much."

I tried not to choke on my wine. Slowly I was beginning to understand the true purpose of the Assassin's Guild and this mission. "Is there another realm you could approach for help?"

"Kastikaan is the closest. But their intentions are suspect at best. They are east of us and some believe they somehow dam the river in the fall to prevent the water we need from reaching us." She looked down sadly at the table. "And we are too weak to stop them if they are."

I was going to have another talk with Algorph, I knew, although I suspected he had been kept in the dark as much as I. Or, worse, didn't care about anything save following his orders. "From what you tell me, I shall not be lingering in Houff. But I would like to meet Pipo Fess before I go. Does she live within the city?"

"Take the main road east. Her manor lies at the very end."

I reached in my pocket and removed five gold coins. Before leaving our room, I had told Algorph I had to have money as I was the merchant and therefore I would have to pay for everything. He had given it to me as freely as he would give his teeth. "For your companionship and for your beauty," I said as I placed them on the table.

Her eyes widened. "But, sir, that is too much!"

"Not at all." I bent forward and kissed her lightly on the forehead. "It in no way balances the debt I owe you." I paused. "Will you be working here in the morning?"

She grimaced. "I have little choice."

I handed her two more coins. "Please have something ready for my servant and myself. Whatever your kitchen can provide. Good evening."

My pleasant countenance disappeared once I reached the stairs to our rooms above. The Assassin's Guild had always claimed to be above politics. What they were doing to assist Kastikaan defied everything in their charter.

Algorph greeted me coldly when I entered the room. "Took you long enough."

"Gathering information takes time. But I think I've learned everything I need to know." I sat in the one decrepit chair and crossed my arms. "Tell me, where do we go when we're done? Or, rather, I'm done."

"Kastikaan. The nearest Guild offices are there. So what did you learn?"

*How surprising.* "The ruler Pipo Fess is indeed a magician. A farmer I talked to said she wears a ring of power which gives her control over the darker realms. It could be just idle talk, of course. But if nothing else, its theft would be a symbolic blow to her rule. It appears many are frustrated with their situation. She controls this realm through fear of the demons she commands. Remove them and she would be overthrown by the rightful rulers of Houff."

I suppressed a smile at his reaction. He could totally accept that fabrication, as could his superiors at the Assassin's Guild. Which might give me the time I needed. "So when do we strike?" he asked eagerly.

"Not 'we.' I am the trained thief, not you." I paused to scratch one of my many newly-acquired insect bites. "I think tonight would be best, before Pipo Fess becomes curious about us."

"If you think I will sit like a spinster in this room waiting for you, you are mistaken, Brendell. I will follow my orders. I will accompany you."

I frowned as I considered. Getting rid of my unwelcome shadow was proving as difficult as shedding a bad cough. But then it might be better he *was* there. Especially if I was caught in the act. "Far be it for me to challenge the wisdom of the Assassin's Guild. You can come with me, but you'll have to wait outside. I don't need you stumbling around a darkened manor like the village drunk."

He reached inside his vest and suddenly was holding an evil-looking knife. "I am trained in reconnaissance, Brendell."

I remained unimpressed. "But not theft. Perhaps I was a bad instructor at the Academy, Algorph, but you lacked the talent to graduate in any event. A successful thief *does not* blindly follow orders. You can do what you do best and be my protector. Nothing more."

He slowly sheathed his weapon. "As you wish. Let's begin." He started toward the door.

I grabbed his arm. "Just where do you think you're going?"

He looked at me and frowned. "I thought you said we were going to work."

"Not that way." I went to the back of the room and opened the window. It overlooked a narrow alley. Even better, I saw no lights in the windows of the surrounding buildings. I removed the worn curtains and tied them together, then knotted one end around the bedpost. The other ended halfway down the outer wall. Not a far drop and I nodded, satisfied. "Lock our door."

Algorph did so, then joined me. "I'll go first."

"Of course. Try not to wake the neighborhood when you land."

He grunted as he climbed out the window. He descended rapidly and within seconds was on the ground. A moment later I was beside him. I searched the alley quickly and found an empty barrel amongst the trash, which I set below our improvised rope. "In case we have to hurry back," I said. "Now we go east."

As Cordita had promised, the Fess manor was easy to find. I was surprised how quiet and empty the streets were, which was another symptom of Houff's poverty. "Where are the guards?" Algorph asked as we studied it.

*She probably can't afford any.* "Inside I would suspect. With her powers, she probably believes she doesn't require them. Now that you know where it is, go get our horses. If I'm successful, we'll need them."

"I don't like this. I don't like leaving you on your own."

I grinned. "Are you suddenly concerned about my well-being, Algorph? Get the horses; we may have to leave quickly."

He grunted, then headed back. I waited until he disappeared in the darkness, then took a deep breath. I was about to take the biggest gamble of my career. And everything was predicated on the words of a serving wench. *Brendell, you are a fool.* And possibly a dead one, I told my inner voice as I approached the manor.

I proceeded to make a leisurely study of the building. I suspected there were no exterior guards because

her magic and the realm's economy weren't that strong. Inside should be a different matter. While I fully planned to announce myself, it wouldn't be through the front door, so I entered through the rear. I found myself in the kitchen, but, unlike homes of other royalty I had visited, there was no cooking or cleaning staff hard at work. I wouldn't have been surprised if Pipo Fess cooked and cleaned for herself.

I went through the door into a hallway. Immediately an oil lamp on a table burst into light, followed by four more leading down the hall. *She knows I'm here.* Taking a deep breath, I walked down the hall, following the lights that continued to ignite as I neared them. They led me through a maze of hallways until I was led to a closed door. I knocked softly.

"Bourherr Gastinell?" a woman responded.

"Of course."

"Please come in."

I entered to find myself in a study. Again, however, the poverty of Houff was evident. The shelves were nearly empty, the walls bereft of art. A small fire burned sullenly in the hearth, providing the only light. Pipo Fess rose as I entered. As she approached, I was startled to find how tall she was, how proudly she carried herself. Thin, but I suspected she had an inner will like iron. Her youthful beauty had long given way to aged wisdom. She held out her hand and I took it and bowed. "I've been expecting you. Please have a seat."

"Why is that?" I asked as I did as bidden.

She sat across from me. Even in the darkness I could see the lines of worry that crossed her eyes and forehead, aging her prematurely. I suspected she wasn't much older than I, but the demands of ruling had stolen years from her. "Few visit Houff, especially traveling merchants."

"So I've gathered. Your men informed you, I take it."

"That is their duty. You've picked an odd hour to visit me, Bourherr Gastinell. If that is indeed your name."

I smiled. "It will suffice for now."

She remained nonplussed. "So why are you really here?"

"I would think my intentions are obvious. To steal from you."

She laughed, a heartfelt laugh that warmed the room. "Interesting. An honest thief! I'm afraid, however, that Houff has very little to offer."

"You offer more than you can imagine. And I can offer something as well."

"Which is?"

"A way to solve at least some of your problems."

She crossed her legs and relaxed. "And why would you do that?"

"Simple. I need your help. And you need mine." And I quickly told her why I had been brought to Houff.

Her lips were tight with tension when I finished. "Then there is really nothing I can do. I've tried to protect my people from the pressure of Kastikaan., but my magic cannot battle drought or invade their land and

destroy their dam. We can't afford the protection of the Assassin's Guild and now you tell me they are working against us." She sighed heavily, her shoulders slumping. "I don't know. There are too few of us left to even make the effort."

"You say Kastikaan dams the river."

"We're sure of it. But they do it on their land and we are powerless to stop them."

*Perhaps not.* "I might be able to help you there. Perhaps with some other things as well. But you have to help me first."

"And how do I do that?"

"Simple. You kill thieves, don't you?"

She studied me for a moment, then decided I was serious. "That would be under my discretion, yes. But isn't that a bit drastic?"

"I don't know. Do you have any magical tethers?"

Algorph had recovered the horses when I returned. "Good," I said, already mounting my animal.

"You found it? Already?"

"Don't just stand there, get on your horse. We have to get out of here now." I reached in my pocket and pulled out an ornate ring. "This gives her power over magic. Without it she is helpless." I handed it to him.

"How did you do it?" he asked as we started down the road.

"I'll tell you later. We don't have time to talk now." And then the darkness abruptly disappeared as all the street lamps burst into life at once. Algorph froze, staring at the now-well-lit street like a child at a traveling show. "Don't dawdle, idiot. They're coming. Ride!" And I whipped my horse and started galloping down the brick road.

Algorph caught up quickly. "I'll take the point. We have to leave through the gate." He held his knife in one hand. "Curse the gods; if I only had my sword."

We turned a corner, the sound of hooves on stone the only break in the bright silence. Still there was no light in any window. Either the people of Houff were remarkably heavy sleepers or they were terrified of what was occurring outside, I decided. "Let's hope they haven't closed the gate."

Algorph favored me with a hurried glare. "If I could have brought my men, that wouldn't be a problem, Brendell."

"We wouldn't have her ring, either."

"That is debatable. No wonder the Guild kicked you out." Then he grunted. "Good, I can see the gate ahead. It's still open."

But not unguarded. Archers suddenly appeared as if from thin air. And then the air itself became thick with arrows. "Don't slow down," I yelled, urging my tiring mount onward.

"That's your first command I agree with, Brendell." Algorph was leaning over his horse, making himself as small a target as possible.

Unfortunately I wasn't the horseman he was. I was having difficulties controlling my now terrified mount, let alone trying to evade the arrows flying around us. Then I lost control totally as one buried itself in my horse's side. My steed whinnied loudly and began falling. I managed to jump off before I could be pinned beneath it, but that only delayed the inevitable. "Algorph," I managed to yell even as I was being seized by several armed men who sprang from the shadows.

He looked back but didn't even try to rescue me. Which would have been impossible anyway. I watched as he rode through the gate and the darkness beyond. Then I allowed myself to be pulled back down the street and the home of Pipo Fess.

She was in the same study when my entourage arrived. "You've done excellently," she told my captors. "Now leave us."

"But mistress, are you sure?" one complained. "You said he is a thief."

"Who is now working for me. I have nothing to fear from Master Gustinell. Now go, and tell no one of this."

"They did perform well," I agreed after the door closed behind them. "Unfortunate about the horse, though."

"It was much more difficult for my construct archers to miss you than hit you, you know."

I nodded. "Magical constructs. I thought as much."

Unlike my first visit, there was a decanter of wine and two glasses waiting. I helped myself and sat beside her. "Algorph now has your ring of power. He should be satisfied."

She laughed. "Ring of power.' As if magic were that simple. Granted, there are amulets and such that can be helpful. But a ring! How gullible!"

I shivered, remembering my early experience with the disk of Garnula. It had been my first face-to-face experience with demons and led to the death of a baron who fancied himself a magician. "The Assassin's Guild isn't noted for their intelligence. Just their diligence."

"So are we done now, or do we continue this charade?"

"Algorph knows I'm caught; he doesn't know yet that I'm dead. And he'll want to make sure of that."

"He won't try to rescue you?"

I shrugged. "I suspect not. I'm not that important to the Guild. I accomplished what they wanted. I'm as disposable as the bones after a feast."

She sipped at her wine. "We'll have to do this quickly, I suppose. I'll make the proclamation tomorrow and your execution will be the following morning."

"Your magical tethers work, correct?"

She giggled. "Why, Bourheur Gustinell, one would think you didn't trust me. Yes, what you propose should work."

"*Should*" work, *not* "*would*." I forced the thought aside. I had seen another magician do what I was proposing. "Perhaps we should do a test."



She shook her head. "I'm already exhausted. You cannot imagine the effort involved in summoning so many construct bowmen. It will take me more than a day to recover." Then she smiled. "Don't worry; I will be recovered sufficiently to do what is necessary."

"Good." I finished my wine. "I cannot go back to the inn, of course."

"Of course. You shall stay here. There's a room by the kitchen that has a cot. That should suffice." She rose. "Good night. You may stay and enjoy the wine if you wish."

I nodded. "Thank you for your hospitality and trust."

She paused at the door. "I don't necessarily trust you. But you are worth the risk. Still, my magical wards remain in place. I will be alerted immediately if you try ... anything."

"Understood. Good night."

I poured more wine as she left the room. She had just told me I couldn't leave, but I had no intention of doing that. I had to escape the Assassin's Guild and only she could help me. Would my untested plan work? Could I trust *her*? Was her magic strong enough to succeed? "You'll find out in two days, Brendell," I whispered into my glass. I enjoyed her wine long into the morning and fell asleep in the chair.

"Quite a crowd," I observed. It was now the morning of my execution. The street in front of the Fess manor was filled with people awaiting the spectacle. A wooden pole had been erected at the front of the house, and men were busy surrounding it with more wood. It promised to burn quickly and grandly.

Fess walked up to me. "My people don't enjoy such entertainments very often. Are you sure your friend—what's his name?—is out there?"

"Probably not Algorph, but at least one of his men. The Assassin's Guild is trained in disguise, although not as thoroughly as my Guild. You wouldn't find them no matter how hard you tried."

She sighed. "I don't like killing people, Gestinell."

I smiled. "That's why you are a beloved ruler. If only more felt like you. But it's the only way. I can do much more for your people dead than alive. You have the tether?"

She opened her hand to reveal an unassuming pin. I shivered as I recognized it. Once it was attached to an object, a magician could retrieve it instantly no matter what the distance. "Undress."

I frowned. "Why?"

"To ensure your safety. It would be most unfortunate if I only retrieved your vest, wouldn't it?"

I couldn't argue with that. She tried, not successfully, to hide a smile as I dutifully removed my vestments. The morning was cool and the flags outside revealed a steady wind from the west. I could only hope my planned execution was not going to be an all-day affair. "Now what?"

"Put it in your mouth." She paused. "Those are your real teeth? Not wooden?"

"Real," I nodded.

"Good. I don't want to retrieve only dentures."

It could be worse, I thought as I placed it under my tongue. It was small enough to cause no difficulties. "Are we ready?" I asked with a hint of a lisp.

"Yes. Guards," she said loudly and clapped her hands. Two armed men entered. "We're ready. You know your instructions. Follow them accurately."

They nodded and seized me, one on each arm, then conducted me from the room. We said nothing as we went down the stairs, the main hall and through the front door. The crowd greeted me immediately with a chorus of jeers and laughter. I looked down with shame and humiliation as I was roughly brought to the awaiting pyre. A few threw rocks and rotting vegetables at me, but the guards quickly discouraged them. "He will die most painfully," I heard one assure an eager onlooker. I was lifted over the pile of wood surrounding the pole, then quickly tied to it. This was my first real concern. Since I had nothing with me save the magical tether, I would not be able to cut my way out of the knots. And I didn't want to leave my hands behind when Pipo Fess brought me back.

But the knots were purposely loose and I had my hands free in seconds. They didn't even bother to tie my feet. I held the rope and kept my hands behind my back anyway, in case an observant onlooker, or Assassin's Guild member, became curious. So I stood there, the rough pole burying into my back, stones on the ground cutting my feet, trying to ignore the angry horde surrounding me and the damp cold wind blowing in my face. And waited.

Meanwhile the fine people of Houff continued to curse me, jeer at me, make degrading comments about my character and manhood. At least one had to be an Assassin's Guild spy, and I wondered idly if they would make any attempt to rescue me. I had told Fess the truth; I was sure they wouldn't as they considered me a disposable tool. And since I had supposedly obtained what they wanted, they would see no need to risk a member's life to save mine.

I did recognize one face, the tavern wench Cordita. She glared at me when our eyes met briefly and I sighed. How could I explain to her that what I was doing was to help her and her people? But that would be a problem to solve another day as I heard a sudden blare of trumpets. *It must be time.*

The horde cheered, then hushed so that I could now hear the breeze and approaching footsteps. I couldn't see what was going on behind me, but I could imagine. Pipo Fess had to be making her slow progression to where I stood bound and waiting. I could only hope she hurried as I was getting colder and more miserable by the moment. I was almost ready to tell the executioner to light the fire when she finally appeared.

She was now dressed in all her royal finery. A purple silk robe embedded with pearls and jewels covered her from neck to ankles. She wore golden bracelets on each wrist, golden earrings and a small golden tiara. She kept her back to me as she spoke to the crowd. "Good people of Houff, I have called you today to bring justified vengeance on those who would destroy us. This man has sought to steal from you, each and every one of you, by stealing from me. Our laws will not be violated! Our homes and our land shall be protected and those who try to harm us must feel our wrath!"

The crowd called out in rage and triumph as she raised a fist to the sky. "Thieves will not be welcomed or harbored within our borders." She turned and for the first time faced me. "Bourherr Gastinell, for the crimes you have perpetrated against the people of Houff, you have earned our just vengeance. You shall die within these fires, which will burn you to your immortal soul. Pray to your gods for forgiveness, for you shall receive none from Houff! Executioners, you may begin."

The crowd broke out in cheers and more insults—they *were* an imaginative group—as men stepped forward on all sides and set their torches against the pile of wood that surrounded me like a moat. It caught immediately, sending thick black smoke to the sky and causing me to cough uncontrollably.

But the smoke also effectively hid me from the view of the crowd. I could now drop the rope and not

pretend my hands were tied behind me. I could have even tried to escape by diving through the steadily rising flames. Of course, with all the people still outside and watching my cremation, I wouldn't have gotten very far.

"You better hurry, Fess," I whispered as I huddled by the pole, trying to find fresh air to breathe and avoiding without being obvious the embers that were flying like moths everywhere. Now I was grateful I was naked; the embers hurt, of course, but at least I didn't have to worry about my clothing catching on fire. But the heat was getting unbearable and sweat poured down my face, obscuring my limited vision even more. I was light-headed and already gasping for breath, which only brought more smoke into my lungs, causing me to cough even more.

And then I felt something. Something like a giant hand seizing me, wresting me from the here-and-now. And then the smoke and heat and fire vanished and I found myself standing next to Fess in her manor.

But not standing for long. I've been possessed, albeit briefly, by the spirit of a deceased queen; I've been enveloped by a demon. This was the worst sensation I have ever experienced. It was as if some mad chef had tried to make an omelet with my insides. I could do nothing but lie on the floor, curled up like an infant and whimpering in pain. I had no control of my limbs, wasn't sure I *had* limbs. Even my eyelids hurt.

Ever so slowly I regained control of myself. Still it must have taken over an hour before I could even sit up. Only then did I notice Fess had draped a blanket over me. I managed to look up and saw her standing near me. She was pale and trembling as well, and I assumed she was nearly as exhausted as I from bringing me here.

I saw food and water on a nearby table. Summoning all my strength, I crawled to it and managed to obtain a glass. It was filled with water, but it didn't taste like water. It tasted blue, which somehow I knew made no sense. I drank it anyway and it burned all the way down to my stomach. But it helped as I felt a burst of energy. I took the other glass and drank that as well, then had enough strength to take the pitcher and drink directly from it. I eschewed the fruit however; I wasn't certain my stomach was up to that.

Then I felt someone lift me and lead me to a chair. "Thank you," I said as I collapsed in it. "I don't think I could have done that myself."

"Rest," said Fess. She adjusted the blanket around my shoulders, then sat gratefully across from me.

"I don't think I have a choice." I shuddered, and not just from the cold. "Remind me that the next time you plan to burn me at the stake, just do it."

She gave me a wry smile. "Now you know why we don't use tethers for living beings. If the distance would have been greater, you might not have survived."

I wiped sweat from my forehead with a trembling hand. "I can imagine. I'm afraid I will have to impose upon your hospitality another day at least. Right now I couldn't pick my nose, let alone a lock."

She laughed. "I think you'll have the time. It sounds like the festivities are winding down. Would you like to look?"

I nodded. She helped me to my feet and led me to the window. Below, the crowd had almost dispersed. The fire was burned down to nothing and I noticed several men sifting through the ashes. "What are they looking for?"

"Proof of your death. Bones and burned flesh I would think. Undoubtedly your friends from the Assassin's Guild. But we've taken care of that."

I hadn't considered that. Of course the Guild would want physical evidence I was now a mere memory. "How?"

"One of our farmers died last week from The Blight. His body was hidden beneath the pile of wood. Ah, they've found it."

One of the men was holding up something and waving to the other. They spent several minutes searching that one location, then left carrying what I assumed were charred limbs. "Good. That should make them happy."

"Yes." Weariness was heavy in Fess' voice. "We've saved you, Bourherr Gestinell. Now how do you propose to save us?"

"Help me back to the chair." She did so, then sat across from me, waiting. It was a good while before I could work up the strength to speak; just walking to and from the window had exhausted me. "We have to stop Kastikaan from damming the river."

"Agreed."

"I think I may know how, but I won't be able to do it here. But first we have to find another source of income for Houff."

"My people have always been farmers," she said. "We don't have the resources for mining or timber or fishing and we certainly have nothing to attract visitors."

"Which means we'll have to do something more direct. The people you select are going to join me in the challenging yet rewarding field of thievery."

It took her some time to respond. "That's ... dishonest," she finally said with a grimace.

"It's what I do best. It's the fastest way to acquire the wealth you need." I leaned forward. "Understand, your majesty, that Kastikaan has declared war on you. You are too weak to fight them head-on; you have to strike from the shadows. A small band of thieves, trained and led by me, will get you the money you need to buy the time you and I need." I stopped to let her consider my remarks. And build up my rapidly draining strength.

"I don't like this, Gastinell. There must be another way. It's too dangerous."

"Consider this. An onslaught of thefts in Kastikaan will force them to employ more of the Assassin's Guild to protect themselves. This will be expensive. Their attention will be focused on their own borders, not yours. Any immediate plans they have for possibly invading you will have to be put aside so they can deal with the more immediate problem." I sat back and crossed my legs, which was not as easy as it sounds. "If you have another suggestion, I would think you would have done it by now."

She gnawed on a nail while she ruminated. "How long will this take? How many people do you need?"

"No more than ten. Your most trustworthy. Of course I will have final say on who is selected. If they are dedicated, I can train them on the basics in less than a month." I then swallowed heavily and my stomach grumbled as she bit into an apple while weighing her options. That was a good sign as I could soon eat something more substantial than water.

"You're asking me to put my people and my realm in your hands. The hands of a thief!"

"A very good thief. One whose enemies are the same as yours."

"And how do we get rid of this ... loot?"

*Good.* "There are ways. There are merchants in other realms we can contact. Don't worry; your people can go back to honest farming once the threat of Kastikaan is eliminated." *If they want to.*

She rose, disgust and resignation mingling on her face. "I'll see what I can do. Stay here and rest."

"Before you go." I pointed to the nearby table. "Could you hand me an apple?"

## Kastikaan

"No, no, no. Your object is to brush up against your target, not knock him off his feet."

The farm boy blushed, then stepped back from me. I glared at him, then at the other men and women in my "class." True to her word, Pipo Fess had found about 20 volunteers to learn the rudiments of thievery. After three days I had pared them down to less than half. One recruit had been a farmer so old he could barely walk, another a lad so tall that he would immediately attract attention anywhere. Not a desirable attribute for successful thieves. What I now had was a group of young men and women who would have never survived the first year in the Thief's Academy.

But I was committed to my plan and had no choice. I was still confident it would succeed, I just wasn't sure *this* group would succeed. "Okay," I said with a sigh, "take your position and let's try again."

So the morning went, me being poked and prodded like a melon at the market while my pupils developed their pickpocket skills. Several were actually successful, and those little victories were what stopped me from abandoning my plan. Finally noon arrived, as did our meals. I set a locked box in front of each of them. "Your lunches are inside. Enjoy."

"But these are locked!" one heavy-set farm boy said.

"So they are. Unlock them and you can eat. If you can't, then fast."

Grumbling, they went to work. "Don't pry it," I yelled to one woman who was wedging her pick under the lid. I walked quickly to her table. "Like this." I took the pick from her hand and with a well-practiced movement had the box open. Then I shut it firmly and returned her tool. "Now you try." Grunting and flicking a stray strand of hair from her eyes, she went to work.

I had already finished my meal before the first of my students succeeded. It was Cordita. Our first meeting after my "death" was as warm as a usurer's smile, but she had become more accommodating once Fess had explained most of our plan to the class. "Good," I said. "Would you be so kind as to help the others?"

She nodded and within a matter of moments all my students had succeeded. That's when it struck me: whether it was because of her attitude or her association with them or just the typical fear and awe students held for professors, the group had learned faster from her than from me. It gave me an idea how to get the class to learn the necessary skills more rapidly. I waited until everyone had eaten, then called Cordita to me.

"Yes?" I noted a trace of pride in her smile. That convinced me.

"I want you to take the other women and help them with lock picking. Just you and them, a small group."

She frowned. "But I can't teach that. I barely know how to do it myself."

I smiled. "Yes, you can. Don't worry, I'll assist with the more difficult locks. But for what we need right now, your skills are more than adequate."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." I stood and addressed the class. "Ladies and gentlemen, we're going to try something a bit different. I want all the ladies to join Cordita in one corner. She will assist you in learning to pick locks. Theroun, you have been the most successful in stealing purses. You will help the men master that skill.

Now,” and I clapped my hands, “class is back in session.”

The remainder of the afternoon I basically just watched as my students helped each other master lock picking, purse stealing, disguises and shop-lifting. Fortunate, I thought, that no one from the Thief's Academy was present: my new methodology would never have received approval. I was able to identify quickly which of my students excelled in various areas and these I put in charge of various groups. The others, rather than being jealous, actually appeared enthusiastic that I had become little more than an overseer, occasionally assisting or correcting but otherwise staying out of the way. When we broke for the evening, I felt, for the first time, that we had made progress.

Which I happily told Fess that night. I was still ensconced within her manor on the off chance the Assassin's Guild was still lingering within Houff. “Excellent,” she said, dabbing her lips with a napkin. “When will they be ready?”

“If they continue to progress like today, I would hope by the end of the month.”

She frowned. “We are nearing the time when Kastikaan traditionally dams the river. We are going to need everyone if we are going to be able to save any of our fields.”

I didn't need to hear that. It was now more vital than ever my troupe be successful. And I couldn't do it all. “I don't want to push them too hard.”

“My people are used to hard work. Have you any idea the difficulty of the life of a farmer?”

Actually I did. Growing up, I had spent many hours bent over a scythe in our Mistmourning fields. That was probably one of the reasons I had chosen my profession. “Point taken. They will be ready by the end of the week.” Were I only as confident as my words.

I made the announcement the following morning. To my surprise, my students took the news with a renewed burst of enthusiasm. Without my encouragement, they broke into their groups and began their lessons. I circulated among them, once again making observations and suggestions but for the most part remaining an onlooker. I was particularly surprised when one of my more inept students was showing little difficulty in opening a variety of locks and even a safe. “You've been working,” I said softly, standing over him.

He looked up and blushed. “Yes. Cordita and I were up all night practicing.”

“Good.” I patted him on the shoulder. “Keep up the good work. But don't spend all your time on locks. Practice the skills you are weakest in, not strongest.” Then I walked off to congratulate Cordita on her hard work.

The rest of the week flew by and I continued to be amazed by the rapid development of my students. If students at the Thief's Academy were as dedicated, must would graduate within a year, not four, I was sure. But then I knew firsthand that the Academy was more interested in expanding their coffers with student fees than actually graduating qualified professionals. Pipo Fess was delighted when I told her we would be leaving for Kastikaan within two days. “They are ready, then?”

“They have to be. You told me there is a festival scheduled there within three days. That will be the ideal time to go to work. Strangers will be everywhere so we will be able to blend in the crowd.”

She stood at her study window and looked out over her realm. The streets were empty, the signs of poverty and despair everywhere. “The Houff you see before you is not the Houff I grew up in. We used to be a happy and prosperous land.” She shook her head. “I never thought thievery would be our only

way to save ourselves."

"It's temporary," and I patted her on the shoulder. "Your people will be happy to go back to an honest," I had to force out that word, "way of life."

She gave me a small smile. "I can only hope."

There was nothing I could say to reassure her. I wasn't that certain myself. "Tomorrow they have their finals. Would you like to observe?"

She shook her head. "I've put my realm in your hands, Gastinell. I can do nothing to change that." Then she looked me in the eyes. "Just make sure my people return safe."

"Of course." I handed her a glass of wine. "To our success."

She studied me over the lip of her glass. "To our survival."

I wish you hadn't put it that way, I thought as we drank our wine.

"I have good news," I greeted my class the following morning. "Tomorrow we go to Kastikaan."

My announcement was greeted by a stunned silence. But only for a moment. Then they all broke out in cheers and self-congratulations. I waited until the tumult died down before continuing. "Which means today you are taking your final exams. I don't expect you to pass every test, but I *do* expect you to excel in at least one area. From that we will determine what your assignments will be when we reach Kastikaan. Cordita, would you help me?"

The lock boxes were passed out first and I was pleased to see the entire class succeed. Next came shoplifting. As I expected, only a few passed, but that was enough. "You can act as diversions," I told the ones who failed. That brightened their spirits considerably. So the morning passed as we went through disguises, gambling, forgery and counterfeiting (although I suspected we would have little use for those skills soon). Finally, after a grueling morning, I stood before the class. "Now our final test, stealing purses. Theroun, you first."

He stood and shook his head. "I don't think that's necessary."

I frowned. "Why?"

"Because," and he held up my purse, "I already have it."

The class broke out in laughter and applause, which I happily joined. "Excellent! In that case, I leave you in charge of this exercise, Theroun. Afterwards you are excused until the evening when we will go over your assignments." With that I left them to their own devices. I still had plenty of work to do myself.

The main streets of Kastikaan were bursting with activity when we arrived the following afternoon. Not together, of course; my little band had separated once we were within its borders. I had paired them for mutual protection and to accommodate each other's weaknesses. I was teamed with Cordita, chiefly because I wanted to be. My guise was a rich merchant, she was my concubine.

Which she complained about unceasingly. "Why do I have to wear these ... clothes?" she asked for the hundredth time. "You said we were to be inconspicuous." She certainly wasn't, not clad in sheer red and yellow silks that brought appreciative stares from every man and many women we passed.

"Look around us," I whispered in her ear. "In this crowd we are but one couple among hundreds."



Which was true enough. The festival had brought out a full regalia of attire among the attendees. Plus their finest jewels. "These are the people we want to be among. If we dressed as anything else, we *would* be conspicuous. Don't worry. Once we get to the city proper, we'll change into something else."

My comments appeased her, or at least the constant jostling of the crowd distracted her enough so that she remained quiet as we walked slowly through the city. And there were enough wondrous sights to keep her preoccupied in any event. Jugglers, tumblers and musicians wandered throughout or stood on makeshift platforms to provide entertainment in hopes of a coin or two. Tents were pitched and merchants offered food and drink and oddities to passers-by. We stopped at one, where she admired the array of rings and bracelets on display. She gave me a quizzical look but I shook my head and led her away.

"Why?" she said when we had turned a corner and were relatively alone. "I thought we were here to steal!"

"Not fake jewels. Those baubles would earn us nothing." I reached in my vest and showed her a jade bracelet. "This is what we're after."

Her eyes widened. "When did you get that?"

I laughed. "I've been picking pockets and lifting jewels since we arrived."

She frowned, then smiled shyly. "And all I've gotten is this." She opened her hand to reveal a small purse.

"Good!" I patted the pelf in one pocket. "Let's see if we can find a jeweler or usurer who will help us."

Which we did in short order. The usurer was unmoved as I told him of my misadventures at the gaming tables and my need to sell several bracelets so I could afford food and lodging. It was a story he heard countless times during the yearly festival and he only offered a pittance for their real value. I bartered a bit, telling him how much I had paid for them and their value to my wife, but in the end I accepted his offer. "I am glad to be of help," he said as he smiled and counted out a dozen gold coins. "If I can be of further assistance, I will be here throughout the festival."

"I'm sure my fortunes will soon change at the tables," I said. The look on his face as I walked away told me he hoped it did not.

Cordita had stood by me silently throughout the negotiations. Once outside, however, she erupted. "He *robbed* from you! Those jewels were worth easily ten times that!"

"Of course. Which is why I rarely use usurers. But we needed money, and he wasn't likely to question how I got them. We'll arrange for more equitable exchanges later. Let's find an inn."

That proved a bit more difficult, but an extra coin offered for a night's lodging obtained us accommodations. "Stay here," I told Cordita once we were in our room. "I have some shopping to do." I returned shortly and threw my parcel on the bed. "I think you'll find these more acceptable."

"Good," she said as she held up a plain long black skirt and simple yellow blouse. The outfit did nothing to dim her beauty but it did make her less obvious.

"I thought those would go well with your vest. You brought it?"

"Of course. I've had it wrapped around my waist." The vest was important because it had inner pockets where items she lifted could be hidden. She started to remove her robes, then paused. "You *are* going to give me some privacy, correct?"

"Correct." I paused at the door. "Change your jewelry. And your hair while you're at it. Meet me in the wine shop downstairs when you're done."

I was sipping at a plebian vintage when she joined me. She looked nothing like the woman who had walked in with me, which was all to the better. "Good. Are you ready to earn your keep?"

She frowned. "If you mean am I ready to steal, the answer is yes."

"Then let's go."

She stopped me from rising. "Wait. Aren't you going to change?"

"No. I'm going to be the distraction. I'll be more effective dressed like this. Come, there are several nearby shops that look promising."

So we started. Since we were only robbing a few shops and staying just one day, I saw no real reason to vary our routine. I went in first, pretending to be a slightly drunk baron looking for something to appease his angry wife. Cordita would enter later, perhaps with other arriving customers, and spend most of her time admiring scarves and such. I would engage the clerks at the jewelry counter, letting my anger and voice build as one by one I denigrated their wares. Inevitably the owner would appear, inevitably I would be surrounded by guards and more clerks as I became increasingly intolerable. Finally, with the helpful assistance of the guards, I would leave without purchasing anything. But not before I had seen Cordita leave out of the corner of my eye. The sun was setting when I finally returned to our room, a bit disheveled from my treatment and performance. Cordita was waiting with a large smile on her face. "How did you do?" I asked.

She shyly opened the scarf sitting on the bed. Inside, more than a dozen rings, bracelets and earrings glistened. "Do I pass?" she asked, then giggled.

"Absolutely." I hugged her, then kissed her lightly on the forehead. Or tried to. She looked up just as I bent down and suddenly I found myself kissing her on the lips. I stepped back and blushed. "I'm sorry."

She stared at me in surprise. "Well, I'm not." Then she laughed at my embarrassment before turning serious. "What do we do next?"

"Supper. A change of clothes for me. Then we'll find out what the guests of the inn have to offer us."

"Good." She began to unbutton her blouse. "I want to see what else Master Gastinell can teach me."

Which turned out to be not near as much as she taught me.

"Notice the rooms which have no lights? Those are the ones you want to rob."

We were standing across the street from our inn. There were still crowds enjoying the festivities and we still could have enjoyed a profitable evening relieving them of their property. But it was important that Cordita gain experience in the more important—and profitable—field of breaking and entering.

"Me? You're not going to come with me?"

"Two thieves would be too much. I'll be doing other things." I patted her hand. "Consider this your final exam."

She frowned, but I could also see the anticipation in her eyes. "How many?"

"As many as you wish. Just make sure the room isn't occupied with sleeping customers. You know

where to put everything?"

She nodded. Before leaving, I had removed a floorboard in our room. There was enough room below to hide a substantial amount of coin and jewels. "Where will you be?"

"At the inn. Join me when you're finished."

She stood and bent over me. "Wish me luck."

"Luck." I kissed her lightly. "Now go." I watched her wend her way through the crowd back to our inn. No good reason to go myself as yet. The longer I lingered, the more people wouldn't remember we were together. So I leisurely finished another glass of wine, then returned myself.

The inn was filled with revelers as well, most, I was sure, guests. I could have easily filled my pockets with the adornments they wore, but this was not the time or place. Instead I ingratiated myself with as many as I could, buying drinks with coins I had lifted earlier and telling stories and basically making myself as conspicuous and beloved as possible.

So the time passed, with me making more friends and becoming more inebriated (although not near as much as I let on) when I saw Cordita enter. She was again dressed in the revealing silks she had complained about so much and I immediately went to her. "Castina, you've returned!" I greeted her grandly. I had insisted she use an alias that would be easy for her to remember and recognize. "Come, meet our new friends!"

So we went from table to table, she shyly nodding and accepting their compliments silently like a good concubine would. We were both carrying fresh glasses of wine when I finally found us a relatively quiet corner. "You hid everything under the floorboard?" I whispered tenderly in her ear.

"Yes. And I replaced it and the rug as you suggested." Her eyes were bright with excitement as she looked into mine.

I kissed her and made sure to caress her buttocks for the benefit of the onlookers. "Excellent. No problems?"

"The rooms you selected were empty like you suspected."

"Even better." I wrapped my left arm around her waist, making sure to cradle her right breast as I did so.

"Do you have to be that obvious? It's embarrassing," she whispered.

"You're a concubine. Act like one. So," I continued, loudly now so those nearby could overhear. "How were the gaming tables?"

We had rehearsed this as well. There had to be a reasonable explanation why she had joined me later at the inn. "They were cheating, I'm sure of it. I've *never* been that unlucky at catkikan before!"

"Those things happen at festivals." Again I spoke loudly. "I wouldn't be surprised if there were thieves and pickpockets at work here as well. You must be watchful when we're on the streets as Kastikaan offers little protection for its visitors." Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed more than one reveler checking their purses or jewelry. Now I knew where most kept their valuables, but I wouldn't use that knowledge tonight. I only hoped Cordita noticed as well.

"So now what do we do?" she asked between a forced smile.

"Wait. Sooner or later, someone will discover they have been robbed." I gave her breast a slight squeeze. "For now, enjoy yourself."

So we continued to circulate, our glasses filled often, my drunken pose becoming easier and easier to maintain, when the revelry was interrupted by a scream. "We've been robbed!"

The crowd hushed immediately as all eyes turned to the richly dressed woman standing in the doorway. "We've been robbed!" she screamed again. "Some thief has broken into our room and stolen everything!"

Our cue. "Castina, come. We must check our own room," I said loudly. I wrested her away from the couple we were chatting with and joined the other scurrying patrons with the same purpose in mind. "This is the fault of this establishment!" I yelled as we approached the door. "Kastikaan should be more protective of its guests. I *knew* we should not have stayed here."

The inn staff and those who I presumed to be Assassin's Guild members were everywhere when we reached the lobby and headed for the stairs. Obviously the victim had informed the innkeeper before making her announcement to one and all. But I had expected that.

I also expected the knock on our door not long after we reached our quarters. "Who is it?" I said in a tired voice.

"The innkeeper. We need to talk to you."

"It's about time," I said angrily. I threw open the door. "Where were you when I was being robbed?"

Three men entered. Two were dressed alike, which meant they had to be guards. "You were robbed also?" said the third, who had to be the innkeeper.

"Yes! Except for what Castina was wearing. All our gold and jewelry are gone! What kind of establishment do you run here? Taking advantage of your guests like this!"

The innkeeper walked up to me. "We apologize. During the festival there are many strangers here. You saw nothing?"

"No. I was in the wine shop below. And what are they doing?" The two guards had ignored me. Instead they immediately began searching our room.

"We are searching every room in case the thief is still here," the innkeeper said with an apologetic smile.

"I was robbed and you're accusing *me*? Castina, we are leaving this inn first thing in the morning! I will not stay in an establishment that harbors thieves."

"Please, Master Paarn," he tried to calm me. "We are accusing no one. We are merely trying to protect our guests."

"A bit late for that," I said and snorted. I had chosen another name as well, just in case someone from the Assassin's Guild became too observant. Then I turned and glared at the guards, who were busy opening every drawer and searching our meager belongings. "And where were you? If you are the type of incompetents the Guild is now employing, I for one will never use you again!"

That brought the reaction I expected. "Please stand still," one said and approached me. He searched me roughly, expertly, but except for a few gold coins found nothing. He backed away, disappointed.

I straightened my clothing angrily. "Treat Castina like that and I promise you I'll break your arm."

"That will not be necessary," the innkeeper said quickly. "Are we done?" The guards nodded grimly. "In that case." He bowed. "Again I offer our heartfelt apologies for disturbing you. We will find your belongings, I promise you."

"I will make out a list and give it to you. And the address where they may be sent. I will *not* be staying here beyond this evening! I doubt I will get any sleep this night."

The innkeeper bowed once more, then left with his men. I turned and smiled at Cordita. "Excellent. Everything is going according to plan."

She sat on the bed, still shaken by the intrusion. "They'll be searching everyone, won't they?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then how do we get away with our ... loot?"

"Simple." I sat beside her and smiled. "We don't."

The following morning found us just one of the many couples checking out early. I continued my performance, informing the clerk and anyone nearby that I was completely and utterly dissatisfied with their service and their concern for their guests.

"This has never happened to us before," she said and blushed.

"A likely story. More likely the thief is in the your employ." I banged my fist on the counter for emphasis. "Your staff and the Assassin's Guild is totally incompetent!"

"As you wish, sir," she said and bowed her head in shame.

Cordita and I were stopped at the door by a guard. "Your bags," he said roughly.

"A bit late for your vigilance, isn't it?" I asked coldly as I allowed him to paw through our meager belongings.

He merely grunted. "You may pass."

"Incompetent," I said, then grabbed our bags and hurried Cordita outside.

"Now what?" she asked as we made our way through the crowd. The festival still had two days to run.

"We go back to our meeting place and wait for the others."

"But what about our money?"

"We'll take care of that later. Come, we have a long walk awaiting."

On the way I happened to pass a town crier, which gave me an idea. "Did you know our room, and rooms of others as well, was broken into last night and our possessions stolen?" I asked him during a break in his litany.

"No," he said. "Which inn?"

I told him, then gave him one of my few remaining coins. "You will be doing others a great service if you warn them that thieves are loose in Kastikaan."

"Thank you, kind sir," he said and smiled. "I will be sure to do so."

As we left him, I heard him add that information to his normal list of news and such. I suppressed a smile as several travelers immediately approached him and offered payment to learn more.

"Do you think the Assassin's Guild will be checking everyone?" Cordita asked as we continued on.

"No. They did that to us for show. And to assuage the innkeeper. They are not prepared to search everyone leaving, especially with so many here for the festival."

She gave me a shy smile. "Then you don't mind if I—practice—on our way out?"

I laughed and squeezed her lightly. "Not at all. It's always good to practice."

So she did as we journeyed back down the main road of Kastikaan into the countryside and along the river until we reached our encampment within Houff's borders. Fess had provided guards, and they were relieved to see us. "You have succeeded?" one asked.

"In a manner of speaking. You may return to the city. We'll look after everything here."

He nodded and they rode off. I set to work building a fire. The rest of my merry band should be straggling in at any time. "So how do we collect our gold?" Cordita asked as she returned with an armload of firewood.

"We aren't. I'll explain when everyone is here," I answered the surprised look on her face.

So we went about preparing for the others, Cordita trapping several hares and gathering wild vegetables while I fetched water and sorted through what we had brought back with us. Throughout the day the others returned alone or in pairs until near dark the entire group was together.

I was greatly relieved when the last arrived. Except for brief congratulations, I held off discussing our expedition until we had all eaten and were now enjoying wine that one of the early arrivals had brought back. They spent much of the time discussing their adventures among themselves so my silence was hardly noticed. I knew, however, that their newborn enthusiasm had to be extinguished lest they put themselves in danger. So I clapped my hands to get their attention. "We've all returned and I congratulate each and every one of you," I began, rising to my feet. I raised my mug and they all joined me in a victory drink. "You've made me proud. Each of you has passed the final exam. And, of course, done a great service to your homeland." Another hoist, another drink. "We are not finished, as you know." They nodded in silent agreement. "And from now on, what must be done must be done by you alone."

"What, what are you saying?" Cordita asked, dread in her voice.

"That I must be leaving you. I will be serving Pipo Fess and Houff on my own."

"But Master Gastinell," one protested. "We need you. You are our teacher!"

"And, judging by the wealth I see before me, you are all very apt pupils. But pupils nonetheless. I must emphasize that none of you, *none* of you, are at the level of even a third year Academy student. Our task was made easier because of the festival. When you return to Kastikaan, it will not be as such. The Assassin's Guild will be more watchful. I suspect the Thief's Guild will take an interest as well as they frown upon and discourage unprofessional thieves. I do not want you to stop, merely be more circumspect."

"What are we to do?" asked Theroun.

"Don't worry, I have assignments for each of you. Come, sit closer to the fire and I will give them."

First, I told them how to dispose of our profits. "Different merchants in different villages, *none* in Kastikaan." I had separated the jewelry into three piles. I held up a ring from one. "Remove the stone and melt this down into gold. Do the same with the others in this group. They will be much easier to dispose of." I pointed at the next pile. These were mostly bracelets and pins. "These are more valuable as they are. They are also less likely to be unique or commissioned items, unlike the rings. Again, only a few at a time." I pointed to the third pile, which was a collection of about anything. "These are all nearly worthless. But they will have their uses as well."

"What about the gold we left in our room?" Cordita asked.

I smiled. "I was getting to that. In two weeks, Theroun, you and Breia," I pointed to the young blonde who had shown a budding talent for forgery, "will return to Kastikaan. You will go to our inn and ask to stay in Room 114. Tell them you are celebrating your anniversary and wish to spend the night in the same room you celebrated the consummation of your marriage." Everyone laughed and Breia blushed at this. "Take this," I pointed at the cheap or fake jewelry, "with you. You will switch it with the gold and such we hid there. Cordita will tell you more when it is time."

"So we can still go to Kastikaan to ... work?" one asked.

"Yes, but only alone or as a pair. You've proven that the groupings I assigned were successful. Don't go often, and do so in disguise, but we do want to keep Kastikaan uneasy."

"What about those who visit Houff?" Theroun asked.

"No," I shook my head emphatically. "Do not steal from *anyone* who travels within your borders. Let Kastikaan earn its reputation as a haven for unlawful thievery."

"Let me emphasize again; I have only taught you the rudiments of property acquisition and disbursement." They chuckled at my synonym for my profession. "Continue to practice all your skills. Remember: *none* of you are adept enough to survive as a professional thief. If I can accomplish what I have promised Pipo Fess, those skills can be forgotten and you can return to your lives as, well, whatever you did before."

I noticed a few grumble among themselves, which did not please me. *Can't you see I'm telling you the truth?* But there was little I could do beyond warning them. So I did the next best thing. I walked up to Theroun. "Theroun, I believe this is yours," and I handed him his purse. I proceeded to walk around the campfire, returning purses or bracelets or rings I had lifted from each earlier that evening. They were silent and gazing at me in awe when I finished. "You will be dealing now with the Thief's Guild as well as the Assassin's Guild. Our venture in Kastikaan has assured that much. Am I making myself clear?" Everyone nodded, their eagerness now sufficiently squelched. "Excellent!" I clapped my hands. "We still have wine to drink. Let us celebrate these graduation ceremonies!"

Later Cordita joined me. Many of my little group had either staggered back to their homes in Houff or were sleeping by the fire. "Pipo Fess knows what you are doing?"

"Not the specifics, but she knew I wouldn't be coming back. At least not yet."

She snuggled next to me, then looked up at the sky. "Why are you helping us, Gastinell? If that is your real name."

"It is for now. I've lost my real name." *But not for long.* She looked at me but I ignored the question in her eyes. "Pipo Fess saved me. I owe her and your people my life. I may be a thief, but I repay my

debts."

She ran her fingers along my vest, unbuttoning it, then my shirt underneath and opened it. "What do I owe you?" she asked softly as she twirled a fingertip in the hairs on my chest.

"Nothing at all," I managed to say. Despite the chill of the night, I was feeling unnaturally warm.

"I disagree." Suddenly I felt her hands on my trousers, unloosening them and pulling them rapidly to my knees.

"Cordita, stop! Someone will see."

She put a finger on my lips, effectively quieting me. "It's dark. And I don't care." Then she was straddling me, on top of me, and suddenly I was within her. She kissed me, then sat up, her eyes glowing in the soft moonlight. "I want everyone to know I'm the teacher's pet."

"Yes," I whispered. Then I closed my eyes and let her lead me to our private land of enchantment.

"And why are you in Kastikaan?" the guard asked me.

The cowl of the monk's robe covered my features as I looked up at him. "I am making a pilgrimage to Cardinaul, to pray at the feet of Our Lady Wisteria."

He grunted. "Cardinaul is many days away. Why do you have no mount?"

"Ours is a poor order. When I arrive matters not, only that I do."

"Let me see your bag."

I handed my meager belongings to him. He quickly found it had nothing of interest and returned it with another grunt. I slung it over my shoulder. "Do you always treat holy men so? I have not been treated such in other lands."

"I apologize, friar. But we have had a recent spate of thievery within our borders. That is something we cannot allow for the safety and peace of mind of our citizens and visitors."

*Good.* I smiled. "I'm afraid a thief would find little of interest in what I carry. Such things happen when one strays from the proper path."

"Indeed." Another grunt. "You may go."

"Bless you. May Our Lady Wisteria smile upon you."

But he was already turning his attention to another traveler, so I walked on. It had been a long walk from the Houff borders to the walls of Kastikaan, and I was beginning to reconsider my disguise. The heavy robes were growing warmer by the minute as the noonday sun beat down on me. A disguise was a necessity; Algorph might still be in Kastikaan and I certainly couldn't risk being recognized. My attire made me immediately conspicuous, but that wasn't necessarily a disadvantage. My purpose was reconnaissance only and traveling holy men were common sights in every land.

My only concern really was for Theroun. But if he followed my instructions, waiting several weeks before returning to the inn to collect what we had hidden there and bringing the cheap and fake jewelry with him, he should get through the guards. The odds were that no one would notice the gems and such had been switched from the time he entered until he left. *If* he would follow my instructions.



But that was a concern I had for all my “students.” They had enjoyed moderate success, but they were hardly prepared for the real world of thievery. I could only hope they would not learn those lessons in the harshest fashion.

"You've come a long way, Brendell," I whispered as I made my slow way past the city and into the countryside beyond. Not only was I at war with the Guilds, but now I was under obligation to Pipo Fess and the people of Houff. The ethics of thievery demanded commitment and reasonable honesty with your client and total devotion to the Guild. One did not form bonds with people outside your family and Guild because at sometime you might be required to steal from them. A contract was a contract, the prospect a name and nothing more.

And here I was committed to helping complete strangers. For nothing (well, my life perhaps, but still ... ). If Professor Grimmire could see me now, he would be even more disappointed with me than he was before. I sighed. *Once this is done, I'm going to find another line of work.*

I continued following the river deeper into the valley. Farmholds grew scarcer as the size and density of the forest increased. It wasn't long before I came to a sawmill. It spilled across both sides of the river and by the number of men working there, I realized it was the chief industry of Kastikaan. There was a steady stream of freshly hewn lumber being brought in by horse-drawn wagons. One group of men was busy chopping off limbs, another cutting the logs into more manageable size. What interested me most was the large circular saw blades used to cut the logs into boards. The blades were positioned vertically on an axle. Handles were attached on either side of the axle, with three men on each handle turning the blade as rapidly as they could. Other men guided the logs into the blade itself, pushing the log through and out the other side. I wondered how they could avoid being injured, then noticed that when the log was nearly halved, another was brought in behind it, pushing the first log completely through and taking its place in line. The halved logs were taken to the next saw and the process repeated until regular boards were all that was left. Those were then stacked on waiting wagons, which were driven to the barges waiting on the river.

It was an amazing enterprise, and the sight of the men hard at work made me both tired and hungry. So I wandered down to the massive building sitting alone and seemingly empty to the south. As I approached, I smelled meat cooking and tea boiling; it had to be the cookhouse. Perhaps they'll take pity on a wandering pilgrim, I thought as I opened the door and entered.

The room was filled with empty wooden tables and benches. In the rear, I could see the kitchen staff hard at work preparing for the horde of hungry workers invading them soon. I stood silently watching and enjoying the aromas until one of the cooks turned and noticed me. “What do you want?” he asked, although not unkindly.

I held my head low, too humble to look him in the eye. “Good sir, as you can see I am just a lowly friar, making a pilgrimage to far-off Cardinaul. As I was walking past, I couldn't ignore the delightful smell of your cooking.”

"You're hungry!" He beamed at me. “Of course we will be delighted to feed you! What would you like?”

"A potato or two would suffice, if that would not be an inconvenience."

"Bah. You need more than that. If you are walking to Cardinaul, you have a long, difficult journey before you. Sit at that table," and he pointed with his spoon. “We'll put some meat on those ribs.”

"May Our Lady Wisteria bless you."

I did as ordered and soon I had a platter piled high with vegetables, meat and a nice slice of cheese. The

cook set a pitcher of water next to me. "Enjoy."

"I hope you don't get in any trouble for this," I said between mouthfuls.

He pounded his chest proudly. "I run the kitchen. No one will question me. But you may want to be gone before the workers arrive."

"Of course." He remained so I took the opportunity to chat. "This is a marvelous operation you have."

He nodded. "Yes. Fortunately, our work is nearly done for the season."

"Really? You stop in the fall, then?"

"The lumbermen will stop by the next full moon. Then it's just a matter of raising the river so the barges can be taken to Campris."

I favored him with raised eyebrows. "Raise the river? The work of demons or the gods?"

"Neither, good friar. The other realm is not involved. Since we completed the Wall about five seasons past, transporting our lumber has become much easier and more profitable. If your path continues along the river, you'll come across it."

"I look forward to that. I will give it my blessing as I pass."

"Wonderful! Now if you'll excuse me, I must ensure my staff is staying on their tasks."

I waved at him with a full fork. "You have been much too kind." I hastened through my meal, now eager to see what this "Wall" could be. It had to be the dam Pipo Fess believed closed the river. Thanks to the cook I knew why. Now it was time to learn how. And just what I could do to stop it.

Now well fed, I left the lumber camp and followed the river east, my pockets filled with cheese and bread. The river narrowed as the elevation slowly rose. Several times I passed teams of men and horses pulling the laden barges upstream against the current. Time-consuming indeed, but considerably easier than trying to drive wagons through the thick forest. So I walked for several more hours, enjoying the coolness of the forest and meeting no one save teams of struggling workers totally preoccupied with the barges.

Then, among the constant din of the forest, I heard something else, a soft roar from up ahead that became more pronounced as I walked. Through the trees, I could see a wooden structure on both sides of the riverbank. It had to be the wall the cook had referred to and I ran the remaining distance to see what Kastikaan had created.

Here the mountains rose sharply, forming a natural basin at their base. The river entered through a narrow gorge; the roar I had heard was the river pouring down over a short range of rapids. Surrounding the basin was a nearly solid wooden wall. On the natural lake formed by the basin, filled barges were anchored and bobbed slowly on the water.

I sat on a rock, munching cheese and bread as I watched another barge being pulled into this safe harbor. Now I understood what Kastikaan was doing. Getting the barges this far was difficult enough; getting them up and past the rapids would be near impossible. Unless the level of the lake was raised. I focused my attention on the wall. The opening was large enough for one barge to pass. Blocking that should be relatively easy. As I studied the wall further, my appreciation of the planning and effort grew. They had even bored holes near the tops of the giant wooden posts so excess water could escape. Unfortunate, I thought, that such a great boon for the Kastikaan economy had to destroy Houff's. They

had probably not planned or realized what detrimental effect their work would have on their neighbors downstream. And I doubted they cared. Unfortunate also that I was going to have to stop them. And I had a good idea how.

## Kestya

"Bikken! It's been much too long." Baron Vincin greeted me with a hearty handshake. "You don't have any more of Ensten's discoveries with you, do you?"

"Sorry," I said, shaking my head. Using that alias, I had first visited Baron Vincin after the disaster involving the mad genius Ensten, a dreamer who had died at the behest of the Guilds. A dreamer who had died because of me.

It had taken me two months to travel from Campris to Kestya, the Baron's home. Two months that, beyond a message sent to Pipo Fess, kept me completely out of contact with Houff.

"Most unfortunate," the Baron said. "Your help was invaluable. I've been able to recreate his fire salt, improve upon it, actually. I've built a few of his devices as well, but I'm not sure if they are working. Not sure what they are to do, actually." He studied me. "Perhaps you could look at them, remember something that would be helpful."

"I didn't work with him that long," I said with a sad smile. Which was the truth. "Ensten wasn't always forthcoming with his inventions, their purpose or how they worked. Once he was done with them, he lost interest rather quickly."

"Shame. I enjoyed our correspondence even though we never met."

He and Ensten had communicated via birds. I wished that were possible with Pipo Fess. Or my father. "Yes, he felt the same way himself. Spoke about you often."

"Indeed." He sat back and sipped his wine. I did the same. Even though it had taken two months to get here, I had traveled as fast as I could, over land, sea and land again, finally arriving on an exhausted mount less than an hour previous. Now I was more than content to sit in a comfortable chair and relax.

Finally he asked the obvious. "Since you bring no wonders from Ensten, why are you here? Are you seeking employment?"

He assumed I had been Ensten's assistant, when I had really been sent to steal the Far Glass. Which I had done. Which had led directly to Ensten's death. "No. Your assistance. I would like to purchase a quantity of fire salt."

"Really?" He frowned. "I do not keep quantities on hand. I've found it can be quite dangerous if handled improperly. Which, I'm sure, you know. Why not just make your own?"

I blushed. "I don't know how."

That startled him. "You did give me the formula."

No reason to lie. "I forgot it. I am not the genius you and Ensten are."

"Disappointing, Bikken. A good lab assistant would never be so careless."

"I guess I was never that good a lab assistant. Ensten was very effective at keeping his secrets. He wrote his notes in a code I couldn't read. I was fortunate to save what little I could."

He nodded sagely. "True. I write in code myself. I'm sorry, I judged you too harshly, Bikken. Could I ask what you need it for?"

"My village needs to clear some land for farming. I thought the fire salt could help."

He considered. "Yes, I suppose it could. In much larger quantities than I've experimented with. You *will* be careful with it, not let the formula fall into irresponsible hands?"

"Absolutely. I will destroy the formula after I am finished."

He ruminated some more. "It's only right, I suppose. You gave it to me in the first place. So be it." He went to his desk and returned with quill, ink and paper. "Here you are," he said after a moment's writing and handed me a folded paper. "Ensten's original fire salt with my minor improvements."

I glanced at it and whistled softly. The ingredients—niter, charcoal, sulfur—were so ordinary it was hard to understand why it hadn't been discovered before. Or why it helped cause Ensten's murder. I placed it in my pouch. "My village and I thank you, Baron. Now I must hurry back so we can have our fields ready before the spring planting."

"Of course. Good luck, Bikken."

"Thank you. And good luck to you." I hurried out the door before the Baron could reconsider my transparent tale.

On my ride back to the nearest port, I considered the aftermath of what I was planning to do. If it worked, Kastikaan would survive; they would just have to return to their old way of transporting lumber overland instead of by water. But there would be an economic setback. One they were not going to take lightly.

They would surely blame Houff as Houff had the most to gain, which meant additional problems with the Assassin's Guild. And no matter how effective my little army of thieves might be, they would never obtain enough wealth so Pipo Fess could hire members of the Guild to help her. Which meant she or I had to obtain protection from somewhere else. Unfortunately, I had a good idea where I could get it.

"It's been a long time, Bourherr Gastinell," Pipo Fess scolded me gently. "The seasons have changed twice since you left."

"It couldn't be helped." I selected a haunch of mutton from the many platters of food before me. "Kestya is a long ways off."

"I have been told as much. Still we are relieved you are back."

"As am I."

"When will you resume the training?"

I looked at her in surprise. "I'm not sure that will be necessary. Not if what I have brought with me succeeds." I had already told her about the dam Kastikaan had constructed, its true purpose and how it might be eliminated upon my arrival in Houff.

"As you can see," she pointed at the feast laid out before us, "your other plan has worked exceptionally well. It has been moons since our coffers were this full."

*I was afraid this might happen.* I set my meal aside and stared in her eyes. "I will tell you what I told my students: thievery is not a profession to enter in lightly. They have been fortunate they have not been caught. Sooner or later it *will* happen. I must believe the Thief's Guild is already becoming curious. You already have the Assassin's Guild armed against you. You don't want my former Guild as an enemy also."

"I'm sure if you train them properly, that danger can be avoided," she said over her glass. "Those you chose have taken eagerly to—how did you refer to it?—property reallocation. Their efforts have saved their homeland. Yet there is so much more they can do. *Want* to do."

"Isn't getting back to your old way of life more important?" Even as I said it, I knew that would be impossible.

"I never wanted to preside over a nation of thieves, Gestinell. But I don't want to depend entirely on rain, the river and the good intentions of Kastikaan to survive, either."

"You won't. But there are other ways."

Fess stared at me darkly. "If you were one of my subjects, we would not be having this discussion. However, you are still in my debt, Gestinell."

I set down my fork. "True enough. I will talk with the class tomorrow." *But they won't like what they hear.*

We met in the same room of Fess' manor as our original classes had been held. I was relieved once again that none of my students had been caught. I was especially relieved Cordita was among them. "So. Pipo Fess assures me you all have been working hard in my absence." They were eager to tell me of their successes, so I listened patiently while each described their adventures. I yawned when the last one finished. "Is that all? And you dare call yourselves thieves?"

They stared at me, their emotions ranging from shock and embarrassment to outright anger. "We've done everything you said," one finally offered.

"No, you haven't. You've been robbing the blind, stealing from sheep. None of you have been face to face with a demon, stood on the gallows with a noose around his neck, entered a castle guarded by the living and dead, made off with anything of real value. If I allow you to continue, you will abase the honor of my entire profession."

"We obey the will of Pipo Fess," said Cordita coldly. "In everything we do."

*Everything?* That led to possibilities I did not want to explore. "Soon our troubles with Kastikaan will be over. You can return to your lives as farmers or," I nodded to Cordita, "innkeepers. It's best that way. Trust me."

They muttered amongst themselves and more than one favored me with a dark glare. "You're a thief. Why should we trust a thief?" Theroun said.

"You did everything I told you to do, correct? And you were able to obtain the wealth Houff needed to survive thus far. That will change, especially after we deal with the treachery of Kastikaan. What lies ahead will be much more trying than what you've dealt with up to now. Petty theft is not going to be the answer."

"What exactly lies ahead?" asked Cordita.

I had spoken the truth until now. I saw no reason to change. "Quite possibly war."

Cordita sought me out after I had dismissed the class. "What are you doing, Bourherr Gestinell? What are you doing to Houff?"

I sat and placed her on my lap. "Like you, I am obeying the will of Pipo Fess."

She wriggled in anger, not an unpleasant sensation for me. "But ... war! There can be no war. The Assassin's Guild will never allow it!"

"I'm afraid the Assassin's Guild will be fighting it. Don't you understand, Cordita? The Guilds have lied to you." *Just as they lied to me.*

"This makes no sense. We couldn't afford the Assassin's Guild; that's the reason they wouldn't work for us. But now we can."

"No. The Assassin's Guild is working exclusively for Kastikaan. Pipo Fess told me she could not hire the Guild because they refused."

She stared at me, unable to believe. "But the Guild doesn't do that. They never take sides!"

"That's what they want you to believe. They've *told* me as much. They are using you against Kastikaan, just like they tried to use me against you. I've seen what they will do for the honor of their Guild. You cannot expect their protection no matter how much gold is in your coffers."

Her gaze dropped to her hands clutched in her lap. "We have no hope. We can not prevail against the Guild."

"Perhaps we cannot defeat them, but we might be able to discourage them."

She looked up at me hopefully. "What does Pipo Fess say?"

I smiled. "She has said nothing. But she knows. She has to. She is a strong leader, Cordita. She only does what she must."

She steeled herself. "Whatever she says shall be done."

I placed one arm on her shoulders. Did I dare ask what was on my lips, in my heart? I had no choice. "Did Pipo Fess give you any orders on how to act toward me?"

She frowned. "To follow your instructions, of course. We were all told that."

"I mean, anything else. Anything ... more personal?"

The surprise in her eyes turned to anger. "Are you asking ... damn you, Gastinell! You *dare* imply I was your whore on the behest of Pipo Fess?!" Then she slapped me across the face. Hard. "If you think you will *ever* share my bed again, you are as foolish as a newborn goose."

She stalked away while I sat there in silence, rubbing my aching cheek. Funny, I thought as I finally left. Over the years I had stolen just about everything, from a 10-foot statue and a demonic disk to a stolen scepter and a baron's peace of mind. But how could I possibly steal Cordita's heart?

"I've received many complaints about you, Gastinell. You greatly upset the men and women I provided you."

I looked across the dinner table at Pipo Fess. It was now an hour after I had dismissed my class and I was more interested in eating. "What I did was entirely necessary. If I am successful, there will be no need for any of them to be anything but the peaceful farmers they once were."

She rubbed her chin, deep in thought. "Yet you also warned them that we will be at war. Presumably both with Kastikaan and the Assassin's Guild."

"I wish I could lie. If I am successful, I fear it will be inevitable."

She slammed her fist on the table. "I cannot put my people in such jeopardy! You shall not do this."

I remained unmoved. "Your people are *already* in jeopardy. What they've stolen has bought you a little time, nothing more. Your farmers will continue to suffer every year as long as Kastikaan dams the river. And they have no intention of stopping." I set down my fork and leaned forward. "I will do whatever you wish. But we both know things cannot continue as they are, relying upon theft to finance your kingdom. Sooner or later, one or more is going to be caught. Your secret will inevitably get out. If not Kastikaan or the Assassin's Guild, the Thief's Guild will descend upon you."

"I should never have listened to you. I should never have allowed this to happen." She shook her head.

I sat back and drank some water before answering. "Your enemy is Kastikaan, not me. The dam they built put you in this situation. I provided you a temporary solution to your problem. Now I can provide a more permanent one. Or you can do nothing and watch Houff wither and die around you. Your choice." I immediately returned my attention to my meal.

"What are you planning to do?" she asked after a prolonged silence.

"Remove the dam, of course."

"How?"

"You don't need to know."

Her eyes darkened briefly. "Do you need assistance?" she asked after another pause.

"No. Best I do this myself." *Especially if my plan doesn't work.* Then I sighed and sat back. "If I succeed, I won't be coming back for quite some time."

She favored me with a slight smile. "I thought as much. Your debt to me would be more than fully repaid if you do."

*Perhaps. But not my debt to the Assassin's Guild or Thief's Guild.* "What I'll have to do will require some time. If I come back, we may have the power to completely discourage Kastikaan and the Assassin's Guild."

"If you come back," she whispered. "Why are you doing this, Gastinell? You owe no real allegiance to me or to Houff. I consider any debt of yours paid in full."

"Perhaps. We're both at war, your highness. The Thief's Guild stole my life, the Assassin's Guild stole my name. I want them back. You've helped me get what I want. Now I'll help you get what we *both* want." Then I shrugged. "Or you can say no and I'll go on my way." I rose. "You can give me your answer in the morning."

"No need for that," she said and smiled grimly. "Houff will help you as best we can. Good luck, Bourherr Gastinell."

I paused at the door. "Brendell. My name is Brendell." *And I am going to get it back!*

"Here is your sulfur." The pharmacologist set the bag on the counter. "Three lead coins."

"Excellent." I dutifully counted out the coins and handed them to the Kastikaan merchant. "Thank you for your prompt service."



"That is quite a supply. That would last most of my customers a full year."

I shrugged. "I have a great problem with insects in my fruit cellar during the winter. I find that burning it helps keep them away."

He said nothing else and I left whistling to hoist the bag on the back of my horse. He was probably just grateful to have a customer and only wanted to chat, not pry, I decided. Being a lumbering town, Kastikaan was a slumbering town in the winter. Only one inn remained open and the presence of the Assassin's Guild was drastically curtailed. I had been stopped when entering, but whether due to my alibi or the weather, the Guild guard quickly let me continue. So I did, to three different merchants for the three ingredients used in Baron Vinci's recipe for fire salt. Then it was directly out of Kastikaan and east toward the lumber camp.

That wasn't entirely closed. They would still do some logging in the winter, but with the river frozen and the main roads snow-covered, felled trees would just be left to harvest later. The real work was probably getting the equipment ready for spring. I noticed lights and smoke rising from the chimney of the cookhouse and I wondered briefly if I should stop and perhaps cadge another meal from the friendly head cook, but quickly changed my mind. I wanted to get this done as quickly as possible because the Assassin's Guild would soon be after me.

So I continued east, my horse protesting constantly as we made our slow way along the frozen river until we reached the dam. It was open now; Fess had told me the river was only blocked off for several months. Which was sufficient to once again nearly destroy their crops. I had already pitched a tent and went directly there. It wasn't much of a tent, more a windbreak that blocked the wind but not the cold. I already had four empty casks waiting. I secured my horse, then opened the sacks and started mixing.

The instructions weren't complicated and I was trained in making and blending paints for counterfeiting, so getting the right proportions for Ensten's/Vinci's fire salt was no problem. I had practiced while in Houff, but never with quantities this large. Within the hour I had the four casks filled, plus some powder left to ignite them.

One more thing to do. I led my mount up the gently rising slope to the natural basin above. There were no barges on the small lake now. It and the section of rapids beyond were ice-covered. I had debated setting my fire salt here, then determined there would be more damage wrought at the base of the wall. I tied my mount to a tree, then walked a good distance into the woods before returning, careful to step in my own tracks. I did such side trips several more times as I led my horse up along the rapids to the level section above. The Assassin's Guild was going to be after me and they were going to be very determined, so anything I could do to distract them—such as laying false trails into the woods—could only help.

But I had no intention of traveling through the forest, not immediately at least. Instead I tore the now-empty sacks of sulfur, saltpeter and charcoal into strips and tied them around my mount's hooves. Since the river was frozen over, we were taking that route. The rags would give my mount better traction and help hide our steps as I led him on the ice. It would be slow going I knew, but not much worse than trying to ride through a snow-burdened forest. I tied him to a branch overhanging the river and patted his muzzle. His eyes were wide with fear and recrimination. "I know," I tried to reassure him. "But it's the only way. I won't be gone long." Then back for my casks and to the base of the wall.

I had practiced this as well. The fact the river was frozen over was a benefit; the fire salt burned as easily and quickly on snow and ice as on bare ground. It was a simple matter of placing the filled casks where I assumed they would do the most good, then pouring more fire salt from each to one central point. Once lit by my torch, the strands of fire salt would burn all the way to the casks, setting those on fire. Those

would catch the dam on fire and that would be that.

Or so I thought. I ignited the fire salt and it burned merrily just as I expected. I started running up the slope, all the while watching the rapid progress of the fire. This is going to work, I was congratulating myself as the fire reached the casks.

And then I thought the world ended. There was a sound like thunder, but louder and closer than I have ever experienced. Then it was as if a tornado had seized me. I found myself flying through the air, landing a good ten feet away in snow covered bushes. It took several minutes before I recovered. *What happened?* I looked back at the dam, expecting the great wooden wall to be burning.

It wasn't there. At least most of it wasn't. Smoke and snow were rising in great plumes from the base of the wall. Only the bottommost ends of the wall remained, the rest having just disappeared like chalk erased from slate. The ice was shattered on the small lake and river and water was once again running freely down the gentle slope to the valley.

I staggered to my feet gasping for breath. *This* had never happened in my tests. A pop and flash of light, yes, but nothing like *this*. I had watched Ensten develop his fire salt and it had burned, but nothing else. Baron Vinci never suggested this would happen either.

But I didn't have time to ponder these unexpected results. There was absolutely no doubt the Assassin's Guild would be here shortly, so I scrambled up the slope to where my mount waited.

The poor creature was terrified and it took all my attention to untie him and begin leading him up the river. I was relieved that the mountains that surrounded us were not heavily burdened with snow. That roar caused by the erupting fire salt would surely have caused an avalanche.

Leading a terrified animal up a frozen river was slow going, as I knew it would be. But I continued until night began to fall, stopping only long enough to wrap rags around my shoes for better traction. Only when it was dark did I finally leave the river for the forest. Even then I eschewed a fire, instead wrapping myself in heavy blankets and tried to get some sleep.

But it wasn't just the cold that kept me awake. I had planned to destroy the dam, but I never expected to be so successful. This isn't the first time your plans have gone astray, Brendell, I reminded myself. The merchant Greymark, destroyed by my actions. The mad genius Ensten, hunted down by the Guilds after I revealed his secrets. Meriz UllMerr, Lord Bandikane, even, to some extent, my own father. And now I had surely brought about the possible destruction of Houff ... and my own. Enough, I scolded myself. *You know what you have to do now.*

Which was simply to break into the Guild Archives. It was not a comforting thought.

## Mohantasset

I didn't reach Mohantasset until late spring. Monhasset, capital and largest city in the kingdom of Surkarii. Trading and shipping center of the entire region. Every Guild had its headquarters here and I now found myself standing before the impressive edifice housing the Thief's Guild. A statue of Braznell, the founder of the Guild, stood proudly outside the entrance. At an earlier time, just hearing his name had filled me with awe. Now it merely symbolized betrayal.

I walked across the crowded street to an inn and found a seat near the window so I could study the headquarters in comfort. Somewhere within were the Guild archives. Actually all regional offices had archives, where items both valuable and profane were held. The most valuable or dangerous, however, were kept here. Including the Dragon Clause, the contract I had stolen from Lord Bandikane. The contract which gave the holder total control over the evil dragon Madnizaroc. To save Houff, and myself, I had to regain that contract.

I sipped some root tea and sighed. I didn't know where it would be. Didn't know even if the Guild still possessed it despite my warnings. They were not above selling such items to the highest bidder. And I had to break into Guild headquarters, something much more difficult than robbing a small district office. I finished my modest meal quickly. Time to find a room and begin my surveillance.

My accommodations were well-appointed, which was a refreshing change. I had spent most of my journey from Kastikaan living off the land, only twice staying briefly at friendly farmholds. When I finally reached the nearest port, my beard was fully grown, my clothing ragged. I retained the beard but replaced everything else from money obtained by some judicious thievery. Just a coin or jewel here and there, not enough to catch the attention of the Assassin's or Thief's Guild. I arranged passage on one ship by trading transport for deck hand, not the most enjoyable way to travel but the least conspicuous. Then overland to another port, another ship, making my slow way northwest to Mohantasset. In all that time I had no contact with Houff, heard nothing about what repercussions my destruction of the dam had wrought.

That was the frustrating part. My efforts to protect Houff may already be in vain, but I couldn't know until I finally returned. *If* I finally returned. I should have brought a magical tether, I scolded myself. Attached it to a note or something so Pipo Fess would know I was doing everything I could on her behalf. Or the birds Ensten had used to communicate with Baron Vincin. I could only hope Pipo Fess could prevail until I was ready.

I had dinner at the same inn. The streets of Mohantasset remained lit and crowded long through the evening. I noticed that every room within the Thief's Guild headquarters remained lit as well. That didn't necessarily mean every room was occupied, as a lit room could prove a deterrent to inexperienced thieves. But there was a slow and steady stream of people in and out of the building long after sunset. Most I assumed were successful thieves reporting in after fulfilling a contract or the occasional customer hiring the Guild.

After the inn closed, I spent an hour walking the streets around the headquarters. The buildings were packed solidly together with only narrow alleys between each to allow deliveries in the rear. I noticed guards patrolling the Guild rooftop as well as stationed near the entrance. If they were in the front, more were probably in the rear. Not impossible to avoid, but a consideration nonetheless. When I finally returned to my room, the streets were emptying and a light rain was beginning to fall.

Still I was satisfied. That many guards meant the true treasures of the Guild Archives were stored there, not somewhere else. There would be no such reason for so many guards otherwise. Of course it also

meant guards would be inside. But then the Guild had taught me how to avoid guards. I was going to make them regret that.

The following morning found me once again standing outside the Guild headquarters. Today I was clad in the rich robes and adornments that would befit a wealthy baron. My head and beard were shaved, my body anointed with aromatic oils. All that I was lacking was an entourage, but that could not be helped. I walked to the massive door and took a deep breath. *If anyone recognized me...*

I forced the thought aside. The appearance and promise of wealth was still the most effective means of deflecting suspicion. I opened the door and entered.

The Guild headquarters was as well-appointed as any castle or manor. Marble floors and columns, rich tapestries on the walls, gold and silver statuary resting on hand-carved tables, ornate vases filled with fresh flowers. Everything was designed to convince prospective clients that the Guild was always successful in its contracts, and I wondered how many of these items had been stolen and purchased by the Guild at a mere percentage of their true value. There was an attractive young woman seated behind a desk at the end of the hall. I approached her as if such a duty was unworthy of me. "I am Regent Horis Tykonnu. I need to speak to whoever is in charge immediately," I said to her welcoming smile.

"Good morning, Master Tykonnu," she said warmly.

"Regent."

Her smile quivered. "Regent Tykonnu. How may we help you?"

"I need to speak to the man in charge immediately."

"The Guild master is very busy at the moment," she said after a pause. "Perhaps if you would tell me why you are here, I could direct you to someone else who can assist you."

I straightened myself and glared at her. "My intentions are none of your affair. I have traveled a long way at great inconvenience and expense to Mohantasset. I do not have the time to waste talking to underlings. Summon the person in charge immediately!"

"Sir," she pointed down the hall, where others were sitting patiently for their own appointments, "as you can see, others arrived before you did. If you would just take a seat..."

I slammed my fist on her desk. The sound echoed off the wood and marble and caught everyone's attention. "I wait for no one! I am Regent Horis Tykonnu. Tell your master I must see him now!"

"I will see what I can do," she said after long consideration. "Please have a seat."

"I will wait here."

"If you wish." I suppressed a smile as she reluctantly entered a side room. During my years as an apprentice, I had often dealt with the insufferable rich. It was enjoyable to play one for a change.

After a few minutes she returned, not at all pleased. "The Guild master will see you, Regent Tykonnu."

"Excellent!" For the first time I smiled at her. "For your efforts," and I dropped several lead coins on her desk before entering the office she had just left.

The Guild master was waiting at the door when I entered. "Regent Tykonnu. I am delighted to meet you," and he held out his hand.

"As well you should be," I said, ignoring it. Instead I took a seat at his desk. "Let us get down to business. My ship leaves this afternoon."

The Guild master's smile never wavered, he being long accustomed to dealing with surly clients. "As you wish." He sat behind his desk and picked up a quill. On his desk was a standard contract waiting to be filled out and signed. "What item are you interested in us procuring for you?"

"I have been told it has already been procured."

He frowned. "I don't understand."

"I wish to purchase the Disk of Gnarunia. I have been told it is in your possession."

He set down his quill. "I wouldn't know. Why would you think we own it?"

I pretended to be controlling my anger. "I have spent many years searching for the Disk. I know it was once owned by the magician Coberan, then obtained for the merchant Greymark by one of your members. After that, the Disk appears to have disappeared. I have been told by others, however, that your Guild purchases certain items of interest. I am here to buy it."

The Guild master sat back. "It is true we occasionally purchase items acquired by our members. However, I cannot be expected to know of everything we may have stored in our archives."

I leaned forward. "Then bring me someone who can."

He forced a smile. "Regent Tykonnu, you must understand that what you are requesting is highly unusual. The Guild must value the privacy of both its members and its clients."

"Your protocols are no concern of mine." I pulled out my purse and set forty gold coins on his desk. I had lifted the purse earlier that morning from a rich traveling merchant while he was enjoying breakfast. "If you have the Disk, I will pay you fairly for it. Plus," and I set ten more coins on a separate pile, "extra for your assistance."

Although he tried to remain calm, I noticed sweat forming on his forehead. He took the ten coins and put them in his pocket. "I will arrange to have an archivist meet you. Please wait; I shall return shortly."

After he left, I took the remaining coins and returned them to my stolen purse. I would have other uses for them later since I had no intention of purchasing the Disk. After a short wait, the Guild master returned with another in tow. "I've made arrangements, Regent. Chistano here will take you to the Archivist."

*Excellent.* "Then perhaps we can do business. You," I pointed at the aide, "lead the way."

I followed my guide silently down the hall and into the cellars below. I noticed a few of the patrolling guards study me with surprise and suspicion, but the presence of Chistano got us swift passage. I pretended to be bored but I was far from it as we made our way through the twisting stone corridors. Light was provided by torches on the wall. Doors leading to side rooms were frequent—and locked. Occasionally I heard unrecognizable sounds coming from the locked rooms. Animals or demons? I wondered. If the latter, then doubtless some of the rooms were protected by magical as well as physical locks. That was not encouraging as such locks are often individually prepared by magicians and can only be removed by the same. If the dragon clause was protected by such a lock, my task became even more difficult.

We descended several more flights of stairs until I was led into a large room. The walls were lined with

shelves and they were sagging from the weight of books, small statuary and a myriad of other objects, one of which I recognized. Seated at a desk, which was also piled high with various items, waited the Guild archivist.

He bounded from his seat when I entered, a large smile on his wrinkled face. "Greetings! Welcome! Come in!" He grabbed my hand and shook it as if priming a pump. "How can we help you today?"

I knew it was going to be difficult to maintain my imperious air before a man who barely rose to my waist. Fortunately Chistano had left me alone with the archivist so it wasn't necessary. "You were informed why I am here?"

"No. Is that important?"

"Most definitely. I am inquiring about a certain treasure you may have."

"Treasures. Yes," he nodded eagerly. "As you can see," and he pointed at the bookshelves, "we own items both rare and valuable. Some even *invaluable* if you will," and he winked. "That onyx globe, for example. It is said that if you whisper the proper spell, you will be immediately transported to any location you desire."

*Interesting.* "And you know the spell?"

He smiled sadly. "Alas, we have yet to uncover it. I alone have spent hours perusing texts sacred and profane hoping to discover the solution." He shrugged. "Perhaps it is a mere tale, designed to increase the item's value beyond what it would normally be."

"What I am seeking has true magical powers." *Which I know all too well.*

He opened the massive volume in front of him. "And that would be?"

"The Disk of Gnarunia"

"The Disk of Gnarunia. Hmm. I believe I have heard of it. Let me see." He began leafing feverishly through the book. After about five minutes he sat back smiling in triumph. "Yes, we indeed possess it. One of our members obtained it quite a few years ago at great danger to himself."

"You have it here?"

"According to this inventory, indeed we do! Most rare, most rare and unique."

"I am interested in purchasing it. Retrieve it, please."

He looked at his ledger again. "That will take some time. We have it stored on another floor under demon guard."

"I can wait. The disk is extremely important to me."

"I will return shortly."

I waited until he closed the door behind him, then started searching through his ledger. How would they have it listed? I wondered as I turned the pages. Items were arranged roughly in alphabetical order, and I noticed more than one had a heavy black line drawn through it. I could only assume the item had been sold. First I tried "d" for dragon, but that led nowhere. Then I tried to find Madnizaroc, the name of the dragon. Again nothing. *Could it be under my name?* I searched for Brendell, but again nothing. But then I noticed the name of Lord Bandikane. The man from whom I had stolen the contract.

There was no other description, just the name and a number beside it. It had to be the dragon clause, as nothing else had been stolen from the Lord to my knowledge. He had owned nothing else of real value and Madnizaroc—and the Lord's own traps—had proven to be a most effective deterrent against surreptitious property procurement. I memorized the number, then returned the ledger to the page listing the disk.

One more thing. I went to one of the shells and picked up a simple brass cylinder. It was the Far Glass, the item that had led to the eventual death of Ensten at the hands of the Assassin's Guild. Judging by the dust on it and the other items, it had been ignored for months at least. This was an unexpected boon I couldn't ignore. I stuck it inside my sleeve, then returned to my chair and waited.

My stomach was beginning to growl in protest when the archivist finally returned. He set something wrapped in black velvet proudly on his disk. "Here it is, the Disk of Gnarunia! A most valuable item indeed."

*Not anymore.* "May I see it?"

"Of course." He unwrapped it and my breath caught when it was revealed in all its unholy glory. This disk had led directly to the unplanned death of the merchant Greymark. I ran my fingers across the silver runes etched in the black stone. "There is something wrong."

The archivist frowned. "What do you mean? I assure you this is indeed the Disk of Gnarunia."

"That may be true," and I pointed at the runes. "But I have been studying everything available on the disk, and these runes are not right. They have been changed."

"Really?" He made a moue as he ran his fingers across his lips. "I do seem to recall that the member who obtained it had done something to it. Altered it in some way."

"There is no doubt." I stood. "Summon my guide. I must talk to the Guild master."

He smiled sadly. "If you wish. Is there anything else you might be interested in?"

*Did I dare ask?* No, I had risked enough. "I am afraid not. But I do thank you for your assistance."

The archivist nodded, then left. He returned shortly with another guard. "He will lead you back to the Guild offices. One can get lost down here very easily."

I nodded stiffly and followed the guard down the hall. Once beyond the archivist, I resumed my obnoxious air, complaining unceasingly about the temperature, the smells, the dampness, the unfortunate necessity of having to meet personally with an underling. All the while, however, I was noticing the room numbers, hoping to find the one I wanted. When I finally entered the Guild master's office, he was surprised I was carrying nothing. "Where is the disk? The archivist couldn't find it?"

"The disk has been damaged beyond all salvation. *Someone* altered the runes. It is totally worthless, as you well know. I came to Mohantasset at great expense and inconvenience for absolutely nothing!"

He tried desperately to appease me, hoping no doubt he could still earn a profit. "Surely, Master Tykonnu..."

*"Regent Tykonnu."*

"Regent. There may be something else that will suffice. We have many other magical relics in our vaults."

"Your archivist said as much. Only the disk is of any interest to me." I rose regally. "I have wasted too much time here. I shall leave now. I assure you your superiors will hear of this incompetence."

"Your complaints will be duly noted," he muttered to my retreating back. I made sure to slam his door behind me, then continued down the hallway favoring everyone with threatening glares.

I was staying at a nearby inn. I went directly to my room and quickly disrobed. When I left, I bore little resemblance to the Regent Horis Tykonnu. I now had a full beard and short brown hair. I wore a simple blue jerkin and trousers. I even walked with a limp, courtesy of the stone placed in my left boot. To anyone save the most curious, I would arouse no more interest than the wind. Carrying a single tote, I went directly to a different inn, where I already had reserved a room under a different name. Now it was a simple matter of waiting until nightfall.

That evening found me once again on the city streets and near the Guild headquarters. My attention was now on the building next to it. Here the windows were dark, the doors locked, no one entering or leaving. Except me, and not through the front. I ducked into the alley between the two buildings and walked down it, hoping to find a door. No such luck.

The alley intersected another, and I saw men busy unloading wagons. I didn't hesitate. "Sorry I'm late," I said as I joined the queue of men working behind the building I had chosen to break into.

The man in front of me merely grunted. I made my slow way to the wagon, grabbed a parcel and followed another inside. I dumped it with the others and started back when someone grabbed my arm. I turned and found myself in the presence of the man I assumed was in charge. Unlike the others, his clothes were clean and he wasn't sweating. He held a ledger under one arm. "Who are you and what are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm working. Isn't it obvious? Let me go before someone starts complaining."

"I don't recognize you."

I shrugged. "Maybe it's because I've been here less than a week."

He glanced down at his ledger, then at the activity around us. "Fine. Go back to work."

I suppressed a smile as I went to retrieve another package. He probably paid little attention to his workers as his team surely went through frequent changes. In all likelihood he was relieved to have another warm body helping him. But I wouldn't help for long.

We were working on our third wagon when I decided it was time. I carried another sack inside and noticed the supervisor was involved in the far corner of the room. Instead of dropping my load with the others, I continued into the next room. One worker gave me a questioning stare. Before he could ask, I said, "I was told to take this one to the front." He shrugged and went back to his own business.

Once in the other room, I dropped my sack and looked for the stairs. It was dark but not pitch black, and I was accustomed to roaming through unlit buildings at night. I tried a few side doors and found what I was looking for.

I was on the roof within minutes. I removed the Far Glass from an inside pocket and peered through it. Once again I was amazed at the genius of Ensten. I felt I could reach out and touch the guards patrolling the roof of the Guild headquarters. One happened to look my way and I found myself ducking, even though there was no chance he could see me. No wonder, I thought as I continued to watch the guards, that the Captain's Guild desired the Far Glass and the Assassin's Guild, along with my own, was fearful of



it.

I observed the guards long enough to confirm what I expected: the guards were bored and not at all observant. They rarely glanced at the other buildings or looked down the sides of the headquarters, confident the guards patrolling below would stop anyone. And the foot patrol would only be interested in the ground and not the sky.

I went down two floors and into the first side room I found, confident I was the only one on these floors. The single window was directly across from a window in the Guild offices. I opened the window and crawled out. The distance wasn't great; I could easily jump it but there was nothing to hold onto on the other side. I needed a board but I settled for a bench. It stretched across easily and there was just enough of a ledge to keep it solid as I traversed it quickly. The window was closed and locked, but that only deterred me for a moment. Once in the room, I pulled in the bench in case I decided to leave the same way. Then it was time to go to the archives and retrieve the dragon clause.

I couldn't become careless here as the Guild and its guards would not be so unconcerned about strangers wandering the halls. It was unfortunate I had to enter on the fifth floor since I had to reach the chambers underground. It took me much longer than desirable to creep down from one floor to the next, often ducking into rooms when I heard approaching footsteps. Beyond the patrols, however, all the staff was working on the first floor or below and I was able to find a passage to the cellars at the rear of the building.

The archives themselves were not as busy. The torches cast heavy shadows here, which provided some protection. The few voices I heard were behind closed doors—voices and other sounds I had no desire to investigate. Otherwise no one else was down here, or at least roaming the corridors, and once again I was relieved at the overconfidence of the Thief's Guild.

The corridors were confusing, but I eventually came upon a door with a number near the one I was seeking. It was near a passage leading off from the main one, so I followed it. There was another door at the end, which bore the proper number.

I paused at it and strained to listen. Silence. I removed my picks but found I didn't need them as the door was unlocked. So sure of themselves, I thought as I opened it and walked inside.

Then I discovered why they didn't need a lock. There was a demon sitting on top of a nearby table. Its scaly skin was streaked in red and yellow. Its pronged tail flicked to and fro, its talons clicked eagerly. Most disconcerting were its eyes: there were at least a dozen and they seemed to circle its head. "You are trespassing," it hissed, its tongue slithering out between rows of pointed teeth.

"Just lost is all. Sorry. Didn't mean to disturb you." I took a step back.

"You aren't to be here. I should tell the guards."

"No need to do that. Really. Relax, I can find my way out."

"You came for the parchment."

I froze. "What parchment?"

"The one you call the dragon clause."

This was not going well. "How would you know that?"

"I see and know everything." It yawned and stretched. "I even know who you are."

I couldn't spend all night chatting with a demon. Especially one whose knowledge would doom me. "In that case you know I *own* the parchment. I am here to retrieve what is rightfully mine."

"You'll have to get past me to get it."

*Wonderful.* I decided to try something that had fooled a demon before. "Brocephus is here," an unseen voice suddenly arouse from somewhere.

The demon reacted not at all. "Nice try, Brendell. I saw your lips move. I would say your ventriloquism is a bit rusty."

*Oh, well.* I was losing my patience. And running out of time. "If you know so much, why did you get caught?"

"Who says I'm caught? I can leave anytime I wish. I don't choose to."

*A likely story.* Deciding it might be bound by a magical tether, I took several steps to the side. Instantly it was on the table next to me. "Going somewhere?" it asked and grinned, revealing five rows of sharpened fangs.

"Not at all. Just stretching my legs. Standing too long in one place and all. Listen, you know that parchment is mine."

"Perhaps."

I began feeling lightheaded. Perhaps it was the presence of the demon, or that I hadn't eaten in several hours. I had to end this negotiation soon. "You know I need it to save Houff."

"Hardly my concern."

"Perhaps I can free you."

"I am hardly a terrified young princess bound at the stake to satisfy a rampaging monster. I can leave here anytime I wish."

"Then go."

"Say the magic word first."

"Please?"

"Wrong answer."

"Wrong answer."

It pointed its tail at me like a teacher chastising a student. "Do you really think I would *tell* you the magic word? You'll have to do much better than that, Brendell."

I swallowed heavily. Then I had an idea, although I had no inkling why. It was worth a try, but I knew what I was going to say could kill me. But just standing here would kill me first. "If I get the parchment, I will free Madnizaroc."

Its pointed ears lurched forward. "Really?" Suddenly the creature began to shake. Smoke began pouring from it until it was totally hidden from view. Then there was a flash of light and the demon was gone.

To be replaced by a small dragon. It looked at me with red-rimmed eyes. "You know where I am, Brendell. Honor your word. Come for me and set me free. Or my minions will destroy you and everything you treasure."

It paid no attention as I walked to the safe. The Guild hadn't even bothered to lock it, so confident they could never be robbed. I took the parchment and held it before the dragon. "I'm on my way, Madnizaroc."

"Excellent. I've been waiting far too long for this moment." Another cloud of smoke and the original demon had returned. "You better hurry," it said. "Madnizaroc is eager to obtain her freedom."

What have I done? I thought as I left the room. Even while under the thrall of the parchment, she could not be trusted. If I freed her, I was dooming not only myself.

When I reached the door, I looked down the hall but it was empty, so I started back. As I walked I noticed I was feeling normal again, the bout of lightheadedness gone. Perhaps it was because I was away from the demon, I thought. Then another possibility struck like a boulder. *I was under its influence. It forced me to say I would free Madnizaroc.* I could only sigh. If I escaped from here, I now had to come up with a plan to fool the dragon.

That would have to wait. I hurried back to the first floor, then into a room on the opposite side of the building from where I had entered. The room was lit but empty. I went to the window and opened it slowly, then looked out. No guards were in sight. I crawled out, then dropped down to the alley. I didn't head toward the main street, however. Instead I went to the back and the alley that ran behind the buildings. As I expected, I was stopped by a guard as soon as I reached it. When I told him I was merely going to work, he shrugged and released me as he was long accustomed to hearing such stories. I walked down the other alley and back to my room at the inn.

When I arrived, I quickly removed my disguise and clothes, especially the stone in my boot as it was now creating a sizable hole in my foot. I stared at the parchment resting on my bed. Madnizaroc was once again under my control. But for how long? I knew the contract cut both ways since I had forged it in order to steal it from Lord Bandikane. I was as obligated to follow it as she was, even if my signature wasn't on it. Madnizaroc was under the total control of anyone who possessed it. Only the possessor of the document, or the destruction of the document, could free her. The owner of the document, however, had to honor any agreements made with her as well or the contract was immediately rendered null and void. Whether forced by the demon thrall of the dragon or not, I was going to have to eventually grant her freedom.

But I would have to determine how and when at another time. I threw what I needed in a satchel, then left my room. I retrieved my mount at the nearby stables and was on the road out of Monhasset before sunrise. I still had to journey to Mount Perjheus and retrieve a very angry dragon before I could return to Houff. Assuming it was still there.

## Houff

Those plans soon took a fork in the road. I had reached Qinim Bay just three days after Monhasset, stopping only to change mounts or a quick rest. Mount Perjheus was a long voyage north and I wanted to get there as quickly as possible. I was relaxing in a wine shop waiting impatiently for the time to board my ship when the conversation near me became too loud to ignore.

"It's demon work," one man said. Because of his drink and his temper, his face nearly matched his red jerkin. "There is no other explanation!"

"An avalanche," his companion answered. "Or maybe an earthquake."

His friend was unappeased. "You weren't there. I saw it! It was like a giant hand reached down and pushed over the great wall of Kastikaan! There was no sign of an avalanche."

"What magician has the power to do that? *Why* would he do that?"

"The Assassin's Guild is convinced it was done by Houff. There have always been rumors their leader is a witch. The two kingdoms have been at odds for years. Houff has long wanted to conquer Kastikaan."

His companion was unimpressed. "I don't believe in magicians or demons. The Assassin's Guild won't allow that in any event."

"You better start believing." They had my full attention now and I watched as he paused to finish a glass of wine. "From what I've heard, the Assassin's Guild is not going to tolerate this. They plan to destroy Houff."

His companion remained skeptical. "The Assassin's Guild doesn't attack kingdoms. Their task is to deter war, not foment it."

"This is different. Magic is involved. Houff must be stopped."

"Even without proof?" Both turned and stared in surprise at me. I didn't want to bring unwanted attention to myself, but I needed to learn more. "I'm sorry," and I smiled shyly, "but I couldn't help but overhear. I've never heard of magicians being so powerful either. I was traveling through Kastikaan just last year. When did all this happen?"

"Last winter," the man in red said. "Demons ripped the great Kastikaan wall out of the ground as if it was made of sticks!"

"An avalanche," the other insisted.

"I have seen magic," I said and set my flask of wine on the table as cost of admission. "I've never seen or heard of a magician powerful enough to do as you say."

"Demons," the red-faced man said. "The witch of Houff controls demons. But the Assassin's Guild will stop her."

"How do you know this? I'm not calling you a liar," I added quickly when he glared at me, "just curious."

"My nephew is in the Assassin's Guild. He told me," he said sullenly after a pause.

"This is most unfortunate," I said and filled their glasses from my flask. "I have done business with both Houff and Kastikaan. The people of Houff never appeared to me as anything but poor and friendly."

"They are a nation of thieves and demon-worshippers. My nephew could tell you stories that would give you nightmares for weeks! The Assassin's Guild will stop them."

*Thieves?* I sighed mentally. Despite my instructions, some had obviously continued practicing their new-learned trade ... and been caught. Professor Grimmire would be pleased, I was sure. He always said my plans would eventually fail. Pipó Fess and I had foreseen some of the future, but now that it was a reality ... "I am surprised the other Guilds would allow this to happen."

"Bah! What do you know of the Guilds? The Assassin's Guild has its bit in every mouth."

That wasn't quite true. I had, not by choice, attended a Guild Council meeting once. Each had jealously protected his territory, but in the end all had acquiesced to the majority. The memory inevitably brought me back to the harmless dreamer Ensten. His invention of the Far Glass had struck fear in both the Thief's Guild and the Assassin's Guild and they had led the debate which resulted in his eventual death.

*The Far Glass.* I still had it safely stowed in my saddlebags. The Captain's Guild had been most interested in that invention, but they had been voted down by the other Guilds. *Would they still be interested?*

"Are you done bothering us now?" The voice interrupted my unplanned reverie.

"I apologize," I said hastily. "Please enjoy the rest of my wine. A small payment for interrupting you."

"Don't do it again," the man in red said, more in disinterest than anger.

I nodded and returned to my own table, then ordered another flask while I ruminated. The fire salt. I would never use it again; it was just too dangerous. But the Miner's Guild or Logger's Guild might be interested. *But how will that help Houff?*

It was evening when I finally left the inn. My ship had long sailed but I couldn't go to Mount Perjheus right now anyway. I had no idea what to do when I got there, but I knew I had to return to Houff.

"Just what have you *done* to us, Gastinell?" Pipó Fess asked, rage in her voice and eyes. We were seated in her library. Since I had managed to sneak back into Houff, this was the first time we had been alone.

"We knew there would be difficulties," I said.

"Not like this! We are surrounded. They are choking the life out of us!"

I couldn't argue with her as I had seen it with my own eyes. I had heard increasingly distressing news as I neared Houff. But even the tales only hinted at the truth. Immediately after the destruction of the dam, Kastikaan had blamed Houff, or, specifically, Pipó Fess. Magic, they had claimed. The Assassin's Guild had immediately declared the realm as a rogue, one that must be brought down.

But they did not invade, perhaps afraid of the demons Fess supposedly controlled. Instead they put Houff under siege. Travelers were prevented from entering; residents who tried to leave were arrested. They couldn't blockade the river because of other communities downstream, but they could prevent any river travel or trade—except for a single person who looked remarkably like me swimming down the river at night, his possessions in a bag tied to his back. Whether the Guild believed in her magic or not, the results were the same: Houff was slowly being starved to death.

"I'm sorry. I didn't expect this."

"Just what did you do to that dam, Gastinell? They say a demon appeared in a cloud of fire and swept it aside with a swipe of a giant tallied hand."

*Amazing. No one was there to see it but me.* "Nothing that picturesque I'm afraid. I thought it would just catch fire. I didn't know the fire salt would do that."

She frowned. "Fire salt? Is that some magical device?"

"On the contrary. Anyone can make it." *But that would not be a good idea.*

"Can this fire salt help us now?"

"No," and I shook my head emphatically. "That would only confirm that Houff was somehow involved, that your magical powers are a threat to everyone. Right now the Assassin's Guild is hesitant to attack you. Use it and they won't."

She nodded grimly. "Were my powers what they are reputed to be. My people are starving, Gastinell. This must stop!"

"We need help."

"A cogent observation," she said dryly.

I had been considering this option during my long trek to Houff. "We have to get the Guilds, at least some of them, to support us."

"Why would the other Guilds defy the Assassin's Guild?"

"We have to make it worth their while."

She shook her head. "We have nothing to offer. Haven't you noticed, Gastinell? We are *poor*."

"You have the fire salt. The Miner's Guild will be very interested in it. And you have this." I set the Far Glass on the table.

She picked it up and studied it. "What is it? It appears to be nothing more than a brass tube."

"The Far Glass. I retrieved it from the Thief's Guild. That little item caused the death of an innocent dreamer at the demand of the Assassin's Guild. Look through it."

She complied ... and gasped. "You, you look so close!" She lowered the glass to confirm I hadn't moved. "This is amazing."

"Houff is going to make them and sell them."

She set the Far Glass down carefully. "We have no mines here."

"You can easily trade for the metal. You can make glass, right?"

"We have a few craftsmen that do that. Like any village."

I nodded. "For now, you only need to make a few. Melt down some brass ornaments. Have your craftsmen take this apart and study it. I suspect the secret is in the glass."

"But how will this help us?"

"The Captain's Guild will be very interested in this device," and I told her briefly about Ensten, the Far Glass and my meeting with the Guild chiefs. "We approach the Captain's Guild and offer them this device exclusively. They *will* want it."

"But what's to stop them from just stealing it? Having someone else make it?"

"That is where your magic comes in. Can you place magical tethers on them, for example?"

Pipo Fess gnawed at an apple while she ruminated. "No. But I could place a simple locking spell. It would prevent them from taking it apart without the assistance of another magician."

"Better if the item would be irrevocably destroyed if someone tried to learn its secret."

"That might be possible."

"Good." I rose. "I need to get some rest. Tomorrow I must leave again. When I return, have a supply of Far Glasses ready."

"We will try. But my people are suffering. We have little food."

"They can escape. The blockade can stop ships but not a single swimmer. Especially at night; that's how I got here. There are limbs and other things floating down that river. The Guild ignores them. You could secure bags of flour and other items beneath them. It won't be easy but it can be done."

Her eyes brightened at the possibilities. "Yes, we could do that. Or attached to the bottom of a simple fishing boat."

"It should carry you through until I return. Oh, and one more thing."

"Yes?"

"Someone from here was caught stealing, weren't they?"

She frowned. "Yes. How did you know?"

"I've heard. Everyone has heard. I told you, I told *them*, to stop."

"Since her hanging they have."

I winced. "Who was it?"

"Hassain Gilch"

After a moment I remembered her, a young brunette who had been eager but not particularly adept. I had always teamed her with someone else, her primary responsibility to act as a distraction. "I'm sorry. Do as I ask. We will win yet." I started toward the door.

"Where are you staying?"

"I have a room. I will return as soon as I can."

Cordita was more than surprised to see me again. "Bourherr, you're back!" she yelped in surprise when I entered her parent's inn. She ran up to me and hugged me until I was gasping for breath.

"Cordita," I managed to say, struggling to disengage myself before my ribs were broken. "The patrons are watching."

She frowned. "What patrons?"

True enough, there was no one else in the inn. "Sorry. I just needed to catch my breath."

She smiled shyly and ran a finger across my cheek. "Of course. Come, we must celebrate." She took my hand and pulled me to a table. "Don't leave me. We still have some wine." She returned shortly with a flagon and filled two glasses. "This is the last bottle," she said sadly after we toasted.

"That is going to change. But not immediately," I added when she smiled.

She understood what I meant. "You are leaving then." There was no recrimination in her voice, only finality.

"Yes." I reached across and held her hand. "One more time. Then I should be able to stay."

She pulled her hand away. "Do you really want to? Stay in Houff, I mean. After all the places you've been."

I decided to tell her some of the truth. "Things are difficult now, but Houff is no better or worse than other lands."

It wasn't what she was hoping to hear. "Perhaps you can show me these other lands. When you return."

I smiled at her over the rim of my glass. "I would like that."

She finished her wine in silence. I was enjoying just admiring her so I said nothing as well. We had finished the flagon when she finally spoke again. "When do you leave?"

"As soon as possible. After dark, when I can get past the guards."

"It will be dark soon."

"I know."

She looked at me shyly. "In that case you need your rest."

"True. I could use a room for a few hours. If you would."

"Of course. Come." I followed her upstairs, but she didn't lead me to a rented room. Instead I found myself in hers. She pointed to her bed. "This will suffice?"

"Absolutely. I don't mean to put you out, Cordita."

She turned and I noticed her tunic was already undone. "You're not. Now get undressed and come to bed."

I couldn't argue with that. I *did* get some sleep, but not for another hour.



## Mount Perjheus

The river was cold. When I finally made it to land after several hours swimming downstream with the current, all the while holding onto a tree limb to provide some cover from the curious, the only thing I wanted was a fire and dry clothing.

I started through the woods, flitting from tree to tree, all the while looking for sentries. I knew the Assassin's Guild would have some on duty, but not as many as during the day. After all these months of inactivity, I was confident they would be bored and relaxed. I had gotten into Houff; surely I could get out.

I had gotten perhaps 50 yards from the river bank when I heard a splashing sound, followed by a heavy sigh. A guard, I realized, relieving himself. I went to duck down behind a tree when my foot caught on an unseen root. I lost my balance and fell head-long into a bush. A bush with thorns.

Perhaps the guard would have ignored my fall as just an animal, but he couldn't ignore my yelps of pain as the thorns dug into my face and arms. "Who is that? Who is there?" he yelled out.

I managed to struggle out of the bush but immediately saw a light quickly heading my way. Could I escape? He was still yelling and I heard voices from behind me. *No way*. So I sat wiping away blood from a thousand scratches on my face and arms until he arrived.

He found me in short order. "Who are you and what are you doing here?" he asked as he approached, a lantern in one hand, a sword in the other.

"Komerran." I pointed at my clothing. Even in the dark anyone could see it was wet. "I was fishing when my boat overturned. I was fortunate to reach shore."

"Fishing at night?" The sword rose slowly toward my throat.

"Of course. They bite better at night."

"Remove your clothing."

"Why?" His sword immediately inched closer. "If you insist." I struggled to my feet, then removed my soaked jerkin and trousers. "My boots also?" He nodded and I removed them as well.

By now other guards had reached us. Several busied themselves searching my garments while the others chatted in hushed tones. "He claims he was fishing and he fell in the river," I heard my discoverer say.

"Perhaps," said another. "Or perhaps he's from Houff." He turned to the others. "Find anything?"

"Not a thing. His pockets are empty," said one.

"Should we let him go?" the first guard asked. "He can't possibly be a threat."

"That is up to the captain to decide." The new arrival approached. "If you are as you say, we shall release you shortly." He looked at the pile of wet clothing. "Here, put this on," and he handed me his cape.

"Thank you," I said, wrapping it around my shoulders, then sneezing for emphasis. "My boots."

"Our camp is close. You can dry them out by our fire. Come with us."

I followed them as best I could. If I could convince their captain I wasn't lying, I just might get away, perhaps even with dry clothing. I was already rehearsing my fabrication when we reached camp. There were a half dozen tents and three curious guards seated around the campfire. One of the guards was kind enough to spread my clothing on a log near the fire. The others kept their swords drawn, however, so I stood among them shivering while one entered the largest tent. After several minutes he reemerged, to be followed by their sleepy captain. And my hopes of release vanished like the summer dew.

"Brendell!" Algorph said my name like a powerful curse. Then he stood there, shaking in surprise and perhaps outrage.

"Good evening, Algorph," I said and nodded shyly. "Nice to see you again. I see you've been promoted. Congratulations."

"You're *dead*! I *saw* you *die*." He approached, still unconvinced I wasn't an apparition or a demon in disguise. "How?"

During my long journey back to Houff, I had tried to plan for every contingency. I had overlooked one. I mentally shook myself. *If a lie won't suffice ...* "It was that witch Pipo Fess. She imprisoned me!"

"How?" he asked again. This time he removed his dagger and held it before my eyes.

"A magical tether," I said quickly. "They didn't tie me up. When the smoke rose, she used it to transport me."

"And why would she do that?" He ran the dagger along my cheek.

"To use me just as you did. She forced me to teach her subjects how to steal. She wanted me to turn Houff into a nation of thieves."

"A most interesting tale, Brendell," he said. "All lies, of course."

"Then why am I still alive? You must know what has happened in Kastikaan. The thefts."

"I'm more interested in what happened to the wall."

*Good, he's listening.* "Her magic. She is very powerful. She is the most powerful magician I have ever met."

His men had been standing near us listening to every word. "There was an outbreak of thefts in Kastikaan," one said. "I was stationed there. They did catch a thief and she admitted she was from Houff before they hung her."

"Which should be the fate of all from Houff," Algorph said. "It shall be yours, Brendell, for aiding them."

"I told you, I had no choice. Kill me if you will, Algorph, but a death by sword is nothing compared to what she promised would happen to me if I betrayed her."

"In that case, perhaps we'll return you and let her have the pleasure." Suddenly Algorph's dagger was at my throat. "Why did she let you go?"

I forced a bitter laugh even as I swallowed bile. "A poor choice of words, Algorph. Over the months I managed to ingratiate myself with one of the guards. More than ingratiate, actually. I promised I would come back for her if she helped me escape."

"And she believed you?" Algorph laughed heartily. "You are trying my patience, Brendell."

"Do you think I was the only prisoner of that mad witch? *All* of Houff is under her thrall. Her people long for their freedom."

Algorph paused, then sheathed his knife. "Then perhaps you can help us grant their wish. You've been there; tell us about her defenses."

"You know of her demon army, of course."

"Of course."

I paused. *What fabrication would he believe? Better yet, deter him?* "She has shadow sentries placed on all her borders. No single man, let alone an army, can hope to enter and not be seen. You know what her servants can do; you saw the disaster at Kastikaan."

He nodded. "We expected as much. That is why we have chosen to blockade Houff rather than invade it. We will starve the witch to submission."

"Your children's children will still be stationed here if you're waiting for that to happen."

"What do you mean?"

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see all his men were listening intently. I couldn't have hoped for a better audience. I just hoped my tale would be as worthy. "Pipo Fess is able to obtain all the food and supplies she needs."

"Impossible!" and seconds later Algorph's dagger was resting against my throat. "We patrol the rivers and roads. No one gets in or out without us knowing."

*I did.* "That's not how she does it."

"Magic," one of the other guards said.

I took a deep breath before responding. "No, much more mundane than that. There is a tunnel leading from her manor to ... somewhere. I've seen wagonloads of supplies brought in through it."

"What?" Algorph glared at me. "Impossible! We would know of it."

I knew I had to play this lie to the end. "Why? You have spies in Houff?"

In the firelight, I could see a trace of doubt on his face. "No. But we've never heard of it."

"Pipo Fess guards her secrets closely. Like all magicians."

"Where does this tunnel lead?"

"It begins beneath her manor. I have no idea about the end. I only helped unload the wagons."

He laughed. "Which I'm sure you enjoyed immensely. I'm not sure I believe you, Brendell."

"And why should I lie? After what she's done to me?" I forced righteous anger into my voice. "I want her kingdom to fall more than you do."

Algorph stepped back, then reluctantly sheathed his dagger. "If what you say is true, Brendell..."

"It is."

"We will have much to reconsider. If she can get supplies as you state, our current efforts are useless."

*Time to play my last card.* "Not if you find her tunnel and close it down."

Algorph ruminated briefly. "Indeed. I'll have to talk to my superiors." He looked toward the river. "It would have to be on this side. She surely cannot burrow under the river."

"Not without magical assistance," I agreed.

"Yes," he replied softly. "Men, get him some clean dry clothes. Then secure him. At daylight I must speak with the commander."

"And something to eat?" I asked as Algorph started back to his tent.

"Yes," he said and shook his head. "Feed the prisoner as well."

Within a few minutes I was wearing new pants and shirt courtesy of a guard close to my side. I was then manacled and secured to a log near the fire and soon was enjoying a late meal of hare stew.

While I ate I silently congratulated myself. Algorph would indeed present my fable to his superiors, and I was sure they would act upon it. Their contingent would now be stretched to the breaking point searching for the non-existent tunnel, making it easier for food and supplies to be smuggled into Houff by land and river. More importantly, I had bought myself time to get to Mount Perjheus and back. Now all I had to do was escape from the Assassin's Guild.

I started the following morning. "Guard," I said after breakfast had been served and the guards had changed shifts, "could I have my old jerkin back?"

He looked at me coldly. He had not been there earlier and thus didn't witness my performance. But he had been told enough about me. "Why? You are a thief and our prisoner. You have no right to request anything."

"This shirt I was given, it itches and it is too large. I'm sure the man who owns it would be happy to have it back. It's of much finer material than my jerkin."

He grunted, then picked up my clothing, which had sat all night on a nearby log. "Dry enough," he said and shrugged. Then he started going through the pockets.

"They did that last night."

He merely grunted as he continued, but, finally satisfied, threw them on the ground in front of me. "Put them on."

I held up my manacled hands. "I'm afraid I'll ruin this fine shirt trying to remove it like this."

Another grunt. He released one of my hands so I could remove half the shirt and partially don my jerkin, then put the manacles back on my wrist and repeated the process with my other hand. "Happy now?" he asked as he stepped back.

He couldn't know how much. Sewn inside my jerkin was the dragon clause. Without it I had no reason to go to Mount Perjheus, perhaps no way to finally save Houff. "Yes, thank you," I replied sincerely.

Another grunt—he was the quiet type—and he returned his attention to his breakfast.

I reached across my left side as if scratching an itch. Actually I was searching for the pick I had hidden in

a seam of my leather jerkin. I was certain it was still there as one of the guards would have reacted in triumph if he had found it. They hadn't; I did. "I'm so glad you left the Academy your freshman year, Algorph," I whispered as I worked it loose. Only in the advanced courses were you taught how to hide picks in clothing and elsewhere.

Then I went to work removing my manacles. The guard looked at me once, but I appeared to be merely rubbing soreness from my ankles. By the time he finished his meal, my hands and feet were free. "I have to relieve myself," I said when he rose to take his plate back to camp.

Another grunt as he set his utensils aside, then approached to lead me into the woods. Just as he leaned over me, I jumped up, ramming my head into his chin. He gasped and fell back, his eyes already glazing over. It took me more time than I wished for my head to clear, but there was no sign anyone had noticed. I manacled him to the log and stuffed leaves in his mouth to keep him quiet for now. Then I hurried into the woods.

Not far into the woods, however. In daylight, this close to camp, I could stumble across a guard any second. Instead I selected a tall tree and climbed up as far as I could. Then I hid among the leaves and branches and waited.

It wasn't long before another guard arrived, perhaps to keep his fellow company. From my perch I could see him hurriedly releasing the captive, then yelling for help. Soon nearly a dozen guards were there, and if I strained, I could overhear bits of their conversation. Then their leader arrived and that was no longer necessary.

"He what? Who was watching him?" Even from this far, I could see his face was red with rage and I longed to have the Far Glass right now.

Several pointed to the culprit, still seated on the log, manacles loose on his legs, trying to rub away the pain from his sore jaw. The leader ran to him and jerked him to his feet. "How did this happen? How did he pick those locks?" I couldn't hear the unfortunate's reply, but it didn't appease his superior. "Algorph will take care of you when he returns." He threw the guard to the ground, then spun on his heels. "The rest of you, get into the woods and find him. He has to be going to the river."

"He won't escape, captain," one said.

"He better not. The colonel wants to question him about this tunnel. Now *get out of my sight.*"

They dispersed into the woods, leaving only their leader behind. I watched him study the manacles for a moment, shake his head, then take the path back to their main camp. I remained on my perch until I could hear nothing but insects and the breeze, then I slowly climbed down. Since I was certain the other guards were following orders and searching the riverbank, I went the other way. I approached the main camp warily, but there was no one about save the captain, and he was eating his lunch and probably trying to create an explanation about my escape that would protect him from his superiors. He was easily avoided.

I reached the far end of the camp and was debating whether to rob a few tents when I came across something better: fresh laundry hanging on a rope. I threw a guard tunic over my jerkin and now I could pass a cursory inspection as an Assassin's Guild member.

Their horses were tethered not far away. The mounts were well trained and ignored my approach, being more interested in eating. I untied them all, then mounted one, which took no offense. As I started my slow way south, my only regret was that I hadn't liberated another meal from the camp.

Which I rectified later that afternoon. I had ridden for perhaps two hours and managed to put the Guild camp a good distance behind me when I came across a group of hunters hunched around a small fire. They were not happy to see me approach. "We have nothing more for you, Guildsman," one said as soon as I reined my horse. "We've had no luck this day as you can see."

What does he mean? I wondered. Their angry countenances furnished the answer. The Guild had been laying siege to Houff for over a year. The guards had to be fed, and they certainly wouldn't waste their talents hunting or farming. Those near the Kastikaan borders were surely supplied by that kingdom, but those this far away had to get their supplies elsewhere. I surmised immediately they were using the excuse of protection to obtain what they needed without payment.

"You defy the will of the Guild?" I asked sternly.

The men turned their eyes to the ground immediately. "No," one said with heavy resignation.

"A wise answer." I dismounted and confidently walked to the campfire. They moved aside reluctantly as I surveyed the meal they were preparing. A hare and several small birds were roasting on a spit. Beside it, a small kettle filled with wild onions was bubbling merrily away. "I'll take these for my men and I," I said, grabbing the spit. "Only fair payment for protecting you from Houff."

"Houff has never troubled us," one mumbled as I walked away with my prize.

"Be thankful we're here to ensure they never do," I said as I mounted my horse. "Remember: what the Guild wants, the Guild takes." Then I rode away, their muttered curses following me like a shadow.

Excellent, I thought as I rode through the forest, munching on my ill-gotten meal. *The Guild is rapidly outstaying its welcome.* That bit of information could prove helpful down the road.

Only once did I come across any Guild guards as I made my way east. When I saw them, I rode right up to them. "Where is your leader?" I asked as they stood at attention.

"At our camp," one said, pointing toward the river.

"At ease. I have important new orders for him. How far?"

"Ten minutes perhaps. Just head south and you can't miss it."

"Excellent. Continue." I rode into the forest until they were out of sight, then immediately headed east. Once again their rigorous Guild training became an asset for me as my apparent rank had eliminated all suspicion. Whether that would continue, however, was something I didn't want to test, so when I camped for the evening, I burned the tunic. Two days later I was at sea, finally on my way to Mount Perjheus.

## Freeing The Dragon

The wind tore at me like some insatiable hawk, blowing the snow so hard it scoured my skin. I shouldn't be out in a storm this fierce, should stay huddled in a cabin until it blew over. But Mount Perjheus was famous for storms that could rage unceasingly for over a week, and I had already spent several months hopping from port to port, ship to ship, just getting here.

I tried to peer through the whiteness, find a tree or anything that might provide a bit of shelter. It was so white that I could see no shadows, nothing ahead of my outstretched hand and my frosty breath being ripped from my lips. At least I had enough sense to tie a rope from my waist to a tree next to the small cabin I was staying at. I should be able to get back to safety ... assuming I didn't freeze to death first.

"Madnizaroc," I added my voice to the howling wind. "Your master is here, Madnizaroc. I demand you come to me."

No answer save the wind.

Could she hear me? I wondered as I yelled her name again. She *had* to sense I was near, had to feel the pull of the contract that remained hidden within my jerkin, one she had been tricked into signing, one that made her an unwilling slave to whomever possessed it. I debated if I should reveal the contract, but the storm could easily rip it from my grasp. I yelled again, then crouched, my back to the wind, shivering and struggling to stay warm. *Come to me Madnizaroc. You want to come to me.* I closed my eyes and continued whispering her name, as if my force of will would cause her to appear.

I don't know how long I crouched outside in the storm. My limbs were growing numb, my breathing becoming as labored as if I were constantly running uphill. Then, above the constant song of the wind, I heard something else. Like distant thunder, approaching from the north. As the sound grew louder, it became more distinct. Not thunder, but a roar. A roar of rage. It had to be Madnizaroc.

I opened my eyes then, just in time to see the whiteness explode in shades of orange and yellow and red, and suddenly it was not snow falling upon me, but hot rain. I looked up to see a great gray shape hovering above me. Streams of fire emerged from it, streaking through the sky, turning the snow to steam and setting nearby trees on fire. Slowly the shape revealed itself to be a fully-grown dragon as it approached, finally landing just five feet from me. "How do you like the weather?" I greeted her.

The great creature studied me for a moment. Then it began to change, melting and folding into itself until instead of a dragon, a woman clad in royal green stood before me. "You have treated me most cruelly, Brendell," she said, her eyes glowing even in the whiteness. "Dragons do not tolerate cold well."

I rose slowly and shook the snow from my coat, the stiffness from my muscles. "Sorry for the inconvenience. Come, we have to talk."

"Free me first. Free me now. You promised."

"When it's time. Come." I started back to the cabin, confident she would follow. She had no choice.

I was already out of my coat and enjoying a glass of wine when she finally entered the small cabin. "Took you long enough. Have a seat."

"I am not your slave, Brendell," she said coldly, remaining in the doorway.

"Maybe you're used to living in a cave, but I'm not. Close the door and sit."

"Of course. Master." She did so and I offered her some wine. She accepted it, but the ice in her voice and gaze remained. "You're here to free me."

I shivered, and not because of the cold. This close, the evilness that emanated from her was nearly palpable enough to touch. Under her constant influence, her previous master, Lord Bandikane, had been slowly transformed from a competent and fair ruler to an intolerable tyrant. If I remained in her presence too long, I was certain the same could happen to me. "Yes," I said slowly. "I told your minion I would free you. But you must earn it."

"How?" She tried, but couldn't keep the anticipation from her voice.

"You have to help me free the people of Houff."

She threw back her head and laughed. "Since when do you care about anyone save yourself, Brendell? You are a thief, after all. Thieves are notorious for lacking compassion."

"True enough," I replied after lingering over my wine. "Things have changed. *I* have changed. I am in debt to the people of Houff for saving my life."

"And you are in debt to *me* for stranding me here." She stood and began stalking the room angrily. "Nothing to hunt but rabbits and mountain goats. Living in the deepest, darkest caves because only there could I find any of the warmth of the earth. Forbidden, *forbidden*, to leave until the day you finally deign to journey here." She stood and pointed at me as if I was some mad dog loose on the streets. "You owe me far more than you could ever hope to repay!"

I finished my wine and poured more before replying. "And I should have loosed you in some clime where you could have terrorized the land at your leisure."

She shrugged. "It's what dragons do."

"Then you should be happy. Now you can put your natural proclivity toward destruction to good use. You're going to stop a war."

"Really?" She studied her hands as if just finishing a manicure. "A war you say? I prefer to ignore your petty human disagreements. They don't concern me."

"I have the contract, Madnizaroc," and I patted my vest.

"Let me see it."

I yawned. "No need. You know I have it. You can feel it, can't you?" Her silence was all the answer I needed. "Good." I looked out the window. The sky was darkening rapidly. "It's getting late and I need my sleep. Return to your lair and come back here in the morning. Then we will start our journey to Houff."

She frowned, then smiled. "Is that what you really want, Brendell?" She merely touched the neckline of her dress and it vanished instantly, to reveal a fully grown, fully formed and fully nude woman. She cradled her ample breasts and aimed them at me. "There is much more I can do for you, Brendell, then slay your enemies. As you can see," and she ran her hands along her waist, then down her thighs, "I am a woman in every way."

I shivered anew, and from more than fear or cold. "If your desire is to pleasure me, then do so by following my orders."



Her eyes darkened. Seconds later, her clothing had reappeared. "You are making things more difficult than they need to be, Brendell."

I shrugged. "That's my way, I'm afraid. See you in the morning. Good night."

She stalked outside, slamming the door behind her. Seconds later there was a tremendous roar of unequalled rage which continued until it disappeared within the screams of the storm outside. "She doesn't like you very much, Brendell," I whispered to myself. After tomorrow, I was certain she would like me even less.

I was right about that. "You want me to do *what?*" She was quivering with anger, and I knew that without the protection of the contract she would have reverted to her dragon form and turned me into a cinder in seconds.

Madnizaroc had appeared at the cabin at daybreak; a bit earlier than I would have preferred, but I hadn't been that specific. With her, as I had dreadfully learned, being specific with instructions was extremely important.

Now I merely sat and watched her clothing flow in a torrent of colors as her moods shifted from surprise to rage to umbrage. "You heard me," I said after she stopped screaming. "It's the only way. I cannot delay any longer."

"You are expecting me to act like some mindless *horse!*"

"Not mindless exactly. I do expect you to find your way to Houff. I doubt I will be of little help, being up in the air and all."

"Brendell, you are the *most disgusting* human I have ever met." She turned her back to emphasize her point.

"I know some who may agree. Be that as it may, we must be leaving."

She spun on her heels. "You will not ride me! I will not suffer the dignity of having you atop me like some, like some simple beast of burden!"

"Fine. Then you can carry me."

She smiled. "Yes. And if I happen to sneeze, well, accidents do happen."

"I was thinking more in your claws."

She hesitated only a second. "Agree. Be sure to let me know if I happen to hold you too tight."

"That shouldn't be a problem." I rose and walked to the end of the room where an object covered by a blanket sat. "I prepared this basket," I said as I threw the blanket aside. The basket was made of wicker, large and reasonably comfortable. Two strong ropes were attached and I held them up. "Merely hold onto these as tightly as you wish."

She glared at me, something I was getting accustomed to. "I will never forget this indignity, Brendell."

"I'm sure. Help me get this outside." Muttering curses, she helped me drag it through the small cabin and out the door. Then I climbed inside and wrapped myself with several blankets. "Take me to Houff."

Madnizaroc immediately changed into her dragon form. Sending a towering stream of flame into the heavens, she rose in the air, then hovered over me before reaching down with her mighty legs. I held my

breath as her talons nearly brushed my forehead before grasping the ropes. Then, seemingly without effort, she flew upward, unleashing a roar of anger before circling and heading south.

Far below, the land slowly turned from snow white to gray to green. The forests looked more like moss on a rock than the tall, stately trees I knew them to be. Surprisingly, it was colder up here than on the ground, and I wrapped the blankets tightly around me and wished I had more. It would be nice, I mused, if a serving wench could serve me a glass of wine and a meal as I had nothing else to do but huddle and shiver. Still this was an interesting way to travel, and I wondered idly if dragons could be trained to provide such service. But all I needed to do was look at Madnizaroc and see the anger in her eyes to realize that would never happen.

When we landed for the evening, we had left Mount Perjheus far behind. "Tomorrow we must travel across the Pini Ocean," Madnizaroc said as we ate. She had done the hunting, certainly the only activity she had enjoyed all day, and we were feasting on roasted deer—prepared by one blast of her fiery breath.

"You can cross that in one day?" I asked, impressed. It took weeks by ship.

"We'll spend the evening on an island I know. It is too small to be of any use to your kind."

"Excellent."

"I should leave you there."

"Then you will never be free of me."

She studied me in the firelight, one which she also had started. Having a dragon as a traveling companion, I was quickly realizing, had unique advantages. "You know, Brendell, you and I could make a powerful team. Your talents, while reprehensible, still have their uses. This Houff you are so concerned about; the two of us could conquer it and rule it together."

By her expression, I could see she was serious. In the firelight, in her human form, she appeared as little more save a desirable woman. Alas, that was not the case. I set down my meal reluctantly. "The way you and Lord Bandikane ruled his kingdom? Through fear and destruction?"

"They have their uses."

"Houff already has a ruler. One who is revered by her followers and who cares for their well-being. I have no interest in usurping her throne."

She threw a gnawed bone into the fire. "You are a fool and a coward, Brendell. I will be ecstatic to be rid of you."

"As soon as we reach Houff. Excuse me, but I need my rest." Her eyes, glowing like twin volcanoes, continued to stare at me as I wrapped myself in my blankets and tried to fall asleep. I finally succeeded, but her mocking voice remained inside my dreams. I earned little rest that night.

Despite its billowing sails, the ship seemed to be solidly embedded on a deep blue porcelain plate. I leaned over the edge of my carriage and stared in wonder. This high, the entire world below was frozen, as if some god had painted a massive still life. I wished I had the Far Glass with me, just so I could observe in greater detail. "Could we fly lower?" I yelled to my steed.

"If you wish," Madnizaroc replied. "Just so you know, it is not unusual for humans to shoot at my kind with arrows. They can't harm me, but I don't know about you."

"Point taken," I grumbled and settled back in my basket. We were now in our second day above the ocean. As Madnizaroc had said, we had spent the previous evening on a small isle. I had managed to scrounge a meal out of some fruit and the other inhabitants I found there; she ate nothing. When asked, she said that dragons did not have to eat as often as "weak humans."

"Suit yourself. This crab is good, though."

"Crab. Yes," she said with a snort. "You merely picked them off the beach. Where is the thrill of the kill, the excitement of the hunt, in that?"

"I prefer the simple life." *I just can't seem to avoid complications.*

"Only apt for a simple man."

"Perhaps," I had said and smiled. "But this simple man has the power to make a dragon do anything he wishes."

Within seconds she had turned from human into her true form. She towered over me and brought her great head so close that her hot breath nearly burned me. "I will enjoy so much feasting upon your liver, Brendell."

I merely shrugged. "While you're waiting, fetch me a few more crabs, will you?"

The memory of that conversation caused my stomach to growl, and I reached in a pocket and pulled out a cooked crab. Would we reach the mainland before nightfall? I wondered as I enjoyed my meal. If not, I could only hope our next island stop would have as ample a larder as the last one.

My reverie was shattered, however, by a sudden scream from Madnizaroc. It was unlike any I had heard before, and I looked at her in surprise and alarm. "What is it?"

"Can you swim, or will your basket float?" she asked as she suddenly veered downward.

"Yes. To both I suppose." I looked down. The ocean was approaching. Fast. And there was something in the water, something nearly as large as a ship. "What are you doing? Take us back up. Now!"

"I can't," she said, and suddenly she loosed that scream again. But this time a response came from below.

My basket was rocking wildly as she continued her mad descent. "You must! I have the contract! You *must* obey me."

"I *can't*. I have no choice!" And suddenly she released her hold on the ropes.

"Madnizaroc!" I screamed as abruptly I was falling out of control toward the ocean. My basket threatened to turn over but I fought it, trying to shift my weight to keep it upright. Then I had the chance to look over the rim of my basket, and my concerns over controlling it become moot.

I was heading straight toward a sea monster.

I had never seen one before, although I had heard the tales. And the tales didn't do it justice. It was nearly as large as a ship, larger than Madnizaroc. It was covered by green scales and a giant fin ran from its head to its tail. It was answering Madnizaroc's screams with trumpeting of its own, and it rose halfway out of the water as she approached.

Was she going to attack? I wondered, then stopped wondering as my basket crashed into the water, nearly throwing me overboard. I managed to steady it so it stayed upright, but, by the amount of water

pouring in, it wouldn't remain so long. It would float, I realized, but not with me inside, so I crawled over the side, then grabbed hold of a rope so I wouldn't lose it. Only then could I return my attention to the two giant creatures.

They were still screaming at each other, the sea monster rearing out of the water, Madnizaroc hovering just out of its reach. The sea monster had two small arms about halfway down its body, so small that I couldn't imagine it using them for hunting. It waved them fruitlessly in the air as Madnizaroc remained determinedly out of its reach.

Why doesn't she use her fire? I wondered as they continued, the sea monster rising and falling in the water, she diving then soaring, both maintaining their constant trumpeting. It appeared like some insane challenge to arms, or a dance.

*A dance.* "This can't be," I whispered, now totally entranced by the two monsters.

But it was. Madnizaroc soared once again high into the air, then turned and dove directly down toward the water. The sea monster rose to meet her. This time she made no attempt to elude it; instead she stopped just a few feet in front of it as if waiting. Again the sea monster screamed and lunged forward, but this time it managed to grasp her with its puny arms. It brought Madnizaroc, still protesting but weakly, to it, forcing her tail into the water. The ocean roiled around them and both creatures continued screaming until abruptly the sea monster released her and dropped back into the water. Madnizaroc literally staggered into the air. She circled over the ocean for several minutes, but the sea monster did not reappear. One more scream—this one *was* of frustration—and then she turned and started toward me. I quickly crawled into the nearly full basket and pulled the two ropes together. She grabbed them with her great talons and once again we were aloft.

The basket emptied quickly and the sunlight did a thorough job of drying my clothing, but I hardly noticed. *I've just seen dragons mate.* Now I knew why dragons were always females; the males lived in the oceans, not in the air. I also understood why Madnizaroc had ignored my commands. She must have been in heat, and her need to mate had been stronger than even the words on the contract. "Hope you're feeling better," I told her and chuckled.

She spat smoke. "You will say *nothing* of this. It shall go to your grave."

"Fair enough. How soon before we reach the mainland?"

"Before nightfall. Now be quiet. Talking to you takes too much effort and it's boring and I'm hungry."

*I bet you are.* I wrapped a blanket around me, crouched down in the damp basket and went to sleep.

"There's been something I've been meaning to ask you," I began. We had just finished our supper and were relaxing at our campfire. Despite our unexpected detour, we had reached the mainland just before dark and made camp in a forest far from any village.

Madnizaroc, still in dragon form, glared at me. "I will not discuss what happened today. That knowledge will go to your grave. I will ensure that."

"Not that. I'm just curious. Why did you sign the contract?"

"The magician *tricked* me!" She rose and suddenly towered over me. Her head was just inches from my own, her jaws open, her fangs glistening in the campfire light.

I put a finger on one and gently pushed her head back. "But how? You're not stupid, Madnizaroc."

"No, I was under a spell. Rather, the parchment was under a spell. What I agreed to was not what the contract says now."

"Why did you sign anything?"

"It was in my best interest."

"I still don't understand."

Abruptly she adopted her human guise. "You are ignorant about the ways of dragons and magicians, Brendell."

"Enlighten me."

She frowned. "I suppose it doesn't matter if I tell you, the knowledge is common enough. Magicians *need* dragons. We provide eggs, fangs and scales they use to prepare the most powerful potions. They provide us with demons and spells so we can protect ourselves and our nests. But Kladiskan betrayed me."

"The magician?"

"Exactly. I assumed I was signing a standard contract for mutual gain and protection. As I just told you, the words were changed after I signed it."

"I see." I sat in silent thought as she watched. I had dealt more often than I would have liked with magicians in the past. Rarely was it pleasurable. Fortunately, none save Lord Bandikane had had such an agreement with a dragon. More fortunately, magicians were few and far between, dragons even more so. Then an idea struck me. "You say this Kladiskan had cast a spell on the document."

She crossed her arms and snorted. "Is it necessary I repeat *everything* so you can comprehend?"

I waved aside her frustration. "I'm just wondering; perhaps the spell was cast after you signed the contract, rather than removed."

She frowned. "What are you saying?"

"That perhaps the contract you signed was real, but the words on it now are false."

She considered my hypothesis. "Even if true, it hardly matters. What the contract says is what I must obey. Unlike you humans, I live up to my obligations no matter how treacherously obtained."

I reached in my vest and removed the parchment. In the firelight, it looked authentic enough. It certainly was effective. "If what I surmise is true, there may be a way to correct the problem."

"Indeed. Burn the contract."

"Can't," and I put it back in my vest. "You would kill me in a heartbeat."

"Perhaps. More the likelihood I would prolong your justified death for the indignities you have forced upon me."

"You're making it difficult for me to consider helping you, you know."

She smiled. "True. But once we reach Houff, then you are obligated to release me."

"No, when I'm *through* with you I'll release you. I have much to do before I am ready for the endless sleep."

Her eyes flashed red with anger. "What are you telling me, Brendell? That, like all humans, you are going back on your word?"

"No. Just that I can't let you kill me right now. Perhaps later, we'll see." I yawned and stretched. "Can we reach Houff tomorrow?"

"It depends how tired I am. And hungry." She licked her lips for emphasis.

I pointed to the remains of my meal resting on a spit over the fire. "Have some more rabbit."

"I can't. You *ruined* it. It's cooked!"

I shook my head. "Then hunt if you want to. I have to rest. Tomorrow will be a busy day."

"It better be my day of emancipation."

"We'll see. Goodnight." I lied down and threw a blanket over my head. I didn't want to see the recrimination in her eyes any longer.

Amazing what one can see from up here, I thought as we flew over the countryside. The trails within the forests, the meandering course of the river and streams branching to the sides, the patterns made by farms and fields and homesteads; the terrain was a constantly changing checkerboard of greens and browns and grays as the land shifted constantly from nature's use to man's. A dragon would be a wonderful weapon in a battle, I realized, and not simply because of its power. A field general would be victorious in every conflict if he had the information gathered by soaring over the enemy. No wonder, I realized, why the Assassin's Guild was so opposed to the Far Glass; even its limited powers would be invaluable in a conflict.

That made it even more imperative I get it into the hands of the Captain's Guild.

"How much longer?" I called out.

"Several more hours."

"When we arrive, don't get too low. The Guild will surely fire upon us."

"I have no fear of your puny weapons."

"I do. This basket would make an inviting target."

She merely grunted, then abruptly veered upward. I wrapped the blankets tightly around me. This high, the temperature dropped considerably and I could now see my breath frosting in the air. "Maybe a little lower," I said between chattering teeth.

"Make up your mind, Brendell." We descended. "Happy now?" she asked after she again began flying straight.

I could no longer see my breath in the air. "Yes, this will do."

"I'll be glad when I'm rid of you," she muttered and sent a burst of fire into the air.

*So will I.*

"Wake up, Brendell." The command was followed by a violent shaking of my basket.

I groaned and shook myself awake. "What is it?"

"We've reached Houff. Where now?"

I looked down. The terrain looked little different than what we had passed before. But if Madnizaroc said we were over Houff, then we must be. "Near the village. I'll have to go first to ... prepare them."

"Prepare them for what?" Suspicion was heavy in her voice.

"You, of course. It isn't often that a dragon visits Houff."

"Why don't I just go with you in my human form?"

*Because I have to tell Pipo Fess what I'm doing, what she must do.* "The magician of this realm uses demon archers for protection. You might fool a human, but I doubt you can fool them."

"A magician?" The basket suddenly began jerking violently. "You never told me a magician ruled Houff!"

"You never asked. She isn't much of a magician anyway. You should have nothing to fear from her." I looked ahead. I could see the walls of Houff growing rapidly in the distance. "This is good. Just land in that field and wait. I'll call you."

"How?" she asked after we were back on ground. We were between the forest and river and no one else was around. Perhaps they were all gone, I thought but forced the possibility aside.

"We'll light a fire on the wall."

"Agreed. How shall I arrive?"

"By air," I decided. "Be more impressive. Shouldn't take long. Stay here." And I headed toward Houff.

I met no one as I hurried to the village gates, which was not encouraging. Perhaps the Guild had finally overrun the handful of defenders. Or perhaps they had just conceded to the inevitable and fled.

Those fears vanished, however, when I reached the village. Armed sentries manned the walls, although I was sure most were demon soldiers, not human. The gates opened slowly at my approach and I was met immediately by guards. One I recognized. He recognized me as well.

"Brendell!" Theroun said and embraced me. "You're back!"

"Yes, Theroun." I stepped back. "I'm glad to see you're still well."

He shrugged. "As well as can be expected. The Guild maintains its siege."

"Not for long. I need to speak with Pipo Fess."

"Then I shall take you to her. Come." He grabbed my arm and we walked inside. "What has taken so long? We were afraid you were killed or captured."

"I was. Captured I mean," I said as we made our way down the nearly empty streets. "How many remain?"

"Not many," he said sadly. "Most have fled to nearby lands. Even with Pipo Fess' magic, we do not have enough men to stop the Guild when they attack."

"We may not need them. Are you still able to smuggle in supplies?"

He smiled. "Yes. For some reason, the Guild has been less diligent in guarding the river. We've been leashing food and such under logs and floating them down the river. Food, at least, has not been a problem."

Good, I thought. The Guild was still wasting time and men searching for a non-existent tunnel. But that wouldn't last much longer. "Anything else I should know?"

"We captured some Guild spies a few weeks ago. Pipo Fess has them secured in her manor. We have no idea what to do with them. Several suggested torture but she said no."

"Good for her." I patted him on the arm. "We'll think of something." In short order we reached the manor. "Wait here. I need to talk to Pipo Fess alone."

"She'll want to talk to you as well," he said and nodded. "Go on in. She already knows you've arrived."

I slammed the door behind me when I entered to let her know I was there. "Not so loud, you'll wake the dead," I heard her call out. "I'm in the study." She rose to greet me when I walked in. "Brendell! You're back!" She hugged me, then stepped back, embarrassed.

I was as well. "Yes, fortunately. And I've brought help."

She frowned. "Really? I was told you came alone."

"Not really. She's waiting for my signal."

"She?"

"Madnizaroc. She's a dragon."

She jumped as if she had sat on a beehive. "You what? You brought a dragon *here*? Wonderful, Brendell. The Assassin's Guild needn't kill us. The dragon will do it for them!"

"Not as long as we have this," and I took the contract from my vest and handed it to her. "As you can see, anyone who owns that contract essentially owns her."

She was still shaking as she read it. "As it says. But there's something wrong here. No dragon, sane or otherwise, would agree to this."

"She claims a magician tricked her. Kladiskan I believe she called him."

She nodded grimly. "He was one of the most famous and powerful magicians of all."

"Was?"

"He's been dead for several hundred years." She studied the parchment further. "Yes, I can sense an enchantment. Some spell is altering this contract. I might be able to remove it."

"That will be something between you and Madnizaroc."

She looked at me in surprise. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I'm going to give you that contract. And control over Madnizaroc."

She folded the parchment carefully before replying. "I'm not sure if that is a boon or not."



"I wouldn't say so, but right now you, we, need her."

She made a moue. "A dragon could be effective in patrolling our borders, I suppose."

"More than that. If Kastikaan rebuilds the dam, she can unbuild it so to speak."

"And they are."

"I suspected as much. That dam has increased the profitability of their lumber mill greatly. They will not give it up easily."

"We have another problem."

"Supplies? I was told you were having little difficulty smuggling them in."

"Not that. We have four Guild spies locked in my chambers below."

"I was told as much. I'll talk with them later. Right now we have to deal with Madnizaroc." I held out my hand and she gave me the contract. "Tell your men to light a signal fire above the gate. We're about to enjoy a most interesting conversation."

She arrived twenty minutes later. There was no doubt it was her; the screams from outside were irrefutable testimony. Minutes later a terrified guard ran into the room. He was ashen with fear and fell to his knees in front of Pipo Fess. "Your majesty, we are doomed!" It took nearly all his strength to say that. "A dragon is attacking us!"

"Not attacking," I said, rising calmly. "She is expected. But don't get too close; she hasn't eaten much for several days."

He stared at me, his eyes two full moons in a sunken face. "You know this? You brought that creature here?"

I grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet. "Actually it was the other way around. Lead her here. She can't harm you."

He turned to Fess for help, but she only nodded grimly. He took a deep breath to try to control his trembling. "It is what you want?"

"Yes," I said. "Hurry. We don't want her to think us rude."

"But *how*? It is," and he held his arms far apart, "huge!"

"She'll know what to do. Now go."

He turned and staggered away. I suppressed a chuckle even though I understood. A dragon in full regalia is quite impressive.

Madnizaroc entered five minutes later. Not as a dragon, of course, since she could never have gotten through the entrance. She stood at the doorway, first glaring at me, then studying Fess. Then she walked up to me. "I've done what you asked, Brendell. Now live up to your agreement."

"Soon. Madnizaroc, meet Pipo Fess. She is the ruler of Houff."

"Your majesty," Madnizaroc said and bowed. Her voice, however, held no respect.

"I normally don't believe in formalities, but in your case I'll make an exception," she said. "So you're the dragon Brendell has brought to protect us."

"Is that what he told you?" Madnizaroc laughed. "Why would I do that?"

"Here's why," I said. I took the contract and handed it to Fess. "The possessor of this contract possesses total control over Madnizaroc. I now give it to you of my own free will and foreswear any further obligations of Madnizaroc to me."

"No!" Madnizaroc's scream echoed within the library and was nearly loud enough to shake the books on the shelves. "You cannot do this! I cannot remain a slave any longer!"

"You have no choice," Fess said coldly. "I accept this, Brendell. Houff is eternally in your debt. And you, dragon, stop your screaming. Now!"

"I will kill you, Brendell. I assure you of that."

I looked at Madnizaroc and shrugged. "I believe Pipo Fess will make that decision, not you."

"Indeed. It would appear premature for that action." Fess walked over to a chair. "Everyone sit, please. Let us discuss this situation in a more civilized forum."

"You lied to me, Brendell. Like all humans," Madnizaroc said as she reluctantly complied.

"Not at all. I freed you. Of me. What Pipo Fess decides to do is up to her."

Madnizaroc looked at Fess. "Let me kill him. Please. He is a thief and cannot be trusted."

Fess raised her hand. "Stop acting like the jilted bride. Brendell has told me some interesting things about your ... condition. Let me see if he is right." She sat back and began reading the contract while we sat in silence. I glanced at Madnizaroc once, but the hatred in her eyes convinced me to turn my attention elsewhere, so I studied the various tomes on the shelves until Fess cleared her throat. "Clear enough," and she set the contract down. "Brendell says you claim the magician tricked you."

"Kladiskan. Yes," she said heavily.

"And the contract was magicked."

"Yes."

She nodded. "It was. And I see you were as well. The demon that surrounds you; that is what controls you, not this contract. Am I correct?"

Madnizaroc sighed. "Yes."

I started. A demon controlled Madnizaroc? She had said nothing about that. "A demon?" I asked Fess. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. I can see the aura that surrounds her. It's something only a magician can see."

"You can free me of it?" Madnizaroc asked hopefully.

I stopped listening as the two continued their conversation. *Ensnared by a demon*. No wonder Madnizaroc exuded pure evil, no wonder she obeyed every command of the possessor of the contract. Years ago, a magician had done the same to me. It had been among most painful experiences of my life.

To be completely inundated by an unholy presence, forced to obey without question any order given. *And yet she had disobeyed that control when mating with the male dragon.* I could only shake my head in amazement and commiseration. The pain she had had to endure, it was nearly beyond belief. Now I looked at Madnizaroc with different eyes. Now I had to hope that Fess could free her from those unearthly chains. "How can you help her?" I heard myself ask.

Fess crossed her legs. "I for one do not want a dragon roaming the forests of Houff. Especially one which will be nesting in the near future."

Madnizaroc shook in surprise, then stared at me. "Brendell, you *told!*"

Fess laughed. "Your condition is obvious to me, Madnizaroc. Brendell had to tell me nothing."

Madnizaroc gave me another withering glare, which had no effect since I was inured to them by now, then looked suspiciously at Fess. "I must return to the mountains."

"Not in your current condition. Or in mine, I'm afraid." Fess sighed. "I could remove you from the thrall of the demon. I could remove the spell on this contract. But tell me, Madnizaroc, how will this help me solve the problems Houff now faces?"

"You are a woman. Only you can understand what I have endured and what I must do."

"Don't look at me for sympathy, Madnizaroc. My first and overriding concern is the condition of Houff and my people. Brendell brought you here to help us. And that you shall." She stood. "Leave us now, Madnizaroc. There is food in the kitchen. Cooked, I'm afraid, but I can't have you out hunting and alarming my people. Brendell and I still have much to discuss."

She nodded slowly and left, but not before honoring me with one more angry glare. I waited until the door closed before speaking. "You do have to help her. For my sake if nothing else."

"Don't worry. I know how to handle females, no matter what species they are. Right now I'm more concerned about what to do with the Guild members in my cells. I can't release them and don't dare hang them. Thus far the Guild has not attacked us, but this standoff cannot continue forever."

"It may not have to. Let's visit them, shall we?"

"There are four of them," Pipa Fess said as we made our way through the cellars below her manor. Her home was built over a cavern, and I couldn't help but shiver in the damp and darkness as the torches on the wall provided little save light.

"You know they are Assassin's Guild?"

"They claimed as such. I've been able to get no other information as their leader has refused to provide any, just demands that we release them."

"Typical Assassin's Guild. They think they don't leave a ring around the bathtub. I'm glad you kept them."

"I'm not! All they do is complain. I have to feed them and provide guards while they just sit there. Totally useless."

"We'll see what we can do. Wait here. This could be interesting."

Far more interesting than I could have imagined. They were huddled in the far corner of their cell when I entered. "I want to talk with your leader," I said.

They all ignored me. Except for one. "No! It can't be!" Algorph slowly turned and stared at me. "You!" and he pointed an accusing finger. "If I had my sword I would kill you now!"

I smiled. "Sorry. I just keep coming back like a bad meal, don't I?"

He approached, stopping just one pace away. "I knew I should have killed you when I had the chance."

"Be glad you didn't. Otherwise you would be dead right now. It is only through my intervention you and your men have been allowed to live."

He straightened and threw out his chest. "You and Houff have no right to threaten the Guild. We were seized without provocation and we demand our release!"

I scratched my nose as if deep in thought. "Yes, seized. Exactly what were you and your men doing in Houff, Algorph?"

"A Guild matter that is none of your concern."

"Really? Is the fact you've been laying siege on Houff any of my concern?"

"Houff has become an unlawful threat to Kastikaan and its neighbors. We are merely protecting others from the threat of this Pipo Fess and her demon armies."

"Pipo Fess and her people are no threat. To Kastikaan or to anyone else and you know that."

"Pipo Fess declared unprovoked war upon Kastikaan," he retorted, his face turning red. "She used her magic to destroy their great wall."

"Actually it was a dragon. Which," I answered the startled look on his face, "she will use again if Kastikaan rebuilds that dam."

"The witch controls a dragon?" The red in his face was fading by the second. "Impossible! I don't believe you. She is not that powerful."

"You, and Kastikaan, will find out for themselves if they continue to rebuild that wall. Kastikaan has *no right* to dam that river and destroy every land below them that needs that river to survive."

He took a step back, his righteous mien evaporating in the harsh light of my threat. "I know nothing about that."

"Your Guild does. Or should. Houff is not interested in conquest, only protecting itself." I pointed to the walls around us. "As you've seen, we can do that very well."

He continued to spout the propaganda I was afraid he actually believed. "The evil magician must be destroyed, for the people of Kastikaan and the people of Houff. She cannot be allowed to defy the will of the Guild!"

"Please." I shook my head and laughed. "You told me yourself, Algorph. The Guild often uses the apparent threat of lawless lands to reap generous contracts from neighboring realms. Use Houff in the same fashion. Pipo Fess is of more value to you and your coffers in power than burning at the stake."

"No," he said after a moment. "She must be destroyed. Houff has become a land of wanton thieves. Her evil magic must be erased from this land!"

My little band of enthusiasts had been more effective than I dared dream, I realized. Almost surely the

Thief's Guild had heard of this by now. Doubtless they were also taking an interest in this conflict. And I knew they would not be as easy to placate as the Assassin's Guild. *I hope your people are starting to create the Far Glass, Fess.* "Just think about my offer. We *will* unleash our dragon if Kastikaan rebuilds that wall. Do not make us unleash her upon you as well." I started to walk away.

"What use is your offer to me and my men when we are lingering within this prison?"

I stopped. "A valid point." I walked back to him. "I can tell the magician to release you and your men unharmed *if* you tell the Guild what I have told you."

"It would be in my report."

"Good. You're only an underling, so I can expect no more I suppose." I suppressed a grin as I saw anger rise in Algorph's eyes. "I'm sure she'll release you if you promise you and your men will not set foot on Houff land again."

He didn't hesitate. "That is acceptable."

"Then I'll see what I can do. In the mean time," and I pointed to the walls around us, "enjoy the hospitality that all who oppose Houff can expect to receive when we are threatened." With that I left, closing the door loudly behind me.

Fess was full of questions when I met her farther down the hall. "Well, what did he have to say?"

"If we release him, he promised he and his men won't bother you again."

She shook her head. "That's all? Of what use is a promise like that? As a Guild member, he has to follow their orders. Even if he doesn't return, others will."

"Of course. Which is why I made them an offer they might find more attractive than war."

"Which is?"

I explained how the Guild used rogue lands to garner lucrative contracts from others. "From their standpoint we will be more valuable alive than dead, so to speak," I finished.

She made a moue. "I don't like that necessarily. Houff has always been a peaceful land. Would they agree to that?"

"I think they might. Especially once Madnizaroc is finished with Kastikaan. The Guild has no stomach for battling magicians and dragons."

"So what do we do about them?" she gave a nod toward the cells behind us.

"Release them in the morning. But I'll want to talk to Algorph once more before you do. Now, is there any way I could get something to eat?"

"That was delicious."

Cordita smiled shyly as she removed the dishes. Rather than imposing further on Fess' hospitality, I had decided to dine that evening in the inn owned by Cordita's family. Although I did have more than a meal on my mind. "I wish I could offer you more. We can only smuggle the most basic meats and grain past the blockade."

I patted her hand. "That should change soon."

"Really?" Her smile brightened immediately. "You've found a way to defeat the Guild and save us?"

"'Defeat' may be too strong a word. Discourage, perhaps."

"I knew you could save us!" Suddenly she jumped at me, hugging me tightly and kissing the top of my head. "Gastinell, my hero!"

I tried to look in her eyes, although it was difficult, being that my face was imprisoned between her ample breasts. "Our struggle isn't over, Cordita. I still have one more journey to make."

She stepped back. "You must leave me again?"

"Yes," I nodded sadly. Then I took her hand. "But for the last time."

She sat across from me. "I heard rumors you brought a dragon back to Houff."

"Madnizaroc. Yes. She is going to help protect you while I'm gone."

"You are an amazing man, Bourherr Gastinell."

"Brendell. That is my real name." *And the name I shall soon own again.*

Her eyes suddenly darkened. "You lied about your name. What else have you lied to me about?"

"Nothing." *Of importance.*

She stood, then began gnawing on a finger, her head bowed. "I don't know. There is so much I need to discuss with you, but now? I don't know." Then she looked at me. "When are you leaving ... again?"

"I don't know. Soon. Within the week I would hope."

"And you'll be gone how long?"

"I don't know." I rose and stood next to her. "I promise I shall return as soon as I can."

Cordita pressed against me as if she was searching for warmth on a frosty night. "You are a strange man, Gastinell. Brendell."

I forced a laugh as I embraced her. "So I've been told. More than once."

She looked up and kissed me quickly, then stepped back and took my hand. "If you must be leaving soon, we should make better use of our time together. There are no other customers I need to be concerned with. Come." And she led me to her room and, not much later, bed.

The following morning, Pipo Fess and I made another journey to the cells and the band of Assassin's Guild members. "What are you going to tell them?" she asked as she shivered from the cold and dampness.

"I'm going to give their leader some extra incentive to tell his overseers what we want."

"And exactly what would that be?"

"That his mission was successful and he was able to destroy the tunnel. His group just happened to be caught afterwards."

She frowned. "What tunnel? They were chattering about the same thing and I have no idea what they

were talking about."

"I told Algorph that you had constructed a tunnel from your manor to the outside. It was how you were able to bring in supplies despite their blockade. Fortunately they believed in the possibility enough to dispatch some troops to search for it."

Her appreciative laughter filled the corridor. "You never stop surprising me, Brendell! You've managed to protect us with nothing save tall tales."

"Thankfully that onus will fall upon Madnizaroc now. Although I'm afraid she will be most reluctant to do so."

"We've already had a long discussion. As I told you, Brendell, I know how to deal with females. We've managed to strike an equitable agreement."

"Good. Just don't trust her." We continued in silence until we reached the last turn before the chamber holding the cells. "You can wait here. I shouldn't need more than a few minutes with them."

Her eyes frosted over. "I am the leader of Houff. Or have you forgotten?"

I blushed. "Sorry. Of course you are welcome, your majesty."

"That's better," she said and snorted. "I have a few things to say to them as well."

As before, only Algorph approached when we entered. "You are going to release us now, Brendell?" It really didn't come out as a question.

"Algorph, I assume you will do as we discussed yesterday."

"It is my *duty* to inform my superiors."

I nodded. "That it is. I suggest you also tell them that you succeeded in destroying the tunnel before you were captured."

He was silent for a moment, then shook his head. "I will not lie to them. Our mission was a failure. *I* am a failure."

"You wouldn't really be lying. Especially since the tunnel was a lie."

He began to shake as realization sunk in. "You! You ... thief!" He reached by reflex for his sword, then the red in his face slowly turned from rage to embarrassment when he realized he was unarmed. For another minute he continued to glare at me. Then he threw back his head and laughed. "I hate you, Brendell. I've hated you ever since you destroyed me at the Thief's Academy. But," and he shook his head, "you have also earned my respect. You would make a good commander, Brendell, I cede you that."

"Enough of your foolish male rituals," Pipofess interrupted coldly. "It is *my* land you have threatened, *my* people you have imperiled. I *demand* your hostilities end immediately."

Algorph studied her soberly. "As I have promised the thief, I will present your demands to my superiors. I believe they will accept your terms."

"My terms?" She glanced from Algorph to me. "What did you tell him, Brendell?"

"That it would be more profitable to the Guild if you remain as you are, free of any Guild entanglements."

And that, of course, you be allowed to live in peace."

She considered my remarks. "I see. I think. And you, Algorph is it? You will tell your superiors to lift the blockade and not interfere with my rule of Houff?"

"It appears the most reasonable solution," he said.

"In that case you are free to go. My men will escort you to our borders."

"Of course, your majesty. I would expect nothing less. Oh, before we leave." He seized the iron door to the cell and pulled. There was a groaning sound, then the door began to separate from the cavern wall. He stepped back and pointed to the wide gap that now existed. "You might want to do some work on your jail. We could have escaped any time we wished."

Fess looked at him in amazement. "Then why didn't you?"

He laughed bitterly. "We had to find out where the tunnel was. We thought we could learn more if we appeared to be prisoners than if we wandered blindly all over the place." Then he looked at me. "I guess we were right."

I patted Algorph on the shoulder. "I think I was wrong about you. You would have made a good thief."

"I won't take that as a compliment." But he was smiling when he said it. "Men," he turned, "we are being released. Follow me."

"No weapons," I said as we started back down the corridor in single file.

"Understood. Although," and Algorph's voice dropped to a whisper, "I would appreciate it if somehow you could return my sword to me. I paid dearly for it."

I nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

Fess' guards were surprised when we appeared outside her manor. There were no protests, only relief, however, when she told them to lead the prisoners to the border and release them. Then, with a nod toward me, she returned to her manor, me right behind.

We marched directly to her library. "So you presume to speak for me and the people of Houff with this Algorph," she said as soon as we sat. "Ignoring the fact that I rule her, not you." Then she leaned forward, her eyes glazing over with ice. "How *dare* you negotiate with Algorph without my authority!"

She had every right to chastise me, I knew. "I was only doing what I felt best, your majesty. I was certain my plan would work."

"Your plans. Yes. Tell me, Brendell, exactly what *are* your plans? For Houff and for me. And for Cordita." She sat back and studied me. "She is with your child, you know."

I couldn't help but gasp in surprise. "No," I managed after a long pause. "I didn't know." *Why didn't she tell me?*

"And I suspect you don't care. But that's between you and her. Now you've managed to dispose of the Assassin's Guild. But that hardly ends our difficulties with Kastikaan."

"The dam. Yes, your majesty."

"A little late to be honoring my position now, wouldn't you say?"



"Yes. Again I apologize." Why is she acting like this? I couldn't help but wonder. Everything I had done had been for the well-being of Houff and her people. Surely she could see that. But, I had to admit, I had kept her in the dark about much of my activities. "The dam will cause a problem. Have you any suggestions?"

"Now you ask for my opinions. How thoughtful. No; you tell me what you have in mind, then I'll tell you what you shall do."

"We have Madnizaroc now. She can do it. It would be best if they believe she did it the first time as well."

"They won't. You were foolish enough to destroy it during the day. *Someone* would have seen Madnizaroc if that were true." She paused. "And I'm still not sure how you did it. Was it that fire salt you talked about?"

*Foolish?* If I had tried that at night, I would have been caught or worse. Now, however, was not the time to argue, so I merely agreed.

"Don't use it again. It is too dangerous."

"Of course."

"Fine." She sat back and crossed her legs, then poured some wine before continuing. "I have decided you will take Madnizaroc to Kastikaan during the day and destroy that dam. It is important they see her so they know she is under our control and that we can attack them at any time."

"A good plan, your majesty, an excellent plan. It shall convince Kastikaan not to trouble you and Houff again. It shall be carried out as you say."

She laughed, a hearty laugh that nearly brought her to tears. "Stop it, Brendell," she managed to say during paroxysms of giggles. "Your attempts at being the fawning underling are just too funny!"

I frowned. "Then why..."

She managed to regain control. "To put you in your place. To remind you who is the leader of Houff. You should have seen your face. Priceless!"

I bowed my head, both chastened and miffed. "I am sorry I overstepped my bounds."

She gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Hardly worth apologizing for, especially considering what you've done for us. I just don't like your continual surprises."

"Again I apologize."

"Accepted," she said after a moment. "And I apologize for acting on my own wounded pride. You didn't deserve that. A toast then." She held up her glass and I walked over with mine and touched glasses. "To Houff."

"To Houff," I nodded.

"Tomorrow, you take Madnizaroc to Kastikaan and deal with the dam. Tonight," and she smiled, "I suggest you spend with Cordita. You two have your own plans to make."

"Is this really necessary?" Madnizaroc, in her dragon form, and I were outside the city walls and my well-used basket was waiting for me. It was early morning and few were out of bed. Pipofess had

insisted on this; "We don't want to alarm my subjects any more than necessary," she had explained.

I felt as inconvenienced as Madnizaroc, but for different reasons. I had spent the previous evening with Cordita, when she reluctantly admitted she was pregnant. "You don't owe me anything, Brendell," she had insisted as we shared her bed. "I chose this and I am fully prepared and able to raise our child by myself."

"I can't do that," I replied.

"Why not? You've never married, correct?" Then she stopped and even in the darkness I could see the suspicion in her eyes. "Or is that something else you haven't told me?"

"I'm not married," I said quickly. "I am not a father, either."

"As far as you know," she said with a sniff.

I sighed. "I admit there is a possibility."

"I thought as much." She sat up and crossed her arms, resting them on her ample breasts. "I've thought about this, Brendell. If you took too long to return, or *never* returned, I was going to tell your child you were dead." She stared quietly at me for a long time and I could feel the sadness in her gaze. "It's the best way. A child shouldn't be brought up without his father."

"Yes," I said heavily. "But I will return."

Then she grabbed my hand and pressed it to her breast. "But only if you want to."

"I want to." I kissed her on the forehead, then the lips. And then everywhere else to reassure her even more.

"So are we ready to leave?" Madnizaroc asked, shattering my reverie.

"Of course." I climbed into my basket and moments later we were aloft. Once again I was amazed at the view below so I lost track of time before I heard Madnizaroc clear her throat. "Sorry. What?"

"I never thought I would say this, but I must thank you, Brendell."

I never thought she would say that, either. "For what?"

"For bringing me to Pipo Fess."

For the first time in I couldn't say how long I felt a momentary sense of relief. "I'm glad for you. She was able to remove the spell?"

"Yes. The demon no longer controls me. I am now free to be ... me"

So much for relief. "But you will help us, correct?"

"She and I have come to a more equitable agreement. One which will benefit us both."

"Then you no longer want to kill me."

My basket wobbled abruptly, nearly forcing me overboard. Then Madnizaroc laughed. "Your inevitable death is only temporarily postponed. I still don't like you, Brendell, for exiling me to Mount Perjheus."

"But you understand why I had to do that," I said hastily.

"No," and she abruptly veered downward, heading directly for a copse of tall tree. She streaked above them, my basket nearly brushing the treetops and bringing cries of alarm from the birds roosting there. I was still brushing aside the startled birds searching for refuge in my basket when she turned upward. "Did I make my point?"

"Clear as rain."

"Good. Now, where is this dam you were prattling about?"

"Just follow the river. It's at the base of the mountains."

We continued east at a leisurely pace. The good people of Kastikaan were now stirring for another day's labor and, even from our height, I could tell the sight of Madnizaroc was causing great concern. "You're making quite an impression," I said as we hovered briefly over the walls of the city itself. A few of the sentries sent arrows our way, but we were high enough that they fell harmlessly short.

"Fools," she said as another volley of arrows were futilely fired. "If I were of a mind, I could set afire their entire city."

"No need. The dam is our sole objective."

"You lack all sense of adventure, Brendell."

*Perhaps that's why I'm still alive.* "I didn't become a thief for the 'adventure,' Madnizaroc. Okay, there's the logging camp. The dam is coming up."

The loggers stopped working as we flew overhead. I watched, bemused, as they began chasing after us. Which was just what I had hoped for; we needed a large audience for what we planned. "Is that it?" Madnizaroc asked.

The great wooden wall now was in plain sight. "Yes. Soar above it and circle so they can all see."

Once again my basket rocked violently as she flew upward, clearing the wall by just a few feet before circling over the dam and the lake it formed. As we circled waiting for the lumbermen to arrive, I couldn't help but admire the structure. This high, the man-made lake reminded me of a giant bird bath. "Too bad you don't swim," I said off-handedly.

Madnizaroc snorted. "Who said I don't? Dragons aren't afraid of water. In the mountains, we swim in mountain pools all the time."

"Really?" I looked down, a finger to my lips. "Could you swim in that?"

"Are you deaf? Of course. It's probably not as cold as I would like it, though."

"You know, maybe we won't have to destroy this dam after all."

"What are you saying, Brendell? Pipo Fess told me this dam was the cause of all the problems."

"It is. I'm just saying, maybe *we* don't have to destroy it. Put me on the ground, then take a little swim."

"You're an enigma, Brendell. Someday I'll bite the top of your head off to see how your mind works." Still she dropped low enough so I could safely jump from my basket to the ground. Then she rose and soon was enjoying herself in the lake.

The approaching crowd had seen me land, so I merely had to wait, arms folded, until they arrived. They

looked from me to Madnizaroc, their faces various shades of pale. Finally one found his tongue. "That dragon. You brought that dragon! You must get it out of here before it destroys us!"

I shrugged. "When she's done with her bath. It wouldn't be a good idea to interrupt her right now. Dragons have short tempers."

"You brought that dragon here!" another said and pointed an accusing finger.

"On orders of Pipo Fess, rightful ruler of Houff. She controls the dragon, not me." *That*, at least, was the truth. "She knew the dragon needed a place to swim and hunt. The lake you've created is ideal."

"It's *our* lake. It belongs to Kastikaan!"

"True enough. I suggest, though, that you bring up your objections with her," and I pointed to Madnizaroc. "Pipo Fess has only limited control over the dragon."

"If you don't get rid of that creature, we will destroy it!" another angry voice called out.

I looked at their armament—axes, saws, several swords and knives—and laughed. "Arrows won't harm her. With what you have, you'll have to get very close to her to have any chance. You understand she breaths fire, don't you?"

"Pipo Fess will hear of this," still another said. "If she can't control the beast, we will destroy Houff."

"I'll relay the message." I looked back at Madnizaroc, who happily remained in the water. "But you know how hard it is to control dragons once their mind is set. That lake is so attractive ... I just don't know. I won't be surprised if she dropped by for a visit everyday." I then gave out a piercing whistle. Slowly, majestically, Madnizaroc rose from the waters and within a few minutes my basket was on the ground next to me. "Good afternoon, gentlemen," I said with a smile as I climbed in. "I'll relay your concerns to Pipo Fess."

As we flew away, I kept my attention on the dam and the men below. They remained for quite some time before returning to their camp. I was certain, however, that more than one would soon be discussing the situation with the Kastikaan council.

Pipo Fess was waiting for us when we returned to Houff. "Is it gone?" she asked as soon as I stepped on the ground.

"As good as gone."

She frowned. "What are you telling me, Brendell? You didn't follow my expressed orders?"

"I took advantage of a situation that presented itself," and I explained what I had done.

When I finished, she wore a bemused look on her face. "Do you think it will work?"

"Madnizaroc may have to provide some persuasion. Perhaps a return to the lake this afternoon. But I believe they will destroy that dam themselves. And as long as she remains a threat, they don't dare rebuild it." I gave her a shy smile. "Much better for you and Houff, yes?"

She chuckled. "Yes, most emphatically. How long will we have to wait?"

"I don't know. Less than a week I would hazard."

It didn't take that long. By the following morning, the river had risen to its normal banks.

## The Guild Council

I spent the week in Houff just to make sure the Guild wouldn't go back on its word or that Kastikaan would try anything on their own. But the mercenaries retreated, although we heard reports that more than normal remained in Kastikaan. Travel and trade to and from Houff returned to normal, the farmers were able to return to their fields, the merchants enjoyed a slow but steady stream of customers and everyone, except perhaps Cordita, were at the least relieved.

I should have felt the same, but I knew better. The Assassin's Guild may have been assuaged, but not the Thief's Guild. Sooner than later, they would send someone to investigate. And unlike the Assassin's Guild, they would not be dissuaded by a dragon or demon army. I knew I would have to leave Houff one more time. So one morning after breakfast, I made my way to Fess' manor.

I found her in fine form. She was in her study, plucking a jaunty tune on a harp. I politely sat and listened until she finished, then applauded. "Very nice. Perhaps Cordita could have you entertain at her inn some evening."

She blushed. "I only play for my own enjoyment. What brings you here, Brendell?"

"Our troubles are not over, you know."

She sighed and pushed the instrument aside. "I know. But couldn't you mention that on a more appropriate day? The sun is shining, the butterflies are everywhere. This is the Houff I grew up in. We used to be a happy land and happy people."

"And you will be again. When we're finished."

"So what is our problem this time?"

"My Guild. It is a point of honor among them, as well as good business practice, to punish unlicensed thievery. Now that the siege is over, I strongly suspect they will be turning their attention on us."

She pushed a stray strand of hair aside while sighing. "And what do we do about that?"

"All you can do is be alert, be suspicious of any strangers. Move your valuables to other locations. I can give you advice on that, but believe me when I tell you that they can make things very uncomfortable no matter what you do. *You* won't be able to stop them, but I might be able to."

She smiled sadly. "Let me guess; you'll be leaving us again."

"I'm afraid so."

"Are you going to tell me what you're planning? For a change?"

"Basically, I have to break the power of the Guilds."

I rested in my bed and watched a spider make its slow progress across the ceiling. One kingdom taking on the power of the Guilds; one *man* taking on the power of the Guilds. Ridiculous, and Pipo Fess had said as much before I left Houff. "This isn't necessary. We can't declare war on the Guilds and win. We've come to an agreement with the Assassin's Guild; what more do we need?"

*It's what I need.* "We can stop the Thief's Guild as well. If you'll let me."

We were in her study, and she sat back in her chair and studied me. "This really doesn't have anything to

do with us, does it?"

"I admit I hold a personal vendetta against my former Guild. But you are a target as well. I'm helping both of us."

"Just don't confuse the two."

"I won't. What I'm doing will protect you."

"So be it." She rose. "I have much to do, so I must bid you leave. Your supplies will be ready in the morning."

Three days later I was relaxing in this Trevis Harbor inn. I turned my attention from the spider to the Far Glass sitting beside me on the bed. An excellent copy of Ensten's original creation but with an interesting addition: a spell, courtesy of Fess, which made it unusable without the proper incantation. This would prevent others from copying it, a simple feat otherwise. Such a modest device, I mused as I rolled it in my hand, yet also dangerous. It had led to the death of Ensten, a death directly caused by my actions. I had brought it to the Guilds because I saw the potential threat it presented. My Guild and the Assassin's Guild in particular had felt the same, and their votes and arguments had swayed the other Guilds during a council meeting. Thus Ensten had to die. Now I was trying to garner support and protection from several of the Guilds against Houff's enemies ... and mine. My hope was that the renamed Far Glass would help do that.

So the next morning I was the first one on the ship bound for Mynosia. Mynosia did not even have a Captain's Guild office, but it was home to the Miner's Guild. I suspected they would have no interest in the Far Glass. But I did have something else they might find useful.

As soon as we left port, I found an excuse to meet with the ship's captain. "Is there a problem with your quarters. Mister Bourherr?" he asked me brusquely when I entered his stateroom at the appointed time. "If so, you should take that up with the steward, not me."

"Not at all. They are quite satisfactory."

He frowned. "Than what is it?"

If I could have claimed Guild membership, our meeting would be more cordial. So I wasted no time. "I am a traveling merchant. I was recently in Houff and discovered a device that I believe you might find interesting."

"I am not familiar with Houff and I certainly have no time to look at trinkets. Now if you'll excuse me..."

He began to rise so I put the Far Glass on his desk. "No bauble I assure you. Instead, this is a device they call the Long Eye. I am confident you would find quite useful."

He picked up the simple brass tube and studied it. "Long Eye you call this. And just what is it for?"

"Just look through the end." He complied. He reacted just as I expected. First surprise, then suspicion. He set it down to ensure I hadn't moved closer, then looked through it again. I smiled as he placed it carefully on his desk, then stared at me. "Interesting, isn't it?"

"Very." He ran his fingers across the brass tube. "You say you got this where?"

"From Houff. They invented it. I suspected the Captain's Guild would be very interested in it."

"Yes," he said softly, his gaze once again on my gift. "This would be very helpful."

"Keep that with my compliments," I said, rising. "Introduce it to your Guild. Houff will be delighted to provide more at a reasonable fee." I started toward the door, then paused. "Just so you know, there is a spell applied that will render the Long Eye useless if anyone endeavors to uncover its secret. They will even attune the Long Eye to each Guild member if desired. At a reasonable fee, of course."

He nodded, his attention still focused on the tool. "I will bring this to the attention of my Guild as soon as possible."

"Thank you." I left him still studying the inspired invention of Ensten. The Captain's Guild had bowed to the will of the other Guilds once; my hopes for Houff depended upon them not doing so again.

I was able to relax the remainder of the voyage to Mynosia. In fact, I was quite satisfied with myself and feeling very confident when we finally arrived. Which turned out to be a mistake.

It was my own fault. I had been taught never to let my guard down, to be suspicious of everything and everyone. Even the best-laid plans and so on and so on. So I had allowed myself to become careless when I left the ship and started down the crowded street leading to the heart of the city. I was being jostled constantly—an advantage if I were in the mind to lift some purses—and I found myself constantly sidestepping approaching pedestrians or dodging coaches and wares piled on the sidewalk.

Thus completely distracted, I didn't notice the three men in uniform walking straight for me. I *did* notice, however, the pointed object that suddenly was pressed against my side. "Be still, Brendell," a harsh voice whispered in my ear. "Don't make a sound."

The sudden chill engulfing me had nothing to do with the knife. *Someone knows who I am.* "What is this?" I asked the unseen voice. "Who are..."

A sharp jab in my ribs stopped the rest of my protest. "Do what I say or die."

No arguing with that. I stood still as people continued to walk unmindful by me. I couldn't even turn to see who was threatening me. But I couldn't miss the three men who walked up to me.

I didn't recognize their uniforms, but there was little doubt they were the Mynosian police. "This is the man?" one asked.

"Yes." My attacker stepped beside me. I studied him out of the corner of my eye, but I didn't recognize him. I could only presume he had been following me for quite some time, probably since I had left Houff. He had to be employed by the Thief's or the Assassin's Guild. "Yes, commander. His name is Brendell. He is a former member of the Thief's Guild, now no longer working under our aegis."

The commander glared at me. "Is he correct? Is your name Brendell?"

I forced anger into my voice. "My name is Bourherr Gastinell. As you will see from documents in my bags. This man is mistaken. I have never heard of this Brendell."

"This man is a professional thief," my accuser said calmly. "Of course he would have nothing on him that would betray his true identity. He *did*, however, have this. Which I discovered and removed from his stateroom while aboard ship."

I winced as he handed the commander a document, one I recognized immediately. A valid Thief contract. I needed no prognosticator to tell me whose name was on it. "I've never seen that before! This man is the thief, not I."

So much for the truth setting me free. The commander read the document. "Just as you informed us in your letter," he said, folding the contract and placing it in his pocket. "Mynosia owes you much this day, Peron Grimmire."

*Grimmire?* My mind raced frantically between this news and my immediate predicament. Was the man related to Professor Grimmire of the Thief's Academy? Perhaps his son? If so, the highest echelon of the Thief's Guild had to be involved, which was not an encouraging thought. "I am innocent," I said weakly.

The commander glared at me. "We will discover that soon enough. A night in the chambers has loosened many a stubborn tongue."

"I know nothing of what this man is talking about. I am a businessman here to see the Miner's Guild on matters most urgent."

"He is a rogue who must be stopped at all costs," Peron said. "For the honor of the Guild and the safety of all Mynosia." He turned and glared at me. "This man has no conscience and is beneath contempt."

"If I am no longer a member of the Guild, then how could I obtain a legal contract?" I pleaded with the commander as his men seized me. "That's impossible! You must know how the Guilds work."

"He accepted a legal contract illicitly," Peron said with a smug smile. "Fortunate we discovered his treachery before anyone could be harmed."

"Then someone else will fulfill the contract," I said quickly as I was being pulled away. "Whoever's name on that paper is still a Guild target!"

"Let them try," said the commander. "The prince will be well-protected now that we are forewarned."

"Wise that you do so," Peron said as I was being led away. "His benevolence is famous even in my land. I would dearly like to meet him while I am here."

The commander smiled and shook his hand. "I'm sure that can be arranged, Master Grimmire."

"I am humbled by the honor. You can reach me at the Cock's Crow." Then he glared at me one more time. "You have earned your fate, Brendell. May the buzzards feast upon your bleached bones."

"Grimmire is going to steal from the prince," I said as the guards led me away. "I can help you stop him!"

"We have stopped you, that's all that matters. Now quiet; save your breath for our inquisitors. They have some new devices they've been desperate to use."

The crowds gave way as we made rapid progress down the streets, too rapid for my peace of mind. One man was on either side of me, holding one of my arms and supporting most of my weight. Fortunately they were using both hands so neither held a weapon. The commander remained several steps ahead, ignoring us as he cleared a path through the throng.

I waited until we reached an uneven patch of sidewalk, then went limp and dropped to my knees. Both my captors lost their balance and loosened their grips. When I jumped up and flipped backwards, they lost hold of me completely. I grabbed one and threw him into the other, then turned and ran as best I could down the crowded street.

The heavy traffic was now an advantage. My pursuers couldn't chase me any faster than I could run and they had difficulty keeping me in view. I ran by several stores but decided I couldn't hide inside one; the customers would see me and could point me out to the guards.



Instead I ducked down an alley. It led to another main artery, but I decided not to risk it. If there were more patrolling guards, I would probably be caught. Instead I searched for a hiding place, and the balconies that stretched above me gave me one. I leaped and managed to grab the bottom decorative railing of one. I pulled myself up and wedged my right foot into the other end of the railing, then flattened myself as best I could against the bottom of the balcony. The railing, besides giving me something to hold onto, also helped hide me from searching eyes.

It wouldn't hide me for long, of course, not if they did a thorough search. I had barely situated myself when I heard the yells from the guardsmen and, soon after, approaching footsteps. I held my breath and willed myself still as they approached. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see them run past me, hardly glancing up. They were certain I had fled to the street beyond and headed directly to it.

As soon as they turned the corner, I climbed onto the balcony. I didn't dare go back the way I had come as other guards might be alerted and waiting, so, hoping desperately no one was inside, I opened the glass door on the balcony and entered the building.

It led to a lady's bedroom. I went to the far door, pressed my ear against it and listened intently. No sound. It didn't mean this residence was empty, but at least I should have time to don a disguise. Fortunate, I thought as I studied the owner's closet, that I was clean-shaven. That had been hammered into us in Disguise 101 at the Academy; a false beard could easily be added, but removing a beard could be impossible if the situation was dire. This one was. I removed my jerkin and rolled up my trousers, then threw a nondescript blue dress over myself. A shawl to cover my arms and a hat would help hide my more masculine features. Then I looked at my shoes and sighed. No chance hers would fit me and mine would betray me if anyone looked closely, so I would have to dispose of this disguise and buy new clothing as soon as possible. Finally I grabbed a purse—I emptied it as I had no interest in stealing more than necessary—and I was ready for the Mynosia streets.

I reached the outer hallway easily enough, but I stopped when I heard voices coming from below. "I've seen nothing," I heard someone say. It has to be the guards, I realized. I might be able to fool them, but not those who lived in this building, so I returned to the lady's apartment and waited. Soon enough I heard footsteps, then a heavy knock on the door. "Who is it?" I asked in a high voice.

"The police. We need to ask you some questions."

"The police?" I opened the door a crack and peeked through it. Two stern guards were standing outside. "So you are." I opened the door completely. "What do you want? I'm in a hurry."

"Madam, we're sorry to disturb you," one said. "Have you seen a strange man in the last half hour?"

I frowned but kept my head bowed, not looking in their eyes. "No. What's strange about him?"

The guard grimaced. "A criminal escaped nearby. Very dangerous. We are seeking him."

"Most derelict of you to let a dangerous criminal escape, wouldn't you say?"

"May we come in?" the other guard asked. "He escaped near here."

I feigned outrage. "Just what are you saying, young man? That I, an unmarried woman, would have a man in my rooms? How *dare* you!"

The second guard stepped back, embarrassed. "No, madam, not at all."

"We're sorry to have troubled you," the first guard said.

"You should be." I almost stomped my foot in supposed frustration but stopped myself. *If they look at my shoes ...* "Now if you'll excuse me, I have an appointment and I'm already late."

"Of course." They bowed and stepped back as I slowly walked out and down the hall. I imagined their eyes drilling through my back like a woodpecker as I walked daintily down the stairs and out the front door. Fortunately the presence of the guards had encouraged the residents to remain in their rooms, so I reached the streets without further problems. Only then did I allow myself to relax. I lingered on the corner and planned. Clothing first, then an inn. Then I could decide what to do about Paton Grimmire.

My supper at the Golden Hart was delicious, and I pushed myself away from the table with a satisfied sigh. It was expensive as well, but that mattered little as, thanks to the crowded Mynosia streets, I had amassed a full purse.

I was now wearing the rich robes of landed gentry, with bracelets and rings and long flowing blond hair. I hadn't wanted to go to such extremes, but Grimmire had changed all that. Obviously I had been followed since leaving Houff. Someone, presumably the Assassin's Guild, had told them I was still alive. I *hoped* it was the Assassin's Guild; I didn't want to contemplate possible treachery from Houff.

Careless, Brendell, I scolded myself as I enjoyed an excellent wine. I had made no effort to cover my tracks beyond my assumed identity all the way to Mynosia. Anyone could have followed me. Once I was asea, keeping track of me was even easier. Grimmire had been onboard as well, and probably sent a message to the authorities ashore by a dispatch boat before we docked. Then he merely followed and waited to spring the trap.

Now I had two tasks to accomplish while here: meet with the Miner's Guild and extract a measure of revenge on Grimmire. The latter I vowed to accomplish that evening.

It was nearing midnight when I entered the Cock's Crow. I had to ring the bell five times before a sleepy clerk came out from the back room. "I'm sorry," he said and yawned, "but we have no rooms."

I sniffed. "As if I would ever stay here. I believe you have a gentleman staying that I have come to see. Paton Grimmire."

The young man shook his head. "I'm sorry, we respect our guests' privacy."

"Of course you do." I set three gold coins on the counter. "But he is expecting me. It is most urgent I see him. Now."

His eyes widened at the sight of the coins, his struggle with greed obvious. Then his shoulders slumped. "I'm sorry," and he shoved the coins toward me.

I stopped him. "That may not be necessary. You don't have to *tell* me anything. Just let me look at your ledger."

"But that would be the same..."

I grimaced. Sometimes dealing with an honest man can be so frustrating. "I won't say a word if you won't. Believe me, Mr. Grimmire will be grateful for your assistance."

He looked at the coins one more time. "Just look at the ledger?"

"A simple request, no?" I pointed to the empty lobby. "Who is going to know?"

He stepped back, then reached down and set the ledger on the counter. I opened it and found the last

page with writing. Of course Grimmire had used his real name; otherwise the guards wouldn't be able to reach him if the Prince did grant him an audience. I pointed to his signature. "The room is on the fourth floor?"

"Yes. At the end of the hall. On the left."

"You've been most helpful," and I added two more coins to the pile. "The stairs are that way?" I pointed to the rear.

He nodded. "Please be quiet. Our guests are sleeping."

I smiled. "I plan to. No one will know I'm there." *Especially Paton Grimmire.*

I heard the normal noises of an inn at night as I made my way up the stairs: muted arguments, loud snores, the occasional squeak of the bed and accompanying cries of passion. His room was right where the clerk told me. I listened at the door but heard nothing. I opened the door quickly and slipped inside. If I was lucky, he was still enjoying the enticements of an inn somewhere.

I wasn't. He was slumbering peacefully, but at least he was alone. Two people would have deterred me; one didn't concern me. A loose floorboard posed more immediate danger than a sleeping man. I crept to the window and pulled back a curtain to let in more light. Now it was merely finding what I was looking for.

Grimmire had to be an Academy graduate, so I was confident he had his purse and jewels stowed under the mattress. Trying to retrieve them would inevitably waken him. I was more interested in what might be in his satchel. That was hanging conspicuously on a hook on the wall. Nothing within would interest a common thief, but I've always liked to think I wasn't common. Just unfortunate on occasion.

This wasn't one of them. I opened it and found what I was seeking: Guild contracts. There were only three, but, as I had hoped, they were blank, which only made sense. If Grimmire had been following me, he could have no idea where I was bound. He had filled out the false contract during our sea voyage. The others were merely for emergencies.

I considered this an emergency. I removed one and returned the satchel to its resting place, then closed the curtains. Not long after I was enjoying a well-earned flagon of wine in a nearby inn, gleefully planning the fall of Paton Grimmire.

"You are sure of what you heard?" asked the guard captain for perhaps the dozenth time.

"Yes," I said patiently. "I was in the Golden Crow and the man, clearly besotted by the grape, mentioned to his companion that he was planning to rob the prince."

"And you know him ... how?"

"His companion mentioned his name."

"I see." The captain stood and began pacing behind his desk. "Serious charges, Master Fayden, serious indeed. Especially since this man has already accused another of a similar crime."

I shrugged. "I know nothing about that."

He looked at me intently. Even if he had been among the guards sent to capture me, he wouldn't recognize me in my current disguise. "Quite a coincidence, wouldn't you say? Two thieves after our prince."

"Perhaps there's only one. Perhaps this Grimmire lied to throw you off the scent so to speak. I reluctantly admit I have employed the Thief's Guild in the past. They will stop at nothing to fulfill their contracts."

He put a finger to his lips, deep in thought. "Still, this is merely your word against his."

"Easy enough to find out. Question him. From my experience, thieves always have a copy of their contracts with them."

"Yes." He sighed. "It is our sworn duty to protect the royal family. Any threat must be investigated. Where are you staying, in case we need further information from you?"

I supplied the name of an inn, just as false as my identity. "If I am wrong, if I misunderstood, then there is no harm done."

"Perhaps. Thank you for your assistance, Master Fayden." He offered his hand.

"I pray I'm wrong," I said, rising and accepting it. "I do not make it a practice of slandering the innocent."

"Good that you don't. Goodday."

I nodded and left, only allowing myself to smile after I was out of the guard offices. They *would* find a signed contract in Grimmire's possession; that morning I had returned the now-completed document to his satchel while he was enjoying breakfast at another inn. I was confident the guard would pursue their duty vigorously. A shame, I thought, that I couldn't be around to enjoy the aftermath.

I went straight to the inn I claimed I was staying at, just in case I was followed. I had been there previously under the pretext of perhaps renting quarters and, while pretending to study the ledger, learned there was a Quam Fayden staying there. I didn't want to involve another innocent in my plans, but the guard would realize the truth soon enough if they had the mind to question him or her. Then it was to a closet on the second floor, where I discarded my outer wraps and false beard. When I left, I looked nothing like the man who had entered. Now it was time to meet with the Miner's Guild.

First I went to a few stores to obtain the ingredients for the fire salt. Not a lot; I wasn't taking down a dam this time, just enough to spark interest amongst the miners. Then to the stables and a horse for my journey.

The Miner's Guild offices were outside Mynosia, near the region's mining operations. The Guild secretary greeted me reluctantly. "We have no openings," he began our meeting.

"I'm not here for work. I've brought something, however, that might make your work a bit easier."

"We are quite satisfied with our current operations," he said stiffly.

I had expected this. I had already learned, thanks to Ensten, how resistant the Guilds were to anything new. "We are not suggesting a change, just an addition if you will. It can help your Guild earn greater profits."

I thought that would interest him. He leaned forward. "How?"

"Let me demonstrate." I removed a small bag of fire salt from my pocket. "This is fire salt. It was developed in Houff."

"Houff?" He frowned. "We have no mining operations in that region."

"We didn't develop it for mining. Actually we use it to clear land for farming. The proper amount will

remove the largest tree stump.” I poured some of the powder on his desk. “If I light this, it would burst harmlessly into flame. Pack this tightly into a container of some kind, however, and it erupts like a volcano. It will actually blow a hole in a stone wall.” I paused. “Or a mine.”

"That sounds dangerous," he said, interest flagging.

"It can be if too much is used. But with a bit of experimentation, you should be able to discover the proper amount."

He nodded reluctantly. "Houff is a long way from here. Shipping would be a problem."

"We'll provide the formula. The ingredients are easily obtained anywhere."

He sat back and wriggled his fingers while he thought. I noticed how crooked and scarred they were, doubtless broken more than once while working in the mines. "Ours is not the richest of Guilds. How much would we owe you for this 'fire salt'?"

I smiled. "Absolutely nothing. Consider it a gift from the good people of Houff."

"A gift?"

"Yes. We see no reason not to share this valuable tool with others. If, at some point in the future, you might be able to help us in some way, we would greatly appreciate it, of course. Beyond that?" I shrugged and stopped.

He formed a steeple with his fingers as he sat back. "That would appear a fair offer. You will demonstrate this, of course?"

"Of course. I have everything with me. We can do it right now if you wish."

"Let me summon my assistant and you can show us."

Not long after the three of us were in a nearby forest. I had already packed some fire salt in a paper tube and attached a string covered with more of the salt. "As I told you, you'll have to experiment to determine how much of the salt you need," I explained as I shoved the tube into the ground near a small tree. "Once you've placed it, just light the string," which I did with the torch I had brought, "and get back."

We moved back a good twenty paces while the string burned merrily. Not far enough. When the fire salt erupted, we were knocked to the ground and immediately covered with dirt and shards of wood. When the smoke cleared, there was a large hole in the ground and the tree had been torn in half.

I grinned weakly as we rose and shook away the debris. "Sorry. Used a bit too much."

The Guild members, however, just stared in awed silence at the wreckage. "Amazing," the secretary managed to say after several minutes.

"I thought you might be interested."

He nodded, his gaze still focused on the ruined tree.

"In that case..." I patted him on the shoulder. "I'll give you the fire salt recipe. Be sure to let your Guild know about this and the generosity of Houff."

"We will." He turned reluctantly and offered his hand. "You have provided a great service, sir. I'm sorry,

I didn't get your name."

*You never asked before.* "Brendell," I shook his hand. "Be sure to mention my name as well."

I took a circuitous path back to Houff, chiefly to lose any pursuers. Four times I traveled by ship; each time I presented the captain with a Long Eye, and by the last he said that the Guild had learned about them and were already in discussions with the Houff government about purchasing more. The Miner's Guild, I knew, would take longer, but if they became as enthusiastic as the Captain's Guild, then my efforts to protect Houff would have succeeded.

So when I finally made my way down the main road of Houff, it had turned from spring to fall. The changes amazed me. The river now flowed freely and the fields were full and ripe for harvest. There was now a steady stream of travelers flowing into and out of the city proper. Soon, I was sure, I could get out of my disguise and join Cordita in her inn to share a glass of wine and her bed. By now you'd think I'd learned...

The guards, mostly human now, let me pass through the gates without question. Unlike before, the streets were crowded and many of the buildings bore fresh coats of paints as new businesses had moved in. Eventually I had to dismount and lead my mount to the stables far from the gates. "Two silver coins," the stablemaster said when I asked for quarters for my horse.

"Really? Your prices have gone up," I said.

He bent over and peered closely at me. "You've been here before?" he asked after a long moment. "I remember faces but I don't recognize you."

*You aren't supposed to.* I wore a goatee and blonde hair of medium length, plus a large earring in one ear that was impossible to ignore. "It's been a long time. Here," and I handed him the fee. "Make sure he's well cared for."

"Of course," he said, dropping the money in his leather apron.

"Things have changed a lot since last time I was here," I continued casually.

"If you were last here during the troubles, then you are right. Kastikaan no longer threatens us. Pipofess and her magic have shown the world that we can defend ourselves! Even the Assassin's Guild is no match for her."

*Or a dragon.* "Well, it looks like things have changed dramatically for you. It's been quite some time; can you recommend an inn?"

"You can stay in my stables if you wish. Two lead coins each day."

"I've been sleeping outside for the last month; I would like a bed that doesn't move beneath me."

"Try the 'Dragon's Bower,'" he said with a touch of pique. "In all likelihood they have no rooms, though."

"Thank you." I walked away whistling merrily. You've done it, Brendell, I thought as I wended my way through the crowded streets. Houff was both safe and prosperous, more, I was sure, than before. I stopped to admire the wares in several storefronts on the way and debated whether to select something for Cordita, then changed my mind. Later we could shop for something she truly wanted.

When I reached Cordita's inn, I realized that it had been renamed and was the one the stablemaster had referred to. It was filled with customers but after a brief wait a table opened. I sat and summoned a

serving wench. "A flagon of your best wine," I told her. "And could you summon Cordita for me?"

She frowned, which troubled her beauty not in the slightest. "I'm sorry, master, but I know no Cordita."

Now I frowned. "Cordita. The woman whose parents own this place."

Her eyes widened in recognition. "Oh, the previous owners! They sold out and left four months ago I believe. A family tragedy or somesuch, I'm not sure. I'm not from Houff."

My good mood vanished like a rainbow in the night. "I see," I said slowly. "I'll have the wine in any event. And thank you."

My mind raced down mordant passageways as I sat in silence. Had something happened to Cordita? To her family? A death perhaps? And where could they have gone? After all this, it wasn't *right*, and I had to stop myself from slamming my fist on the table. I'll have to see Fess earlier than I planned, I realized as I sipped tastelessly at my wine.

I didn't enjoy my quaff, but I felt its effects nonetheless. When I left the inn, I was more drunk than I had planned to be. I should have waited until morning, but the grape won the argument over courtesy and I went directly to Fess' manor. I pounded on the door until a servant opened it and stared at me. "Who are you and what could you possibly want at this hour?" she asked.

"Who are *you*?" I asked, my voice slurred. "I need to see your mistress immediately."

She stood in the doorway, legs spread, arms folded, her intentions clear. "The master is asleep and must not be disturbed. Whatever it is, it can wait until morning. Now leave or I summon the guards."

"This is important. The safety of Houff is at issue. Tell her Brendell is here to see her."

"Brendell?" She stepped forward, sniffed, then her eyes widened in recognition. "It *is* you!"

I understood immediately. "Madnizaroc."

Madnizaroc moved aside. "She will want to see you. Don't understand why. Come in."

"So," I said as we walked toward the library, "how are things? I would think being a serving wench would be beneath you."

"I'm not a 'serving wench!' I do what she asks because she gives me the freedom to do what I must." She stopped and glared at me. "Unlike you."

I sighed. "I'm sorry I had to inconvenience you. And this is the last time I will apologize for anything I did to you." We entered the library and I dropped into a chair. "Now fetch Fess."

She grimaced but left me alone. *So Madnizaroc is now Fess' servant. What does that mean?* Lord Bandikane had passed the dragon off as his wife ... with tragic results. "I hope you know what you're doing," I whispered.

I was still pondering when an upset Pipo Fess entered. She stood in the doorway and looked at me with folded arms and an angry glare. "What are you doing here at this hour?"

The cold reception was not what I was expecting and I rose shakily. "I apologize for the hour, but I had to see you immediately, Mistress Fess."

"Your impatience will be the death of you, Brendell." She entered and sat across from me. She was clad

in a flowing green robe but no jewelry and she stifled a yawn. She looked at me intently. "It is you, right?"

I frowned, then nodded. "Indeed. You can't fool a dragon, you know."

"The beard becomes you."

"You can have it." I pulled it off and tossed it on a table. "This as well," and I removed the earring.

"I doubt I would have use for either, but I am relieved to see you despite the hour."

*Relieved? Not glad to see me?* "I only just arrived and I felt it necessary to talk with you."

"This late in the morning? About what?"

"About." Then I stopped and hung my head, embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I had too much wine, too little to eat." I started to rise.

Fess shook her head. "Sit, Brendell. Now that I've awakened, albeit abruptly, we might as well get this over with. You first. What is on your mind?"

*I don't know. Madnizaroc? The situation with the Captain's Guild? What is the Thief's Guild doing?* "Cordita. I've learned she's left Houff."

She crossed her legs, her robe opening and baring them past her knees. "Yes. Like many of my people. I have no idea where they went."

I shivered, both at the news and Fess' attitude. Perhaps it's just the hour, I thought, reaching for straws. I grabbed one. "I understand the Captain's Guild has contacted you about the Long Eye."

She shrugged. "They have been very interested. Houff thanks you for that."

*This isn't going well at all. I leaned forward, thought about taking her hand then changed my mind. She was acting so formal, such a sign of intimacy would only worsen the situation.* "You have something on your mind. Tell me."

"Your relationship with the Thief's Guild."

"What about it? I warned you they would come. Have they?"

She brushed back a stray strand of graying hair. "Most definitely. And they have accomplished what the Assassin's Guild could not. We've been robbed blind, Brendell. All because of you!"

Now I was beginning to understand. The Guild had put out an open contract on Houff. "You've taken the steps I suggested to protect yourself?"

"As if it's mattered! Oh, we've caught some. But they've stolen from everyone. You ask about Cordita. They drove her family to ruin, forced them to sell and leave. And they're not the only ones. The Guild has made it very uncomfortable for us." She straightened. "They know you're alive."

"I'm aware of that."

"They've declared war on you, Brendell. And on anyone else who would dare help you."

I swallowed a boulder. "What are you telling me?"



"Your vendetta against the Guild does not concern us. It is not our battle."

Shivering, I managed to say, "But I've saved you!"

"And *we* saved *you*. Houff is grateful for everything you've done for us. But we can do no more for you."

"Then I'll leave." I tried to stand, but my legs wouldn't allow me.

"No. To protect Houff, I had to make an agreement with them. They've been waiting here in case you returned. Madnizaroc is already notifying them. They should be here to retrieve you in minutes." She sighed. "I do like you, Brendell. But the well-being of Houff is more important than yours. There is really nothing I can do."

I tried to frame an answer even as I heard a din erupt outside our room. *Betrayed. Again.* Any influence of the wine was gone now. All I felt was cold, a freezing hand grasping me like a doll. I didn't try to move, even speak, as I heard the voices and footsteps approaching. Then the door flew open and five armed men entered. "This is Brendell?" one asked Fess.

"It is. As you requested."

"Excellent. The Guild will be most pleased."

"As long as they honor our agreement." Fess looked at me and I could see the apprehension and resignation in her eyes.

"The Guild will honor its commitment." He turned to his men. "Seize him. Search him. Bind him. He must not escape again."

I hardly noticed them stripping me completely, then tying my arms behind me, manacling my ankles, putting a metal collar around my neck and a hood over my head. Everything I had done for Fess, for Houff, and I had been betrayed. What made things worse was I understood. Whatever I had done for them they had repaid in kind. Fess' loyalty was to her people first. I couldn't blame her. But I couldn't forgive her, either.

The men said nothing as I was half led, half carried outside, then thrown into a cart of some sort. The clang of metal convinced me I was in a locked cage. I managed to get my knees under me and tried to stand, but only got part way up when my head hit the top. Better I stayed on my knees anyway. The night was crisp and they had given me no cloak. So I huddled, trying to conserve heat as I felt us move through the cobbled streets of Houff.

I finally fell asleep so I don't know how long we traveled when something poked me sharply in the side, waking me. The heat on my skin told me it had to be morning. I groaned loudly. "I'm cold."

"He's alive," someone said, not trying to hide his disappointment.

"Good. Drag him out of there. Find something for him to wear."

I heard the creaking of an opening door, then hands reached in and dragged me roughly outside. I fell on my knees on the ground, then rolled on my side. My legs and arms were aching from crouching all night and I groaned again as I tried to stretch my legs.

"Stop whining, thief," someone said and kicked me in the side. Then I was jerked to my feet and I felt something being draped across my shoulders and around my chest.

I wasn't ready to stand but as I started to fall over, someone grabbed me. "None of that," and I was slapped sharply across the face.

"Can't, can't help it," I said, tasting blood. "Need water."

"Now he wants water!" said the man who caught me. "Captain, can't we just kill him now?"

"No," another voice said. "The Guild has other plans for him. Give him some water and feed him."

"Waste of time." Then someone ripped the hood away.

It took my eyes a moment to adjust to the sudden light. We were in a clearing in the forest. I guessed we were beyond the borders of Houff, but I had no idea which direction we had traveled and I didn't recognize anything. Forests, after all, tend to look the same. I tried to take a step, but the sudden pressure of a blade in my back convinced me to stop. So I stood silent and observed.

I could see four armed men; the one behind me meant there were at least five. Two were leisurely building a fire while the others were tending to the horses. We had probably ridden all night and now they planned to camp and rest for a few hours. Then I looked down at my manacled feet. A chain hung down from the collar around my neck and my hands remained bound behind my back. I could wiggle my fingers, but there was no give in the knots. My captors knew what they were doing. Unfortunately. "I have to relieve myself," I said.

"Go right ahead," said the man still standing behind me.

"My hands..."

He laughed. "If you think I'm going to hold it for you, you're insane."

I moved my hands. "I'll wet myself."

"The sun is warm. You will dry soon enough."

*Try something else.* "May I sit? My legs hurt."

He grunted, then walked in front of me, grabbed the chain attached to the collar and led me to a nearby log. "Don't go anywhere. I'll get you some water."

Not very likely, I thought as he walked away. For the first time I saw my conveyance, a small wagon with an iron cage in back. They had planned well, I had to admit. Between the cage and my bonds, I had almost no freedom of movement. Even if I had a pick, it would have been difficult to use. If I couldn't at least get my hands free, I was going wherever they wanted. I began rubbing the knots against the log, hoping the rough bark would weaken the cord.

The guard returned shortly with a ladle and a small bucket. "Thirsty, eh? Here," and he poured a scoop of water over my head.

I gasped, then licked up the water dripping down my face. "Thank you."

He pointed at the bucket resting on the ground. "More where that came from. Help yourself." Then he threw a few apples in it. "There's your lunch." He was laughing when he walked away.

I squirmed off the log and sat awkwardly next to the bucket. The fruit at first resisted my efforts, but, after a thorough soaking, I managed to bite into one and pulled it out. Wedging it between my knees, I was able to eat most of it before it inevitably and irretrievably fell to the ground. My efforts caused no

small amount of merriment among the guards and they began betting on whether I could capture another apple.

Instead I rested against the log, hoping the sun would quickly dry me as the steady breeze was chilling. One thought comforted me; I would probably die of the fever caught during this trip than any rope around my neck.

The guards' interest in me died quickly when they realized I was no longer a source of entertainment. I leaned against the log and began rubbing my bound hands against the rough bark, but stopped after a few minutes when the guard reappeared. He pointed at the bucket. "You done?" I nodded. "Good. We'll be leaving soon," and he grinned. "By this time tomorrow you'll be only a bad memory."

I cursed softly as he sauntered away. I had always willingly accepted the dangers of my trade. But my death should have been at the hands of an outraged king or merchant, not those of my own Guild! I stretched my legs to get a little relief before I was thrown back in that cage. And nearly yelped in pain as my heel struck a sharp, pointed object hidden in the grass. I inched forward, thoroughly scratching and staining my bare bottom on the rough ground until I was nearly on top of it. Don't be buried too deeply, I prayed as I searched for it blindly with my tied hands. I'm sure I cut my hand when I found it, a sharp stone, not a stick. I pried it out quickly; it was small enough that I could hide it in one hand. At least if they didn't search me too thoroughly.

They didn't. I had made my way back to my favorite log when one of the guards approached. "Stand up, Brendell."

It wasn't easy, and I had to lean against the log to get to my feet. He just stood and watched with a smirk on his face until I was upright, then grabbed the chain and pulled me toward the wagon. I kept up as best I could because I knew he would just drag me if I fell. Then we arrived, and there was more laughter as I was pushed inside. "He must be growing grass back there," one said and threw aside my wrap so all could see my backside.

Other barbs followed until a stern voice yelled out, "Enough! We have to reach Kerry's Cove by tomorrow. We'll be riding all night as it is. Get him in the cage and mount up."

They grumbled and one slapped me across the back of my legs with a switch. I crawled forward, my meager wrap dragging behind me, and then the door clanged shut. Moments later the wagon lurched forward and we were on our way.

*Kerry's Cove*. We were going south, I realized. At least they hadn't bothered with the hood this time, although there wasn't much to see, crouched over as I was. Two of the guards stayed behind the wagon, but I noticed none were on either side. Which made what I planned to do a bit easier. The stone I had found was relatively flat, so I was able to wedge it between two wagon floorboards. The constant rocking of the wagon was now an asset; anyone who cared to look would only assume the ride caused my constant movement, not my attempts to cut through the bonds on my wrists.

The sun had traveled from horizon to horizon and I was covered with sweat both from the direct sunlight and my efforts when I finally felt the bonds around my wrists give way. I fought the urge to move my arms, if to do nothing more than wrap the blanket around me. Now that night was approaching, I was getting cold. But I would have to wait until it was completely dark.

I glanced at the riders, but they were ignoring me. I would undo my ankle manacles next, I decided, then the collar. Then I would figure out how to escape from the cage.

All my plans quickly became moot, however. We went perhaps another mile when the wagon stopped.

Are they going to prepare another meal? I wondered. If so, they would surely discover I had freed my hands. Then I heard voices. I turned my head and saw another group of mounted men blocking the road. I strained, but I couldn't hear what was being said. The anger in the voices, however, was evident enough.

Finally the band of riders approached. Their uniforms bespoke them as Assassin's Guild. And their leader ... "Algorph," I whispered. My mind was racing with a thousand questions as the troops rode up to the wagon.

Algorph smiled as he looked at me. "So good to see you again, Brendell. You're a hard person to find, but not impossible. Now you're coming with us."

"No! He's our prisoner." The voice came from the front of the wagon. The man whom I had assumed was merely the wagon master climbed down and approached. Unlike the others, he wore no sword or uniform. But he was clearly in charge of my captors, doubtless a representative of the Thief's Guild. "This man has attacked the very integrity of the Thief's Guild. His crimes against us are uncountable. His fate will be determined by us and us alone!"

Algorph leaned forward, his attention totally focused on me. "Is that true, Brendell?"

I licked my arid lips. "In a manner of speaking."

Algorph sat up, then looked down at the Guild agent. "That hardly matters. He has also defied the Assassin's Guild. For that he will be punished. By us."

"You cannot have him." The man hopped up and down like an angry rabbit. "He belongs to us!"

Algorph remained calm and bemused. "No. You ceded all claim when you ousted him from your Guild. He is our prisoner now and coming with us."

"I'll kill him first. Right here, right now."

Everyone was listening intently when Algorph responded. "I have my orders and they will be followed. Your men are members of *my* Guild. Their first loyalty *must be* to follow my instructions. Unless," and he smiled, "they're scabs. In which case I have the authority to slay them immediately."

The Guild agent grimaced. "These men are hired members of your Guild. But they work for the Thief's Guild!"

"Assassin's Guild demands take priority." Algorph looked at my guards. "If you men wish to continue to remain members in good standing of the Guild, you must obey me." Then he looked again at the Guild agent. "I am in charge now."

"Never!" and he stomped his foot in frustration. "This matter concerns only the Thief's Guild. We will protest your actions at the next joint council meeting!"

"Which is your right. But until then, he is in our custody."

"Your Guild does not have that right or that power. This is not how the Guild's operate!"

Algorph sighed as he removed his sword and pointed it at the Guild representative. "This has gone on long enough. Get back in your wagon and follow us." Then he looked at me. "And get the prisoner some clothes. We don't want him dead. Yet."

I was dragged out of my cage to be dressed and they discovered I had cut through the ropes. Algorph merely laughed. "As if that would do you any good, Brendell. Remove the necklace but keep the manacles," he told his men. "Those should suffice, now that we're here." Minutes later I was back in the cage and we were once again under way.

We arrived at Kerry's Cove the following morning. It was a small fishing port and the townsfolk watched in silent awe as we paraded down the main street. We were surely the most entertaining sight they had ever seen, which pleased me none at all. Several actually came up to my cage, so I growled at them to drive them away. We stopped at what I immediately recognized was a Guild office. "Come with me and we'll talk to the captain," Algorph told the Guild agent. "Make sure Brendell stays put," he then ordered his men.

"Could you let me out so I could stand?" I asked as soon as the two men disappeared in the building. "Every muscle aches."

"Those are not our orders," one guard said coldly. "Your discomfort should end soon enough." Then he grinned. "And forever."

So I stayed where I was, my anger boiling over. Here I sat, a toy being fought over by the two Guilds. It made no difference who won, I was going to be thoroughly broken. You did this to me, Fess, I said softly, but I knew that was a lie. *I had done this to me.* My ridiculous quest for vengeance had led me to the inevitable. *Attacking the Guilds; you are an utter fool, Brendell.* Yes I am, I had to agree with my inner voice, and now there was nothing I could do but wonder which Guild would decide how I died.

My guards had grown testy and I hot and hungry when Algorph reappeared. "Take Brendell to the cellars," he said. "He is going to remain our guest until the Guild representatives arrive."

"That could take a month or more," one grumbled as they began unlocking the cage. "He's going to die anyway. Why waste the time and expense?"

"I agree," Algorph said. "But we will have to let the Council determine which Guild deserves the honor." Then he pulled his sword and ran his finger along the blade. "I hope I win the lottery to become his executioner."

They pulled me out and quickly tied my hands. I was completely surrounded by armed men as we went inside straight to the cellars below. Soon after I was locked within another cage, although this time I could stand. The other guards left, leaving Algorph and I alone. "Aren't you going to untie my hands?" I asked.

"You're a thief. They should cause you no problem. If they do, well," and he shrugged.

"I helped you before, Algorph. With King Zenora and with Pipo Fess. You and your Guild owe me."

"I don't think so. You defied us. You helped our enemy. You declared war on us, Brendell. Now you've lost and have to pay the price."

*True enough.* I decided a different approach was called for. "You've severely inconvenienced the other Guilds. Why force them to travel all the way here? It would have been faster to go to them. They might be upset with you."

He shook his head. "That would require traveling by ship. It will be easier to protect you here."

"Protect.' An interesting choice of words. Do you suddenly fear for my safety? That perhaps the Thief's Guild will try to steal me away?"

He patted his sword. "Would they try. Your Guild is too cowardly to challenge us. You thieves are all the same, sneaking around in the dark, fleeing at the first sign of danger. Relying on us to protect you." He stepped forward. "Nothing can protect you now, Brendell."

I was tired of his bravado, angered at his ingratitude. I yawned. "Could you give me something to eat, or do you plan to starve me?"

"No. We can't, now. What would you like?"

"Meat. Cooked of course. Vegetables. Perhaps some wine?"

He nodded. "Gruel it is then! Someone will be down soon. Enjoy your stay, Brendell." He laughed and started to walk away, then turned. "Oh, and we'll have guards here all night, *every* night."

He was as good as his word. Unfortunately.

So the days crawled by. Beyond endless jokes at my expense, the guards weren't overly cruel. They did, however, rebuff all my attempts at conversation, and as Algorph never reappeared, I had no one to talk to except the spiders and one overly shy rat which shared my living quarters. I didn't bother trying to escape. My success in doing so previously now proved my undoing; the guards, always two at the minimum, were unnaturally alert and prone to searching me and my cell hourly.

I lost track of the days but I knew something was finally happening when the guards entered my cell carrying a bucket, a razor and a change of clothing. "Strip him and chain him to the wall," one ordered as he set his burden down.

So I was, and they proceeded to scrub me down, shave me and hack away at my hair. I was shivering and spitting soapy water when they released finally me. "Make yourself presentable," another said and pointed at the pile of clean linen. "You are about to be judged for your countless crimes against the Guild."

The shirt was sheer and neither it nor the pants had pockets. They didn't provide shoes. When I was finished, they grabbed my arms and pulled me out of the cell and up the stairs to a room occupied by ten other men seated around a long table. The Guild Council, I realized. Brought here to determine who had the right to kill me.

I was led to the back of the room and forced to stand below the glowering portrait of the Assassin's Guild chief while the men studied me intently like I was the misbehaving schoolboy. I wanted to stand proudly and look each in the eye, but my clothing was still damp and I could do little more than smile in embarrassment at them.

After what seemed forever, the man at the head of the table clapped his hands. "We may now begin. This is the man Brendell we have been brought to judge?"

"Yes," said the man whom I recognized as a Thief's Guild official. "He is a former member of our Guild and must be punished by us and us alone!"

"We'll determine that, thank you." Then he looked at me. "You understand why we are having this trial, Brendell?"

I swallowed a boulder. "Yes," I managed to squeak out.

"Speak up!"

"Yes." I responded louder than necessary.

"Good. But I shall reiterate the charges for the benefit of the attending Guild representatives. You, Brendell, have been accused of heinous crimes against both the Thief's Guild and the Assassin's Guild. Both Guilds demand the right to punish you for your malfeasance. We have been brought here to determine which will have the honor of killing you. Is that correct?"

Both the Thief's Guild and the Assassin's Guild representative nodded.

The chairman sat back. "I suppose all this is a mere formality since your fate is already determined. However, as this is a conflict among Guilds, it must be settled in Guild fashion. Teszneth, would you state your claim first?"

That was the Thief's Guild representative. "Thank you, Guild Chief Mirz. This man," he pointed at me, "has waged a war against the honored members of my Guild. He has interfered in legal contracts, he has stolen from our offices. His direct actions have led to the false detainment of at least three of our members. His crimes have threatened the very foundation of our Guild. As a former member of our Guild, he is ours to judge and ours alone."

Mirz gave a low whistle. "You say he has stolen from *you*?"

"Yes," and Teszneth gave me a withering glare. "From our offices in Hannis Bay."

Good, I thought. They still know nothing about my adventures in the Archives. Or are too embarrassed to admit it.

Mirz looked at me. "Are those accusations true, Brendell?"

"I was defending myself," I said. "They put a contract out on my family. *They* robbed from *me*."

"A legal contract and perfectly within our rights," Teszneth said. "His past actions frequently cast our Guild in a bad light."

"I succeeded in every contract I was given," I snapped back. "Contracts that no other thief could have fulfilled!"

"The man was a failure," Teszneth said calmly. "It was the reason we threw him out of the Guild."

"Your abilities are not why we're here," Mirz addressed me. "Just your actions against two honored Guilds. Commander Zyle, what is your claim?"

The Assassin's Guild representative stood so everyone could admire the medals on his jacket. An impressive display I had to admit and I decided if I had a vote, he would receive it. He straightened and pointed at me. "This man Brendell defied direct Guild orders and imperiled our members. During our containment of the outlaw kingdom Houff, he assisted the evil ruler and her demon army. He led their attack against the innocent people of Kastikaan. It was only through our intervention that that peaceful land was not overrun, her dear citizens enslaved or worse. We have managed to control the situation, but not without a vast expenditure in time and manpower. His intervention led to the deaths or imprisonment of dozens of my Guild members! For that alone he deserves punishment from our hands!"

"If you wouldn't have supported Kastikaan against Houff, none of that would have been necessary." I straightened and looked Zyle in the eye. "I am alive today only because your Guild did not follow the written contract you had made with the Thief's Guild."

"What is he talking about?" Mirz asked Zyle.

"Merely the ramblings of a liar and a rogue thief," he replied.

"Ask your own man Algorph if I'm lying," I said. "The Thief's Guild hired you to capture me and have the rulers of Vrallik dispose of me. Instead you told the Guild I had been killed so you could coerce me into working for you."

Zyle slammed his fist on the table. "I will not stand for you slandering my Guild! These unfounded accusations are just another reason why his head belongs to us!"

I noticed Teszneth gazing at him intently. "You did tell us Brendell had been killed," he said to Zyle.

"The witch Pipo Fess deluded us," Zyle snapped back. "But none of that matters now."

Good, I thought as I studied the look on Teszneth's face. He didn't appear to be appeased. I was sure a bit of divisiveness between the Guilds could only help me, so I tried to widen the gulf. "My accusations are easy enough to prove. Summon Algorph and ask him."

"Sargent Algorph is away on another assignment," Zyle said, folding his arms.

"How convenient," Mirz said. "But overall that matters little. You are already guilty in the eyes of the Guilds, Brendell. This is not a trial but merely a determination of which Guild has priority."

"My Guild," Teszneth broke in. "He is a member of our Guild!"

"Former member," Mirz said.

"Yes," Teszneth admitted.

"You may want to review your membership qualifications if this person has been such a pariah," Mirz said dryly. "Gentlemen," and he looked at each Guild representative in turn, "you have heard the arguments. I see no reason why we should delay any longer, especially since the accused has denied none of the charges against him. Unless there are further questions, I call for a vote."

"I have one," one representative raised his hand.

Mirz nodded. "The chair recognizes the representative from the Miner's Guild."

He stood up and looked at me. "Did you recently visit our headquarters in Mynosia?"

It took me a moment to remember. "Yes."

"And you showed our representative something you called 'fire salt'?"

*Where was he going with this?* "Yes."

He smiled. "Your gift to us has proven to be most helpful. Our operations have improved dramatically since we've begun using it."

"Fire salt. What is it?" asked Mirz.

"It's a powder that, when properly used, can explode. We've found it excellent for mining."

Zyle frowned. "Why have we not heard of this? Why was this not brought to the attention of the Council? This 'fire salt' sounds like something all the Guilds should vote upon."



The Miner's Guild member shrugged. "We didn't consider it your concern. This Brendell brought it to us and us alone. He said it was discovered in Houff." Then he looked at me. "We've been searching for a way to thank you. Now I think we've found it." He turned back to the Guild members. "Gentlemen, Brendell is a member of the Miner's Guild and as such is under our jurisdiction only."

"What?!" Teszneth nearly jumped from his chair. "He cannot be a member of your Guild, Saro. He is not a miner!"

Saro smiled. "He is still an apprentice. But that makes him nonetheless an honored Guild member."

"This cannot be," Zyle joined in. "A man cannot be a member of two Guilds."

"He isn't," Saro said. "Teszneth has said Brendell was thrown out of the Thief's Guild. Are you suggesting, Zyle, that he is a member of yours?"

The commander's medals trembled. "Absolutely not! We have no use for members who cannot follow orders."

"Then it's settled. As Brendell is a member of my Guild, we have priority in determining any punishment he may deserve no matter who those actions were directed against."

"You're overstepping your bounds, Saro," Zyle said darkly. "Your Guild lacks the right or the power."

"My Guild has the right to determine who will join us. Each Guild is equal in the eyes of the Council," he replied with a glare.

Zyle would hear none of that. He popped out of his chair like a gopher from the ground. "Not this day! You will not defy the will of the Assassin's Guild!"

"Enough," and Mirz rapped on the table for attention. "I am in charge here, Commander Zyle, not you. Return to your seat."

"This is some kind of foolish charade and my Guild will not tolerate it," said Teszneth.

"What honored member Saro says is true. We are all equals here," Mirz replied.

"I demand a vote now! Saro must not be allowed to deny justice for my Guild and my men!" Zyle said.

"My Guild has the right to determine who shall be a member and who shall not, not you," Saro said to Zyle.

"Your Guild does not have the power to defy us!" Zyle was now shaking so hard his medals were jingling.

Saro approached and stood inches from the taller man. "And *your* Guild has become too arrogant in its lust for power! You *do not* control my Guild."

Zyle poked a finger in Saro's chest. "You *need* us to protect you!"

"And you need the ore we mine to make your weapons!" Saro moved Zyle's hand aside. "Or would you prefer to 'protect us' with limbs and rocks?"

"Gentlemen, please," Mirz said, slamming his hand on the table. "Take your seats. We will vote on this in a civilized manner." Saro and Zyle were still glaring at each other as they reluctantly complied. Mirz sighed before continuing. "I apologize to the rest of the Guild representatives for the poor behavior of a

few of our members.” He gave Saro, Zyle and Teszneth each a withering glare. “If it happens again, the man will be removed and his voting rights rescinded on this matter. Is that understood?” Each man nodded slowly. “Then let the voting begin.” He took a swallow of water before continuing. “Initially we were dealing only with the conflicting claims of the Thief’s Guild and the Assassin’s Guild. Now we must also consider the claims of the Miner’s Guild. Silversmith’s Guild, what say you?”

I sighed and closed my eyes as I listened to my fate. The surprising actions of Saro; could they save me? Surely not. Zyle was correct; The Assassin’s Guild was the most powerful. No Guild would want to defy them. The result was inevitable and I could only wonder if the Assassin’s would slay me quickly. Hanging or beheading, which method did they use? I couldn’t remember, but neither was overly attractive.

I became lost in my fatal musings so it took Mirz’s rapping on the table to catch my attention. “Enough, gentlemen! We will not sit here and argue with each other!” Then he sat quietly until the other members regained composure. “Thank you. The voting now stands at three supporting the Thief’s Guild, three supporting the Assassin’s Guild and three for the Miner’s Guild. I had hoped that I would merely chair this meeting but obviously, and unfortunately, mine will be the tie-breaking vote. As the representative of the Captain’s Guild, I do not feel that this situation concerns my membership. However, the conflicting demands of the Thief’s and Assassin’s Guild have changed that.

"In listening to the arguments presented, I believe each member has made a strong case for his position. I could argue strongly that each is correct. However, there is one voice we cannot ignore, and that is of the accused. Brendell, I have a question to ask you."

*What? Which Guild I would prefer kill me?* “Go ahead."

"Are you familiar with a device called the Long Eye?"

He had to know the answer. “Yes."

"You introduced it to one of our captains, didn't you? Under a different name."

I had no reason to lie about that. “On behalf of Houff, yes."

"You were merely the messenger then."

"Yes. Houff developed it. We thought your Guild would find it useful."

"I'm sure you did." Mirz then looked at Saro. “Brendell, indirectly or not, has provided a great service to my Guild as well. Already the Long Eye has saved three ships from crashing on unknown reefs. For that reason, I am casting my vote in favor of the claim made by the Miner’s Guild. This council session is now completed."

Zyle leaped from his chair. “This is an outrage! The will of the Assassin’s Guild will not be defied. I will kill this man myself!"

Mirz calmly reached out and grabbed Zyle’s sword arm. “If you dare defy the will of the Guild Council, you are branding you and yours outlaws. We will strip you of all rights and recognition. We *will not tolerate* your continued arrogance."

Zyle glared at Mirz, then Teszneth, then me. “This is not over,” he said, sitting reluctantly.

Mirz was unmoved. “Yes it is. Saro, I am releasing Brendell in your custody. If you wish to arrange compensation with the other complainants, that is up to you. I now call this meeting adjourned."

I remained standing, not yet able to move, as the council members filed out. I was still having difficulty understanding what had just happened. *What do I do now?* I had never considered the option of surviving.

I still hadn't moved when Saro approached. "Come with me," he said. I followed him numbly out of the building. The other guild representatives were in small groups, conversing. I noticed Zyle and Teszneth were arguing under a nearby tree. It was easy to guess the topic. Zyle turned and saw us and immediately started our way.

"Don't think you've escaped our justice," he told me when he reached us.

"Are you threatening a member of the Miner's Guild, Commander Zyle?" Saro asked calmly.

"You and your Guild made a grave mistake this day," he replied, his eyes still locked on me. "This man cannot be trusted."

"I'm sure once we have him working in the mines he will be of no more danger to you."

"Yes," and he slapped his sword. "He will be safe in the mines."

"Come, Brendell. Our ship will be leaving soon." Saro grabbed my arm and led me to a waiting carriage.

"Thank you," I muttered as we walked.

"I spoke the truth in the meeting. You have helped us greatly."

"I confess I never considered myself a miner."

Saro laughed. "And you're not. Your apprenticeship will last only until I board my ship. I will then consider our debt to you paid in full."

I smiled. "As will I."

He opened the door to the carriage. "Get in. We must maintain this charade a little longer."

I said nothing as we were driven to Kerry's Cove. The Assassin's Guild remained my enemy, the Thief's Guild as well. I couldn't go back to Houff and I couldn't find Cordita without Fess' help. Which left me only one choice. When we reached the port, Saro asked me what I would do now. "Go home to Mistmourning," I said.

## Mistmourning and Beyond

I set aside the scythe and wiped away the sweat pouring from my forehead. It was harvest time and my little farm didn't provide enough income for me to hire help. At the same time it did allow me to live in reasonable comfort, albeit alone.

Not much different than when I grew up in Mistmourning, and my thoughts immediately returned to my father. Like I had promised Saro, I had gone home directly, where I learned that my father had passed away the previous winter. In his sleep, the neighbors had assured me. He didn't suffer.

That wasn't quite true, I knew. But I also knew he passed on holding no recrimination toward my siblings or me.

With him gone, there was no reason for me to stay. It wouldn't have been safe in any event, as both the Thief's and Assassin's Guild knew of my homestead. If they still sought revenge, then Mistmourning was the last place I could live.

So, in disguise once again, I had moved on, finally settling in Oqin, a land I had never visited before, a small farming community on the very end of a peninsula, with no other resources and of no interest to anyone, especially the Guilds. I had purchased a small farmhold and now survived like nearly all my neighbors, working the land for food and a small profit. Not at *all* what I had planned to do with my life, but, I would counter while ruminating during long lonely nights, at least I *had* a life.

You've idled long enough, I scolded myself. I retrieved my scythe and was making reasonable progress when I heard the nicker of a horse. I turned and spied a rider approaching my humble home.

An assessor? I wondered as I reluctantly set down my implement. No, I realized as I moved to intercept, it was a female. Probably someone looking for another Oqin resident, I decided. I tried to straighten my flowing hair and donned a smile. "Can I help you?" I greeted her.

'She just sat on her mount, staring at me. Then, surprisingly, she sniffed the air. And I knew. "Madnizaroc."

"No," she said, dismounting. "Her daughter. You *are* Brendell?"

I quivered at the shock of hearing my real name, a name I hadn't used since coming to Oqin. I looked at her closely. I could see a resemblance between her and the teenage guise Madnizaroc had occasionally used while under the control of Lord Bandikane. Now I wished I had my scythe; I suddenly needed something to help me maintain my balance. "Yes," I heard myself whisper.

"Good," she said matter-of-factly. "I've spent a long time looking for you. You're wanted back at Houff."

"Houff." It took a moment for me to remember. "Pipo Fess. Yes. Why?"

"She can explain that better than I. Get what you need and hurry. It's a long flight."

"I ... I can't." I pointed to my home. "I have a farm."

"I didn't come to debate you," she said while she removed the reins from her steed. "It is necessary you come with me. Now."

"Why are you doing that?" I asked, pointing at the reins in her hands. "I don't have a horse."

"We're not going by horse." Seconds later it was not a young woman standing there, but a full-grown dragon. "Put the bridle on me so you have something to hang onto, then climb on my back."

*Houff.* My mind was racing at the sound of the name, at the questions her presence created. Did I dare go with her? Was Houff once again under attack from the Guild's? *Was I being brought to my death?* I looked at my small house, my small farm. If I refused to comply, I would never know the answers. I stumbled forward and did as she asked. "I've never done this," I said as I managed to perch myself behind her long serpentine neck.

"Really?" With the bit in her mouth, she now spoke with a lisp. "My mother said she carried you before."

"That was in a basket."

She shrugged, nearly throwing me to the ground before I could wrap my arms around her neck. "This is easier. Hold on, we're leaving." Seconds later we were airborne.

I gasped as I looked down. I had nearly forgotten how exciting the view from above could be. Farmholds flowed rapidly below us as we headed west, and I wondered with amusement what my neighbors would be thinking if they could see us. "You say Pipo Fess summoned me?"

"Yes." She was flying at a leisurely pace and I quickly realized I was no more a burden to her than a cape would be to me.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Discuss that with Pipo Fess."

Since she refused to elucidate, I decided just to sit back and enjoy the view. "Your mother would never have permitted this," I remarked idly after we had traveled several hours.

"My mother is old-fashioned in many ways. I find it relaxing to have someone to talk to when I'm flying."

"I thank you. What should I call you?"

She snorted. "You should know dragons don't willingly reveal their names."

"Sorry."

"Accepted. So, since we have a long trip ahead, tell me. Why are you so important to Pipo Fess. And how do you know my mother?"

*What can I tell her?* "I guess I helped Fess and Houff in the past. As for your mother, that you might want to discuss with her."

"Fair enough. Tell me how you helped the magician."

As we traveled, I described how I had initially met Fess and how she had saved my life. But that only whetted my mount's appetite for more, so I soon found myself describing everything involved with Kastikaan, the siege, even Madnizaroc's role in thwarting the Assassin's Guild.

When I finished, she appeared suitably impressed. "Now I know why."

"Know what?"

"Nothing. Hang on; I have to land and stretch my legs a bit."

Luckily she had warned me, otherwise I would have been unseated as we veered toward a clearing in the forest below. I alit and discovered I needed to walk a bit myself. She immediately reverted to human form and disappeared in the forest. When she returned, she was carrying a dead rabbit. "I suspect you're hungry by now."

"Yes."

I gathered wood while she expertly gutted the animal. Then she reverted to her true shape and lit the fire with one blast of her breath. "We'll leave once you're done. We should reach Houff by morning." With that she curled up and went to sleep.

As I munched on the roasted rabbit, I tried to imagine why I was being taken to Houff. Surely the land couldn't be in danger again. And why would Fess summon me even if it were? I finally stopped wondering; my companion had no intention of telling me and the answers would come soon enough anyway.

I waited until early evening before rousing her. "I'm ready."

She yawned and stretched, then looked at the darkening sky. "We should have left earlier."

"You looked like you needed your rest."

"Unnecessary. Attach the bridle and get on."

So I did and once again we were airborne. Evening turned to night rapidly as we continued west and I began to shiver as the temperature dropped. The ground below disappeared into continuous shadow, broken infrequently by shards of light. Above, the stars sparkled fitfully behind the clouds. Only her flapping wings broke the silence.

Without light and shadows, there was no way I could judge the passing of time. I decided I dare not sleep as I might lose hold of the reins. We made several brief landings so I could relieve myself, but she was adamant we continue, so I forced myself to remain awake through the night and into the sunrise.

That made it all worthwhile. I've seen the dawn hundreds of times, even if most were reluctantly, but this was different. Aloft, the rising sun was stunning as its orange and yellow fingers streaked slowly across the horizon and chased away the darkness and the shrouded stars above. I felt as if we were flying directly into the glowing disc and I had to shield my eyes from the arriving light.

I must have gasped because she spoke. "What's wrong?"

"The sun. It's ... so beautiful."

"I suppose," she said, the bored voice of experience. "We should be arriving soon."

I looked down. Now that I could once again see land, I thought I recognized a few landmarks. Of course it was probably just my imagination as it had been years since I had ridden with Madnizaroc. "Are we going to land somewhere before Houff?"

"No reason. Unless your puny bladder needs to be emptied again."

I sat back, properly chastised. "No, no."

"Good. I want to get this over with. Your bony knees are starting to dig into my back."

I had no response to *that* so I returned my attention to the ground and let her fly in peace. Now I was

certain I recognized some features; a tall copse of trees in the center of a well-maintained field, a severe bend in the river, the ruins of an abandoned farm. Then, up in the distance, I saw the faint outlines of Houff itself.

I took a deep breath and my grip tightened around the reins. I had to fight the impulse to steer my mount in another direction ... not that she would have obeyed me. Once again I had to wonder why I was being brought back. So I was torn between dread and hope when we finally flew slowly over the city walls directly toward the town square.

We landed without incident. I didn't know what to expect, but surely not this. There was no one here to greet us, indeed, no one seemed to notice our arrival. Had dragon flights become commonplace? I had to wonder. I shook my head. I had lived—hid—in Oqin for many years, but surely not that much had changed. "Is there anyone here?" I asked the dragon once I was safely on the ground.

She was unconcerned. "Pipo Fess is expecting you. You remember the way?"

"Yes."

"Good." Abruptly she turned into a human. "I'll accompany you anyway. I wouldn't want you to get lost now."

I shrugged and followed her down the street. The buildings seemed no different than when I had been here last. I saw an occasional face watching us pass by, but they showed simple curiosity, nothing more. I became lost in thought and didn't notice when we finally reached the manor.

"Just go in. Fess is waiting for you in the library," she said.

"Like old times. You're not coming?"

"My obligations are at an end." With that she turned and walked away.

I looked at the manor and took a deep breath. It couldn't be a trap, I tried to console myself. She's gone to too much trouble just for that. I opened the door and walked inside.

She was waiting for me as promised, but frowned when I entered. "Brendell?" she asked after studying me.

"The same."

She rose and approached, then put a finger to her lips while looking me over. "Callused hands, a working man's tan, hair gray and unkempt. Not like the man who arrived in Houff nearly ten years ago."

I shrugged. "We've both changed, your highness." Although, I had to admit as I gazed at her, I had aged much more than she.

"We'll see." She pointed to a jewelry box sitting on a nearby table. "Open that."

"I don't have my picks," I said as I walked to it. I looked at it only a moment before turning and shaking my head. "A trick. If I pick it up, knives will spring from the side. Even if they're not poisoned, I will at the least be seriously maimed."

For the first time she smiled. "It *is* you!" Before I could react, she sprang forward and hugged me like a wayward son. "I apologize," she said after finally releasing me. "Five times previous I've been visited by men who claimed to be you. You're the first to pass the test."

I shuddered when I glanced back at the box. "Wouldn't it have been simpler just to ask?"

"This is faster and more accurate." She noticed my surprise and laughed. "Don't worry. It's designed so the top falls off is all. No one was hurt." Then she grabbed my hand and pulled me to the couch. "Come. Sit. Tell me what you've been up to."

I blushed as I sat beside her. Fess had never been so informal. "I've been living in Oqin."

She handed me some wine before replying. "So we eventually learned. Why?"

I tried to quickly summarize my capture, release and eventual self-imposed exile in Oqin as rapidly as possible, but we still were on the third flask of wine before I finished.

Only then did she speak again. "I'm sorry so much has happened to you. Your plans and all. Not at all what you expected."

"Quite true." I played with my glass before continuing. "So now you must tell me. How did you find me?"

She smiled. "It wasn't easy, believe me. You covered your tracks well. We've had a reward posted for you for, I don't know, five years now? It was Madnizaroc who finally tracked you down. Apparently dragons have a better sense of smell than even a bloodhound."

I shuddered. I had never seen Madnizaroc. But if she had been high in the air, I would have never noticed. "What makes me so important?" Then I asked the question that I dreaded. "Why did you bring me here?"

She patted me on the cheek. "Because it's over, Brendell. You're finally safe. The Guilds will not pursue you and Houff can finally reward you for what you've given us."

"Really?" *Safe from the Guilds?* I found that impossible to believe. "Why?"

She frowned, then smiled. "You don't know, do you? I take it Oqin is quite rustic."

It was more than that. I had chosen it because it was isolated, poor, of no interest to anyone and I told her as much.

"So you don't know," she said when I finished.

"Know what?"

She sat back and folded her arms. "The Guilds you remember are no more."

*No more?* "What do you mean? There is no Assassin's Guild? No Miner's or Captain's Guild?" *No Thief's Guild?*

"Well, no. They exist, but not as they used to. It would be better to say there is no longer *cooperation* among the Guilds. The Guild Council no longer exists. The Guilds are now totally separate and function independently."

*No Guild Council.* I sat in silence as I considered the ramifications. It was the Guild Council who had censured Ensten. The Guild Council which tried and eventually freed me. But if what Fess was telling me was true ... "And the Thief's Guild?"

"No more. Your former Guild was never a favorite, you know."



I knew that true enough, even if other Guilds, let alone other people, had eagerly sought our services. Only the standing the Thief's Guild enjoyed as an equal among the other Guilds had allowed it to survive and prosper. But with the Guild Council now in ashes, that stature would have vanished. "What about the Assassin's Guild?"

"Weakened. Scattered. Most of the members now are employed solely and independently by various realms."

I wiped my brow, trying to understand. "How did this happen?"

She smiled. "From what I've been told, you precipitated it, Brendell. The trial you told me about? The Guilds have always been in conflict; you drove the final wedge between the stronger and weaker Guilds and especially between the Assassin's and Thief's Guilds."

"Who told you that?"

"Two people actually. Our contact with the Captain's Guild for one. They've been very happy with the Long Eye, incidentally. And someone from the Miner's Guild." She stopped and frowned. "He said something about the fire salt and thanked us for it. Do you know anything about that?"

"A bit," I managed to say. Right now I was finding it hard to talk. I couldn't help myself; I shuddered as I was slowly realizing what I had actually accomplished, and I couldn't help but recall Professor Grimmire's admonitions. *Once again your plans have gone awry, Brendell.* "I never meant that."

She patted my hand. "It was for the best. Even most of the Guilds realize that now. It was inevitable, actually." Then she grinned at me. "To some you are a hero, Brendell."

*A hero? Then why don't I feel like one?* "I don't know what to say." *Or what to do.*

"Just say you'll stay here at Houff." She cocked an eyebrow. "Unless you left someone at Oqin."

I laughed. "I left nothing at Oqin."

She patted my knee and rose. "It's settled then. You are now an honored citizen of Houff." Then she grinned. "And as such you are my subject and bound to my commands."

I smiled shyly. "Of course, your highness. How may I do your bidding?"

"Go to the Dragon's Lair immediately. The mother of your child is awaiting you."

"Watch that one," I told my serving wench and pointed to the man in the red jerkin seated alone. "He's been watching our customers closely for the last half hour. I suspect he'll try to lift a purse or two. Let me know when he's ready to leave."

She nodded and left to deliver more wine while I returned to my work behind the bar. As Fess had promised, Cordita and her family had returned to Houff, had even managed to repurchase their inn. Now she and I were the proprietors, her parents having died within six months of each other.

Our first meeting after so many years had been awkward at best. "So you've finally come back," she said, not at all warmly, when I reintroduced myself.

"I never knew you were here," I said truthfully.

She snapped her towel, which caught the attention of the few patrons in the inn. She didn't care. "You never even tried to find us!"

"Fess never told me where you were." Again the truth, but I was quickly realizing the truth didn't matter. "I had some difficulties myself."

She glared at me. "I have work to do. You can tell me this evening if you care to come back."

I did, and after some more recriminations, she began to thaw. I spent that night in her bed and not long after moved permanently into the inn.

I cleaned a glass while I looked out at our customers. We were full this evening and my son was busy clearing tables. It had taken even longer for him to warm to me than for Cordita to welcome me home, but now he could at least tolerate me. The word "father" never left his lips, however.

My attention was diverted by my serving wench. "He's going," she said, setting her tray on the bar. I turned and saw the man in red stand on unsteady feet and start to leave. He bumped into several patrons on the way but apologized vociferously and managed to avoid any further trouble with them.

But not with me. I was waiting for him at the door. "How are we this evening?" I asked pleasantly.

"Tired," he slurred. "Have to get some rest."

I grabbed his arm and gently led him from the door. "I'm sure you do. But first, return the purses and jewels you lifted if you will."

He staggered, and it wasn't from any wine. "I don't have, I didn't steal anything."

"Really?" I abruptly reached inside his vest and found the secret pocket in seconds. I removed a purse and held it before his startled eyes. "This isn't yours. This is a woman's purse. As is the bracelet in your other pocket."

He stared at it, at me. Finally his shoulders sagged. "How did you know?"

"Brendell does not permit thievery in his establishment. Especially by a thief who could never ever qualify even as an apprentice."

I smiled as his face paled in recognition of my name. "You're, you're Brendell?"

With my free hand, I pulled my dagger from its sheath and showed him the sigil on the handle. "A sleeping dragon. That is my identity. That is *me*."

"I didn't know," he said, now shaking.

"Now you do." I quickly removed all the pelf he had gathered. "I'll return these. Now I suggest you leave Houff immediately. And for good."

He nodded and half staggered, half ran out the door. I chuckled as I set the items on the counter. My customers would come by and retrieve them soon enough.

But this was just one of the reasons why the Dragon's Lair was so popular. My customers never had to worry about their property when they were in an establishment run by a thief.

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