

JHEGAALA

STEVEN BRUST



I gave the guy the sort of smile that means nothing and said, "This is a local Guild, or is it part of a larger Guild throughout the country?"

He gave me what I'm sure he thought was a Penetrating Stare. "Why would you want to know that?"

"Just curious."

"*Why do you want to know that?*" Loiosh thought at me.

"*Just curious.*"

It was interesting, though. Last night, there was someone who had just assumed I was an aristocrat; and now this guy just assumed I was some sort of thug, or criminal. I hate it when people make those kind of assumptions about me. It makes me want to break their legs.

I said, "Does the name Merss mean anything to you?"

His scowl deepened. "Are you threatening me?"

"No."

"I don't respond to threats, young man."

"That's good, because I don't issue them."

"I think you had best leave my establishment."

Establishment. He had an establishment.

I shrugged and walked out because I didn't think staying would be productive, and because that was probably the last thing he expected me to do.

"*That,*" I told Loiosh, "*was one of the more interesting conversations I've had in a life full of interesting conversations.*"

"*Meaning you have no idea what just happened, right?*"

"*Right. Only something did. Didn't it?*"

"*Sure, Boss. Is there a reason you think it might be connected with what you're looking for?*"

"*Loiosh, I mentioned the name of my family and he thought I was threatening him.*"

He didn't answer.

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A TOM DOHEETY ASSOCIATES BOOK

NEW YORK

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THE CYCLE



EGG

Incubation time is short—eight or nine days—during which the egg is vulnerable. While the mother is able to protect the eggs after completing her metamorphosis (see Chapter 19), that still leaves between thirty-five and forty hours during which the eggs would be entirely without protection, we rely it not for the help of a male who has undergone his own metamorphosis after fertilizing the eggs (see Chapter 18) and now returns, as it were, to stand guard while the mother is helpless, as will be covered in more detail during the discussion of the levidopt.

It must be stressed that it is not, in particular, the father who returns to guard the eggs, but rather the first unattached male levidopt to pass within fifty feet or so of the transforming mother. Exactly how the male levidopt finds the eggs ...

—Oscaani: *Fauna of the Middle South: A Brief Survey*, Volume 6, [Chapter 15](#)



LEFIT T: But, *my dear*, what does it do?

BOR AAN: *Why, nothing, of course. It just lies there. That's the beauty of it.*

—Miersen, *Six Parts Water*

Day One, Act II, Scene 4

There is a place in the mountain called Saestara where, according to the locals, you can look east and see the past, and look west and see the future. I suppose it has its origins in some migration in pre-history, or some invasion, or some mystical rubbish built of thin air—plenty of that in the mountains, at any rate. I don't know, but the locals seem to believe it.

And, if it's true, I was going backward. Looking west, I remembered lots of painful scrabbling up paths that were made by and for mountain goats; looking east, I foresaw more of the same going down.

Some distance behind me was a lake called Szurke, on the edge of a forest. I owned the lake and a little bit of the forest and the big manor house near it, courtesy of the Empire and thanks to “extraordinary service.” That's a laugh. I didn't dare stay there, courtesy of the House of the Jhereg and thanks to “extraordinary misdeeds.” That's not such a laugh.

I'd installed my grandfather as regent. As I told him, “I prefer nepotism to despotism.” He hadn't been amused; he didn't much like the idea of being a despot himself, having pretended much always hated the aristocracy with a sort of mild dispassionate hate that had its origins in a past of which I'd never gotten more than hints.

He and I had both been worried during my visit. He was worried because the poaching in his part of the forest had gotten out of hand when the poachers realized he didn't have the heart to enforce the laws against it. I was worried that the Jhereg might be mad enough to take it out on him. I didn't think they would—what I'd done hadn't been as bad as, say, giving evidence to the Empire—but it caused me some concern.

We talked about that, and Noish-pa wasn't worried. The Jhereg is capable, perhaps, of making use of a human witch, no matter how much they scorn the magic of “Easterners,” but they'd be hard pressed to find one as skilled as my grandfather. And give him a little time with all the animals, and even the trees and plants in this area, and he would create a security network and defensive perimeter I'd defy Mario to break through.

We had a long talk about the trouble I was in, and his troubles with poachers (which translated to hating having to tell anyone what to do), and where I was going to go from here. He didn't want to know, because he figured that what he didn't know the Jhereg couldn't force him to tell. I was going to explain that the Jhereg didn't do things like that, but, well, sometimes they do.

I played with Ambrus, his familiar; and Noish-pa and Loiosh, my familiar, got reacquainted. I stayed for a week and he cooked for me and we talked about many things, especially how

he could continue as regent without actually running anything. We came up with some idea to at least cut down on the orders he would have to give, and he seemed happy.

One night, over Fenarian brandy, I said, “Noish-pa, is there anything you can tell me about my mother?”

He sighed. “She studied the Art, Vladimir, and that made my son, may he find peace, unhappy. And so I saw her little.”

“Eh, why?”

“You know how your father felt about the Art, Vladimir. He didn’t want the two of us speaking of it. I hardly saw my son after his marriage, save when he brought you over after your mother passed on. I wish I could tell you what she was like, Vladimir. I remember she had a kind face and a soft voice, yes?”

I nodded; that much was more than I’d had before.

He said, “You know that, like me, she was not long in this land of elves. I came from Fenario when—when I had to leave. But her father came, either before she was born, or when she was only in arms.”

“Why did he leave?”

“She never said.”

I nodded. “What was her name? I mean, before she was married?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “No—” He frowned. “Yes, I may know at that. A moment later, Vladimir, while I search.”

He left the room—a cozy little alcove that Noish-pa had turned into his library—and was gone for about half an hour. When he returned, he was holding a piece of parchment-clotted cloth. He said, “I had this note of her. I have often puzzled over it.”

I took it. It smelled the way cloth gets to smell when it’s been in a drawer for years and years; it had yellowed a little. I studied it and frowned. “You can’t read it either?”

“Oh, I can read it, Vladimir. It is a runic writing that is very, very old in Fenario. Some say it goes back to before the Fenarians settled there. It is still sometimes found in old tomes of the Art, which is why I learned it. I should have taught you.”

“Well, if you can read it, what’s the puzzle?”

He smiled the smile I knew so well: eyes twinkling with secrets that were fun, rather than secrets that could cut. He took it back; he had to hold it just a little farther away from his eyes than he had a few years before. He cleared his throat and read: “Father, the food was good and the evening delightful. Please accept my thanks on behalf of myself and Pishta. We both very much look forward to seeing you again. With love, Marishka Merss Taltos.”

“Merss,” I said.

He nodded.

Then I frowned. “Wait. What is puzzling about it?”

“Eh, Vladimir? You tell me.” His eyes were twinkling again.

“Umm,” I said. “Well, is it what it seems? I mean, did it come after a meal?”

He nodded.

“Then what—oh.” It took me a moment, but I got it; first one piece, then the other. “In the first place, why did she use her full name when writing a thank-you note? In the second, why write a thank-you note in an ancient runic script?”

He nodded. “I still wonder.”

I said, “Do you remember the dinner?”

“Oh, yes. Not often did your father visit me at that time.”

“Noish-pa?”

“Hmm?”

“Was my mother pregnant when she wrote that?”

He frowned and his eyes narrowed and shifted up and to the right as his memory worked. After a moment he nodded.

I smiled. “It was meant for me, Noish-pa. To answer my questions, in case I lived and she died. She knew my father—”

He was grinning and nodding. “Yes. It must be!”

“I wonder where she was from?” I said.

He shrugged. “Mersss, it is not a common name. Do you know its meaning?”

I shook my head.

“Pulper,” he said. “And what is a pulper?”

“Um, it has something to do with wood. With making paper out of wood, I think.”

He nodded and frowned. “I know of a town where much paper came from, in the west of Fenario where the River of Faerie is young and strong. Burz, it is called.”

I laughed. “Burz? They named their town Burz?”

“Eh, perhaps making paper makes not such a pretty smell?”

“Maybe,” I said.

A town called Burz with a paper factory and a bad smell, on the River—that was where my mother might have come from. And me with nothing to do except stay out of the clutches of the Jhereg. There would be all sorts of advantages to going East to the homeland of my mother and father. For one thing, a Dragaeran would stand out there even more than I stood out among the Dragaerans. For another, I had the strong feeling that they were going to use a Morganti weapon on me. And bringing such a weapon in among a group of witches would alert every one of them within a quarter of a mile. There are special sheaths made to conceal the effects of such a blade from a sorcerer—I knew, I’d used them a couple of times. But even if it were possible to construct a sheath to hide the psychic emanations a witch would feel, the Jhereg wouldn’t know how to go about it. In fact, they might well not even be aware of what they needed to.

No question, it would be safer for me in the East.

And I could find my mother’s family.

The conversation passed on to other things, and I never told him I was going East, but over

the next several days I received lectures, in the same tones I remembered from when I was studying the Art, about Eastern customs, the political structures of Fenario, and the culture. He also began speaking Fenarian and demanded I did, too. He was very picky about my pronunciation, and even pickier about my accent.

Guilds and Covens.

We talked a lot about Guilds and Covens, and it was good that we did, because—but not I'm getting ahead of myself. But I'll tell you some of it now, so that later you'll understand. Well, understand at least as well as I did, which wasn't very.

Guilds, I was told, were for trades—craftsmen—and were a means to have some way of defending themselves against the merchants who often sold their goods as middlemen. In some parts of Fenario, the craftsmen sold things directly, so there were fewer Guilds. In other parts, there were Guilds that took in large areas (well, relatively large; Fenario itself is a pretty small kingdom by my standards).

And nearly every town, no matter how small, had its Coven, occasionally open, but more often with its members secret. The Coven functioned as a Guild for witches, sometimes combining their powers into common spells, sometimes simply using the threat of their abilities to look out for the members' interests.

I asked him, "Are all witches usually members?"

"Vladimir, in Fenario, there are, ah, well, nearly all peasants know some little spell or another."

"Then who joins a Coven?"

"Those who use the Art a great deal. Many will sell their services, you know. And others who gather and prepare the herbs."

"Like you. You'd be in a Coven if you were back there."

He nodded. "Many places, you can't help it. Those who do not join, but should ..." He trailed off, leaving to my imagination what a Coven might do to an individual witch that she didn't like.

"Is there ever more than one Coven?"

"Not for long," he said.

Guilds and Covens, Covens and Guilds. Yeah, it's a good thing he took the time to explain those to me.

We drank more brandy and ate more food, and finally, the day after Spring Balance day, he embraced him and said good-bye, which was how it came to be that I stood in the pass of Saestara, looking behind me into the future and before me into the past.

Below, at some vague point, was the end of the Empire, and the border of Fenario, land of ignorance and knowledge, superstition and science. Okay, well, maybe not so much with the science. But what do you call it when the superstitions might be true?

Loiosh on my right shoulder, Rocza on my left, I started down the mountain.

APOPTERA

This stage will last from the moment of hatching until the layer of fat has been entirely consumed—usually four to five weeks. During this period, the apoptera, its fins fully grown by the time it has hatched, will remain entirely in the water while its basic organs develop. Curiously, the last of these is sight; the apoptera is blind until nearly the moment of transformation. Indeed, it has been speculated by some natural philosophers (cf. Hidna, Corventra) that it is the first sensation of light that triggers its metamorphosis....

Much remains unknown about the memory of the apoptera. Most of the assumptions in previous work about the “astonishing memory” at this stage are based on Leroni’s work documenting its determination to explore every corner of its limited world. While its inquisitive nature cannot be denied, it has never been positively established that there is any memorization as such that carries over to later stages. Indeed, there is some indication to the contrary (see Appendix D this volume).

—Oscaani: *Fauna of the Middle South: A Brief Survey*,
Volume 6, [Chapter 16](#)

B O R A A N : *A candle! As you love the Gods, a candle!*

N U R S E : *But we have no candles!*

B O R A A N : *How, no candles?*

N U R S E : *They were all burned up in the flood.*

D A G L E R : *Permit me to sell you this beeswax.*

[Boraan strikes Dagler with candlestick]

[Exit Dagler, holding his head]

—Miersen, *Six Parts Water*

Day One, Act IV, Scene 4

The transition from mountain to forest was so gradual, I wasn't entirely sure I was out of the mountains for a while even after I had turned north; and this in spite of them towering over me to my left. But eventually, I became convinced that I wasn't getting much lower, and soon enough, there was no question that I was in deep woods, with trees I can't name so close together I sometimes had to squeeze past them and with branches so low I had to duck to avoid getting hit in the face. The combination seemed unfair.

After that I felt more confident as I headed north, giving thanks for the occasional clearing even though in the clearings I could see the Furnace, and it hurt my eyes.

I don't like forests. I hate the trees, and I hate the bushes, and I'm not even that fond of the paths, because they have a way of either suddenly heading off in directions you don't want to go, or just stopping without giving you any explanation for their conduct. When I was running my territory for the Jhereg, if any of my people had acted like that I'd have had their legs broken.

In the Pushta, you can usually see a good distance around you; you just have to keep a good eye on what might be moving through the grasses. In the mountain, at least the mountain I've been on, you can see for miles in at least a couple of directions. In the city, you might not be able to see very far, but you can identify where anyone who might want to do you harm could be lurking. Forests are thick, and anything can come from anywhere; I never feel safe.

And sleeping is the worst. I spent about three nights in the forest after I came down from the mountains, and I didn't get a good night's sleep the entire time, in spite of the fact that Loiosh and Rocza were watching for me. I just couldn't relax. When I become ruler of the world, I'm going to have inns put up along every little road and trail in that place. I would certainly have gotten lost if it weren't for Loiosh and an occasional sight of the mountain.

I waded over several brooks and streams, one of which showed signs of becoming a river.

soon: it seemed to be in a terrible hurry, and had a lot of force for being only a foot or so deep and maybe ten feet wide. I didn't much care for that, either.

In spite of the annoyances, I was never in any danger so far as I know (though I'm told the Dzur sometimes hunt the forests). I made it through; leave it at that. The trees became lower and sparser, and the grass taller, with large, jagged boulders intruding on the landscape as if the mountain were encroaching.

"Well, for marching blind, I guess we did all right, Loiosh."

"We sure did, Boss. And only modesty forbids me from saying how we managed."

"Heh."

An hour or so later we found a road. A real road. I could have danced, if I could dance. It was getting on toward evening, and the Furnace was sinking behind the mountains. The shadows—remarkably sharp, looking almost tangible—were long, and a certain chill was coming into the air on a breeze from behind me.

"That way," said my familiar, indicating down the road to the right. Since the mountains were to the left, I'd have figured that one out on my own, but I didn't say anything. I set out.

After mountain and forest, it was a positive luxury to walk on a road; even a rutted and gouged, untended road like this. My feet thanked me, as did my left elbow, which was no longer being cracked by my sword's pommel when I raised my left leg to climb onto a rock.

For an hour or so, I saw no one and nothing save a lone farmhouse far across a field. The shadows lengthened and Loiosh was silent and my mind wandered.

I thought about Cawti, of course. A few weeks ago, I'd been married. A few weeks before that, happily married; or at least I thought so. Anyone can make a mistake.

But what was odd was how little I was feeling it. It was pleasant walking down the road and I was in good shape from all the climbing, and the evening wasn't too cold. I knew the whole thing was going to hit me—I mean, I *knew* it. It was like seeing an out-of-control tea cart barreling down on you, and watching it come closer, and knowing it's going to flatten you. Here it comes, yep, I'm about to be either killed or messed up.

Any second now. How interesting.

I could even be sort of dispassionate about it. I pondered whether I could convince her to take me back, and, if so, how? I ran through the arguments in my head, and they seemed very persuasive. I suspected they'd be less so when I actually tried them on her. And, even if she was convinced, I'd still have to deal with her politics, which is what had gotten between us in the first place.

And there was still the big problem, which was that circumstances had conspired to force me to save her. I don't know if I could have forgiven her if she had saved me; I didn't see how she could forgive me for saving her. It's an ugly burden. Eventually, I was going to have to try to overcome it.

And in the meantime, I was heading in the opposite direction, while somewhere behind there were people who wanted to get rich by putting the shine on me.

No, it didn't look good.

How interesting.

“We getting close to the water, Loiosh?”

“Wind shifted, Boss. I don’t know.”

“All right.”

I should mention that nothing so far was at all familiar from my previous journey to Fenario, but that had been years before, and I wasn’t paying all that much attention to my surroundings then.

With an abruptness that caught me by surprise, it was dark—I mean completely dark. There were small pinpoints of light in the sky, but they provided no illumination. Maybe they should have; I was told by a human physicker once that I had poor night vision. I could have had it corrected, but the process is painful, and a spell to compensate is absurdly easy. Except, of course, when you are unable to cast the simplest of spells for fear of removing the protections that keep the bad guys from finding you. So for now, little points of light or no, I was effectively blind. I wondered if failing to have that fixed when I could would end up being what did me in. Come to think of it, I still wonder.

I stepped a few paces off the road, and, having no better idea, took off my pack, spread out my blanket, and lay down. Loiosh and Rocza, I knew, would take care of any annoying beasts, and wake me if there were any dangerous ones. It wasn’t until I was prone that I became aware of the sound of night insects all around me. I wondered if they were the sort that bit; then sleep took me.

Evidently they weren’t the sort that bit.

I’d been walking about two hours the next day before I passed a young man driving a wagon filled with hay. I hailed him, and he stopped the horse—one of the biggest I’d ever seen—and greeted me. I had the impression he was a bit disconcerted by the jhereg on my shoulders, but was too polite to say anything.

“Which way to Burz?” I asked him.

He pointed the way I was going. *“Over the bridge,”* he said, *“in a while the road will fork and there’s a sign. You’ll likely smell it after that.”*

“Good enough,” I told him, and gave him a couple of copper pennies. He tapped his forehead, which I took as a gesture of thanks, and continued on his way.

I suddenly felt as if I was too relaxed, not paying enough attention, and resolved to stay a little more on my guard. Then it hit me that I had now made that resolution around a dozen times since coming down out of the mountains.

“I’m feeling safe, Loiosh. As if I’m out of danger. I can’t decide if I should trust that feeling.”

“I’m not sure, Boss, but I’ve been feeling the same way.”

“Like we’re out of their reach?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, we probably are, but let’s not trust it too much.”

I found the bridge—it spanned a stream maybe twenty feet wide—and went “a while” which turned out to be most of the rest of the day. Once over the bridge, the road abruptly

improved, showing signs of regular maintenance. I stopped a couple of times to eat bread, cheese, and sausage I'd gotten in Saestara (the village, not the mountain). The bread was getting stale, but it was still better than the hardtack. As I walked, I noticed that the forest which I had thought was left behind me, seemed to be returning on my right; or maybe it was a different forest. I ought to have tried to find a map, I suppose, but I'm told they are hard to come by and rarely reliable.

Over the next several hours, the forest seemed to come closer, but avoided the road. I don't know, the road was dug around the forest, but I'm telling you how it looked, all right? Eventually, I found the fork, and there was a sign just as there was supposed to be, on a stone and a wooden pole.

I followed it, and the road bent closer to the forest. It took us over low hills, and in places there were crops I didn't recognize in neat rows. More farmhouses appeared. The outbuildings were in good shape, and well painted. I tried not to look down on the locals for building everything out of wood; I knew that just came from living among Dragaerans. From an unbiased viewpoint, this seemed to be a more prosperous area than similar regions near Adrilankha. I wondered what Cawti would say if I made that observation to her.

The shadows lengthened, as the Furnace prepared to vanish behind the mountains, still looming up behind me. Presently, I became aware of a low rumble to my right, and I saw that the road had been joined by a fairly respectable river.

The Furnace plunged below the mountains, and it became significantly darker; still somewhat lit by the glow behind me, but—I was going to have to get used to how much more quickly it became dark, and how very much darker it was here. It had never occurred to me that the permanent overcast above the Empire might somehow provide a bit of ambient light, but apparently it does. I went another mile or so, and realized sadly that I was probably going to have to spend another night on the road.

The road curved as I came to the top of a hill, and below, still some distance away, was a very faint light. *"Check it out, Loiosh."*

It was a long way away; I must have covered half a mile before he returned, and from what I could see it could still be anything from a bonfire to—

"Just what you want, Boss. A nice little inn. And just beyond it, a nice little town. And, to judge from the smell, it is just the nice little town you're looking for."

"You are hereby forgiven for the last nine things that require forgiving."

"Speaking of smells, I think they have real food at the inn there, Boss. Just don't forget who your friends are."

It was full dark by the time I reached the door to the place. The light I'd seen came from two windows of oiled paper, and wasn't enough to let me see the sign. But I didn't need it by then. There was talking and laughing and the smell of bad beer and good food, stronger than the stench from—I presumed—the paper factory that I'd started to notice during the last few hundred yards.

I forced myself to ignore the growling of my stomach for a few minutes, while I stood near a window and let my eyes adjust; then I opened the thick door and stepped inside, moving once to the side. I got a couple of glances, and Loiosh and Rocza got a couple more as

looked around. It was a two-story building, with doors in the back, but this room occupied most of the structure. A long, polished bar ran about half the length of the wall to my right, and there were a few score of people—Easterners—humans—sitting at tables, leaning on the bar, or standing against walls.

I went up to the bar, and eventually a middle-aged human came over to me. He had a pot belly and wore a sleeveless brown tunic; his arm muscles were truly impressive. Before he could say anything, he gestured toward my familiars with his chin and said, “Get them out of here.”

I studied him. He looked strong, but not very fast. His eyes were brown. After a moment he looked away. I said, “Brandy. I also want some food.” He barely nodded, poured, and said, “See one of the girls about the food.” He retreated to the other end of the bar. I left him a couple of coins, then went over to find a blank piece of wall.

“Ignorant prejudice, Boss. It’s shameful—”

“Stay alert.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Eventually a young lady came by. She was dressed in red and blue and yellow and had nice ankles as well as a tray full of mugs and pitchers. “Food,” I said as she passed by.

She stopped, noticed the reptiles on my shoulders, and seemed to consider whether she ought to be upset. Eventually she decided not to be, because she said, “There are some fowls roasting, lamb stew, and a hunter’s stew.”

“The hunter’s stew.”

She nodded, then looked around. “I don’t think there’s any place to sit.”

“I can stand.”

She made an effort at smiling, then turned and walked away. I used my finely honed powers of observation to make sure the ankles looked as good from the back. They did.

It was about then I noticed that, full as the room was, there were no women there at all except the three barmaids. I wasn’t sure what that meant, but it was interesting.

I picked up bits and pieces of conversation. Not much was interesting, but they were speaking Fenarian, and the purity of the accent made me miss my grandfather although it had been only days since I’d seen him.

Presently, the ankles returned with a large bowl of hunter’s stew, a big spoon, and a loaf of black bread that could have fed a family in South Adrilankha for a week. I set my drink down on a shelf against the wall—probably made for that purpose—paid her, and collected the food. She inspected the Dragaeran copper carefully, but accepted it without complaint.

The stew was pork (no, I don’t know why they’d call something made with pork “hunter’s stew,” unless it was the tenderest wild boar in the history of cooking) and onions, and a delightful variety of mushroom I’d never had before and three kinds of peppers, peas, carrot, and some other sort of legume. The bread was still warm from the oven and it was perfect. I got a few looks as I fed bits to the jhereg, but no one seemed inclined to comment—maybe because I was the only one in the place openly carrying a weapon.

I was about halfway through the bowl when a table opened up in front of me and I was able to sit down. That was better. The place was beginning to clear out a bit. By the time I finished eating, there were only about a dozen left, all having quiet conversations. Most of them were elderly. The hard-core drinkers. I knew the type; I'd be willing to bet thirty hours from now I'd see the same faces in here.

I called a barmaid over. This one also had nice ankles; it seemed to be a requirement of the profession. I said, "Is it possible to get a room for the night?"

She had deep violet eyes, unusual for a Fenarian. She nodded and said, "You'll have to see the host."

"I will then," I said. "In the meantime, another brandy."

She headed off to get it while I relaxed and started realizing how tired I was getting. The thought of a real bed, the second since I'd left Noish-pa's, was enchanting.

I drank the brandy slowly, after it was delivered, enjoying the feeling that I was very tired and would soon rest. Then I went up to the host and asked about a room. He glanced at the jhereg on my shoulders, then nodded grudgingly, accepted a silver orb, and pointed toward a door in the back of the room.

The door led to a stairway, which ended in a hall, beyond which were doors. I opened the first one on the right, saw the bed, smiled, and stretched out on it. I gave a sigh of contentment and that's all I remember for a while.

The host was there the next morning when I came downstairs. He glanced at me, then returned to wiping down the bar. I walked out the door and took my first breath, which was no fun. Verra's tits and toenails, but it stank!

"Boss—"

"I know."

"Rocza doesn't like it."

"We'll get used to it."

"I hope not."

I tried to ignore the stench, and took a good look around.

The sign over my head showed a long pointed hat painted with red and white stripes. I didn't want to guess what they called the place. To the left was nothing. Well, okay, fields planted with wheat, and the road. To the right was a small town: a few score buildings and houses, and I could see some side streets heading off. Between some houses I could make out a river, with docks jutting out into it, and boats and barges tied to the docks, and the Furnace, bright enough that I had some trouble seeing the rest. I headed in that direction.

Not many people were on the streets; one woman in a faded blue dress and absurdly bright yellow shoes carried an infant into a shop; two old men sat on a low stone wall in front of a narrow house—I think they'd been in the inn last night; a young man wearing a battered silver hat drove a pushcart full of bits of iron, and seemed to be in no hurry to get where he was going.

As I passed the two old men, they stopped their conversation, and politely stared at me.

No, I'm not sure how they did that. I turned right on a winding, narrow road, aiming for the docks. Two men were strolling in the same direction. One said, "How are things, Janchi?" to which the other replied, "Dreaming small," if I heard him right. Then they heard my footsteps, glanced back, and stood aside while I passed. I nodded to them. They nodded back and then stared politely.

The breeze was in my face as I approached the docks, and I could now see a large brick structure on the other side of the river, belching smoke. There were docks there too, and several barges. I stopped and watched for a while. There was an affair upstream of the docks that, after some study, I realized was a log corral; at least, that's all I can think to call it. It was a sort of slatted fence, complete with gate, and through the slats I could see logs floating.

The river was of respectable girth; I'd say a good quarter of a mile across. I watched it for a while. There is something calming about watching a river. I know some people get that feeling from watching the ocean, but I prefer a nice river. When I was a kid, I used to stand on the Chain Bridge and watch the Adrilankha River float by under me for hours at a time. This river didn't have any such pretensions; it didn't even have any river traffic, at least while I was watching just then. But it was soothing. I had never asked Cawti how she felt about rivers; it had somehow never come up.

I left my dignity there, then walked out to the end of the dock in front of me and sat down. The river was a sort of dingy brown, but if there was any smell to it, it couldn't penetrate the rotting-vegetation smell of the factory. I watched the river as if I had a reason to, as if I were on a job. But I wasn't. I didn't have anything I really had to do. I had idle curiosity about my mother's family, and a bit of a clue to follow up on, but it wasn't important. I'd maybe ask a few questions, and see if anyone could tell me anything, but beyond that, my life was focused around not letting the Jhereg get to me. I was going from, not toward. It was a new experience. I wasn't certain if it would come to bother me, someday in the future when I would start to feel things again. I wondered where I would be when that happened. Alone, I hoped.

I suddenly wished I had a handful of pebbles to throw into the water one at a time, and listen to them plunk and watch the ripples.

I must have sat there for a couple of hours; then I got up and went back to the inn, where the host was convinced to feed me some of yesterday's bread with a goat's milk cheese, smoked sausage, and some coffee with warmed cream, chocolate, and beet sugar. It was a little stuffy inside, and for just an instant I was going to ask him to open a window, when I realized why it was closed.

I finished eating and went back to the host, who was sitting on a tall stool behind the bar with his head back against the wall and his eyes closed. He opened them when my footsteps approached. I said, "My name is Vlad."

He hesitated, then said, "Inchay."

I nodded, and decided that was enough sociability for the moment; I headed back out into the stench.

You don't need to hear about the next several hours. I walked around, nodding to a few people and getting to know the town. It was big, as such places go, with a couple hundred

identical shacks at the far end, a shoemaker and a dry goods store to support them, and a spot for the market to set up come Endweek. The area around the shacks was a lot filthier than the farms I'd seen. And I saw other things, nothing worth noting.

As the shadows became long, I returned to the inn and had them feed me on a roasted fowl basted with sweet wine. As I was eating, two of the barmaids appeared wearing simple peasant gowns. They vanished into a room in the back of the inn, then emerged a few minutes later with their ankles showing and their breasts stretched taut against yellow or blue fabric. The one with curly, dark hair asked if I needed anything, and I accepted a glass of the local red wine, which was a bit acidic, but drinkable.

As it grew dark outside, the place filled up again. I was seated along the back wall, and this time, I suppose because I wasn't hungry and exhausted, I paid more attention to the people around me.

I realized that I knew at once those who worked at the paper factory, because they wore simpler clothing than the peasants who had dressed up to spend an evening drinking and wore bright blues and reds and yellows; those who worked in the mill wore simple clothing of dark green or brown. The young ones had long hair and were clean shaven; the older ones had mustaches or neatly trimmed beards. There were only a couple of small groups of these, most of the patrons were obviously peasants, some of them too young to shave. And there were still no women in the place, save the barmaids. The more I sat there, the stranger it seemed that it was so easy to identify which group they were part of, and that they all held so rigidly to their style. The groups didn't mix with each other, either.

To be sure, there were a few who didn't belong to any group: One fellow with bright, tearful eyes who grinned a lot through several missing teeth and wore black pants and a white shirt with a blue coat and several rings. And another who had high red boots and mustaches that fell well below his chin. And the barrel-chested one in the blue felt vest with inky black hair that fell behind his shoulder in thick curls.

"What do you think of those three, Loiosh?"

"Dunno, Boss. If we were home, I'd take the toothy one and the mustached one as merchants. Couldn't guess about Curly."

"That's what I was thinking as well. How come there are no women in this place?"

"I couldn't guess, Boss. Ask someone?"

"I think I will."

While I was deciding what to ask, who to ask it of, and how to approach it, the problem was taken out of my hands by the guy in the blue felt vest, who came up to my table, glanced at the jhereg on my shoulders, and said, "Mind if I join you?"

I nodded at one of the empty chairs.

He sat down smoothly and held up a hand; in a few minutes, a barmaid came over and brought him a tiny porcelain cup, which he lifted in my direction. "Barash Orbahn. Call me Orbahn."

"Merss Vladimir," I lied, lifting my own. "Vlad."

He frowned a little. "Merss? An unusual name."

“Yes,” I said.

He downed his drink and winced, shivered, shook his head, and smiled. I sipped from mine. “What are you drinking?”

“Rakia. Plum brandy.”

“Ah. I should have guessed. My grandfather used to look like that when he drank it.”

He nodded. “It’s imported from the South. I don’t know why we import it, or why anyone drinks it. A test of manhood, maybe.” He grinned. He had all of his teeth, and they were very white.

I chuckled. “The local palinka is good, and I think safer.”

“A wise man,” he said. Then, “If you’ll forgive me, you have a trace of something foreign in your speech.”

I nodded. “I’ve come here from some distance away.”

“And yet, your name is distinctly local.”

“Is it?” I said. “I hadn’t realized.”

He nodded.

“Not surprising,” I said after a moment. “I have family from here.”

“Family? Or kin?”

In Fenarian, those are different words, with rather more of a difference than in the Northwestern language. “Kin,” I said. “Think you might know anyone I might be related to?”

“Hmm. I’ll have to think about it. This is a pretty big town, you know.”

No, it wasn’t. “Yes, it is.”

After a moment I said, “No offense to your town, but it stinks.”

He smiled. “Yes, I suppose. Believe it or not, after a while you don’t notice it at all.”

“You can get used to anything, I suppose.”

“Indeed.”

“Maybe you can tell me something else.”

“Sure.”

“Why aren’t there any women in here?”

His eyes widened. “Women go into taverns where you’re from?”

“If they want a drink.”

“I see. That, ah, doesn’t happen here.”

“Why not?”

“Well, because ...” He frowned and seemed to be searching for words. “Because it wouldn’t be right,” he finally said.

I nodded and didn’t push it. “What do you do?”

“Beg pardon? Oh. I import and export liquor.”

“So the rakia is your fault?”

He smiled and nodded. "I drink it as a sort of penance."

"A man of high moral character, I see."

"Not that high; I'm a trader." He signaled the barmaid and she brought him another. "So ask me your next question; it seems I am today the man with the answers."

"All right," I said. "Why are the streets so wide?"

"Eh? Are they?"

"Wider than I'm used to. A lot wider."

"Hmmm. Well, the streets you're used to—why are they so narrow?"

"A fair question," I said, "only you claimed to be the one with the answers."

He smiled his smile—it was the sort that makes you think that by smiling he was losing ground. His drink came. He raised it and said, "Welcome to our city and our country, *boyore*."

I felt my eyebrows climb. "Boyore? Why do you call me that?"

"It's as clear as Doroatya's ankles. You're used to giving orders, and expecting them to be obeyed."

"Am I?" I said. "Interesting."

"Not to mention the rather long piece of steel at your side."

"Yes, I guess that's unusual around here."

"I'll not pass it around, if you don't wish me to; but unless you begin to walk differently and start looking down a bit more, you can expect the peasants to bow and call you 'my lord' and stand aside when they meet you on the street. But then," he added, "perhaps they'll not meet you at all, what with the streets being so wide."

He laughed a little as if deucedly pleased with his cleverness. I smiled and nodded and sipped my wine.

"Where are you from that women go into bars, and streets are narrow?"

"Oh. Sorry, I'd thought it was obvious. I live on the other side of the mountain, the Dragaeran Empire."

"Ah. Yes, I sort of suspected that, but I wasn't sure, and I didn't know if you'd want it known."

"Why not? I can't be the first human to come back here."

"Here? Yes, you're the first one I know of. I've seen a few others in my travels, but they don't stop in Burz. And they don't seem as, well, as aristocratic as you. At least, not until they reach Fenario, or Esania, or Arenthia, and find out they have magic no one else has."

"Mmm. I hadn't thought about that."

"Hadn't you? I assume you have the same sort of magic."

"You seem pretty blasé about magic."

He shrugged. "Not everyone is. You know about the Art we practice; I see signs of it about you. Is it really so different?"

Yes, it was. "No, not really," I said.

He nodded. "I can't tell if you follow the light or the darkness, of course; they, too, aren't as different as many think."

I nodded, wondering what he was talking about. I said, "What generally happens to the people you mention, the ones with the magic no one else has?"

"Usually they set themselves up as minor lordlings until someone, ah, puts them down, you know what I mean. No one has done that around here, though; at least, not in my lifetime. Which is good, because the King never turns his attention this far west, and sometimes the King has to be the one to deal with them."

I nodded. "Well, if that's what you're worried about, you don't need to. I'm not especially interested in becoming a minor lordling. Or a major one, for that matter."

He studied me. "No, I don't imagine you are." I wasn't at all sure how to take that, so I just let it go past.

We drank for a few minutes, and then he said, "It's getting late; I should be going."

I said, "Is there any chance you might be able to find out anything about my people?"

"Sure," he said. "I'll ask a few questions, see what I can learn."

"I'd take that as a great kindness," I said. "Where and when shall I meet you?"

"Right here is good. Say, sometime around noon?"

"Lunch is on me," I told him.

He smiled and stood up. "See you then," he said.

As he walked away, I drank more wine and considered.

"What do you suppose he is, Loiosh?"

"Not sure, Boss. I suppose there is always the possibility that he's just what he claims to be."

"No," I said. *"There isn't."*

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