



MERCHANT



An early draft of a novel by Simon Brooke

Merchant

by Simon Brooke

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Introduction for test readers

This is a very early draft text; it was started on 1st December 2013. I'm writing very fast and much of what I'm writing will need fleshing out. Ignore spelling and gramatical mistakes, *except* inconsistencies in the spelling of names.

Please let me know

- Whether you feel engaged in the overall story, and the characters;
- Of things you find psychologically implausible;
- If you feel some character has an inconsistent voice;
- Of continuity issues.

Comments and criticism to simon@journeyman.cc; please put **MERCHANT** in the subject of your mail.

Problems I'm aware of at this stage

These are the issues I'm still working on. Please bear these questions in mind when reading the story, and let me know which bothered you. Obviously, let me know of other things which bother you!

Voices of the characters aren't sufficiently deistinct

I'm aware of this and will be doing a second draft in which I work much more on individual characterisation.

Geography and economy of Tchahua

The geography and economy aren't yet fully fleshed out. As a city with overland mercantile trade before the development of the new long distance ships, there must be a caravanserai somewhere, but I don't know where it is. This problem is compounded by the fact that half way through writing the book I moved the confluence of the Sind and Tcha rivers from south of Tchahua to north of it. The text implies (doesn't actually say) that the main road north is on the east side of the Tcha valley, and so is interrupted by the Sind Ferry. You can't take a camel caravan across a ferry, so... It's possible that caravans transhipped to barges at Sind Ferry (or further up the Tcha valley), in which case the terminal caravanserai would be there; but I need to explain this.

I've written just four mercantile families into the story. There must be more. It's conceivable that they've fled (to Sinhua?) but again I need to cover this. Additionally there must be the families of the inn-keepers of the two major inns, and the slum landlords. Who are they? What happens to them?

River trade is possible between Sinhua and Tchahua, but for how long has it been established? How many barges are there? When does the barge trade re-establish itself after the situation in Tchahua calms down?

The journeys north and south lack detail

We don't see much of the mulberry orchards on Dalmethan's country estate; we ought to see more of them, and, explicitly, of their workers. We know the river is navigable as far up as here; how much further is it navigable? Are there any towns of any size in the valley? What about ariston estates, castles and so on?

Presumably the 'South Inn' in the chapter 'The Road North' is north of the Black Ford – at this stage I don't even know what river the Black Ford crosses – but it must be a tributary of the Tcha so it ought to be described; not least because it's significant geography I need for other stories. I also need to give a sense of distance.

Also, do Dalwhiel and Selchae travel back by Sinhua? If so, why? If they do, I've a whole new city to describe, which doesn't feature much in this story and is a bit of a distraction.

Problems with military organisation and training

The Red Company are, at core, an extremely highly trained heavy infantry unit – essentially, similar to a phalanx. By this time in their history they are lead contractors on campaigns, subcontracting in other companies with other specialisations; and they certainly have experience of seiging cities, because seiging cities is an established part of the warfare of the period.

I have not suggested that the Red Company have a seige train with them – they don't have their own seige train until about 20-30 years after this, so it would have to be subcontracted, and their plan for capturing Hans'hua doesn't rely on a seige train so I don't want to add one. But the wall at Tchahua is not high, and is known to be breached (and in any case you can bypass it by using the river). So they would not need a seige train for Tchahua either – all they'd need would be ladders.

I don't want to go into a lot of exposition about Red Company in this story; they're the hook around which the whole meta-story hangs, but in each book they're sort of tangential to what the characters in the book think are going on; but I think when Dalwhiel goes to talk to them in their winter camp he ought to learn a bit more background.

The Red Company are a lot of highly trained heavy soldiers. They certainly have both spears and pikes, because that's their primary armament. If they can get onto the wallhead with their spears and pikes, then anyone on the wallhead who doesn't have a spear is toast. So all the militia must be equipped with a spear, and trained to use it. Swords are much less necessary – secondary rather than primary weapons.

What about Rothic's band? They've clearly been one of Red Company's subcontractors, but beyond that I haven't thought much about them. I think it probably works best if they're a

cavalry unit, because that means they're not particularly well equipped/trained for defending a castle. But again, when the residence is taken, it's probably advisable that at least the squads who seize the wall-head are equipped with spears.

So essentially I've got this wrong. I've also got the detail of Selchae's sword all wrong. She'd probably be better off with a longer, hand-and-a-half sword, because it would be lighter than a rapier of the same length and give her more reach than a rapier of the same weight.

The detail that I have included on sword training is wrong, too – Tchikharn may well want them to use only one hand in initial training to teach finesse, but the implication of what I've written is he's saying 'never use two hands', which he certainly wouldn't say.

So there's a lot to rewrite there.

Other problems about weapons and armour

The coastal region is about North Africa warm – it's not quite tropical but a lot warmer than Scotland. Fighting in gambesons or brigandines is going to lead to heat exhaustion pretty quickly. Red Company standard is a sleeveless tunic of scale mail, with pauldrons, greaves, bracers and a kilt of straps all made of heavy leather (possibly boiled). They must have helmets as well but I'm not really certain about those yet. Andarogan – a high status warrior of the western clans – wears leather clothing with pauldrons, bracers and greaves of bronze.

The militia won't initially have this; Dalwhiel (and others) may put pressure on other wealthy citizens to fund armour, but actually there's a shortage of both materials and craft skills

to produce it. As a cloth weaving city, gambesons could be produced reasonably quickly and in reasonable quantity, but (a) heat exhaustion and (b) a gambeson won't stop a thrust with a spear or sword.

The Wikipedia entry on boiled leather notes that its performance could be improved, according to Arab sources, with 'a crushed mineral facing mixed with glue', and that would be possible (either on a leather or cloth substrate).

It isn't a good idea to be sharing armour – it gets pretty sweaty and it has to fit well; and there'd probably be a public health risk – so probably the militia (and certainly their leaders) would want individual armour. There's potentially a plot point where wealthy citizens bribe their way to elected office within the militia by offering to equip their soldiers with armour.

English bowmen at Agincourt are reported by a French eye witness (Jean de Wavrin) as having worn boiled leather or wicker helmets, and boiled leather helmets reinforced with iron straps were common in the early medieval period.

I'm not consistent about Sellachen's armour. In the fight in the ruined shop he's wearing a breastplate, but when we meet him in the wood he's wearing scale armour. It's unlikely that he escaped during the fall of the city with two different suits of armour, unless he kept his armour in an out-of-town stronghold – which he may well have, but I haven't suggested it. Perhaps west, towards the frontier with the Western Clans?

Dalwhiel's dagger is said to be in the same scabbard as his sword. While that might look good, the actual practicalities of drawing it might not be so good; probably better if he wears it horizontally across the small of his back, in 15th century Italian style.

It would also be good to get in some barbed conversation between Dalwhiel and Sellachen earlier in the story – probably at the meeting in the wood – in which each ‘jokingly’ criticises the other’s choice of weapons.

Problems with the Hearing

There’s a lot of problems with the hearing, as it presently stands. I think for the plot to work, Dalwhiel must be away visiting the Red Company, so he isn’t present. So I need another experienced merchant, not related to any of the parties to the dispute. It could be Gratenon from the Sind Ferry distillery, but he wouldn’t know the detail of the cloth trade. So I think I need a new character, and, if so, I need to introduce that character earlier in the plot.

There are also a number of points in this chapter where I’ve got details wrong – wrong names for people, and so on. It needs a very careful detail edit, once I’ve got the core narrative right.

Problems with calendar and timing

The ships don’t travel in the winter. To make the narrative a year’s cycle, it needs to end at the same point in the year as it begins (although that’s a conceit and I could get around that). But the ships can’t return until the invaders have been driven out – the port really isn’t safe. So either they return (and the story ends) in autumn, or they don’t return until Spring.

But there are a lot of good reasons for having the religious festival at midwinter. That's the season more or less every religion does have a festival; it's the season seals come ashore to breed; it's the turning of the year and the beginning of the return of light/warmth/hope. The problem is, if I have essentially the climax of the story at midwinter and I can't wrap up and tie off the threads until spring, what happens to the characters in between? Can I just do the literary equivalent of one of those old cinema captions, 'three months later'?

Prologue

It was spring. The evening air was fresh and hopeful. On the north side of the market place, the new guildhall stood tall, its walls freshly white with limewash, its oaken timbers not yet faded to silver. From it came the music of fiddles, of pipes and of tambour. Within, in the great hall lit with many candles, a feast was being held to dedicate it.

A great feast, and well attended. Up on the dais, at the high table, the rich and mighty sat. In the centre, as host, Master Gratingen the distiller – supplier of the fine wines and meads they had enjoyed through the meal, of the liquors now being poured into their glasses by the servers, of the brandy that the men would drink later – his great bulk made magnificent in a brocade tunic of green and blue trimmed with fox-fur.

He was listening attentively to the man on his right, his guest of honour. Tyrranos Selloch, ruler of the city, was clad in a dress of black silk brocade worked with silver, with collars and cuffs of ermine – far grander than the man to his left, the Oligarch Goratin from the ancient and wealthy city of Hans'hua, high on the desert plateau to the north, in the plain

robes of that place. Next to Goratin sat his daughter Gotanae, her face hidden by a fine veil. Beside her was seated Selachen, son and heir to the Tyrranos, but he was openly flirting with the girl on his other side, Gorwithiel, the unwed princess of the Western Clans whose wit and dark beauty were already celebrated all along the coast by minstrels, watched over by her father, Prince Gortanien.

Further to the left, beyond merchants and craft-masters of the city, the line ended with Seal Mother Gordala, mother of the Tyrranos, and high priestess of the city, clad in black, talking sternly to her grand-daughter Selchae, looking tense in maiden's white.

Tanzathael must be present

On the other side of the table, beyond Selloch, his elder daughter Selkaren, now married to Fannish, an ariston from the turbulent city of Sinhua shared a jest with Captain-General Talingen of Swift Company, commander of the city garrison, resplendent in bronze scale armour over a tunic of wine-red silk. Beyond him, a family group: the city's richest citizen, the cloth merchant Pentarn, sat between his wife Palena and his new daughter-in-law, Grava, daughter to Gratingen; and beyond her, her husband Pentarff. Next, another priestess – the incumbent of the foreign House of the Mother, dressed far too well in far too little – talked animatedly with Schoolmaster Kollirn.

The servers stood back, and the musicians fell silent. Master Gratingen placed both his beringed hands on the table, and pushed himself to his feet. He raised his glass, and called for a toast to the ruler who had presided over the growth in wealth and prestige of their city, who had graciously granted permission for the new deep water quay through which that wealth chiefly came, and who even now was raising a new and

far more magnificent sanctuary to the Goddess to ensure the continued prosperity of the city into the future.

Throughout the hall, all the guests got to their feet and drank. As soon as they were all settled again, while servers were still refilling glasses, the Tyrranos stood. He thanked his hosts. He praised the new hall. He spoke of the importance of industry and trade. He proposed a toast to the merchants of Tchahua. Again, everyone drank, and looked back up to the dais – to see that the Tyrranos was still on his feet.

“But what has changed our city so much in the past eight years,” he said, “has been the coming of the great ships from the north. And I want to speak now of one family – one family, and one young man – who has contributed more than most. I’ll speak first of his father, Master Dalmethan, who – as you all know – comes from humble roots, his father a modest trader in cloth, his grandfather a freed slave. Master Dalmethan in his youth joined the caravans that go north, across the high plateau and through fabled Hans’hua – home of our honoured guest Goratin – to the furthest shore of the world, where the sun is cold and the white-skinned people do not speak any known language. Over many years of hard journeys he built up his trade, selling our silks and bringing back the woolens and furs of that distant land. Over those years he watched the northern shipbuilders extend their craft, build ships which were ever bigger and wider ranging, until he heard of one that had made the voyage to the Great Place.

“That winter, as you’ll remember, Master Dalmethan spent many weeks on the river, in all weathers, in a small boat with a crew of knowledgeable fisher folk, measuring depths with a lead-line; none of us knew what he was at. We all laughed at him – I own it, I did myself – as mad. And then he came to me with a proposal which seemed to me still more posterous.

He wanted to build a new harbour, right alongside the rocks where the sacred seals come ashore to breed.

“Well, he was not mad. He built his harbour. He persuaded the northern ship-owners to come. And the trade of this city has increased eight-fold. We are all of us – every one of us – richer because of it. It is because of our new harbour, our new trade, our new wealth, that I have been able to raise the new sanctuary to our Goddess. And three years ago, a new ship came – the Shearwater, that lies in the harbour now. The first of the great ships to be part owned by a man from our own city: by Master Dalmethan himself.

“But although the harbour and the ship were built by Dalmethan, it is another man who has sailed her six times around the known world: six times north, carrying our silks, our spirits; carrying wheat from the Great Place and wines from Sinhua; and returning laden with good steel tools and weapons, with these fine glasses we drink from, with woollen cloths, with luxurious furs. But bringing back more than these: bringing back also gold: wealth for our treasury and for us all. I raise a toast to Dalmethan’s son, to Dalwhiel, whom I now name Master!”

There was a buzz through the hall. It would have surprised no-one if Selloch had honoured Dalmethan. But his son? Some remembered the lad as quiet, awkward, studious; well mannered but shy. A favourite of the schoolmaster Kollirn. But Dalwhiel had been away at sea most of these past three years. When his ship had been in port he had been busy with cargo, spending most of his time at the new harbour out on the promontary beyond the Residence, or quietly at his father’s new mansion; or among the weavers and other craftsmen whose wares he transported. The wealthy of the city had almost forgotten him. Now, as they raised their glasses, guests looked

along the line of the high table, speculatively, trying to identify him.

The glasses drained, the buzz died away. The Tyrranos was looking to his right. And at the far right hand end of the high table, a tall young man rose to his feet. A tall young man in northern plaids, his hair and beard trimmed short in the northern style.

“Great Tyrranos, you honour me far above my deserts. That I have travelled around our world is true, but not alone. Without the skills and knowledge of my shipmates and especially of my brother adventurer, I could not have done it. And, as you have said, without the foresight and persuasiveness of my father, it could not have been done. Still, it is with pride that I have taken the goods produced in our city – in your fine city – to the distant north, and seen them greatly prized in the markets there. And it has been with pride that I have seen the wealth that I have helped to bring back translated into fine additions to this city: the new outer ward that defends your Residence, the new River Gate, this guildhall in which we sit, and many more modest buildings; and your great new sanctuary yet to come.

“I have not built these things: I have been away. But when I come home, it gives me pleasure to see the work of other men’s hands, and to know that I have made my own contribution.”

Dalwhiel paused, and took his glass from the table. He looked along the length of it. “But it is not buildings which are fairest in this city. It is not buildings of which I think with longing when the ship rides the wide sea, or lies safe in the stony harbours of the distant north. In this city there is one fairer – and nearer to my heart – than all others. I ask you all to raise your glasses now to our fair princess, the Arista Selchae, named for the Goddess from whom she is descended and who

protects us all. And to her, I say this: fair princess, will you be my wife?"

The buzz this time was louder. So this was the story, was it? This was where the Tyrranos planned to find the money to complete his folly? Glasses were drained quickly. All eyes turned to the other end of the dais, where a slender figure was already on her feet.

"The boy is right," she said. "I am descended mother to daughter through thirty seven generations from the goddess herself, whose name I am honoured to bear. On my father's side I am descended from seven generations, father to son, of rulers of this place, who have built it from a muddy fishing village to the great city in which we live today.

"And before they even came here, my father's fathers were aristae, warriors, leaders of men. The man I shall marry shall be such a one. A warrior. A leader of men. A ruler. Someone whose tread makes the earth shake, makes the rulers of distant cities tremble. This boy? This spawn of slaves, this hawker of hoddens and counter of coin, this wind-driven, wave-tossed wanderer? This is not the man for me."

She inverted her delicate glass, watching the sticky liquer spill and puddle onto the rich table cloth.

"And I say this, before all of you," she said, looking along the table to where the Tyrranos sat, shocked and silent, "I am not merchandise for the machinations of meddling menfolk. I will not be pawned to fund the folly of my father. I am Selchae, scion of the sacred seal, and I shall not be sold."

She looked down at the glass still hanging from her hand, shaking, seeming not to know what to do next; and then straightened suddenly and threw it, empty, over her shoulder, to smash against the wall.

She sat.

There was silence in the hall. Men looked at men, women at women. And then, suddenly, the buzz was louder than ever.

A Homecoming

It was late summer. The evening air was hot and tired. On the north side of the market place, the wreck of the guildhall squatted, such walls as still stood streaked and smeared with soot, its oaken timbers charred and blackened.

In front of it, between the still smoking city and the grey bulk of the palace-fortress which was called the Residence, a stretch of open ground that in more peaceful times had been the market place. In the middle of that open ground, just sixteen men. Two lines of seven, armed, faced one another, as far apart as one might throw a stone. Between them, two more, wearing no weapons, talking.

“My lord, we have not been paid, and the men are hungry.”

The man with his back to the town was heavy set, in his middle years; his leather jerkin was sewn with overlapping bronze plates. Beneath it he wore a heavy leather kilt, and bronze greaves above his sandals. Under the leather was a garment that had been bright red and fine, but what could be seen of it looked worn and grimy. His unshaven face lacked sleep. Behind him, his men were a shifting rabble, variously

dressed and armed. And behind them, the ruin of the new guildhall, its charred timbers still hot.

“No, Talingen. Nor I, nor my men either.”

The man with his back to the fortress was younger, taller, sharper; obviously, more anxious. He wore a breastplate with a stylised dragon in red, a kilt of bronze plates, and high boots. Behind, his men stood smartly in line, alert and untrusting.

“Nor,” he went on, “after what yours have done, are we like to be. And the only thing I can see good in the situation is that there will be no more money to pay Red Company either, so Fannish cannot send them back to punish us.

“But, my lord, it was just cloth!”

“Aye. Twenty thousand gold’s worth of fine silk, just cloth. Aye. And now you expect Fannish – who you know has spent every last bronze he owned on funding the war – to pay you?”

The older man shook his head wearily. “What are we to do?”

“Get your rabble back under control, get the fires out, and stop killing townsfolk.”

The older man shrugged, and rubbed a dirty hand across his eyes.

“My lord,” he said again, pleadingly, “they have not been paid. And you would not believe how much booze there is in that warehouse.”

“Swift Company? You call yourselves Swift Company? Swallow company, more like. Listen, man, there is no gold. It was all taken to pay Red Company and those pissing bankers Fannish owes so much. There isn’t any. I have none. You must have more, after what you’ve been doing to the merchants. But

the wealth of this city was in those two warehouses, and you've burned one and drunk the other. There is no gold."

"Could you not even spare us some bread, my lord? We have no food."

"What of the townsfolk, captain? Have they none?"

The captain shrugged. "None we can find. They're mostly all fled, anyway. There's hardly anyone left."

"And you wonder at it?"

"No, my lord."

"Get the fires out," the younger man said. "Get your troops sober. Then I'll find you some bread."

He turned, and strode back towards the mass of the fortress, his men falling in behind him. The great gate was closed; they made instead for a sally port. By it, another soldier waited, saluting as they strode up.

"My lord, there is a great ship of the northern style lying off, and a boat approaches."

By the time they reached the dock, the boat was close in; a small, double ended craft, driven by a high peaked tan sail. It came up the far side of the river, the two men in it obviously taking a careful look at the town beyond the bridge, before it tacked smartly and approached the dock. As it came alongside the sail was neatly dropped onto the thwarts. One of the boatmen hopped up onto the quay with a rope, and dropped it over a bollard. The other quickly followed him.

Two men. Both tall, one younger, darker; the other with that odd pale coloring that is often seen in men of the distant north.

Dressed alike in bright patterned woolen clothing, showing the northern skill in dying. They spoke briefly, and then approached. The young lord strode to meet them, his right hand raised in peaceful greeting.

“I greet you, strangers. I am Rothic of Corrastan, lately appointed castelan here.”

The younger man raised his right hand, bowing his head gravely. He spoke in the northern tongue to his companion, who translated.

“We greet you, Ariston Rothic. He is Dalwhiel, merchant adventurer of the ship Shearwater, out of Treshkar.”

The taller man said something else, and his companion looked surprised, and then laughed. “Oh, he says I am to introduce myself,” he spoke clearly, although his accent was strong. “I am Tchikharn of Treshkar, bodyguard to Master Dalwhiel.”

Rothic looked at Dalwhiel. “You come to trade?”

Dalwhiel spoke at once to his bodyguard; it was clear that he understood the language of the Coast. Again, Tchikharn translated. “We carry fine furs and keen blades from the north, grain from the Great Place, and linens from the east. We had hoped to trade blades for silk, but I see the warehouse is gone. Have you anything to trade?”

“Signal your ship to approach,” said Rothic. “I’m sure that we have much to offer you.”

Dalwhiel just smiled, gentle, cynical, and shook his head.

So many? Probably. But I haven't even sketched so many prosperous families. What happened to them?

Rothic tried again. "In the residence I have some eighty maidens of the better class within the city – they were sent there before the sack. I had hoped they might be ransomed, but..."

A look passed between the two northerners. Not surprise. Perhaps relief. Again, through the interpreter, "they are undamaged? Such goods command a better value when fresh."

Rothic looked affronted. "My men are not animals! They are maidens of good family, and... we thought that they might be ransomed."

"Their families offer nothing?"

Rothic shrugged. "The city is in chaos. Many of the citizens are fled, and the rest... I have heard no offers of ransom."

Perhaps mention the Old Sanctuary here? Mention that its gold statues are missing?

Dalwhiel turned away sharply, looking out to the ship. When he turned back there was a grimness to him. He spoke in the harsh, guttural tongue of the north, which always

sounds angry, even in poetry. His bodyguard looked to Rothic. "In this city we often trade with Master Dalmethan. Have you word of him?"

"Signal your ship to come in," said Rothic, again. "We can discuss all this in comfort."

There was no smile this time. The shake of the head was firm.

"He lived a moon since. I spoke with him, just before the Red Company left. The city was quiet, and we discussed the terms under which trade would be carried on, and the taxes that Tyrranos Fannish wishes me to levy. As to where he is now, I cannot tell you."

Dalwhiel chewed his lip, and spoke low and harsh to his bodyguard. The man nodded, and translated.

“The city was peaceful a moon ago, you say. Those fires were not lit by its citizens. You are castellan here. How come the city is in turmoil? And what guarantee have we of the safety of the ship if we come in?”

Rothic’s shoulders fell. He shook his head, and looked down.

He looked up again, speaking directly to Dalwhiel. “Swift Company had the contract to garrison the city here. From the old tyrannos. Swift Company are a Sinhua company... The Red Company, as you will know, took the city. They are... very well trained, well equipped, well disciplined. They had seven full legions. My men and two other smaller Huandun companies supported the Red Company as auxilliaris. Swift Company did not like the odds – they were but half a legion, and with the wall breached they had no chance. So they turned their coats, and opened the gate. We came into the city; the captains of the Red Company directed me to hold the Residence, which I have done. Then orders came from Sinhua that Red Company and the rest of the auxilliaris were to move north, towards Hans’hua; and Swift Company, now under orders from Sinhua, were once again set to garrison Tchahua.”

He shook his head again, looking weary.

“I was named castellan – my first detached command – and commander of the garrison. I was ordered to make a levy of the townspeople to pay my men and Swift Company. I had discussions – as I’ve told you – with Master Dalmethan and other citizens, and the discussions seemed to go reasonably well. Of course they were not happy, but... I thought we were on the way to an agreement. I have his daughters here, and his nieces, damn it, and – the others, theirs too. Merchants wish

clear laws fairly administered, and to be allowed to trade. They don't greatly care who rules..."

He looked at Dalwhiel, appealing for understanding, sympathy. He was met with a stony gaze. He shook his head, and pressed on.

"The peasants stopped bringing their carts into the city with produce. At this time of year the city granaries are near empty, for the harvest should be coming in – but nothing came. Folk were hungry. I sent half of Swift Company out to forage, to find out what the problem was and bring back grain. They met with partisans loyal to the old regime, and... were driven back in disarray. And then, that night, they found the brandy warehouse, and that's when the city started to burn. Many of the citizens have fled; I don't know how many are killed. I don't have enough of my own men to garrison the residence properly, let alone confront Swift Company. I've lost the city. You've seen the silk warehouse is gone, but the truth is there's damage everywhere."

He shook his head. "I've lost the city. It was my first command."

Dalwhiel spoke through Tchikharn. "You have eighty maidens?"

Rothic nodded.

"You need grain?"

Rothic shrugged. "I have no hope of getting the mutineers back under control if I can't at least feed them."

"Your men – men you can rely on – hold the Residence?"

Rothic nodded.

Dalwhiel nodded. He made a stiff, courteous bow. He spoke, gutterally, to Tchkharn. "He says, I shall return to the ship and consult with my partner."

Below, in the waist of the ship, the seamen were still swinging the land boat in. Dalwhiel leant back against the rail looking at his partner, waiting.

"No word of your father?" Karakhan was fair, northern.

Dalwhiel shrugged. "He was alive four weeks ago, so the lordling says. And, I believe him."

"And no silk."

"Very little. Probably none we can get to. There will be some in the weavers' houses, but... He is desperate for grain."

"You said. And your sisters are still alive."

"Yes."

"How safe is the port?"

"You know it well. If our lordling holds the Residence – and I think he does – and if he is to be trusted – and I think he is – there is no way for the mercenaries to get to the harbour."

"So what do you want to do?"

"It's our parents' ship."

"It's our parents' ship. What do you want to do, brother?"

Dalwhiel shrugged. "I want my sisters safe, obviously. And some others. I'd like to get all the maidens out..."

"We have to make a profit. Without the silks, the only thing valuable we have to take north is grain. Also, bear in mind,

grain is good ballast. We need something heavy in the ship, for the passage north."

"True." Dalwhiel fiddled with a pomander which hung round his neck. "I don't have a good feeling for what's going to happen in there after you've left..."

"After I've left?"

"I think I need to stay and see if I can find my father. But, seriously, Treshkar isn't like the Cities of the Coast."

"What are you saying, brother?"

"The maidens. I don't mean my sisters or... but, anyway, being a high value concubine in Treshkar is better than being raped and killed by a drunken mercenary here, or sold in the market in Huandun."

"You'd sell them into slavery?"

"We have to make a profit, brother. We have to make a profit for your mother – and for my father, if he lives. We have to make a profit so there's a dowry for my sisters. No, of course I don't want to sell them into pissing slavery, Khan. Be real. If we can get them off him for not much grain, we'll get them off him for not much grain, and make our profit selling grain – which you know we just about could, although the loss of the silk will make it thin. If we can trade some blades instead of grain..."

"Yes," Karakhan said. "All right." He turned, and called up to the helm. "Shipmaster, make sail. Take her in."

Orders were called; men ran to obey. Sails creaked up the tall main and fore masts, and, groaning, the ship began to turn.

A pair of shearwaters came past, low across the water, dipping their wingtips in classic shearwater fashion.

“Our own totem bird,” said Karakhan, idly. “Old sailors would say that betokens luck.”

“Aye,” said Dalwhiel. “But those beyond are gannets – what drives them so low?”

He looked up, searching. “What’s that? Dragon?”

Karakhan’s eyes followed the pointing finger. “Aye, but a youngling.”

“It would be,” said Dalwhiel, still staring upwards. “We never see big ones here. Indeed, I did not truly believe the tales of big dragons until first we visited the Great Place. It’s said that they used to roost on the cliffs once, long since... but as I say, we see only younglings now, and for many generations past. Karakhan, is that another?”

“You sound worried, brother?”

Karakhan looked over to the rocky point, where the slender spire of the sanctuary rose above the ceremonial way. “I don’t like to see them so close to the seal colony. In past years we’ve seen them kill young pups.”

“The seals will not be ashore to breed for months yet, surely?”

“No, true,” said Dalwhiel. “I still don’t like to see them here.”

He watched the city coming closer, the shores of the estuary reaching out to embrace the ship. As they passed the steps leading up to the old sanctuary, a young seal watched them from close to the shore. A group of shelduck flew past, also keeping low.

Karakhan turned away and leant back against the rail. “There is another thought,” he said.

“Yes?”

“How many men do you think he has, this lordling?”

“He said the mercenaries were half a legion, but also that they took a beating when they made a foray out of town, so fewer than that. And undisciplined.”

“And his own men?”

“Not many. He admitted he couldn’t fully garrison the castle. I saw only two men on the walls and a squad with him.”

“We have forty eight men – six squads, as you’d say. They’re well disciplined, and they can all fight.”

Dalwhiel spat into the calmer water of the river. “We can’t take the residence. It’s pissing strong, even if it’s undermanned.”

“No. But we could ally with your lordling and pacify the mercs. That would allow us to find your father, if nothing else, and then we could assess the situation? There would be options.”

Dalwhiel nodded. The long line of the bridge was getting closer. “Aye. He spoke of partisans in the countryside.”

“So we could possibly ally with them and drive the Sinhua force out.”

“Possibly. What if Fannish sends the Red Company back?”

“Can he afford to pay them?”

“He can if he takes Hans’hua”

The bower anchor splashed down in mid stream, and men surged its cable out as the ship started to turn across the river, heading for the quay. At the apex of the turn, the kedged dropped too.

Karakhan pushed himself upright, and watched critically as the shipmaster brought his charge in.

“Aye,” he said. “We need to look to the options.” He looked back at Dalwhiel, over his shoulder. “But my mother would see a strong alliance with whoever ends up in charge here as worth more than one voyage’s profit. So think on it, brother.”

The Swimmer in the Dark

“Lads, trust no-one and nothing. This port is not safe.” Shearwater’s crew were gathered in the waist; Karakhan sat easily on the break of the poop, addressing them. Dalwhiel leant against the furled mizzen, behind him.

“We stand three watches as at sea – I want sixteen men on deck at all times,” Karakhan went on. “You keep your weapons with you, and you keep them sharp. Any trouble, you cut the shore lines – the anchors will take her out into the stream. Cut the shore lines first. Don’t waste time getting them in. Blow your whistles and sound the bell, get everyone on deck. If you’re below deck and you hear the alarm, on deck with your weapons ready.

“And lads – we’re in bowshot of the fortress wall. Watch for archers on the wall-head; keep your heads down. Oh, and, keep a lookout from the crows’ nest – I see no sign of a trebuchet or a mangonel, but if you see them moving anything that looks suspicious up there we need to get out of here. Finally, lads, eat well and get rest. There’s fighting to come, I’m nearly sure of it. See to it your blades are sharp.

“Questions?”

A voice called out to the crowd.

“There’ll be no shore leave?”

There was laughter. They knew. They were a good crew.

“No shore leave, lads,” Karakhan said. “No-one goes ashore by themselves. Either Dalwhiel or myself will be aboard at all times, and if Dalwhiel decides to take the ship to sea when I’m ashore you all obey him. We must not lose the ship. Understood?”

There was a rumble of agreement.

“Ration of wine for everyone who’s off watch; men on watch, you get your ration when you go off.”

A rap on the cabin door. “Master Dalwhiel, sir, would you be pleased to come on deck, sir?”

“Coming.” Dalwhiel threw back the curtain and swung himself out of his bunk, still dressed. He found his boots quickly in the dark, and pulled them on, stamping his heels down. He grabbed his sword-belt from where it hung behind the door, and slipped out into the companionway, down the short passage and, ducking, out into the waist. The shipmaster met him there.

“What moves, Jovan?” asked Dalwhiel.

“There’s a swimmer in the water, sir, approaching from the bridge. Just one. I didn’t think it worth waking the ship...”

Dalwhiel nodded. “No,” he said, “that’s wise. How close?”

“He’s at the bower cable now,” a voice from the foredeck.

“Good,” said Dalwhiel. “Help him aboard and get him down here.”

“Down here?” the shipmaster asked.

“I don’t want them to see from the Residence,” said Dalwhiel. “If there’s a crowd of us on the foredeck...”

“Aye, sir.”

The man looked nervous; it was clear that he didn’t understand the northern speech, and few of the sailors knew anything else. They had not handled him roughly, but they’d hurried him down.

“Fetch him a blanket!” Dalwhiel called, in the northern tongue; then, switching to the language of the Coast, “Greetings, friend. Have you news for us?”

“Master Dalwhiel,” said the man. “It is yourself! Kateran said that he thought it might be your ship.”

“It’s myself. Wait, Goltinen?”

“Yes, master, I am called Goltinen, sir...” The man took the blanket offered by a sailor, and wrapped it around his shoulders; another offered him a mug of hot ginger with a splash of mulberry spirit in it, and he drank. He looked up again, clearly not knowing where to start.

“What news of the city, Weaver Goltinen?”

“It isn’t good, sir. The soldiers have been looting, raping and burning anything they can lay their hands on, and killing anyone who resists them. Everyone has left the city who can...”

“My father?”

“I don’t honestly know sir. But many more people have left than been killed, sir. He was at the silk warehouse, the night they burned it. I was there too – all the weavers’ guild, and more, tried to put the fire out, but there was no saving it. I saw him there... but I was in a bucket line, so I... and since then I haven’t seen him. There was bodies on the street next day, sir, but not many, and not his.”

“Our house is burned, too, isn’t it?”

“Aye, that was the same night. Two weeks since. The worst.”

“Yours?”

“My what, sir?”

“Is your home lost?”

“As to that, it stands, sir. They burned the Ship Inn, and the fire from the new guildhall spread to the houses on the west side of Land Street, but most of the poor folks’ houses stand. We don’t have much worth looting.”

“Something to be thankful for, then. Your family?”

“Gone to my mother’s family – they have a farm upriver, sir. All safe, sir, as far as I know.”

“Another matter, Goltinen. The Huandun has dragons roosting on the keep...”

“Aye. There’s been trouble about that – when there were still folk in the town. Your father and master Gratingen went and remonstrated with him, but... dragons are his totem animal.”

“He means to let them bide?”

“Aye, he does.”

There was a sound of feet from the companionway, and Karakhan ducked out into the dim light. "What goes?" he asked. "I heard voices."

"Karakhan, this is Goltinen, a weaver who weaves damasks for my father..."

"Greetings, Weaver Goltinen. One moment, if you don't mind," and then, switching into low, guttural northern, "shipmaster, what is this crowd doing here? Get the men back to watching, we are not safe here!"

There was a brief clatter as the crew dispersed. Karakhan looked to Dalwhiel, who summarised, briefly.

"Where do the mercenaries stay, when they're not on duty?" asked Karakhan.

Goltinen spat. "You wouldn't say they was on duty, sirs. There's some at the Land Gate usually, but... no-one's coming in by the Land Gate, now. They robbed and beat the peasants that came in with food to sell, and they don't come no more. They was stopping folk going out by the gate, but folk just go over the low bit of the wall. Or swim, sir. Everyone here swims, we do it from children. Seems Sinhua folk don't, so much.

I refer to a ship called Raven later. Is it the same ship?

"But no, sirs, when they isn't at the Land Gate they hang around the spirit warehouse mostly, now they've got the doors open.

That was full, or nearly. Master Gratingen was expecting you'd take a lot, and the Fellraven's due, too. So they hangs round there and they must sleep in there. There's women got dragged in there. Old Barenan – you'll call him to mind, sir, used to weave for your father? His granddaughter got took and he tried to stop them, but they killed him."

Dalwhiel leant back against the shore boat, now stored neatly on its chocks on the main hatch. “So the mercenaries are in the spirit warehouse. Young lordling from the Residence said they’d been at the spirit?”

“They have, sirs. Yes. You won’t find any of them sober, any time.”

“So what do you know of the townsfolk, Goltinen? Where are they? And what of the Tyrranos and his court?”

“They do say they hanged the Tyrranos, and that would be no loss, but no-one I know’s seen the body. The seal pup is up in the orchards beyond the Sind Ferry, with some of the landed folk and such. He was stopping folk taking food into the city, but since the mercenaries robbed those that did... well, no-one’s going to. There’s a bunch of us on the west bank, younger men, couple of hundred of us. We thought maybe we’d be able to do something, but... we don’t have any proper weapons, and we don’t rightly know how to fight. I told them you’d be bringing blades?”

Dalwhiel and Karakhan looked at one another.

“We do have blades,” said Karakhan.

“If you put untrained men against mercenaries...” protested Dalwhiel.

“It’s their town, and they want to fight,” said Karakhan. “And the mercenaries are demoralised and drunk.”

“I liked the plan you had yesterday better – our crew and the lordling’s company...”

“We’ll talk about it,” said Karakhan. “Weaver – Goltinen? – we can offer you a meal and a hammock for the night...”

"I should get back, sirs. May I tell the boys you have blades?"

Again Dalwhiel and Karakhan looked at each other. Karakhan nodded.

"Yes," said Dalwhiel. "Do. Somehow, we'll deal with Swift Company. Can you get your boys across the river, with the bridge raised as it is?"

"We've fishing boats, sir, half a dozen such."

"Very good. Can you send someone back here just after dark tomorrow, to talk again? Don't make any move before then."

"I'll come myself, sir, and happy to."

"Thank you very much then, Weaver Goltinen. Until tomorrow night!"

The weaver scrambled down the bower warp and into the water without a splash, his dark head fading into the thin river mist. Dalwhiel watched him out of sight, and then dropped back down into the waist.

"Untrained townsfolk will just be a liability in a fight," he said.

"Yes," agreed Karakhan, jumping up to sit on the break of the afterdeck. "Probably."

Dalwhiel looked up at him. "You don't want to sell too much grain."

"I don't. But, yon lordling would likely trade a lot to get rid of his mutineers."

“True. I’ll talk to him. Five tons, and our men for the raid, in return for the maidens?”

“Up to five. Up to five. Don’t go above five. And only half of it up front.”

“If we beat the mutineers, we can likely buy grain from the peasants.”

“Maybe. For what?”

“We’ve some furs to sell yet. And, we can sell blades to Goltinen’s boys for cash, buy grain with the cash. If the seal pup will let it through.”

“Yes, that works,” Karakhan agreed. “And, if the mercenaries are gone...”

“Gone? Where? I don’t really want them wandering around the countryside, either.”

“Across the bridge?”

“There are a lot of good, peaceful villages on the west bank,” Dalwhiel climbed the starboard side ladder and looked across the river, “Bridgend first of all. Do we want them burned and looted too?”

“Half a legion of mercenaries is a lot of men to kill. We have to send them somewhere.” Karakhan got up, and joined Dalwhiel at the rail. “You can’t send them out the Land Gate, we don’t have any men to defend the wall. It’s the west gate, or kill them.”

Dalwhiel looked away across the water for a long moment, and then nodded. “Disarmed, then.”

“Oh, agreed,” said Karakhan, grinning. “More blades to sell! But, if the mercenaries are gone, the merchants may come back, and then they’ll want to redeem their daughters.”

“With what? The city’s trashed, they’ll not have much gold.”

“They’re mechants, like us. They’ll have some.”

“True,” said Dalwhiel. “And, most of them are creditworthy. For most of them, I’d underwrite their credit, I know my father would back me.”

“So, we don’t have to ship the maidens – at least not all of them – and we don’t have to sell them in Treshkar.” Karakhan looked across at Dalwhiel. “And what of the Seal Princess?”

“The Arista Selchae? Aye.” Dalwhiel looked away again, across the dark water.

Karakhan asked again. “What of her, brother?”

Dalwhiel shook his head, suddenly. His shoulders were tight. “That’s for me. I’ll pay for her myself, in my own gold.”

“That bad?”

“I don’t know,” said Dalwhiel. “I’ve had half a year to get over it. It isn’t as though I think about her all the time. But when I do... I don’t know.”

Karakhan shrugged. “It’s up to you, brother. I shan’t tell you what to do.”

“Thanks,” said Dalwhiel. “Goodnight, brother.”

A Swift Expulsion

Needs rewritten.
Dalwhiel needs to take a
more active part in the
fight. Also, Show don't
tell

Three weeks after the event, Dalwhiel heard the story of that night narrated by a minstrel in an inn in Hans'hua; a year later, he heard it again, still more exaggerated, in an inn in Huandun; and in later life he heard it often, from foreign minstrels wishing to flatter, in his own residence. It was hard to hold onto a true memory of that night, of what was real; it all seemed too improbable, too bizarre.

In the first place, there weren't, as the minstrels would later claim, a legion of Swift Company, or two legions, or five; there was half a legion, and half a legion which had lost men through its mauling by the partisans, through disease, desertion, and internal fights. Secondly, there weren't just eight men at his back. He'd brought four squads – thirty two men – of the ship's crew, counting himself, Karakhan and Tchikharn; and Rothic had brought three squads, so they numbered fifty seven men altogether. At the worst estimate they were outnumbered less than five to one; in truth, probably no more than four to one. It was still very long odds...

And finally, of course, it wasn't really he who had led, although he was nominally in charge. It wasn't Rothic, either.

Dalmethan had hired Tchikharn as captain of his caravan guard years before, and since then he'd stayed in the family home each winter, a quiet, understated man, who played well at the stones. Dalwhiel knew that he'd been a soldier, in those distant wars of the north of which the south knew so little. He carried a sword, a light, slim, not especially long blade, much less showy than the hand-and-a-half blades that many of the southern mercenaries now carried; and he'd taught Dalwhiel to use such a blade. But until the council of war that evening, Dalwhiel had not known the depth of his strategic understanding: it was his plan which was clearly the best, which they unanimously adopted; and it was not until the fight...

They knew – they knew from several sources – that Swift Company would be gathered in the stone-built spirit warehouse. They knew there would be a guard of about twenty men at the Land Gate, and that although there should also be a guard on the river gate, with the drawbridge raised and the warehouse so close it was doubtful there would be anyone there. They knew that Swift Company had not sent out a night patrol for some days.

Tchikharn pointed out three things: that the warehouse had one large door, on the quay, which could be barred from outside, and only three other, smaller doors on the landward side. So Rothic had led two of his squads up towards the Land Gate, with instructions simply to prevent the guard there making a counter attack – not to attempt to storm the gate, not to fight at all if they could avoid it. The gate guard could, as Tchikharn pointed out, easily be starved out later.

A town – a city, yes, for courtesy, but not a big one – outlined in the faint light between the looming bulk of the Residence to the south and the long curve of the city wall, spanning the base of the peninsula to the north. Between them, a jumbled mass of buildings, cut by streets, Land Street straight and broad enough that two wagons might pass, the others variously narrow and crooked. In the still quiet of the darkness, you might even think it was still at peace. Nothing stirred; no lights, no movement. Yet in the still dark air, the taint of rotting flesh and charred timber seemed ranker, more intrusive.

This city was not at peace: there was movement. In ones and twos, men were slipping out from the Residence, sneaking across the east side of the marketplace, and forming up in the shadow of the wreck that had been the Ship Inn. Commands were given quietly. Seventeen men, two squads of soldiers and the ariston to lead them, disappeared into the warren of twisting streets, heading north towards the wall. The rest waited, silently, listening, eager.

To the west of them, by the river, a faint sound of raucous singing. Nothing else, as yet. Again, it seemed that nothing moved. But in the mist on the river, a darker shadow; a small boat, drifting on the rising tide, oars held still above the steely surface. Silently under the low arch of the bridge, the arch nearest the shore, hidden in the shadow of the drawbridge tower. From the river, the sound of singing was louder, but no more melodious.

Oars dipped, and again. The boat moved purposefully, nosing into the quay. A shout came from the shore, and then one man danced ashore, his blade already weaving its mazy domain of steel. Others followed, but it was the swordsman who led, the swordsman who fought, the swordsman who killed.

As Tchikharn said himself on another occasion, it is not pretty to watch a swordsman fight men with swords. It is not a fair fight, It is murder.

There are positions of the sword. The blade moves from one position to another. Cut, slash, lunge, thrust, block, parry, riposte. Soldiers are drilled in it. If your opponent does this, you counter with that. Simple rules. That is how men fight with swords. But Tchikharn, with a sword, did not follow rules. As his blade moved into one position, it did so in a fluid move towards the next he had planned and the next beyond that, a dance not of steps, not of cuts and thrusts, but of progressions, of chords, of glissandos and arabeques.

Tchikharn had taught Dalwhiel; had taught him from a child. Dalwhiel knew how to do this. But in all that time he'd never seen Tchikharn in a serious fight, a mortal fight against trained enemies. He followed, kept close, fought in his own right too; was ready, should the need arise, to go back to back with his bodyguard. And yet he felt that he was a spectator, an honoured spectator, watching an exhibition of an art taken to its most sublime level.

Tchikharn and Dalwhiel danced among the mercenaries, graceful, their light swords quick and sudden. Mercenaries fell. The squad from the boat pressed forward. The boatswain sounded a bray on his trumpet, and then they were at the great double doors, heaving them closed. Men inside pushed against them but it was already too late. Two men dragged up the great bar as four of Karakhan's group raced round one end of the building to help. The bar thumped home. They staggered back, panting, to form a loose semi-circle. Only five of them had wet blades, but Dalwhiel was pleased that his was one. None of them were hurt.

There was, inevitably, a small, man sized door cut into a leaf of the great doors. It was man sized, but not man height, for the great bar crossed it. It opened, and one after another a handful of mercenaries staggered out, stooping, to fling themselves on the waiting men and be slaughtered one after another. It was not long before they stopped coming. Karakhan strolled easily around the corner of the building to report that he'd had no trouble at the doors he controlled; Tchikharn growled at him to go back and keep on having no trouble.

There was a period of quiet, and then a great thundering on the inside of the doors, which appeared to have no effect. Some tiles rattled off the roof at the north end of the building, and Tchikharn send a couple of men back with bows; sure enough, archers appeared on the roof, silhouetted against the stars, and were picked off. There was a long silence. Dawn started to paint the grey stone walls with pink.

A fishing boat arrived at the quay, and then another, each crowded with men armed with staves, bows, axes, fish spears and pitchforks. Dalwhiel went over and greeted Goltinen.

“This is Kateran, sir – he’s Master Gratingen’s caravan master, and he’s our captain, sir.”

“I greet you, Captain Kateran,” said Dalwhiel. “We have them trapped, as you see. Our plan, if we can, is to send them unarmed across the bridge.”

Kateran was a slight, neatly built man, but upright and alert, with a look of command and of confidence.

“My greetings to you, Master Dalwhiel,” he said. “Them across the bridge – and there’s my family there among them

– they’ll not thank you, sir, but I do see there’s none but hard choices.”

“If we fight them here, we’ll lose men, and if we leave them this side of the river they’ll just come back into the city.”

“Aye, I see that. But if you don’t mind I’ll have the rest of our band stay back on the west bank to hurry them on their road.”

“I’ve no objection. I don’t want them stealing weapons. Wait, there’s something happening. Come over – but leave your men back, for now.”

The small door opened once more, but no-one came out. Instead, a voice called.

“Hold your blades, sirs! We’ll talk.”

“One of you, then,” Tchikharn’s northern accent was harsher, more guttural than ever. “And unarmed.”

There was a confused sound of rowdy discussion beyond the doors, and then a dark, sturdy man of middle years came out, his hands held out to the sides, his leather jerkin hung with bronze scales. Below the jerkin, greasy cloth that might once have been red. “We’ll talk,” he said.

Tchikharn looked to Dalwhiel, expectantly.

“How many of you in there?” asked Dalwhiel, also accenting his voice.

Captain Talingen looked confused. “I don’t rightly know,” he said. “A lot more than you.”

“Aye,” said Tchikharn. “But you’re inside and we’re outside, and that spirit will burn.”

“No!” Talingen looked shaken. “No, sirs, please, you wouldn’t...”

“Fine,” said Dalwhiel. “But we want you out of here, and, as you say, there’s more of you than us, so you see we can’t just let you out.”

“We have fine things,” said Talingen. “Fine things from the city. Valuables.”

“No doubt,” said Dalwhiel. “Stolen things. A thief does not get to bargain with his loot.”

“We aren’t thieves, it’s spoils of war!”

Dalwhiel looked surprised. “You were hired to defend this city.”

“But...” the big man staggered slightly, “that was before...”

“Before you turned your coats?”

“Sirs, please, would you fight the Red Company? The wall’s a wreck, the townsfolk had been quarrying it for building stone for that damned folly! What could we do?”

“Your problem,” said Dalwhiel, his accent reverting to the Coast. “We paid our taxes to the Tyrranos, and he paid you. He paid you to defend us. If you chose to turn your coat, don’t expect sympathy.”

“Very well, sirs, we’ll leave. We’ll take our stuff and go...”

“Not so fast,” said Dalwhiel. “Where?”

“Back to Sinhua, sirs. The boys want to go home.”

“Not by the Land Gate. You’ll go across the river.”

“But sirs!” The man wailed his protest. “Sinhua’s east of here! We’d need to go three days march north to the fords, and then it’s ten days from there to Sinhua.”

“I’ll give you bread,” said Dalwhiel. “Five loaves per man, in exchange for your weapons.”

“We’ll keep our weapons.”

“We’ll burn the warehouse,” said Tchikharn.

“In that case,” said the man, “you’ll burn the women too.”

“The women?” asked Dalwhiel, sharply. “What women?”

“We have women, townswomen.” Talingen lowered his hands to his sides. “The boys needed to be entertained.”

“How many women?”

“I couldn’t say. A few.”

“Food?”

The man looked unsure of himself. “Well,” he said, “some.”

“Ten loaves of bread,” said Tchikharn, “tonight, for each woman. But you’re not leaving with your weapons.”

Dalwhiel looked at him in surprise, but said nothing.

The captain-general, though, shook his head. “Twenty-five loaves, no less.”

Tchikharn looked at Dalwhiel, an eyebrow raised.

“How many,” Dalwhiel asked, “is ‘a few’?”

Talingen counted, slowly, on his fingers, muttering under his breath. He looked up. “At least fifteen, sirs, could be double that.”

Dalwhiel shook his head. "Ten," he said. "Count yourself lucky."

"I'll talk to the boys, if you don't mind."

"Do that."

Talingen went in.

"Don't stop watching the door," growled Tchikharn to the Shearwater men. He, Dalwhiel and Kateran walked back a bit.

"You were generous with the bread," said Dalwhiel. "If their bellies are full, they won't trade their swords."

Tchikharn had turned and was looking back at the warehouse. "Aye. But when the women are out, we can threaten to burn them."

"We can't keep this up all day. We've few enough men, and they'll tire."

Tchikharn nodded. "It won't take all day."

Dalwhiel looked at him for a long moment, and shrugged. He turned to Kateran. "Captain, of your goodness, could you send some of your men up to the Residence bakehouse for bread? Find a cart if you can. And you may wish to send one of your boats back to warn your folk that we'll be sending these over."

"I'll do that," said Kateran. "You'll be wanting the drawbridge down. I'll set men to that, too."

Dalwhiel thanked him. Tchikharn had already walked back to the half-circle round the door. They waited. Beyond the city the sun rose slowly, a wash of brilliant light flooded over the river. The small door opened, and Talingen came out again.

“The boys say twelve loaves.”

Dalwhiel nodded. “Let it be twelve. I’ve sent men for them, they’ll be here shortly.”

They waited, as the morning light grew around them. From the gatehouse, a groaning of timber, clattering of chain and scream of leather brakes announced the opening of the bridge. Then a handcart appeared round the end of the building, piled high with sacks.

The minstrels lied about one more thing; they said the women that were found inside where Dalwhiel’s sisters. They were not; his sisters were safe in the Residence. They were not his sisters, and they were not sisters to any of the crew, for the crew were all northerners, nor to any of Rothic’s men who were from Huandun. It was as well.

Talingen and another led the first of the women out. Bruised, her hair matted, covered in grime and blood, she looked dazed, and walked with difficulty. There was a long silence, and then one of Kateran’s men cried out in horror and ran forward, stripping off his smock to wrap it round her. There was angry muttering. Dalwhiel handed the captain a sack of bread, and he went back in.

There was another pause, as angry muttering grew from the townsmen behind, and then two men came out carrying a woman between them. They laid her down, carefully, beside the cart, and were given a sack of bread, and went back in. There was silence among the group of Kateran’s men. They moved forward, in a mass, one man, weeping, going down on his knees beside her. Tchikharn urged them all back, and two of the men lifted her, tenderly, staining their clothes with blood.

The mercenaries came out again carrying a third woman. Again, they laid her down. Again, in silence, Dalwhiel handed over a sack of bread, and they went in.

Dalhiel called back to the townsmen, “is any of you a doctor?”

There was angry muttering, but no-one responded. Dalwhiel turned to one of his men. “Go round to Master Karakhan,” he said in the Northern tongue, “and ask him to send Garachor. This is not good. And Farrach – return quickly. There are few enough of us here!”

Again the door opened, and the two men came out carrying a woman. They laid her down, as before. Dalwhiel looked down at her, and then knelt. He took a wrist, and felt for a pulse. He looked up, sharply, at the men. He held his wrist in front of her mouth, concentrating. Falloch and another man came hurrying round the corner of the building. Dalwhiel looked up at them.

“Garachor, man. Tell me, does she live?”

The man called Garachor – another tall fair northerner – squatted by the woman, and tried wrist, mouth, throat, chest. He looked across the body at Dalwhiel, who stood, slowly.

“We don’t pay for corpses,” he said.

The mercenaries exchanged glances. They went back in.

Garachor went over to the other women, among the group of townsmen on the quayside.

Captain-general Talingen came out of the building alone, his hands held away from his side. He looked at Dalwhiel.

“Well?” said Dalwhiel.

“Five loaves for dead ones?”

“No. Twelve for every live woman, but we will not pay for corpses.”

The captain made a helpless movement with his hands. “Sirs,” he said, “there are no more alive.”

more here

Dalwhiel sent Swift Company, in squads of eight, naked and unarmed out of the city by the river gate. He allowed them their lives; nothing else.

Substantial looted property in the spirit warehouse. Dalwhiel secures the warehouse and through Goltinen arranges a watch on it, of townsfolk; this later becomes the core of the militia. Dalwhiel does not tell Rothic about the presence of the loot.

Possibly introduce Master Gratingen here

Bought and sold

The cell was bare, but clean. Some fresh straw on the cobbled floor, the walls whitewashed. A small high-set window, barred, let in a little light. In the cell, a slender young woman, wearing a long, hooded robe in the Hans'hua style, of white silk; her lace veil was embroidered with gold and hung with small pearls. Around her waist, a girdle of heavy gold links; from her neck, on a fine gold chain, a golden pomander, encrusted with gems. She held it cradled in her hands, breathing in the cool herb smell. She stared up at the window. Behind the veil, her face showed little expression.

A tramp of boots outside, the sound of the bar shifting; the heavy iron-bound door swung open, slowly, with a groan. She turned her head to face it, an eyebrow raised, the pomander still cradled in her hands. A tall figure ducked through the gloom of the doorway, and unfurled like a fern frond.

The pomander dropped and swung on its chain, glinting in the light.

“Master Dalwhiel!”

“Selchae.”

“Am I to understand that it is you who has bought me?”

Dalwhiel nodded, briefly.

“Master Dalwhiel, you will recall that when last we met you sought my hand in marriage.”

Dalwhiel lent against the wall, blocking the doorway.

“Selchae, you will recall what answer you gave me.”

“Indeed,” she said. She closed her hand on her pomander and raised it again, briefly, to her nose. “Would it do me any favour to own that I regret the manner of that?”

“Do you?”

“I do.”

“Now that you are as you are, I don’t doubt it. But did you before?”

She turned away, looking up at the window. “That night, my mother told me most straightly how improperly I had behaved. But I was proud. I am proud. I would not apologise because I was told to apologise.” She looked back at him over her shoulder. “No. Because I had been told to apologise, I would not apologise.”

“And did you wish to?”

She turned to face him, the veil hiding her features. “The manner of it was indecorous. Very indecorous.”

“And that you regretted?”

“Yes.”

“That is all you regret?”

She shrugged. "Oh, now? Now I regret all. But what good does that do me?"

"You did not regret before." It was a flat statement, not a question. His voice was controlled, tight.

"Master Dalwhiel, what would you have me say? I am the daughter of the Tyrranos. His father had been Tyrranos, and his forefathers before him. Your great grandfather was born a slave."

Dalwhiel nodded. "Aye."

There was a pause. She turned away, but the cell was too small to pace.

She turned back. "And so you have bought me. Is that what you intend for me?"

"Selchae, I do not know. Do not press me to answer that." For the first time his gaze dropped.

He shook his head, like a dog wet from swimming, and looked straight at her again, his gaze intent.

"I do not know. In my anger, yes, I would have you a slave. Have you my slave and sell you on when I tire of you. And my anger is still strong."

Again, the angry shake of the head, and he looked down.

"I do not wish to be mastered by my anger. My father, if he lives, would counsel me to give you your freedom as a gift; my father's counsel is usually sound. The man I should like to be would renew his offer, now."

Her hand caught round the pomander again, gripping it firmly. "But...?"

He looked up, his movement sudden, impatient. "Oh, but. But I am not the man I would like to be. I am angry, and for all I know berieved. I do not know my own mind. I do not know!"

This time it was she who looked down, turning and twisting the pomander.

"And so you have bought me," she said, again.

"Yes." He stirred, standing clear of the wall. "I have not bought your clothing, nor your jewellery. Remove them."

"Here?" Her voice was shocked, hollow.

"Here. Now."

"Be so good as to withdraw."

Silence. He did not stir.

"At least turn away your gaze!"

"Selchae, if you were me, would you trust?"

She shook her head, her eyes down.

"I don't know what blade you may carry under your garments," he said. "Enough. Disrobe."

Her movements were slow. She turned away. She undid the golden belt, and laid it carefully on the straw. She slipped the robe off her shoulders, and folded it with shaking hands. The length of her hair surprised him. She squatted, laying the robe carefully down, and fumbled with something beyond his gaze. She laid her rings and bracelets on the folded silk. She stood again, still facing away from him. She took a deep breath, and then another. She gripped her fine silk shift in both hands and pulled it quickly up over her head. The dark hair fell smoothly to clothe her back, and her round buttocks shone through it like bronze globes. She held the fine shift, hanging, in front of

her, little tremors running through her body. Again she folded it carefully and laid it down, gently, on top of her jewellery. Finally she removed and laid down her veil.

She remained there, crouching, for a long moment.

He made no move or sound.

Sighing, she stood slowly, and turned, her hands protecting chest and groin.

He looked at her consideringly, as though for the first time. Without the veil, her jaw was narrow, her mouth small – but not displeasingly so. A good face, even a beautiful one, and with her cheekbones she'd carry that beauty into her age. He nodded, approvingly. But all he said was “sandals.”

“My sandals?”

“I did not buy your sandals.”

Anger and confusion on her narrow-jawed face, she stooped to remove them, and lay them by her clothes; fine red leather, stamped and buckled with gold. Again she stood and faced him. His face was cooler, once again closed.

“Anything else?” he asked,

She shook her head, her eyes down. “Nothing, Master Dalwhiel.”

His eyes dropped to the fine gold chain dangling between her legs. “I did not buy your pomander, girl.”

This window, too, was small, but from it she could see upstream. The long bridge, with its drawbridge span still raised, and beyond it, the burned wrecks of the silk warehouse and of the fine riverside dwellings of the rich merchants. True, the

grey stone bulk of the spirit warehouse still stood, and she could see no further into the city.

She knelt on the settle beneath the window looking out, her face sagging; and then she furlled herself into an almost fetal knot and wept for a time. Her sobs were quiet, contained. After a little, she scrubbed her eyes on the fine brightly patterned sleeve of the tunic she wore, and looked around.

The cabin was small – much smaller than the cell had been, but by far more comfortable. Down one side, a narrow bed was built into the side of the ship, made up with thick woolen blankets and hidden by a heavy curtain of dark blue; beneath it, finely crafted drawers for storage. Facing her across the cabin was a small desk, with a stool upholstered in fine blue leather to match the settle. Above the desk, a shelf of books, with a wooden bar across to prevent them falling if the ship should move uneasily in the sea. At present, of course, it hardly moved, so still that for long periods it was hard for her to believe that she was afloat, and not in some eccentrically-shaped building ashore. For nothing in this cabin was square; even the floor was not level, sloping up slightly to the narrow end where she sat.

She fingered again the tunic that she wore. Wool – she had never worn it before – was surprisingly soft, not as scratchy as she had supposed. She knew that in giving it to her – in giving it to her after he had made her undress before him – he had intended to show his power over her, intended to make her grateful. Well, he had power over her – she wasn't stupid enough not to acknowledge that. For now.

But she steeled herself against gratitude.

She knew that the solitary slip of parchment on the desk was a notarised copy of a receipt which defined her as property, as spoils of war. She knew, too, that it was a copy – only a copy –

and that throwing it out of the window would not aid her any, so she left it. If he chose to clothe his property, though, that was his choice.

It wasn't a favour to her and she would not take it as a favour. Although it had been good not to have had to walk naked past those soldiers in the Residence, or those sailors on the ship. It was much too big for her, of course... but, actually, actually, that helped.

Tears were leaking again.

She uncurled, stood, and reached across to the desk, picking up the parchment, reading it again. She shook her head, angrily. It did not mean anything. She was not – yet – branded, nor tattooed, nor collared. Not yet. If she got away – far enough away that there would not be people to recognise her, Sinhua, say, or Hans'hua – no-one could prove that she was the woman described on this receipt.

But – she dropped the parchment, and turned back to the window – to be a woman alone, with no-one to go to, in this ruin... perhaps it was better to stay where she was, for now. Perhaps it would be better even to be branded. At least she knew him. At least, too, she knew he wanted her, desired her – or, at least, certainly had done so. Or... it could have been just her father's status he desired... but if he did desire her, if he did, surely, somehow, she could parlay that into power?

Again she brushed tears away. The ship moved slightly, ponderously, and something creaked. Beyond the window, the sound of a small bird, singing. She curled tighter on the settle, hugging her knees into her chest.

A sound of footsteps outside, the sound of the latch clicking; the light panelled door swung open, smoothly, with a creak. She turned her head to face it, an eyebrow raised, the long cuffs

bunched in her hands. A tall figure ducked through the gloom of the doorway, stooping slightly under the low beams,

“Arista, my brother asked me...”

The tall girl paused, looking down at the floor.

“Oh,” she said, stooping to pick up the parchment, “what’s this?”

She turned it to catch the light, her lips forming the words as she read. “What is this?”

“Your brother bought me.”

“He bought you?”

“He bought me.”

“Oh... he bade me give you these...”

She held out a pair of sandals: fine red leather, stamped and buckled with gold. Selchae looked up, bewildered, not trying to conceal her tears. “Oh,” she said. “He must have bought them, too.” She made no move to take them.

After a moment, the other girl laid them down, awkwardly, on the desk; and then put down the parchment, too, staring at it for a moment in bewilderment.

“He bought you?” she said, again, as though the words made no sense.

“Has he not purchased you also?”

“He’s ransomed us. At least, I suppose so. No-one’s said. Don’t you just mean he’s ransomed you?”

“You read the bill.”

“Oh.” After a moment, thoughtfully, “we have our own clothes.”

Footsteps moved on the deck overhead, and a distant laugh rang in through the window.

“Daltorae, have you any news?”

“Not really. Everything’s a mess, but you’ve seen that. Our house is burned. Most of the people are gone, but no-one knows how many are dead, or who. Only three of us – Grava, Rathae and Lorica – have yet gone back to their families; the rest of us are all on the ship.”

“My family?”

“I haven’t heard anything of your brothers...”

“But my parents?”

“I don’t know. They say your father’s dead. I’m sorry...” The tall girl made a helpless gesture, and went on. “That’s what Dalwhiel’s been told. But I don’t think he trusts what he’s being told. We don’t know.”

A hand shook her shoulder, not roughly. She started, looked up. It was dark in the cabin; a male presence filled the space.

“You should be in bed, seal girl. You’re exhausted.”

Dalwhiel’s voice was tired, but gentle.

Selchae looked towards the curtained bed. “Is it not your bed, Master Dalwhiel?”

“It is.” He nodded in the darkness. “Get undressed, and get in. I’ll be back soon.”

He slipped out quietly, the door closing behind him. The cabin was dark and silent.

After a long pause, she moved, uncoiling from the little settle and stretching, her hands brushing the deck above and the side of the ship. Her shoulders moved in the darkness, a small shrug, and then she peeled the jerkin off over her head. Unconsciously, instinctively, she folded it carefully and laid it down where she had been sitting.

Unconsciously, instinctively, she braided her long hair. Shivering, not from cold. Fumbling in the dark, she drew back the heavy curtain and climbed into the narrow bed, pushing herself back against the side of the ship to make room.

“Master Dalwhiel?”

“Selchae?”

“Do you mean to sleep there?”

A laugh in the darkness. “The bed is narrow.”

“It is. But I had presumed...”

“That I meant to force you?”

“Well... you bought me.”

“I did. As I told you, I do not know what I shall do. I shall not force you tonight, at least. Sleep.”

Bodies shifted in the darkness; beyond the window, an oystercatcher flew past, piping.

“Whether you force me or not, people will believe that you have done so.” Her voice was quieter.

“Yes,” he acknowledged. “Probably. And yes, I do intend that.”

“Is that my punishment? For my behaviour in the spring, I mean?”

“Do not provoke me, girl.” He shifted again. “This floor is hard.”

“Yes,” she said, more quietly still. “If I am your slave, is it not more proper that I should sleep on the floor and that you should have the bed?”

“You are not my slave, seal girl. Not yet.”

Adjustments

Swords hissed together. It surprised Selchae that they practised with steel blades – blunt ones, to be sure – rather than the wooden sparring blades she'd watched her brother practice with. The ferocity of them surprised her. The movement – the quick twisting of bodies, advances, retreats – the rapid pad of feet punctuating the hiss and scrape of metal – surprised her. This wasn't how she had seen men fight before.

They were skilled, these three – very skilled. Tchikharn, of course – she expected Tchikharn to be skilled, he had been a soldier and a caravan guard. And Karakhan – well, he too was northern and foreign, who knew what skills such a man might have. But Dalwhiel?

Tchikharn sat beside her now, on the break of the after-deck, resting from a bout with Dalwhiel, critically watching the younger men duelling in the well of the ship.

“They fence well indeed,” she said to him, the surprise in her voice apparent.

He smiled, not taking his eyes off them. "Of course they're good, Princess. I trained them."

"But for what need? Are they not in truth simply merchants?"

Now he glanced at her, quickly.

"For what need? Think ye all the ports this ship visits are safe? Do you think a merchant can carry rich goods, if he cannot defend them from thieves? And besides," he added, turning back to watch the fight, "we sell blades. Folk who buy from us want to see them in use, want to hear a knowledgeable discussion of what the merits of each one are. Of course a man who sells blades must be an expert with a blade, as a man who sells cloth must be an expert with cloth. Otherwise, how can he judge the right price to pay and the right price to sell at?"

Selchae nodded, and turned her attention to the fight.

"I marked but a moment past Dalwhiel was fighting right handed, yet now he fights with his left?"

"Aye. I taught him that," said Tchikharn. "Most folk have only ever fought against right handed men; a left handed fighter has something of an advantage."

"I see that might be so," said Selchae. "It's interesting... I write with my left hand, and cannot write with my right." She watched the fight again. "You northerners..." she began, interested. "Most of the swords we use here are northern made, but you use swords that are shorter and lighter."

"You southrons," said Tchikharn, good humouredly, "ae confuse the skill of the swordsman with the size of the sword."

"Perhaps," said Selchae. "But surely, a longer sword allows you to hit when your opponent with a shorter sword cannot."

And the swing of a heavy sword will do more damage than a light one.”

“There’s truth in both those things,” said Tchikharn. “But we northerners fight more with the tip, and you southerners more with the edge. So you need a longer sword. And a heavy sword tires a man quickly in a fight.”

“But you, and Dalwhiel, and Karakhan too – you’re all men of stature, and of strength besides.”

“Aye,” agreed Tchikharn. “But a big strong man with a light sword can fight harder for longer than a smaller man with a bigger sword. Some fights are over in the first few minutes – when you’re up against someone who’s no swordsman, they whiles are. But if you’re outnumbered, you’ll have to go on fighting – perhaps against many at once. Often times, being able to outlast them is all it takes to win a fight.”

The men were sitting on the break of the afterdeck, relaxing, talking. A small knot of young women were on the foredeck, gathered around a rope-ladder leading down into the river; around the bottom of it, other young women swam naked in the tawny water, calling up to them, laughing. High up one of the masts, two seamen worked on some clearing a stuck sheave, while in the well of the ship a gang of others hoisted grain sacks out of the hold, and carried them down a gangplank to stack them on a donkey-cart. At the stern of the ship, abaft the rudder head, two women stood; Selchae, in her ill-fitting northern tunic and delicate sandals, and another, Karda, taller, in a long green robe.

“You are enslaved, Daltorae tells us?”

“Yes,” said Selchae. “I don’t know. Probably. You have your own clothes.”

“He...?” Karda looked down the deck to where Dalwhiel was talking with Karakhan.

“No, not yet.”

“He means to?”

“I know not,” said Selchae. “I deem it probable. In his position, after what I did to him this spring?”

“I don’t know,” said Karda. “I don’t know how a man’s mind... I have not opened myself to a man.”

“No,” said Selchae in sudden agreement. “Of course not.”

“Your family?”

“Daltorae said she’d heard my father was dead, but no word of the others...”

“No,” said Karda. “I’d heard the same. I’m sorry.”

“Yours?”

“No word at all, yet.”

The buildings of Hans’hua are built uniformly of fine grey limestone from the plateau on which the city stands, and that’s natural: there’s no other building material there to be had. The buildings of the City at Her Gates are built mainly of mud brick, and for the same reason. In Andale among the western clans, most buildings are wooden.

But Tchahua was not so constrained. Timber came down the river from the mulberry orchards and the forests; willows grew thickly along the river banks and in the nearby marshlands;

stone came by barge from quarries in the coastal cliffs; and mud the shallow bay and its adjoining marshes supplied in unlimited quantity.

The Residence, then, was stone, as was the wall, as were the sanctuaries, old and new. Stone is a high status building material: solid, enduring, but expensive and slow to work. Wealthy merchants built their buildings impatiently with timber frames, infilled with wattle and daub – on a foundation only of stone. It went up quicker so, and looked grander. Poorer folk built with mud and straw, because it's cheap.

But in a city which had grown rapidly wealthy, many buildings were hybrids. As the silk industry has sucked ever more weavers and spinsters into the city, houses along Land Street which had been built single story of cob or brick, had now grown one or two upper stories – sometimes in brick, but more often timber framed.

In the backs between River Street and Land Street which a generation ago were open vegetable gardens and dyers' greens, new rows of wooden framed weavers cottages stood – on two floors, with the weaving room upstairs and open to the south, for light, and sometimes a loft above for sleeping. Behind the Guildhall and the Ship Inn yards, Weavers' Row, and north of that New Row, and north again North Row, and north from that High Row; and between High Row and the wall, another row was still being built, the Wall Green Row.

The dyers had moved their greens east of Land Street, towards the bay, between Land Street and Marsh Street. To achieve that, many poorer people's shanties had had to be cleared away, and so new tenements now stood between the new dyers greens and the market place, providing improved, airy, sanitary homes – or so their landlords said – for the working poor of Tchahua. But even there space was now

precious, and as the tenements advanced, some of the dyers had recently been fencing off areas of the common pasture, outside the wall, to dry their new-dyed bolts.

The folk on the streets – and folk returned quickly to the streets, now that Swift Company were gone – were in the main small and dark skinned. Most wore short kilts of fabric; some of silk and sometimes even brightly coloured, because in this silk-weaving city bolts of cloth which had been rejected by the merchants for one minor quality flaw or another were often as cheap as any cloth to be had.

The poor wore short kilts and often nothing else, both men and women; among the better off working folk – the weavers, the dyers, the distillers – sandals were common, and many, both men and women, wore a loose shirt or a short vest. But long gowns, or hose and tunics – these were only for the rich, and the rich were not yet much back on the streets.

Dalwhiel had offered Selchae such a kilt as the poor wore, but she had chosen to wear instead the light woollen tunic he had given her the previous day. He was in the foreign tunic, trousers and boots that those who'd travelled to the north now sometimes wore, standing out from the crowd not only by his height but also by the bright patterns. As soon as they turned into River Street folk gathered round them, calling to Dalwhiel, wanting to thank him, wanting to touch him, wanting to hear his story. Selchae was pushed out of the crowd around him, unrecognised and unnoticed. She listened to the clamour.

“Praise you, sir, our Jenna is avenged.”

“How many of them did you kill, Master Dalwhiel?”

“They had ten times as many men as he did, you’ll know”

“Good Master, have you heard anything of a woman Thanatae?”

“Oh, Master Dalwhiel, praise you, praise you!”

Dalwhiel stood in the middle of the mob, looking almost as surprised as Selchae felt; smiling, nodding, reaching out to touch folk. Tchikharn was by him, and Tchikharn, as usual, was looking wary. But he made no move to push these folk back from his master. At last Dalwhiel got up on an old barrel, and called to the crowd to hush.

“Good folk, I thank you. Enough! It was not I alone who drove out Swift Company. I had help from my companions from the ship, and also from Captain Kateran and his volunteers. All these people are equally as deserving of your thanks as I. But yes, the city is free, and you may set to to repair your damage. But now, I beg you, give me space and time that I may inspect mine. I thank you all, again.”

Eight of Kateran’s men, wearing green armbands, pushed into the crowd and made a ring around Dalwhiel, holding the townsfolk back a little. Tchikharn forced his way out, and led Selchae back into the protective ring. It was all friendly, good humoured; and yet at the same time the excited clamour was a little frightening.

They moved on, slowly, to the spirit warehouse. A row of bodies lay outside under cloths, and people would kneel beside them, turning back the covering to inspect faces. By one body an older woman knelt, rocking and wailing with hysterical grief, a frightened child uncomprehending beside her.

Dalwhiel would not let Selchae enter the warehouse, or even listen to his brief low-voiced conversation with Master Gratingen’s clerk, who came out to speak with him. She turned instead to Tchikharn.

“You fought here? Yesterday?”

“Before dawn.”

“Your ship’s crew?”

“Most of them. We had to leave some to guard the ship.”

“Against Swift Company?”

Tchikharn shrugged, and nodded.

“And you beat them?”

“Yes.”

“And Master Karakhan led?”

Tchikharn shook his head. “Dalwhiel led, Princess,” he said.

Selchae looked towards the tall man by the warehouse door, her eyes narrowed. And then she shrugged, and looked around at the townsfolk.

The crowd was ebbing as they moved on up River Street. People still joined it, calling out to Dalwhiel, or reaching through the screen of volunteers to touch his hand or his tunic; but more folk were leaving, returning to the work of restoring their homes and finding their friends and relatives.

Between the quays and the wall, River Street was lined with the larger houses of the wealthy, each standing separate, of various ages and styles. The older ones, at the south end of the street, belonged mostly to aristocratic families, and had been built in more dangerous times with defence in mind: of stone, mainly, and without low windows; these showed little damage.

Further up the street, merchants had built their houses, some smaller, some larger. The home of Dalmethan was towards the far end, and not grand; he might now be by repute the second richest man in the city – at least, before the loss of the silk warehouse – but he had not long been so; and he had not yet put

any of his wealth into a fine new mansion. Instead, he'd still occupied the modest half-timbered house his father had had built, hard by the River Tower, where the city wall extended out into the river and ended.

He wouldn't occupy it again. The stone walls of the ground floor, which had held his counting house and a small store, still stood, and the tall stonework chimney stack which had once run up the centre of the house; but of the timber upper floors only charred, collapsed wreck remained. Dalwhiel stared up at it for a while without speaking. He shrugged, and turned away, and as he did so his eye caught something else.

He turned to the leader of the volunteers. "Tell me, man, what happened to the wall there?"

There was a gap where the wall just was not – was gone. Not a ruinous gap, not piles of rubble from a collapse, or the action of siege engines. A gap with neat edges. Tidy piles of stone. A timber palisade, in sections, stood across the gap, with one section removed to form an open way wide enough for a cart.

"My father ordered that it be taken down," said Selchae.

"What?"

"My father ordered that it be taken down. He had a chapter of masons hired from Huandun, to build the new sanctuary – you know this?"

"I knew he was building the sanctuary, yes."

"There was a late spring storm. One of the barges which serve the quarry was sunk, and the other badly damaged. The masons were expensive, and there was no stone for them to build with."

"So your father had it taken down."

Dalwhiel turned away, said something forceful under his breath, walked briskly over to the gap, his shoulders tight, his steps, jerky.

From the gap in the palisade, the core of the new sanctuary was visible in the meadow, unfinished, more stone piled by it. When they reached him, Dalwhiel was stood centrally in the gap, staring out angrily. None of them dared approach him.

At last he turned.

“Having seen this,” he said to no-one in particular, “I can find it in me to feel sympathy for Swift Company. How could they defend this? There is nothing to defend!”

He set off again, walking fast along the outer side of the wall towards the Land Gate. After a brief discussion with Tchikharn the volunteers turned back, and Tchikharn and Selchae followed Dalwhiel more slowly.

They found him talking with Kateran at the gate, as four other volunteers stood by. A thin but steady stream of people were coming into the city, some with goods on carts, others carrying packs; mainly men, few children. Some fewer were leaving. The volunteers watched them pass attentively, greeting some.

“Your volunteers know the city folk, Kateran,” he was saying. “My seamen don’t; and most of them don’t speak the language. I can send some to help you as guards, but they cannot pass folk into the city by themselves. We will have to find more volunteers. Or leave it undefended.”

“We can’t do that.” Kateran shook his head decisively. “The city needs peace and time to repair, we don’t need trouble. And I want to know what the aristons are doing, up-country. I need

to know whether they're going to help us, or just start a bloody civil war over who gets to be Tyrranos."

"I can do that," said Dalwhiel. "I'll go tomorrow. Meantime I'll get a gang of my men to close the palisade across the gap. It's not much, but it's better than nothing."

They walked back down the hill by Land Street, but half way down Dalwhiel turned right onto High Row. Here were cottages that his father had built for the weavers he employed directly, and for a few pensioners too old to weave. Again, people in the street greeted him warmly, and he stopped to talk for a few moments with each. After each brief conversation he looked less tense, less angry. Half way down, he stopped at a door on the left hand side, rapped, waited, and, after a moment, went in, calling. Selchae hovered nervously outside, but when Tchikharn also went in she followed.

The ground floor had a front room with a table, benches, a spinning wheel, a cloth bag of cocoons and some bobbins of yarn. Behind it was a kitchen with another table, a chair, a fireplace, a couple of pails and a stair leading up. A bin in a corner held rice; a small ham and strings of onions and sprigs of herbs hung from the rafters. On a shelf were two wooden trenchers and a few stoneware jars and beakers, one containing a knife and some wooden spoons. Two coats hung from pegs on the inside of the back door.

Small and simple; but tidy and clean.

"Whose is this house?" Selchae asked, her voice uncertain.

"An old weaver, Barenan, and his granddaughter, younger than you." Dalwhiel was looking at a bunch of dead flowers in

a beaker on the kitchen table. He looked up, meeting her eyes for the first time since they'd left the ruin of his father's home.

"His wife died of a plague before I was born; he was an old man, and sick, and no longer able to work. My father paid him a pension; his granddaughter lived with him to take care of him. I've heard that both Barenan and his granddaughter were killed by Swift Company."

He clattered upstairs. Tchikharn made no move to follow, and Selchae did not, either. After a few moments Dalwhiel was down again, shaking his head. He led them back out into the street, shutting the door carefully.

Dalwhiel led the way down High Row, still uncommunicative. On either side, there were folk working in the houses, or talking to one another outside them; again and again, someone would stop him and offer thanks. Dalwhiel was polite with them, sympathetic, but distracted. On River Street again, he turned right towards the wall, and came to the wreck of his father's house. This time he walked around it, wary of the tottering timbers, but inspecting everything he could. When he came back to the road his face was thoughtful.

"Master Dalwhiel," Selchae asked uncertainly. "That house there. That was Karda's father's – Master Kardurin's – residence, was it not?"

He looked in the direction she was pointing. The wreck there was if possible more complete. "Aye," he said. "Aye, it was. There are many others worse off than us, seal girl."

This is repetitious - I've
already said it

Nearer to the marketplaces, the houses of the old rich were built mainly of stone, and defensively – as miniature castles, with protected entrances and few, small windows. The rich who had remained rich had extended, of course, and those extensions were half-timbered – but because of the size of the plots they had expanded backwards, on piles out over the river. Some of these houses were much less damaged.

From the largest, men were carrying damaged furnishings out into a pile in the street. A tall, fat man in a long wine-and-gold robe and an elaborate fur hat supervised fussily. Looking up, he saw Dalwhiel, and called him over. After a brief greeting, he led the way up the outside stairs and through a narrow doorway into the hall. As they entered a young woman was coming across it, and seeing Selchae she came running up.

“Selchae! Selchae! Is it not so good to be free, and out of that dreadful castle? Come! You must come with me, we have my mother-in-laws’s withdrawing room almost set to rights... Sirs, you will not mind if I take Selchae apart?”

There were many rooms in Master Pentarn’s house – it was the biggest house in the city, save only the Residence; and though parts of it were old, much was newly built. Grava sent a slave-girl down to the kitchen for infusions and pastries, and led Selchae across the great hall and down a short corridor into a small, bright chamber on the east side of the house, lined with pale yellow patterned silk and glowing with polished wood.

A small bay window projected out over the river, with settles built into the sides of the bay so that two or three people could sit intimately and talk. The upholstery of the settles was of brocade, a pale yellow to match the walls. Selchae had barely

had time to admire the room before the slave girl was back with a tray, which she placed on a delicately carved table of gilded wood before departing.

“This is the withdrawing room,” said Grava. “It is my mother-in-law’s private room. She is yet with friends up country; no-one will disturb us here. Sit, and we shall converse.”

“It is very beautiful,” said Selchae. “It makes even the solar in the Residence seem old and mean.”

“Tell me, why are you wearing... it is one of Dalwhiel’s tunics, is it not?”

Selchae shrugged. “He gave me it to wear. It was this or a street-girl’s skirt.”

“But what became of the gown you wore yesterday, when Rothic called you out of the women’s quarters?”

“Master Dalwhiel did not buy it.”

“I don’t understand. He ransomed you...”

“No. He ransomed you, I hear. He bought me.”

“He bought you? What, as a slave? Selchae, the common people think he is a hero...”

“Yes. Well, perhaps. Indeed, I do think that he may be so. But... Am I a slave? That he has not clarified. Yet.”

“He has taken your maidenhead?”

Selchae flushed, and looked down. “Let us not speak of that.”

“He means to become Tyrranos, then?”

Selchae looked up again, surprised. “I thought the whole purpose of the new sanctuary was that the God would be appeased, and thus the ancient customs would no longer apply?”

“That your grandmother might be appeased, you mean?”

“There’s a difference?”

Grava laughed, briefly. “It isn’t finished, though, is it?”

“No... no, it is not. I had not considered... No, I don’t believe so... I do not believe that he has thought. Of that, I mean.”

“Well, you should. Many men will want you, if having you means ruling the city – whether you are a maiden or not.”

Selchae shook her head. “Let the old laws die,” she said. “I’ve no mind to wed my brother. That, too, is against the God’s will, I’m sure of it – and, besides, he is not one who treats women well.”

“Your brother?”

The naming pattern is different here. Of course, it's a long time ago, customs change. Does it matter?

“Oh, he means to be Tyrranos. Don’t doubt that. By any means it takes. And it would not be the first time in our line. Kolcharen, the second Tyrranos, bedded first his mother and then, after he’d killed her, Sinselcha

who was both his sister and his daughter, for he got her on his mother.”

Grava sat up straighter, her eyes bright. “Selchae! You don’t know that Kolcharen killed his mother! The annals just say she died.”

“I know, but how do you think she died? However that may have been, the annals are clear that Sinselcha was his daughter by her. And he would have bedded his daughter-

granddaughter Kolselcha after her, if his own son hadn't killed him and bedded her instead."

She shook her head again, angrily. "This isn't the old law anyway. The old law was that the seal princess ruled, and bedded which ever man won the contest each eighth year. But since the first Tyrranos the princesses have been little more than captives and concubines. My mother and my grandmother had some liberty, because they accepted their subservience, but..."

"You would not, I hope?"

"Against Selcharen? Do you think I could win, against Selcharen? It would be to do as he said, and bear his children, and look away while he bedded whomsoever else he chose; or else it would be to be a prisoner, and compelled to do those things. Let us forget the old laws, and hope that everyone else does, too. My father hated them: hated that my grandmother forced him to set aside his first wife, whom I think he truly loved, and marry my mother just because she carried the blood of the seal."

She looked down, hugging the woollen sleeves of the tunic.

"I tell you this. If it comes to it – if I am indeed Dalwhiel's slave – I do believe that I should rather live as his slave than as Selachen's Tyrrana."

It was evening over the river again, at the slack of the high tide; and swifts and swallows swirled across the slow stream from their nests under the overhangs high on the Residence walls. From one of the artificial islands that supported the piers of the long bridge, the lads of the city dived and splashed, calling raucously; from another, the girls swam more quietly.

Selchae and Karda, too, had swum in the brown water. Now, they were huddled in towels on the forecastle deck close by the top of the rope-ladder, while below them other women still swam briskly in the cool water.

“It’s both not so bad and worse than it looks from here,” Selchae said. “Your father’s house is utterly destroyed, and Dalmethan’s also; and others – the north end of River Street is gone. The guildhall’s gone – you knew that – and a lot of buildings on Land Street...”

“My father’s house?”

“Yes, it is. I’m sorry, but... Why so shocked? There will have been no-one home...”

“It is not paid for. All the work he had done – the new rooms my stepmother wanted...”

“He borrowed that?”

Karda nodded. “The house was mortgaged, to Pentarn.”

“Oh,” said Selchae. “But if... if it was secured against the house, isn’t that Pentarn’s problem?”

Karda looked worriedly upstream, beyond the bridge where, once again, the young lads of the city were playing in the water. “I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t really understand these things. It may be.”

A young dragon came in from the sea, greenish bronze body held straight and motionless, its wings dark in the evening cool; no more than two manheights across. It came in below the height of the top of the keep tower in a steady, economical glide, and what seemed the last moment cupped its wings to trade speed for height, long legs extending to grasp the battlements. Selchae watched it intently, until it hopped down beyond the parapet and disappeared from view.

“You do not like to see those things, do you?”

“I don’t. I am – if my mother is dead, I am – the avatar of the God. The Seal, the mother of the sea, the god of the cycle of life, of maiden and matron and crone, of death and birth. This is her city, her place, that,” she nodded to the tall spire out on the rocks beyond the quayside clutter, “her sanctuary. I have not been brought up to be very religious, my father did not want me so, and yet... I have some duty to her.”

She looked again up to the keep, and back to Karda. “Those... those things – they are the antithesis of all the Seal stands for. They are of the sky and the fire. I do not like them. I do not like them here.”

A long time in politics

The city was changing rapidly; coming back to life. While many houses along the street still stood empty, from others came the regular thump of looms. Where only a day before doorways had been busy with people carrying out broken furnishings, or carrying in buckets of water for cleaning, today many were filled with folk with spinning wheels – the young, the elderly, anyone at all with no better trade. For Tchahua was a weaving city, and those thumping looms had a voracious appetite for yarn.

Especially since the coming of the sea trade, cloth was profitable. Every stage in the making of cloth was profitable. And everywhere the clothmakers were getting their gear back into order. A dyer and his apprentice were rolling a damaged oaken tub up the road towards the coopers workshop. A small train of half-a-dozen donkeys carried bales of woad, marigold and goldenrod down towards the market. A longer train was laden with baskets of silkworm cocoons. A cart turning into tanpits lane carried jars of oil and great lumps of beeswax, for down that lane was the workshop of Master Corawen. His speciality was the production of waterproof oiled silk, both

in the light weights used for protecting documents and other damp-sensitive precious items in transit, and in the heavier weights used by travellers as groundmats.

Just such a groundmat wrapped the roll of blankets slung across the withers of Selchae's horse. The groundmat – like the northern, woolen blankets which it wrapped – was used, though not hard worn; but the well fitting tunic and hose of tan silk which she wore were new. In a city of the cloth trade there were many tailors and seamstresses, of course; but still it said something of Dalwhiel's contacts that, with the city in such turmoil, he had had them made up so quickly.

His own travelling tunic was wool, but of dark, muted colour – like Tchikharn's; and both men wore close fitting trousers of fine tan leather. Each man had a sword hung from one side of his belt, with a dagger sheathed sideways across the back of his waist. Tchikharn carried a quiver of arrows slung behind his left saddlebag, and had a long bow slung across his shoulder. They rode quietly in single file up the left hand side of the street, past the burned out buildings, allowing the incoming traffic to pass on their right.

At the Land Gate they found only four of the ships company, looking alert and wary, and one tired looking volunteer wearing Kateran's armband. Dalwhiel spoke briefly to the sailors in Northern and exchanged greetings in Coastal with the volunteer; yet again, Selchae was surprised to notice that he knew the man's name.

The broad common was empty of the cattle, the camels and horses which would in more peaceful times have grazed there. Some cattle, Selchae knew, had been killed by the mercenaries for meat; but most had been driven inland, for safety. The trenches that had been dug for the abortive siege still scarred the meadow, a bowshot out from the walls. But apart from

that the meadow lay quiet and open, its autumn grasses long and pale and heavy with seed, studded with poppy and with cornflower, droning with bees and aflutter with urgent flurries of finches. Overhead, skylarks sang untroubled, and higher still a kite wheeled, watching.

They passed across the common, to ride among mulberry orchards as the sun rose high into the sky. By noon they reached the marshes of the Sind delta, where the road from the south advances on a causway over a series of marshy islets, with log bridges spanning the winding watercourses. On the northern edge of the delta, the main stream of the Sind meets the Tcha, and beyond that the ground rises. The village of Sind Ferry sits on this northern bank, and it is this main stream that the ferry crosses.

There's a timber-piled staithe on the southern shore; there had been a heavy bronze bell there with which to summon the ferryman. The frame from which the bell had hung still stood, and the mallet with which it had been struck still lay on the ground, but the bell was gone. The ferryman still came, however, at Dalwhiel's shout, rowing his big, clumsy-looking boat across the slow water with only one other man to aid him. The ferry had stoutly built stalls for two horses only, and so took two journeys to ferry them across.

The inn here is probably the terminal caravanserrai for caravans coming to Tchahua, since they can't conveniently cross the Sind; cargo will be transhipped to barges at the staithe. So I need to sketch in all those things.

On the northern bank, the mud-and-reed cottages of the village clustered round the inn and the distillery behind it; Master Gratingen's distillery, and the main source of his wealth, but run now by his twin sons. Over lunch, Dalwhiel exchanged news with Gratenon. Selchae remained silent, and although Gratenon eyed her speculatively he was too polite to ask about her status.

Having eaten, they rode north across the grainlands and on up the valley towards the forest.

Three riders, dressed in good but plain raiment: tunics, hose, boots. Two men, and one boy – or, perhaps, a woman in boy's clothing. Three riders on the road north, the main road, the road towards Hans'hua, riding openly in the afternoon light, away from the sacked city of Tchahua. The men armed; both of them with swords, one with a bow as well. Riding easily, confidently across the grassland. Approaching the mulberry groves more slowly, eyes alert, wary.

A barrier across the road, well manned with archers; and in front of it a small man on a large charger, dressed in enamelled and gilded scale armour, his shield emblazoned with the swimming seal badge of Tchahua. He wore a sword slung diagonally across his back which was almost as tall as he was.

From among the group of three, halted a short bowshot back, one rider comes forward, his right hand held up, empty. He and the armoured rider approach one another, warily. And then a laugh.

“Master Dalwhiel, I greet you!”

“Ariston Selachen, I greet you also. May we pay your toll in news?”

“Tyrranos Selachen, if you please.”

“It is true then? Your father is dead?”

“He is not with us, and, as I hear, he is not in the city. It is said that he is dead, and I believe it. But you said that you would pay my toll in news, not that I should pay yours. What news from Tchahua?”

“Plenty, Ariston Selachen, and some of it good. Might we gather round and talk at ease?”

“Tyrranos Selachen!”

“No, Ariston. You hold the hinterland, perhaps, but you do not hold the city – yet. Until you do, Ariston.”

Selachen nodded, slowly. “Very well, for now. Bring your men up; we have a kettle on the fire, and there will be broth soon.”

“So, some news – and some of it good?”

They sat on logs about a fire, Dalwhiel’s three and fifteen or so of Selachen’s; variously attired, some in costly garb, some in rags.

“Well, to start with good: I have driven Swift Company out of Tchahua.”

“What, naked and on the west bank?”

Dalwhiel laughed. “Yes, as it happens.”

“I’d heard that, but I did not credit it. So: who holds the city?”

Dalwhiel looked wry, and spread his hands. “Rothic still holds the residence. He has grain to last three months’ siege. I see no way to get him out. And before we can make any move against him, my ship must sail, which means I shall have few men.”

“It is your ship then?” asked Selachen. “I had hoped so.”

Before Dalwhiel could answer, one of the men with Selachen broke in: Keren, a minor ariston from up the valley. “So you’re

saying no-one holds the Land Gate? Or does Rothic hold that too?"

"This morning, half a squad of my men hold it", said Dalwhiel. "But I have not enough men to keep it manned, and nor has Rothic. Rothic has but four squads – he cannot afford to lose a single man."

"What of the maidens?" Selachen asked. "While Rothic holds our sisters, we can hardly move against him."

Dalwhiel glanced quickly at Selchae, who put her hood back. "I'm here, brother. The other... the maidens are on the ship."

"There's more," said Dalwhiel, quickly. "But first, is there word of my father?"

"He lives. He has retired to his estate. He was injured in fighting when the warehouse was sacked. Burns, and bruises, from what I hear. The word I have is that he will live."

There was a pause while bowls of soup and hunks of bread were passed around. Then Selachen said "you had more?"

Dalwhiel wiped his mouth, and nodded. "I have blades to equip four legions on the ship. They will not come free – I have my partners to take care of – but they are here. I would trade grain, which I imagine is to be had?"

Selachen nodded. "It's been a good harvest," he said. "The peasants are eager to trade, and resent that I deter them."

"These arms," Keren intervened again. "Will Rothic permit you to land them?"

"I believe so," said Dalwhiel. "I have a plan."

TODO: barbed joshing
between Selachen and
Dalwhiel over choice of
weapons and armour

The fire had died down to a low glow, the conference, ended. Dalwhiel moved among the men, greeting them, asking about their families. Tchikharn, as ever, stayed close to him, watchful. Selchae sat on her log, watching them. Her brother came up and sat beside her.

“What do you with this merchant, sister?”

Selchae shrugged. “He is a merchant, as you say. He buys things. He bought me.”

“He bought you?” Selachen looked shocked, angry. “What, as a slave?”

“It might be deemed a ransom. The matter is not resolved,” Selchae said, and shrugged again. “As one thing or the other, certainly. I do not wear a collar – yet.”

“He is a merchant, you say. He sells things. Shall I redeem your ransom?”

“Can you?”

“Not readily, sister. I have some limited gold, but I have a war to fight, and though for now those with me do so in their own interest...”

“It is my counsel,” said Selchae, “that you should not in any case. You know well that our fathers thought it a suitable match...”

Selachen bit off a harsh laugh. “Aye. And I know well what you made of that plan. Selchae, do you mean this?”

Selchae’s eyes followed Dalwhiel. “He has the city. He has the blades. He has the plan. And if all goes awry, he has the ship – the way out of here. Brother, at this time, can you think of a better match I could seek?”

“Other than myself, you mean?”

The siblings locked eyes for a long moment. Both faces – strikingly similar – were tense.

“Can you think,” repeated Selchae, her voice controlled, “of a better match I could seek?”

Salachan raised his hand in a fencer’s gesture, acknowledging a hit.

“If he weds you, no. He may be just a merchant, but he will be very powerful when this is over. Too powerful, probably. But will he wed you?”

Selchae looked demure. “I am not unattractive, brother. He has long desired me. And, he has not forced me – yet: if he meant to, I think he would by now have done so.”

“Perhaps.” Her brother shook his head slightly. “Perhaps he is just careful, assessing whether you have any value before making his choice.”

“Indeed,” she agreed. “I think that that is so. But even should it be so, I deem it worth the throw of the dice. The more successful you can be, the more I am worth. And, frankly, I believe it would please me better to be no maiden and his slave, than no maiden and someone else’s – which may be all the choice I have. Unless you redeem me.”

Selachen’s eyes followed Dalwhiel again. “This Rothic,” he said. “Would he not have made a better match? He is at least an ariston.”

“That bird has flown,” said Selchae. “I did consider it; I did set out to ensnare him. But he sold me, which reveals how he adjudged my worth. And, in truth, he is not of this one’s measure.”

“Very well.” Selachen stood up. “The more successful I can be, the more you are worth. The more I know of what he plans, the more successful I can be.”

“Certainly.” Selchae remained on the log, apparently at ease. “It will suit you well to have eyes and ears in his train.”

“True.” Both siblings watched Dalwhiel now, as he shared some joke with Keren. “Return with him, then. I shall find a means for you to get word to me, at need.”

“You would lie on the floor?”

They had reached Sind Ferry at dusk, and Dalwhiel had taken a chamber in the inn.

“It’s that or in you, seal girl.”

“You could have the bed and I could have the floor.”

“Aye, I could. If I so desired. Sleep now.”

There was rustling. Outside, an owl hooted, and a dog barked as if in reply.

“You made sure Master Gratenon heard you order me to your room.”

“Aye, I did.”

Again the owl hooted, mournfully.

“Master Dalwhiel, what do you intend? For me, I mean?”

“I intend you to go to sleep. Do so, lassie, or you’ll regret it.”

Late morning: two peasants’ carts, laden with vegetables and sacks of grain, stood by the Land Gate as their drivers chatted

with Kateran. Three riders arrived from the north, their horses dusty.

TODO TODO

A solar, high in the keep of the Residence. A long table covered with a fine cloth; around it, in high-backed chairs, Rothic, Dalwhiel, Tchikharn, Goltinen, a scribe. On a stool at Dalwhiel's feet, Selchae.

The solar was on the family floor of the residence, six manheights above the ground; it was the lowest chamber with good windows, admitting clear daylight. More: it had a clear view out over the sanctuary and the rocks of the point, where already the seals were beginning to come ashore, as yet only in small groups, and over the deep water quay where Shearwater lay. The table had its long side to the window; Rothic, in a dark red gown embroidered with dragons, sat at the head, with a scribe in sober grey at his right hand. Master Goltinen, also fine in a gown of green silk shot with purple, and belted with a belt heavy with gilt buckles and weighty purse, sat at the other end, facing him. Dalwhiel and Tchikharn sat on the long side of the table, facing the windows and the sea, once again in colourful northern tunics, not woven but made with a technique of continuous knotting known in the northern dialect as knitted.

At Dalwhiel's knee, her head barely higher than the tabletop, Selchae knelt, apparently oblivious to the fact they sat in her father's private chamber.

Rothic was speaking. "These partisans, have they any leadership?"

Dalwhiel shrugged. "There are some minor aristons – men of similar rank to yourself. With ambition, probably. But they won't come into the town while you hold the residence, so I don't think we need worry. The men who will come in – who

are coming back in – are the ordinary townsfolk. Now that the town is peaceful they want to repair their homes and get back to their trades.”

“But they have no military experience.”

“Generally speaking, that’s true. How much military experience did your men have when you left Huandun valley?”

“A touch,” said Rothic, raising his hand as though fencing. “Very well, but, if we’re to organise this urban militia, who is to train them?”

“We have to organise a militia, quickly, and we have to repair the walls, before it’s known how weak we are. Otherwise we’re wide open for the partisans to walk in. We don’t have money to hire our own mercenaries, and as you well know, mercenaries don’t always stay bought. Unless we get this city back on its feet, you and your men can either sit here and starve or walk back to Huandun with empty bellies. As to who can train them, you and Tchikharn, surely.”

“Not I,” said Rothic. “I and my men hold the Residence. If I leave it, what guarantee do I have your militia won’t just hang me like a cur? My men are no more popular in this city than Swift Company.”

Dalwhiel sighed, running his hand over Selchae’s head as though stroking a favourite hound.

“If you won’t work with me, Rothic, why should I support you? Karakhan and I can just sail away and leave you in the shit. With Swift Company gone, the partisans are already coming back into the city. You’re outnumbered. They may not be able to storm the Residence, but they can starve you out.”

“You know as well as I do: the Residence separates the city from the port. As long as I hold the Residence, the city

needs me. You know this. Tchahua became important when your father built the new port. Without the port, it's a fishing village. So you have to work with me. Your Tchikharn can train the militia."

"No," said Tchikharn.

"Why not?" asked Dalwhiel, neutrally.

"The old Master hired me to guard you, and until he tells me different that's what I'll do. We need you to find out what Sinhua are planning..."

"Why me?"

"Karakhan won't leave the ship – and should not. I won't leave you. He," Tchikharn nodded at Rothic, "won't leave the Residence. He's right, we don't need him and his four squads of half trained Huandun peasants. But we need the Residence. It's the only card he's got, so he has to hold it. You said he and his men could walk home with empty bellies. Do you think he'd get that far, him and his thirty two men, when the woods are full of thousands of townsfolk who want revenge on him? No. He can't leave, he's got to stay, and we can't get him out, so we have to work with him. So you and I have to find out what's going on elsewhere."

"If you'll pardon me saying, sirs," Goltinen paused, uncertain. Rothic nodded for him to carry on. "If you'll pardon me saying, there's the seal pup..."

"The seal pup?" asked Rothic.

"One of the young aristons up valley", Dalwhiel put in, smoothly. "What of him, Goltinen?"

"You might send him to Sinhua."

Under Dalwhiel's hand, Selchae shook her head slightly.

“Would he take orders from merchants and townsfolk?” Dalwhiel looked meaningfully at Goltinen.

“In any case, what’s in it for him?” asked Rothic. “What can we offer him?”

“He’s a mind to be Tyrranos,” said Goltinen, naively.

“I hold the Residence.”

There was silence. Dalwhiel twisted fingers in Selchae’s hair. Finally he leant forward.

“There must be someone else in this damned city with the experience to train a militia!”

“Not that I can call to mind,” said Goltinen. “We’ve never been a warlike city. There’s Master Giraten, out towards the Long Cliff, but surely he’s too old, now.”

“So Rothic and Selachen both want to be Tyrranos?”

Karakhan was sitting on the transom, a glass of wine in his hand. Dalwhiel leant against port rail, his dark face reddened by the sunset; Selchae, again, knelt at his feet.

Dalwhiel nodded. “Aye,” he said. “And there’ll be others. If we can’t get a militia trained before the next mercenary company comes by, we ought to get my father aboard and sail.”

“Seriously? You’d leave your home city?”

Dalwhiel shrugged. “What choice is there? If we can’t defend it, it will be fought over until it’s in ruins. Sinhua want it, we know that. Hans’hua wanted it, but they’re out of the game for now – we think. The Gor don’t have a deep water port either. And any mercenary captain who fancies himself Tyrranos is probably marching his men this way double time.

Deep water ports are the future: our parents saw that eight years since. Everyone sees it now.”

He sighed, and lifted the bottle to his lips.

“And, brother, it’s our fault, yours and mine and our parents. If it wasn’t for this ship and this port, Tchahua would still be a modest, unimportant place which no-one wanted. That’s why it’s under-defended. We built a fine new port, a fine new guildhall; we brought new trade and new wealth, but we left the defence of the city to a vain and greedy princeling who hired the cheapest mercenaries he could get, and had the wall taken down. That’s why we’re in this mess.”

Karakhan nodded, slowly. “So which of them are you going to back? Rothic or Selachen?”

“Neither.” Dalwhiel turned and spat over the side. “Between ourselves, neither. Why should the citizens defend the city and let some useless princeling skim off all the wealth? Rothic has already shown he’s worthless. He lost control of his first command. He couldn’t even keep track of his assets. In the end we have to get him out – but in the end it will not be hard. Selachen? What’s he got to offer? He has no experience, few men, no money. Just arrogance, pride, and a belief that he owns us.”

He looked down at Selchae, frowning. He laid a hand on her glossy hair. “No, there is no money to employ a garrison to defend the city, so the citizens are going to have to do it. If the citizens are going to defend the city, the citizens will have to own the city. You can’t expect the citizens to pay taxes to some self important jackanapes in a tin suit to defend the city if they’re having to defend it themselves. It doesn’t work. Which means we have to find a way by which the citizens can govern the city. I don’t know how we do that, but that’s what we have to do.”

“A council of elders?” asked Karakhan. “A bit like Hans’hua as was?”

Dalwhiel shook his head. “No. The oligarchs... they had power because they controlled the water. No-one has that sort of power here...”

“Your father owns the port.”

“Aye. And Rothic controls it. But neither of them can man the walls. It’s the men who man the walls who have to feel they own the city, or why else should they die fighting for it?” He shook his head. “Enough. I have to be on the road in the morning. Brother, how long can you wait here with winter coming?”

“Four weeks? A bit more, possibly, but it gets riskier.”

“We should not risk the ship. And to overwinter here while Rothic holds the Residence is to risk the ship. You may have to leave without me. Don’t fear to. We all need the profit from this voyage, and provided you trade well on the blades it shouldn’t be too bad. And it may be that I can find that barge of silk as I go north, and send it to you, in which case it should be good.”

“I won’t risk the ship. Don’t worry. But brother, go carefully. You have many enemies now.”

Dalwhiel looked surprised. “I? Enemies? Why?”

“We have sorted out the mess in this town quickly. We’ve done it well. We’ve deliberately made it look like your work, and that’s fair, because it mostly has been your work. But Sinhua, when they know what you’ve been doing, won’t love you. Rothic must now fear you. And,” Karakhan’s eyes flicked to Selchae, “anyone else who wants to lord it here, they will fear you too – because at the end of this, if there is a city here

defended by a militia, the militia will know who saved the city. The militia will be loyal to you.”

Dalwhiel nodded thoughtfully. He pushed himself up from the bulwark as if to leave, and then paused.

“One last thing, Khan. One very last thing. I know that a match with my family is no longer so advantageous as once it was, but... If when we meet again, you and Daltorae are wed, you will have my very sincere congratulations. If when we meet again she is still a maiden, you will have my gratitude. But if she is not a maiden and you have not wed her, we will not be friends, brother.”

Karakhan, still at ease, laughed. “You say this with the princess in your bed, brother?”

“He has not taken me to his bed!” Selchae rose out of the shadow, standing in front of Dalwhiel as if to protect him.

“Truly?”

Dalwhiel grinned, wryly. “I’ve not, no. My base self and my noble self are still at war over her.”

“Then I am glad, brother. Pass me that bottle, for my glass is empty and I would toast your noble self. As to your sister, don’t fear. Maiden, or wed. I pledge it.”

Darkness in the cramped cabin. A shuffle of blankets. Out of the darkness, a quiet voice.

“Are you awake, Master Dalwhiel?”

“I am.”

“A match with my family is not so advantageous as once it was, is it?”

“It’s not.”

“Not advantageous at all, in fact.”

“I’m afraid that’s true, seal girl. For now. Your brother’s fortunes may improve.”

“But you don’t regard him highly.”

A rustle of blankets; someone turned. “I don’t, but he’s unproven. We may yet find he has some worth.”

“I see.”

A halyard slapped against a mast, slap, slap, slap: a sea breeze getting up.

“If your noble self wins, you will release me, and if your base self wins, enslave me?”

“Seal girl, these are dangerous things for you to discuss.”

“But that is the choice?”

Another movement, restless.

“I don’t know. No. No, it isn’t. If my base self wins, I might still release you, but you won’t be a maiden.”

“Oh! Oh, I see.”

The Road North

Dalwhiel, Tchikarn and Selchae go north and again encounter Selachen. Dalwhiel in discussion implies that he will support Selachen's bid to become Tyrranos, but doesn't say so explicitly; he gives Selachen a slightly coloured account of the strategic situation.

The lane twisted over a low hill, and, as they crested the ridge, they saw through the trees the river again. Dalwhiel increased his pace, and Selchae followed him; Tchikharn still hung back, an arrow on the string but not drawn. Ahead, the hooves of Dalwhiel's black clattered down a cobbled slope and splashed into the river, throwing up little fountains of spray which sparkled in the dappled sun. Still Selchae followed, letting her horse, in turn, dance into the water.

The river ran fast here, and shallow; obviously Dalwhiel knew the ford, and she followed him across. Then the ground rose again and they were once more amid mulberry trees, heavy with fruit, busy with jays and magpies. Long ladders of leaf pickers lay loosely here and there among the trunks. The ground was tidy, unnaturally so for a wood. A path lead up through the orchard, and came out soon onto a lawn which overlooked another branch of the river, deeper and slower.

Selchae looked around her in surprise. "We're on an island?"

"Yes," said Dalwhiel. "Come, this way."

This is wrong. It's too deserted. Dalmethan is quite rich, and in time of trouble he'd be bound to have some guards around him. Also, where are the orchard workers? Where do they live?

There was a graceful wooden house at the north end of the lawn, of cruciform plan with a squat central tower. The formal entrance lay between two of the arms of the cross, facing south across the lawn. A broad terrace, partly roofed, with graceful seats in a group to the left of the wide door. Dalwhiel dismounted, and led his horse the last

hundred manheights, slowly. Selchae, uncertain of herself, imitated him. Before they reached the terrace Tchikharn cantered up.

"I think that we were not followed," he said. "In these woods it is hard to be sure. But they will surely know where you have come."

Dalwhiel thanked him, and handed him up the reins of his horse, signalling Selchae to do the same. Then, as Tchikharn rode away around the side of the house, he ran up the shallow stone steps to the figure who sat alone in a chair.

"Father!" he said. "Father, it is so very good to see you well."

In truth Dalmethan did not look well. His leg was strapped in splints, and a pair of crutches lay by his chair. His right hand was bandaged. He looked tired, thin; older. For the first time, frail.

"Greetings, my son. I am as glad as you. No, more so. And, why, can it be? Arista Selchae! I greet you, Arista; my boy, I would send for refreshments, but as you see I cannot even clap my hands. Go seek Gulnae for me, have her bring forth ginger, and a light repast."

Dalwhiel bowed slightly. "At once, father." He disappeared into the house.

There was silence. Dalmethan looked at Selchae assessingly. Finally he said "well, be seated, Arista. Make yourself comfortable."

Selchae moved a chair closer to Dalmethan's seat, and then sat, carefully and deliberately, on the stone terrace beside it. "I believe, sir, that I owe you also an apology."

"Also? To whom else did you owe an apology?"

"To your son, sir."

Dalmethan nodded, slowly. "Aye. And have you made that apology?"

Selchae blushed, and looked down. "I have apologised for the manner, sir. That is, for my behaviour."

"I see. Arista, you will know, I am sure, that your father and I discussed the matter for some months before that evening in the guildhall. Indeed, your father told me clearly that he had put the question to you, and that you were content."

"He had put it to me, sir. I had read the contract. I knew what was planned."

"And you were content?"

She shook her head slowly, and looked up. "Sir, you knew my father. He was very good at... hearing the answer he wished to hear."

"So you were not content?"

Selchae twisted fingers together. "Sir, my sister married Ariston Fannish, who is now Tyrranos in Sinhua..."

“Whose men killed your father. Yes.” Dalmethan’s voice was dry. “So a mere merchant’s son was not good enough?”

She looked up again, urgent. “Is he dead, sir? And my mother... Do you know this?”

“I am told so, Arista. But I asked you... ah, my son returns. We will speak more of this later.”

Dalwhiel and Tchikharn returned, Dalwhiel bearing a laden tray, which he put on the table by his father’s chair. He looked down at Selchae, but said nothing. He poured beakers of ginger for his father, his bodyguard and himself, and chose a sweet pastry from the tray. Tchikharn took his beaker with quiet thanks, and went to sit on the retaining wall, looking out over the lawn. His bow was now unstrung, but still lay within reach.

Dalwhiel sat down in the chair Selchae had arranged for him, and balanced his beaker on the arm.

“So, father,” he said, “we each have news. Custom dictates that I should make my report first, but it will be long and you will wish to ask many questions, whereas yours, I believe, will be shorter?”

The older man looked meaningfully at Selchae, and then at his son, quizzically; his son looked bland. At last Dalmethan nodded.

“Very well. Briefly, for you will know much of this, through the spring matters went prosperously; we had no setbacks, no dyes which turned the wrong shade or unduly weakened the yarn, no disease in the worms, a very ordinary, useful year, and production went well. We have some particularly fine damasks I am especially pleased with – the weavers are becoming skilled with the new looms, and the patterns become more elaborate.

“Fellraven came into port about the second foot of the foot – high summer. I send a small consignment of silks north with her, but held most – including the finest – back for Shearwater, for you know we make better profits when we carry our own goods. Masters Pentarn and Kardurin also sent consignments with her – larger than ours, so they had their goods away before the fall. And Master Gratingen sent brandies.”

“Did Kardurin sell his silks to Fellraven,” asked Dalwhiel, “or pay carriage on them?”

“Why do you ask?”

“His house was also destroyed, and he is without coin” said Dalwhiel. “I fear things go ill with him, unless there is gold yet to come.”

“H’mmmm... Well, the answer, as I recall, is that he sent his goods joint adventure, so there will be some gold to come. But to return to events; as again you’ll know, we heard that Hans’hua had had talks with Tiger Company about invading us. An embassy came from Falloch in Sinhua, announcing that he would protect us, and hard on its heels Red Company arrived. And son, in great force. I have never seen so large an army; they had I believe seven full legions of their own and one of auxiliaries.

“Selloch denied them entry into the city. And then, between one day and the next, they were in the city, on the walls, and in the Residence as well. If Selloch was killed it was probably then.”

Dalmethan watched his son’s hand make gentle, calming movements in Selchae’s hair. He sipped his ginger. He went on. “I do not know that he was, but let that be. Some few days later, five legions of the array left the city, and we were not told where; the gates were closed and no-one was suffered to enter

or leave. Then, within a few further days, a fair army – four legions – arrived from Hans’hua and demanded the surrender of the city. I watched from the roof of the house on River Street – I believe it is burned now?”

The son nodded. The father shrugged, and went on. “Red Company manned the walls, and there were, as you will surmise, almost as many of them as of Hans’hua. The Hans’hua forces fell back a bow-shot from the wall and started to entrench, I think intending a siege. Evening came, camp fires appeared along the line of the trench, I assumed nothing more would happen and went to my bed. Then, in full darkness, there came a very sudden sound of battle from beyond the walls, and by daylight the Red Company held the entrenchment line, with none but a very small number of Hans’hua prisoners evident.”

“So large a force,” said his son, breaking off a piece of his pastry and feeding it to Selchae, “must be frighteningly expensive to mount. How was it financed?”

“I believe, Neikkei. But do not repeat that.”

“The banker? Why?”

“Son, you know how much Selloch was charging us in tax, and so do I. He charged other merchants more, because I did a deal with him over the port and the outer ward wall. Selloch’s plan was that the roof of his folly should be gold. He must have had thirty thousand gold in the Residence...”

“Thirty thousand would field but a fourth part of that force!”

“For a year, true. But they were going on to Hans’hua, where it is said – and I do believe – that House Karalin alone sits on quarter of a million. By luring the Hans’hua guard to Tchahua and breaking them there, they made the impregnable city pregnable, and that is the point. We were only a gambit in their play – which is why Falloch has not bothered to leave

a force capable of holding Tchahua. Foolish of him, in my opinion, but so it is."

"And your injuries?"

The older man made an impatient gesture with his bandaged hand.

"You'll have been told that Swift Company broke into the spirit warehouse, got drunk, and broke into the silk warehouse at night with lit torches. I imagine someone dropped a torch. The building went up, as you might expect. We foolishly tried to save it. I was organising a bucket line when part of the roof fell, and I was struck by a burning timber. Friends got me away to a boat, and I came here. That is all."

There was a long silence. Dalwhiel played with Selchae's hair. "There is one thing in what you say that troubles me greatly," he said at last.

"There is? Good. I hoped you'd see it."

Dalwhiel fed Selchae another piece of pastry, thoughtfully. "We'd best just leave, then?" he asked.

"What, and abandon the best deep water port on the Coast?"

"Quarter of a million gold. We cannot defend Tchahua against that."

"Son, we are merchants. We trade, we do not govern. Let those who govern make war as they will; our business is to manage our own affairs so that we can survive them. Fannish, too, will need northern blades and desire northern carpets and furs. He needs the port."

"Not if he has Hans'hua. Who has Hans'hua has the caravan road."

"Very well, true. But there is, I think, a point you've missed."

“There is?”

“We do not know that Fannish has the quarter million.”

“He has Hans’hua, I hear.”

“Indeed. But, my guess as to how much gold Hans’hua holds is only a guess. It’s a guess that’s widely shared, yes, but Oligarch Karatan is an ascetic man. He makes – made, for he, too, I hear, is now dead – no great show of wealth. He may have had half a million in gold, or none. And if he did have quarter of a million, where did he keep it? The plateau on which his city sits is a labyrinth of caves. And that’s why you must go to Hans’hua and find out – are the new administration there looking content, or are they anxious?”

His son nodded, slowly. “It is what I did intend, although you give my questions focus. My thanks, Father.”

The son’s report was, as he had said, longer. Detailed. Distances, journey times, winds, depths of water, taxes, goods for sale and goods demanded, prices. Detail upon detail; the whole circumference of the world and all its ports – all its ports, at least, which were accessible to Shearwater, and which would be accessible to the still larger ship now under construction in Treshkar. More food was brought, and Dalwhiel fed mouthfuls to Selchae without interrupting his flow. She listened, some of the time allowing it to pour over her head like music, at others concentrating intently on Dalwhiel’s exposition of all the detail of the great cycle, a trade route revealed as far more complex than, she thought, anyone at her father’s court had remotely guessed.

At last Dalmethan called a halt. “Son, I tire. Go and find Gulnae, bid her have my bed prepared, and have her send for

Tisanae to warm it. Take Tchikharn with you. And son, you need not hurry.”

Selchae looked up, to find his eyes on her.

“I confess I do not understand,” he said, “what is between you and my son?”

“Sir, I do not know. He bought me from the Huandun who holds the Residence, and had me notarised as spoils of war. But he has not told me what he intends.”

“I see. But he ploughs you.”

She blushed, and shook her head, her eyes down. “No indeed, sir. He has not. As yet, at least.”

“In that case, I do not see.”

“It is in part – at least I think – the matter of which we spoke earlier...”

“I would have you know, Arista, that I treated for that match only because I knew how much he desired it.”

“He desired it?”

“Am I not sufficiently explicit? He sought you and no other. You gave him very great insult in the eyes of the city, it’s true. But it was not that alone, and I think not principally that, that hurt him.”

Selchae twisted her fingers together. She looked up again. “I kneel at his feet, as you have seen. He has not asked me to do this, but I know that he likes it. I do so out of – perhaps – contrition?”

“Perhaps?”

“It is hard to know one’s own motivations. And my world – as everyone’s, I’m sure – has changed greatly. I have lost very much. Perhaps I simply seek comfort, or compassion, or resolution?”

“Resolution?”

“‘Spoils of war’, as you know, means that in the eyes of the law as it is accepted all along the Coast, I am a slave. Property. A tradeable asset.”

“Indeed, that is what it does mean.”

“He has not told me that I am a slave. I am not branded. I am not collared. But nor am I freed.” She looked down at her hands again, and then knelt up, much more upright than before, meeting his eyes. “Master Dalmethan,” she said. “I think that in the end he will free me, and then I shall be alone in the world, a woman known to have been property. I do not want that.”

“No,” he said, coolly. “I can see that you might not. Would you rather he sold you?”

She flushed, and looked down. “No, Master Dalmethan.” There was a pause.

She looked up again. “Sir, a year ago, you treated for a match between your son and I. You must have seen that as a match with potential.”

“I did. My son expressed his wish, and a man’s own choice of woman is worth consideration. Also – and I know this weighed with my son as it did with me – Master Kollirn said of you that you were the best pupil he’d had since Dalwhiel himself. But you were then the daughter – a younger daughter, indeed, but one with symbolic significance – of the ruling house of my home city, the city in which I have invested

heavily. And I had not then seen how you treat those whom you despise. Now you are not, and I have.”

“Then you would not counsel him to wed me.”

He shook his head. “I would not. I would counsel him strongly against. There are many advantageous matches he might make, but you are not one of them.”

“Would you, then, have him keep me as his slave?”

Dalmethan looked at her bleakly. “He bought you legally. And I would fully understand if that is his choice. You appear to have the form and spirit to make a fine concubine. No-one would criticise him. It is what many men would do.”

There's a day of
travelling missed here

“Seal girl, is all well with you?”

The night was dark under the trees. In the distance, the sound of the river running over stones. He towered above her, dark in the darkness, fully clothed; it was his turn of the watch. She peered up at him, wide eyed, her breathing fast and unsteady. She sucked on the fingers of her left hand.

“Is all well with you?” he asked, again.

She nodded, feebly. “All is well! I did but dream. I dreamed of our first night on the ship; I dreamed of your base self, and what he wished to do.”

“It’s all right, seal girl.” He knelt, resting a hand on her hair. “It is all right. It didn’t happen...”

“No,” she said. “You take me wrong. It was not a bad dream. I am not troubled.”

“You were jerking in your sleep, and crying out. I thought you had the nightmare.”

She laughed, a soft laugh. “Not the nightmare, no. But such a dream as no maiden should ever have.”

His face was unreadable in the dim light, but his voice was warm. “That is a relief, then.”

“Good morning, Tchikharn. Where is Selchae?”

The old swordsman looked up from the little fire he was building.

“You’re awake? Good – and it looks to be a fine morning indeed. The girl went down to the river, to bathe. You should do the same.”

Dalwhiel got to his feet, yawned, and stretched. “Presently,” he said. “We will spar shortly, and I’ll work up a sweat.”

“The girl is down in the river, bathing. Now. You should go too.”

“There’s no-one around here, Tchikharn; she’s safe enough. Let her have her privacy.”

Tchikharn looked up at him through the smoke. “You’re not commonly stupid, lad. The girl saw you were stirring, and went down to the river. She told me to tell you. I’ll have breakfast ready in a while, but there’s no hurry.”

The river ran swiftly here over sheets of flat rock, pouring noisily down from one level to the next in low irregular steps. Out in the flow, the wreck of a great tree, stuck solidly, and sitting astride it, naked, brown as the water, Selchae. She saw

him, and covered her breasts with her hands. She called something over the noise of the water, but he couldn't hear it. He pointed upstream, making to turn away; but she shook her head, and called again. He put his head on one side to signal puzzlement. She grinned, and took her hands away, flicking her long, wet hair back over her shoulders. He pulled off his sark, his boots and his breeks; she watched with interest. He started to wade into the water. Her hands indicated a breachcloth around her waist, and mimed taking it off. He grinned, and undid his, throwing it behind him onto the shore.

By the tree the water was up to his waist, running faster than he would have been able to swim. She, being smaller and lighter, must have entered the water upstream...

"A man should take care of his property," she said, looking at him under lashes.

"Do I not take adequate care of you?"

"Property needs to be maintained. Kept clean."

"You look clean enough to me."

"Have you inspected carefully? Have you checked everywhere?"

Journey up onto the plateau. It's odd, because it was that journey which I first dreamt which started all this, but I have never written it. Also, discussion on that journey. Selchae is considering what remaining a virgin is buying her, and what not being a virgin - including possibly getting pregnant - might buy her. I don't want her to be very explicit about this to Dalwhiel, of course, but we need to observe her process of thought. It might provide an opportunity to start talking about Xinta

The courtyard of the South Inn became busy at sunset. Four great wagons – two laden with grain, one high with hay, and the last carrying fresh produce under an elaborate sunshade – rolled in from the south, and drivers uncoupled their chains of oxen to be replaced by fresh drivers with trains of camels. A small company of shepherds had gathered with their dogs outside the courtyard, and one wheeled in a barrow to fill waterskins from the well. A squad of light cavalry, wearing the badge of Wolf Company but with little red cockades to show they were under contract to Red Company, watered their horses and checked their harness. A merchant with a caravanlet of only a dozen camels marshalled his beasts and men. Amidst the bustle Tchikharn led four horses from the stable and Selchae queued at the well with their own four waterskins, while Dalwhiel paid the innkeeper.

And then quite suddenly the whole party was moving. The cavalry rode out first, and Dalwhiel's company followed. Behind them came the little caravan and the shepherds, while the wagons rumbled further behind. The road climbed a winding path through woods above the river, which here ran swiftly in a gorge. Then the road entered the gorge – not going down into the gorge, but remaining level as both the river and its gorge climbed. The cavalymen were noticeably alert, but there was no disturbance; the evening was still warm, and above the roaring water the sky was quiet. They followed the gorge around a bend, and then another, and then the road started to climb gradually up the gorge wall. At last they emerged into a different landscape, a stony, barren landscape. To the right of the road stood a fort, clearly well manned – the South Tower.

To the left, the ground fell away steeply to a small lake, whose surface roiled slightly in the fading light. And ahead of them, blocking the view to the north, rose the escarpment, across the face of which the caravan road zizagged upwards.

It was full dark by the time they reached the plateau. Looking back Selchae could see a lantern on one of the wagons gleaming faintly far below.

[More travel](#)

Meetings at the Inn

“Greetings, Trekshtan! I had not thought to see you here! What news?”

The courtyard of the Inn of the Three Camels was sun-drenched and drowsy in early afternoon; so many travellers travelled by night, and so many of the inn’s habitués visited it by night, that the middle of the day was its quiet time. Dalwhiel and Selchae had slept through the morning and had emerged to find food; breads, served with olive oil and spicy meatballs, and a thin chicken soup. Dalwhiel and Tchikharn sat at a small table, while Selchae knelt at Dalwhiel’s feet. Dalwhiel had glanced up as another man had emerged into the sunlight.

“Dalwhiel, my friend! I give you greeting,” replied the newcomer, “and would say the same! I thought you were a ship-man now; what do you in the city of the caravans?”

“You are right, of course. But while I was away at sea things have changed greatly. I came here to try to learn more, to learn how it may affect trade.”

“You’re up from Tchahua, then?” The stranger was fair, northern in colouring, but wore the clothes of a wealthy southerner. “I’m on my way north from Sinhua, perhaps we could trade tales.”

“If you’ve come from Sinhua, I doubt I’ve much to tell that will surprise you.” Dalwhiel caught the direction of Trekshtan’s gaze, and grinned. “Yes, she is very fine, and no, she’s not for sale – or hire.”

The northerner grinned back. “I haven’t opened the bidding yet.”

Selchae looked anxiously at Dalwhiel, who shook his head. “Don’t, man. Sinhua – what happened? When I was last in the south Shauvin held Sinhua in a grip of steel...”

“Aye... look, let us not talk of this here. There is a fine view of the city from the walls, I hear.”

“I could well believe it. I had planned to retire to my room to rest, but perhaps we’ll take a stroll on the wall later?”

“In your shoes,” said the northerner, his eyes straying again to Selchae, “I too would retire. Very well, before sundown, perhaps?”

“Before sundown.”

As Dalwhiel stirred to get up, another man approached: a Herald Junior in the service of the city, even though the city had fallen and its masters now hailed from Sinhua.

“Sirs,” he said, bowing towards Tchikharn, “would one of you be Master Dalwhiel of Treshkar?”

Tchikharn shook his head gently, and indicated Dalwhiel with a graceful gesture. Dalwhiel bowed slightly in acknowledgement.

“Ah,” said the herald, still looking at Tchikharn. “Then you would perhaps be Trekshtan of Treshkar?”

Tchikharn grinned, and open grin, and shook his head again, this time indicating Trekshtan.

“A happy coincidence, then, sirs, and two of my tasks despatched together. I am commanded to inform each of you that the governor, Ariston Falloch of Sinhua, solicits your attendance at an evenings entertainment at the Karalin palace.”

Dalwhiel nodded. “This is a reception?”

“No, sir. An informal entertainment for gentlemen, merely; an opportunity to and to make and renew acquaintanceships.” He glanced at Selchae, still kneeling beside the chair that Dalwhiel had risen from. “It is to be conducted in the mode popular in, ahem, Sinhua. Gentlemen may, of course, bring concubines, and courtesans have been invited. But, if you are travelling light,” he looked blandly at Trekshtan, “the governor is providing a number of slaves for the, ahem, entertainment of guests.”

“Master Dalwhiel...” Selchae started hesitantly. The curtains were closed, shutting the sunlight out of the stone-vaulted chamber.

“Selchae?”

“Your friend – the northerner – desired me...”

“He did, yes.” Dalwhiel looked wry.

Selchae stood uncertainly in the middle of the floor, her fingers twisting in the sash of her robe. “Master Dalwhiel, you have not forced me. Do you not desire me?”

Dalwhiel turned suddenly and took a handful of her hair, tilting her face up to him. “Do not – do not! – provoke me, Selchae.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I do desire – I very much desire – to force you.”

There was a long, taut pause. They stared at one another. At last she shrugged, and untied her sash. “I cannot prevent you,” she said.

He pushed himself away from her, turning to face the wall. “A good man does not.”

“Are you a good man?”

“I don’t know, Selchae. I try. Go to your pallet and rest.”

Dalwhiel went to his pallet, and did not.

The light behind the curtains was dimmer. Dalwhiel was up, in breeks and sark, and stamping his stockinged feet into his boots. Selchae turned on her pallet and looked up at him.

“Do you mean to go to the palace this evening?”

“I do. Yes, of course – what better opportunity will I have?”

She swung her legs round and came to her feet, wearing nothing but the thin shift in which she’d rested. “In that case, Master Dalwhiel, I think that it is time for you to resolve my status.”

“What mean you, seal girl?”

“I mean, another pair of eyes and ears this evening would be of great use to you – particularly a pair which will see and hear things that you could never see.”

“You’d come? You know what may be expected of a slave at such a gathering?”

“Master Dalwhiel, that is why I ask.”

“I do not see the connection.”

Selchae started to say something, and stopped. She turned away, restlessly, and then turned back. She walked up to him. She knelt, as a trained concubine kneels.

“Seal girl, what is this?”

“Master Dalwhiel, I would wish that I were able to do what must be done this evening as I am, with the matter unresolved; for I know you do not wish to resolve it. I would wish that I were able to accompany you and act as though I were a slave, to simulate, because that is what you need of me. But I have given it thought, and I cannot. It is too much. If you tell me now that I am a slave, I will go where you tell me and do as you tell me, without limit, and take such punishment as you decree should I fail, because I shall have no choice. Because, in law, you can compel me. If you make that choice, I will accept that choice – I mean, had I agency to do so, I would accept that choice. But I need you to choose.”

“Then you shall not come, seal girl. Do not fret. I shall be my own eyes and ears.”

“You will not choose?”

“Selchae, I have told you. It is not safe for you to push me on this. And I must go and meet with Master Trekshtan on the wall.”

“Very well. Master Dalwhiel, might I have some small moneys to spend in the market? There are some things I lack for my comfort.”

“So, Sinhua. Tyrranos Shauvin. What happened?”

They sat on the battlements of the western wall, close by the end of the Street of the Grain Traders. The sun was almost gone, but the western sky was bright with reds and oranges which reflected back pink and apricot from the limestone buildings of the city.

“Do you ask what I know happened, or what I surmise happened, or what is rumoured to have happened?”

Dalwhiel grinned. “Start with what you know.”

Trekshtan nodded briefly “So, on the first foot of the season of the mother, Shauvin died. He had held a feast the previous night, which I attended, and he was in good health then. By the following evening, House Fannae were installed in the palace. Within two seasons – before the start of the waiting days – the Red Company arrived in the city. They left again for Tchahua on the fourth waiting day, and as I hear took the city on the third hand of the foot.”

“Yes, that agrees with what I hear, too. Tyrranos Selloch disappeared on that day and has not been seen since.”

Trekshtan looked sharply at Dalwhiel. “Disappeared, or was killed?”

Dalwhiel shook his head. “Don’t know. My girl you so much admired is his daughter. She doesn’t know. His son Selachen leads a ragged band of outlaws in the hinterland. He doesn’t know either. I guess so...”

“Wait – your girl. Fannish’s wife’s sister?”

Dalwhiel grinned, and nodded.

“The better looking sister then! But I would not say it too loudly in Hans’hua, Dalwhiel. It might not go down well.”

“And yet they – probably – killed her father?”

“Aye, politics. Probably. But if they did – if Red Company did, which is not quite the same – House Fannae may not have intended it.”

Dalwhiel nodded, thoughtfully, in acknowledgement. “So, Shauvin. Who killed Shauvin?”

“It’s said, Arista Xinta.”

Dalwhiel nodded again, looking over the darkening city. Candles and lamps were beginning to appear in windows. “She had reason.”

“Aye,” Trekshtan spat over the wall. “That last feast – the night before he died – he had her then.” He turned back to Dalwhiel. “She’s here, you know. In the inn. Looking for a caravan north, so it’s said. But she’s been here since high summer, and hasn’t left.”

“She’s here? And her children?”

“No.” Trekshtan shook his head. “It’s rumoured they’re dead. It’s rumoured Falloch killed them.”

“But House Fannae knew she was going to do it, else how could they be in the palace so soon?”

“I believe they must have known.”

Dalwhiel shook his head, slowly, disbelievingly. “It’s hard to imagine a woman who would plot to kill not only her man but her own children. Have you spoken with her?”

“He was hardly her man. It cannot be said she laid with him willingly – at least, as far as we know. We know he abused her

dreadfully, if less terribly than her mother and her siblings... No, she doesn't speak. She seems a woman lost in grief."

"She may not have intended her children to die... it's an evil tale, Trekshtan."

"I'm sure she did not."

Dalwhiel looked out over the city for a while, at the grey buildings now gleaming silvery in the dusk. The lights were appearing in windiws nearer to the centre of the city, but here by the wall he realised that whole four story blocks stood empty and abandoned. He turned to Trekshtan again.

"But none of this explains the sudden wars. If Red Company were in Sinhua by the waiting days, they must surely have been already under contract before Shauvin died."

"Ah, there we get into what I surmise. And, I shall deny ever having told you any of this."

Dalwhiel nodded.

"Your father is building a bigger ship, is he not?" asked Trekshtan.

"Aye, he is. With Kunerakhan. What of it?"

Since I've changed the course of the Sind River, a ship going up to Sinhua would have to pass under the lifting span of the Tchahua bridge. Do I need to change this?

"The ships change everything. Sinhua's port takes only the smallest ships, and the ariston's wars had occupied the city so much that they't lost the black ford to Koantuan and with it the terminus of the caravan road. The merchants of that city weren't happy men last winter, or, as I hear, these many years. I heard some wild talk, always in private houses, never in the inns or the market place. This much I know: Fannish didn't have the money to fund this war, and he didn't find it in the palace because Shauvin didn't have it either."

“So?”

“So the war is deficit financed. Sinhua grew tired of aristons’ wars. This is a merchant’s war. Someone lent House Fannae the money to do this. And,” said Trekshtan, spitting again, “someone wants it back.”

“Aye, my father thought the same. How fares the House of the Three Stars?”

“Neikkei? He was never one of the wild talkers.”

Trekshtan spat over the wall a third time, and turned back to Dalwhiel, interested.

“Your father suspects – ?”

“I did not say that. The sun has set – we should go.”

It was almost dark in the vaulted chamber when Dalwhiel returned, although the curtains were now open. Almost; not quite. Selchae had lit a candle, and placed it on the floor close to where she knelt.

“What is this, seal girl?” Dalwhiel’s voice was dark.

“I have prepared myself for this evening, Master.”

She was naked, her hair braided with a golden thread, her nipples and lips glossed and glittering with gold dust, star-shaped sequins glinting in her neatly trimmed pubic hair. Around her neck...

“What is this?” Dalwhiel asked again.

“It is only bronze, Master. I feared an iron one, and did not wish to waste your coin on silver.”

Dalwhiel hooked a finger in the slave collar, and pulled her to her feet.

“What is this?” he growled.

She fluttered her hands. “The matter has been unresolved too long. You would not decide. So...”

“So?”

Again, the little shrug. “So I did.”

“You mean this?”

“Master, I have few choices I can make, few futures I can see that are not dark. I do not want not to know. I do not want...” She shrugged. “I mean this.”

“You’re sure?”

“I am sure.”

“On my pallet, seal girl. On your knees.”

She looked up, startled, trembling. “Now?”

“Now.” He pushed her towards the pallet, firmly, not harshly. He started to unbuckle his belt.

She knelt, knees apart. In her father’s Residence, she had seen how concubines behave.

In a shaking voice, she said “we have to go to the palace...”

He kicked his boots off. “Afterwards”.

She trembled, facing the wall, listening to the sounds of falling clothes. Her nipples stiffened, her belly grew soft and heavy. And then he was kneeling behind her, her braid firmly in his hand, pulling her head first backwards for a ruthless kiss, and then pushing it forward, down, onto the bed. And then

MERCHANT

pulling on the braid again, backwards, this time, as he thrust smoothly in.

Now.

At the Karalin Palace

“Here at last, Master Dalwhiel? I had almost given up looking for you.”

The courtyard in the Karalin Palace – the palace which had once been home to the most powerful of Hans’hua’s oligarchs – was surrounded by arcades on four floors, the walls, pillars and arches tessellated with bright tiles in abstract patterns. Trekshtan stood near the back, close to tables spread with a sparse buffet; it had been hard to spot him, partly because of the crowd, but partly because of the gloom. Candles lit up the east end of the first floor arcade above the courtyard, where Ariston Falloch, governor of the city, sat and watched over his guests, flanked on either side by a squad of Red Company guards. For the rest, there was shadow.

“I had a matter to attend to”, said Dalwhiel. Selchae, on a leash for the first time in her life, bit her lip and tried to look demure.

“In that case I’m sure you spent your time better than I have. But there’s a man here – an interesting man – who’s expressed a wish to meet a ship owner. Should I introduce you?”

“Oh,” asked Dalwhiel, glancing round. “Who?”

“Black man over yonder,” said Trekshtan, nodding discreetly. “The one with the gaunt, pale slave girl.”

The slave was indeed gaunt: as tall as a tall man, her hair shaven close to her head and showing an angry scar half across her skull, she looked ill. She wore sandals, and a thin tunic which was stained on the back with stripes and mottles of brown and black, and which seemed to stick to her skin in places. Apart from that, her face showed no expression, her eyes vacant. She looked at the floor in front of her without curiosity; she followed the leash docilely.

“Ambassador Andarogan,” said Trekshtan, “this is Master Dalwhiel, of the ship Shearwater, presently in Tchahua.”

The ambassador was indeed black; black hair, cropped close as fighting men do, to wear under a helmet; black costume, of leather and fitting close, with leggings closer cut than those worn in the north, plated with bronze on shoulder, forearm and shin. A fighting costume by appearance. His face and hands, too, were very dark, darker than commonly seen on the coast. He offered greetings, speaking a halting but perfectly correct northern.

“Ambassador from where,” asked Dalwhiel in coastal, “if it isn’t impolite to enquire?”

“Ah. Well, it’s true that I was ambassador to the Company of Waters,” Andarogan switched smoothly to unaccented coastal, “from the Western Clans; Hans’hua, under their regime, sought alliance with my people. My position now is somewhat ambiguous – the clans and Sinhua have, as yet, no friendly relationship, although I seek to promote one. But nevertheless I remain here, and report back to my people on the political developments – a thing Sinhua knows, and does not seek to

prevent. So, at present, more a spy than a diplomat – but an open and acknowledged spy.

“But I would speak to you of ships, if you’ll permit?”

“Very willingly,” said Dalwhiel. “What can I tell you?”

“Your ship – it is your ship?”

“Strictly, it’s owned jointly between my father, a silk merchant from Tchhua, and his partner, a shipowner from Treshkar. My father thought it wise to partner with someone with experience of shipping, and the partnership allowed the building of a bigger ship than his partner Kunerakhan could have built alone.”

“That is helpful. So, I wish to know, if it isn’t private – how big is a great ship? What cargo may it carry?”

“Are you asking how big Shearwater is? She is twenty manheights in length, and carries forty tons of cargo – as much as a hundred and sixty camels.”

“A hundred and sixty? Truly? No wonder the oligarchs were concerned. And is that typical?”

Dalwhiel smiled, and shook his head. “Each successive ship built in Treshkar is bigger than the last, it seems. A ship was launched this spring which carries sixty tons, and my father and Kunerakhan have ordered the building of one which is yet bigger. The builders have not yet found the limits of their craft, nor have the seamen yet found a ship too big for them to manage at sea.”

“There must be some limits, though, surely? What becomes more strained as the ships grow bigger?”

“At issue is the ports,” said Dalwhiel. “Shearwater needs fully two manheights depth of water, and to come to port she

must have that at the lowest limit of the tide. The foreign quay in the City at her Gates has that, and more. At Tchahua, we believe that we can bring in a ship of three and a half manheights depth. But Huandun has less than a manheight's depth of water, and Sinhua still less.

"Also," "as the ships grow bigger, they become less easy to turn, and need more space. At some of the northern ports there are now large many-oared boats which meet the great ships at sea, and tow them into port. My father was having such a boat built for Tchahua, but I do not yet know whether it has survived the recent wars."

"So your ship replaces three good caravans," the ambassador said, thoughtfully. "How many such ships are there?"

"Not three," Dalwhiel replied, "six. A caravan could make two round trips a year, north to south and back, but it would tire both men and beasts, and as you know most caravan masters make only one. The ship could easily make three trips in a year, or even four, but thus far we have made two."

"Six caravans! Tell me, Master Dalwhiel, how many of these great ships are there?"

"It depends what you deem a great ship. There are seven ships which have yet made the circumnavigation, but of those, two were each but half the size of Shearwater; and one has been lost. So, for now, six; but there will be more."

The men went on talking, of cargoes, of storage, of costs, of risks. Selchae, kneeling at Dalwhiel's feet, looked up at the tall, gaunt slave. She stood somehow awkwardly. Her face seemed slack and vacant; and yet, from time to time, there would be a flicker of animation: her eyes would move and focus, or her head would turn slightly as if to catch the conversation. And

then, almost at once, the vacancy would return. Selchae tried to catch her eye, but there was no response.

Just as the mens' conversation seemed to be coming to an end, a steward came out of the crowd; he looked oddly at the gaunt woman, who seemed not to notice him. He cleared his throat, and addressed the ambassador.

"Your pardon, Lord Andarogan," he said. "Governor Falloch requests the favour of a brief word."

Andarogan bade a courteous farewell to Dalwhiel, and turned towards the stair. The gaunt slave, on her leash, followed clumsily. At the foot of the stair, another squad of soldiers clearly checked each of them, for weapons.

A large room off the courtyard had been set aside for gaming. Men gathered round tables, some in loud, jesting conversations, others in furious concentration over their dice or stones. There were women in the room too. Slaves, mainly unclad, stayed where they were put, kneeling at an owner's feet or standing patiently against a wall, their eyes down, waiting on the pleasure of the men. Serving girls, little more clad, bore trays with beakers and jugs of spirit. But this was a room of men. The men were exuberant, noisy, ostentatious, dressed in their finest; the women, silent.

Selchae stared across the room at one table. A full-breasted woman lay across it on her back, pleasuring a man at either end while they, apparently unconcerned, played their dice on her belly, and other men, laughing, laid bets.

At another table a game seemingly ended, and a young man got up grinning fiercely, siezed a woman, pushed her down

across it, and made use of her, talking joshingly to his rueful companion the while.

A young officer came up to Dalwhiel. "Your slave seems eager to be used," he said.

"She does, doesn't she?" said Dalwhiel, his hand on her back possessively. "She always is. I regret not a clipped bronze of what I paid for her."

"Do you play?" asked the officer. "I wouldn't mind rolling the dice for the use of her."

Selchae's eyes widened, and her nipples filled. Dalwhiel spanked her once, not hard. He grinned at the man. "What have you to hazard?"

Selchae's eyes flicked between the two men, her eyes bright, her teeth lightly gripping her lower lip.

"I have a ring," said the man, displaying it; a nicely made gold signet, with a polished red stone.

"But no woman?" asked Dalwhiel, unimpressed.

"Alas no."

"Another time, then, perhaps?" said Dalwhiel, and they passed on.

Later, in the doorway, he pulled Selchae's leash short.

"A good bed-slave is always in heat," he said to her quietly, his voice amused, "or at least pretends she is. But to her owner. A very good bed-slave shows it only to her owner."

Selchae's cheeks darkened a shade. "I am sorry if I have displeased you..."

"You have not displeased me."

Dalwhiel moved over to the buffet, and tried a spiced meat-ball and a savoury pastry. Noticing Selchae's expression, he passed her a chicken leg. Above them, they could see Andarogan speaking politely with the governor. Others in the court were also looking up with interest.

A muscular man in a red tunic and leather kilt, with three stripes of braid across his shoulder, turned to Dalwhiel.

"Forgive me, sir, I observed you speaking with the ambassador earlier?"

Dalwhiel agreed that he had been, and introduced himself.

"Pleased to meet you, Master Dalwhiel. I am Captain-General Golneth, of the Red Company." The man's eyes flicked up again to the group on the arcade above. "Sir, did you much observe the ambassador's slave?"

"An unusually tall woman, and from the north, by appearance. With a head injury, apparently recent. And seeming witless. It surprised me that a man should choose to keep such a woman as a slave, still yet to show her in public?"

"You don't know who she is, then?"

"Should I?"

The soldier looked, for a moment, worried. "She is – or was – the lady Karae, heir to this palace and half the city. She was a woman by reputation greatly noted for her intellect. I sold her to the ambassador – for a song, as it did not seem she could live with that wound – and I worry that I ought not have. Tell me, did her injury seem to you to any degree feigned?"

"The lady Karae?" Dalwheil's voice was surprised. "It is sad to see her so! No, I fear it did not. But I did not observe her

closely. But – I had thought the oligarchs were hung? We saw their bodies, as we came into the city.”

“They were, but their families were auctioned as slaves. I and my brother officers own another such. There’s a certain – I don’t know, frisson? – owning a woman who by birth and expectation should be so high above one?”

Dalwhiel nodded. “I can believe that,” he said. Selchae kept her eyes down.

There was a pause.

“Captain-general,” said Dalwhiel, “I have some curiosity about your company.”

The soldier nodded in a friendly way. “Many do. Ask!”

“Well, to begin, who owns it? Who are your shareholders?”

“We do,” the officer replied. “All of us. One soldier, one share.”

“That’s unusual, isn’t it?”

“It is, yes. I know of no other force so organised. But it works well for us.”

“Indeed. But, tell me, in such a force, how are officers appointed?”

“Men know who they would trust to follow into battle. And in battle, that trust is necessary. So our sergeants are chosen by their men, and our captains by their sergeants. It is a simple scheme.”

“And captains general by their captains?”

“That’s correct.”

“I see. So, this process of choosing, how is it done?”

“Those who are to choose, come together and discuss. It’s a simple matter, eight men round a campfire or a table in an inn. Usually, we discuss until we all agree; sometimes, when we can’t agree, there’s a vote. But if there has to be a vote that’s usually an indication that the unit is divided, and very often the company will chose to break that unit up and distribute its men to other units.”

They each took more food from the buffet, and then, as everyone else around was engaged in other conversations, turned again to one another.

“I hear your company is unusually well paid?”

“Ha!” said the officer. “Generally speaking, yes, we are, although it’s a sore point just now.”

“Why so? I would have thought this summer’s campaigning had gone very well for you?”

“Militarily yes; financially no. We negotiated a fee for the conquest of Tchahua, and a further fee for the conquest of Hans’hua. But Tyrranos Fannish was, it seems, already heavily indebted from his actions in the long running Sinhua civil war, and found, on taking power, an empty treasury. I think he anticipated seizing more loot in Tchahua than was found there – but what was found there should have been a fine contribution to our fee. However, we didn’t get it – it mostly went back to Sinhua to pay his bankers. Instead, he offered us a higher proportion of the loot from Hans’hua, which we all expected to be very significant.”

“I sense a ‘but’?”

The officer shrugged. “But, we haven’t found it. We’ve found almost nothing. We put the oligarchs – those who survived the fighting – to the question, and recovered some. However, Karatan, who by rumour had vastly the greatest share

of this city's wealth, died in the fighting, and his daughter, who was his heir, was, as we thought, fatally injured. I sold her. And so, we have not put her to the question. Given her present state I doubt it would profit us. And to put her to the question now would create an enmity with the Western Clans I'm not certain the company is ready for."

"In short," said Dalwhiel, "Sinhua is so broke it's defaulting on its debt to the most feared fighting force on the coast?"

The officer laughed. "I didn't say that; not quite. We've agreed to stay to the end of this season, while we continue to search for the hidden treasures, and Fannish negotiates with his bankers. After all, if he can hold onto both Tchahua and Hans'hua, he controls both the caravan road and the sea route; his credit should be good."

Other guests were invited up to the gallery to meet the governor. As one was searched by the stair guards, Dalwhiel turned again to the captain.

"He doesn't trust much, does he?"

"Who, Fannish? No. Since he heard that Arista Xinta was here he has hardly left the palace – and we set more men to guard it than prudence would advise, for there are other threats in this city."

"Why does he not just arrest her, then?"

"I don't know," said the captain. "The politics of Sinhua are above the likes of me."

The crowd in the court was shifting. Selchae saw the ambassador and his slave coming down the stair, the one in

black, the other pale, both of them unusually tall in the gathering. On the opposite side of the court, from the gallery, a trumpet sounded.

“Ah,” said the captain. “I had thought to invite you through to the salon, where my brothers play at the dice, but it seems the masque is to begin. Let us stand against the wall here; we’ll have a fine view.”

A huge curtain was suddenly dropped from the third floor arcade, shielding off a corner of the space. From high above, music sounded. A troupe of dancers – or acrobats? – or acrobatic dancers – emerged from below and around the curtain, naked, moving gracefully, sensuously, spinning and turning, climbing on one another, forming towers, waves, constantly moving, smooth and slow, in time to the sound of the lyres and flutes. A gasp from the crowd directed Dalwhiel’s gaze up, to where a slight woman danced on a rope stretched across the court, gliding and turning.

And then she seemed to lose her balance and fall, but caught herself with one hand on the rope, swinging below it. Now she swung her body, up and over the rope, twisting below it, hooking a knee over it, dangling arms free. And then her knee slipped, and she did fall...

Down to where the dancers had formed themselves into a ring, holding a taut cloth to catch her. The audience gasped, and applauded. Now the music changed, with drumming and the harsh music of a bagpipe. The curtain fell to the floor, revealing behind it two monstrously tall figures – fully two and a half manheights – one dressed in black, one in white. They stalked into the court on long, stilted legs, performing a slow and courtly dance, as the naked acrobats scurried to get out of the way of their feet, and pointed up, mockingly.

Selchae looked from the stilt-dancers to the ambassador and back again. It was clear that it was he who was being mocked, that this masque had some political significance, but yet he looked relaxed, unaffected. His slave looked at a blank wall, her face slack.

The dancers on the floor made more and more obscene gestures. They caressed one another, still pointing up mockingly at the stilt dancers. Male dancers started to pair up, bugging one another, while the female dancers writhed around them suggestively. Meanwhile, the stilt walkers continued their stately dance, until the black clad figure opened his outer costume to reveal an enormous – and obviously fake – red cock. The white figure immediately turned away from him, laying her hands on the handrail of the first floor arcade, just in front of the governor's throne, and bent over to present her arse to her partner.

The black figure thrust the enormous cock into the white figure's costume. There was a clear suggestion of buggery. And then, as though it were part of the performance, the black clad figure seemed to lift the white one, and at the same time she vaulted forwards over the handrail, her costume and stilts falling away behind her. There was a muffled and confused sound, and the dancer vaulted back, now normal-height, naked and dark skinned, onto the shoulders of the black figure. He cavorted across the courtyard until he came to the rope, where the dancer who had been in white reached gracefully up and gripped it. She vaulted up onto the rope, hanging from it by her knees, reaching her hands down.

A shocked shout came from the governor's end. Dalwhiel glanced back to see the guards there gathered around the throne in a tight group, and the scarlet of blood. There was shouting. Soldiers broke away, running for what looked to be the door to the stair up – but it seemed to be locked.

In the centre of the court the stilts and costume of the dancer in black were still falling, while both dancers, revealed to be female, were now on the rope, pulling themselves rapidly to the north side of the building, where they disappeared over second floor handrail. At ground level, soldiers were running everywhere. Naked dancers were scurrying out of the way. Guests looked around, aghast, amazed. Above, on the throne, the governor's body lolled untended, the hilt of the dagger clearly visible against his blood-stained vestments.

The Long Road Home

“I should have forced your decision earlier.”

Behind the closed curtains it was full day; the vaulted room was filled with a dim, suffused light. Outside, quiet sounds of the inn’s late morning somnolence.

“Should you? Why?”

“Because of this.”

“You’re no longer a maiden.”

“I know. But I was no longer a maiden by repute since the first day on the ship; and if I am to live without the repute, I would choose to live with the pleasure.”

“You find it pleasure?”

“Oh, yes. Yes. Yes, I do. I had always thought I should...”

Selchae propped herself up on her elbow, and looked down at him.

“Women of ariston class – especially younger daughters unlikely to inherit... Men of ariston class care about patrimony,

want to be certain that the children they raise are of their own blood. So women are taught not to seek to do – this. Not to seek to lie with men, to take seed into their wombs, until and except the husband chosen for them. Are taught not to expect to enjoy it, to take pleasure in it. But I... I thought that I should – that I should enjoy it. I am not so unlike my father's concubines. I always envied them."

"And you do not say this just to please me, just to flatter me?"

This is a huge amount of exposition. For now I'm going to leave it here because it's needed and this provides me with a working text, but it needs to be better distributed through the story

"That I have had pleasure is your doing, Master. I acknowledge that. I know enough to know there are men who give women pleasure and others who do not, and yes, you have given me pleasure. But I had not thought of you in this sense before we slept in the cabin of your ship..."

"Truly? You knew I sought to wed you."

"I know. I'm sorry. To me that seemed... just part of a conflict between my grandmother and my father."

"How so?"

"You know that neither my grandmother nor my great grandmother had any daughters?"

"I didn't know that, no. But...?"

"My great grandparents were brother and sister, and so were their parents, and the tyrannos before that – the second of our line to rule the city – married his mother, who was also his sister, because she was both daughter and wife to his father. My grandmother is the daughter of one of my great-grandmother's sisters, and my mother was the great, great granddaughter of another of my great-grandmother's sisters. And the reason for

all that is that in the old tradition of the city, legitimate rule does not pass from father to son but from mother to daughter...”

“Yes, I did know that. But that’s ancient history, surely?”

“My grandmother said – and this was long before all the wars – that the reason my great grandmother had no daughters and that she had had no daughters is that Selchae – I mean the goddess, of course, not me – had withdrawn her protection from the city, and she had withdrawn her protection because we’d abandoned the old ways. She said that my brother Selachen should fight my father in single combat at the rededication, kill him, and marry me. She said that was the only way the blessing of the gods would be restored. She said the gods had revealed to her that whoever I wed would be the rightful tyrannos of Tchahua. So my father chose someone for me whom he thought would be completely unacceptable to grandmother...”

“Why you? Why not Selkaren?”

“My father married first a woman of his choosing, Colentae, and she was mother to both Selkaren and Selachen. But she was not of the lineage of the goddess. So my grandmother made him divorce her, and marry my mother, who was of the lineage of the goddess, even though she was daughter to an ariston from Huandun. And older than him, and, if rumours are true, no maiden. So I am of the lineage of the goddess, but my sister is not.”

“So... did you want to marry your brother?”

“Dear Mother, no! Even were he not my brother, he’s an idiot and a bully. But... you have not been in the city much these last few years. And I had a very wrong understanding of the sort of man who is a merchant. I wanted someone forceful,

courageous, thoughtful, energetic, sure. A planner, a thinker, an organiser, a doer.”

“Thoughtful and sure are a hard couple to square...”

“Ah, but that’s you! You think, but when you’ve thought you act. You make things happen.”

“Often, you have to make the best choice that you can see. And you have to appear sure, for the men who must follow you. That doesn’t always make you sure inside. And I am still not sure what to do with you.”

Selchae blushed, and looked down.

“What, seal girl?”

“Fill me. Plough me. Make my body writhe and buck around your cock. Bathe my womb with your seed. Do it hard. Do it often. And keep me by you so that you can do it again, and again. Master, if you do this, you will have no problem with me. And yes, I want you to continue to do so, both because you give me pleasure and because, if I bear your first child – it would be your first child, Master?”

“It would, yes, seal girl. As far as I know.”

“So. If I were to bear your first child, I think you will not turn me away.”

“Aye, you might be right in that. But, seal girl, is this what you want? To be a merchant’s concubine? Is that enough?”

“No. You know it isn’t. I hope – and you already know I hope – that you will wed me. And I believe that if I bear your children that becomes more likely. Your star rises and I think you will not always be just a merchant. But whether that proves true or not I find myself content in your company, and, yes, in your bed and under your body. But if that is not your choice,

there are many worse things that could befall me than to be your concubine. As your concubine I am fed and housed and – sometimes – clothed. If you turn me out or sell me I can be sure of none of those.”

“You could go to your brother.”

“No.” Selchae froze, shocked. “No, Master Dalwhiel, please not that. If I am to be in a man’s power – yours or his – I choose yours.”

“Why, seal girl?”

She shrugged. “I trust you,” she said, seriously.

And then, mercurially, she grinned, and laid her hand on his cock. “Also, you give me pleasure.”

“The pleasure is mine, seal girl.”

“I’d prefer to be your wife, in time. You know that. But so long as you spend your seed in me and not in anyone else, it is not a matter of great urgency. After all, what is a wife but another sort of slave?”

“It need not be so, among the merchant class. The co-owner of my father’s ship is a northern merchant of great experience, knowledge and wisdom, who has been my father’s trusted friend these many years. He also ploughs her, and I have a sister by their union.”

possible return via
Sinhua; really depends
on how much Sinhua
develops in the Xinta
narrative. Certainly it
would be useful for
Dalwhiel to know what's
happening in Sinhua, but
who can he trust there?
Unless I've developed
Sinhua in the Xinta
narrative I have yet
another complicated
city state to flesh out.

Of Civil Governance

“The ship’s gone.”

They had ridden out of the last of the orchards on the road south, and were looking down the pasture to the city. To the right of their view, the tower of Selloch’s Folly; in the centre, the squat bulk of the Residence, and beyond it, the empty quay. Selchae, who had ridden a little ahead, waited for Dalwhiel with the news. But for the folly, the pasture lay open and empty for two long bowshots – more than a hundred manheights. Dalwhiel in turn waited for Tchikharn to come up, and they rode across the meadow together.

A party of Kateran’s volunteers met them outside the gate, and, recognising them, greeted them warmly. The captain, they said, would want to meet with Dalwhiel. And then they clattered in under the arch, and met a mob.

One man was being held by others, while still others yelled at them. There were scattered bruises and cuts among the crowd; there had clearly been scuffling. When Dalwhiel was recognised, at first the noise died down; but then it redoubled.

At last Dalwhiel held up a hand for silence. He rode forward to the held man.

“Weaver Daviran, man, what goes forward here?”

There was a baying from the men around Daviran, which Dalwhiel realised was a cry of “thief, thief, thief”

Dalwhiel held up his hands again for silence. “Let the man speak,” he said.

Daviran shook his head, and answered. “The door of my house was smashed in, and the stairs broken. I needed to make repairs. I saw a box of tools in a broken-in building, and I took them.”

Again the crowd bayed. Dalwhiel held up his hands for silence. “Who is the accuser here?” he asked.

A man stood out of the crowd. “They were my tools, Master Dalwhiel. One of my chisels is broken beyond repair, the rest blunted; and my fine adze is chipped.”

Dalwhiel nodded. “And where were your tools, Loomwright Feranen?” he asked.

“I last saw them in my workshop, which is to say the shed behind my house, sir” Feranen said. “The shed is smashed in, like he says; but all our homes are the same, and it does not do to take the tools of another man’s trade.”

“No indeed,” said Dalwhiel. “What justice do you seek?”

“I need the harm put right, sir. But more than that, he should be punished, sir, for if theft is allowed in the city no-one is safe.”

“A chipped adze may be resharpened, Loomwright?”

“Aye, sir, it may, at some labour; but it will have lost some of its life. The chisels – the unbroken ones – likewise. The broken one must be replaced, when there is a smith who has both the skill and the time. And that will cost.”

“So what punishment do you seek?”

Again there was a confused baying from the crowd. Dalwhiel picked out a fat man who was yelling more loudly than others. “You, man. What do you say?”

“I say he should hang, sir. We cannot abide thieves.” There was a rumble of agreement from some in the crowd.

“And if he hangs,” asked Dalwhiel, “who shall pay for Loomwright Feranan’s new chisel, and sharpen his adze?”

The fat man spat. “Yon weaver has daughters, if he has nothing else worth selling. They could be sold to pay his debts.”

Dalwhiel threw his head back and laughed. “Oh man,” he said, “I would hire you as jester if I had the spare coin. A man hung and a girl sold for borrowing a few tools?”

“I should be repaid, sir,” said the loomwright. “And he should be punished.”

Dalwhiel turned to the weaver. “Have you coin to repay him?”

The weaver shook his head. “I’ve nothing, sir. They’ve taken, or smashed, everything I had.”

Dalwhiel looked from weaver to wright. “You both know me. What’s more, you both know each other. You’ve both worked for my father these many years. Will you abide my judgement?”

“Hang him!” yelled the fat man, and again there was a confused yelling from the crowd; less loud, this time. Less angry.

Dalwhiel raised his hands again for quiet. He looked at Daviran.

“I’ll abide your judgement, Master Dalwhiel,” said the weaver.

“And I,” said the wright.

“Very well,” said Dalwhiel. “Everyone here bear witness, this is my judgement, which accuser and accused have agreed to abide. Weaver Daviran, you have one week to set things in order in your home, and then, for a season, you will labour for Loomwright Feranen as he requires, and, in particular, you shall regrind his adze until it is as sharp as he desires. Do you both understand?”

The men nodded.

“And do you agree?”

“I do, sir,” said Daviran.

“And I,” said the wright.

“That was well done,” said Kateran. At some time during the trial he’d appeared at the edge of the crowd, and when it had dispersed he’d invited Dalwhiel and his company into the office of the gatehouse, where he’d served them bread, wine, and fish soup.

“Are you getting much of that?” asked Dalwhiel.

“It happens. Folk are coming back into the city, and trying to make their homes good; they see useful things lying

unattended, and take them against their need. It's hardly really theft, as such, I think – there is no ill intent behind it. But folk are jumpy, and there's an ugly vengefulness can show itself quickly."

"Aye," said Dalwhiel. "So who's governing the city? Who is in charge of justice?"

Kateran shrugged. "Me and me, it seems," he said. "Rothic won't come out of the Residence, small blame to him; and no-one else is doing anything. But Master Dalwhiel, it can't continue. I've fewer men each day, for all of my volunteers need to see to their own homes and families. And we're dog-tired, bone weary. We've been watch on and watch off since you turned Swift Company out of the warehouse, and I'll own to you I'm that tired I've no idea how long that is since."

The captain yawned.

"The truth is," he said, "there's none in this city I'd trust with its rule. They're all after their own interests, all the great ones. I'm glad that you're back."

"I'm back," said Dalwhiel. "We'll sort out something. I see the ship's gone; did Karakhan leave anything for me?"

"Your father was down with a barge. I think he left something with Master Gratingen. But yon Huandun in the residence was raising a trebuchet, so they took the ship out quickly. There was another great ship in the offing, but she didn't come into the port; I can't say why not but doubtless her crew didn't like the look of the things, small blame!"

"Thank you, Captain. Is there any inn open in the city yet? I'll need to find somewhere to stay."

Kateran shook his head. "There isn't, sir."

“Well, thank you for the meal, then, but we must go. I must find somewhere for us to rest tonight, and I should see Gratingen.”

My Son

As you will have seen, Shearwater has sailed; and your sisters and I have sailed with her. I leave you to take charge of the family's interests in the south, for now. In doing so I leave these thoughts for you:

First, your sisters and I will be safe, and we now have a sufficient base in Treshkar that should all fail here in Tchahua we shall survive as a family and as a merchant house.

Second, we have some nine hundred gold lodged with the House of the Mother. Draw on this cautiously, but do not be afraid to use it all at need.

Thirdly, we have greatly more credit among the folk of Tchahua than we have gold – credit to which you have added, and not inconsiderably, through your expulsion of Swift Company. Folk have learned to expect that we will deliver on our promises, and that we will work for the good of the city: draw on this freely, but sweeten it with a little gold, and it will go far.

Fourthly, a reputation for openhandedness will serve you well. Do not always spend for the narrow interest of the family, but when you spend for the public interest of the city let it be seen that you have done so.

I have sent a barge upstream to the reedbeds of Long Orchard with some items from Shearwater that may be useful to you, including all of the shipment of arms which was unsold.

The barge is in the care of trusty men, and you will know how to find it.

When last we met you had in your train the Arista Selchae. My son, let neither your lust nor your anger – and I know you feel both for her – rule your head. As a match, you know that she is now of little value. Yes, she is, it is true, the Seal Princess, but how much weight that now carries I cannot say. Certainly her father intended that the rule should not pass through her, as you know. In any case, the aristons would not suffer a merchant to rule. Her sister is consort to the Tyrranos of Sinhua – for now; but that does not yet seem to me a stable or settled state. She has no other family in positions of influence, unless you should support her brother in his bid to become tyrranos – and I see no sign that he would serve the city better than did his father.

On the other hand, although I acknowledge that she came to you as spoils of war, as a concubine she has few attributes she does not share with many other women who might be had inexpensively. If you, a merchant, keep the daughter of a tyrranos to warm your bed, the aristons (although they might well do the same themselves) will take affront.

I have confidence in your good sense and your ability. The state is troubled and complex. Not all you attempt will succeed, and it may be that despite all you can do, your efforts will come to nothing. You have my blessing and my confidence, and Master Gratingen, to whom I entrusted this letter for you, should also give you my signet as indication that you act in all things with my authority.

Luck go with you

Dalmethan

Weaver Barenan having been too old to weave, the upstairs room which had held his loom was empty, and Dalwhiel had taken it for his bedchamber, ordering Selchae to make them up a bed, that first night, of cloaks. Later, of course, there would be a proper bed, but for now, the cloaks must do.

Downstairs, Davrana, elder daughter of the weaver Dalwhiel had sentenced that afternoon, was scrubbing out the kitchen, while Tchikharn was idly honing his blades, waiting for her to retire to what had been the weaver's bedroom in the loft before making his own bed up across the foot of the stair. Selchae had already undressed and was kneeling as a concubine should, knees parted and breasts out, for her master's attention. He glanced up at her from his father's letter, and, with a wry grin, passed it across. She looked up, surprised, and took it; and then came across to the candle that he'd put on the little table, to read it more easily. When she came to the passage that concerned her, she looked at him, startled. And suddenly, without knowing why, they both laughed.

"He has confidence in your good sense," she said, smiling.

"Yes," he agreed. "Come and warm my bed."

"I have few attributes..."

"Bring them here."

"Oh, most willingly, my Master," she said, going to him, "for I have confidence in your ability."

Selchae walked slowly back up High Row from the river; in her basket she had fresh crayfish wrapped in wet cloth, from the boats that morning. People were passing down the row towards the river. She saw a face, and called.

“Karda!”

“Selchae, you’re back... oh.”

Selchae lifted her free hand to her collar. “Yes,” she said. “It’s all right, though. We’re staying in that house yonder. You?”

“I’m all right.” Karda looked down, not meeting Selchae’s eyes. “My father’s not well. And the children... I have to go. I have to... I have a job. For money. We need the money.”

“Of course,” said Selchae. “Come by, when you’ve time. It would be – I should love just to talk with you.”

“I will. I won’t be long now, no more than two turns of the glass...”

“Will you come at lunchtime, then? I could feed you.”

“I’d like that.”

“But where are you living?” The crumbs of the meal were still on the wooden trenchers on the table.

“There’s a flat in the tenements. It’s... not exactly ours. The owner hasn’t returned, and perhaps may not. But the tenant hasn’t returned either, so it was empty... There are only two rooms, so Karela and I sleep in the back room with the children, and my father sleeps in the front room. It isn’t very comfortable, but...”

“Has your father no money?” asked Selchae.

“Not now, no. Karela and I are spinning, we’re earning some that way. Enough to buy food in the marketplace.”

“Where’s your step-mother? What’s she doing?”

Karda looked up, surprised. "You hadn't heard? She died, after they fled the city. She was with child, and... she gave birth. In the woods, and... there was no birthing woman to be found."

"The baby?" Selchae poured water from the kettle into two beakers, adding grated ginger and honey. She stood, gracefully.

Karda smiled. "The bairn lived; I have another sister. But she too needs feeding, and care. It is hard find enough fresh milk, pushed as we are."

Selchae placed the beakers on the table, and sat again on her stool.

"But you are doing something for Master Pentarn, that must help?"

There was silence. Karda turned her face away for a moment. Her eyes were wet.

Selchae reached a hand to her across the table. "Karda, what is..."

"We owe a great deal to Master Pentarn. He demands interest on his debt."

"I see," said Selchae. "And he pays you nothing?"

"The service I provide... he says that what I do for him..." Karda looked up. The tears were spilling, now. "He says it isn't enough. To meet the interest. He wants Karela to..."

"She's too young, surely?"

"Too young. Yes. Too young for... any of this. Selchae, how is it for you?"

"I'm not so bad. Not so bad as you. There is this," Selchae tugged at her collar, "but it's partly pretend, I think. For both of us. I mean... I cannot cook, because I was never taught. But we

have Davrana – she was here when you arrived – she’s a free servant, Dalwhiel pays her. But – I have no duties. Except to open myself to him.”

“Yes,” said Karda. Again there was silence.

Karda broke it. “You know I dreamed – when we were younger – that I’d marry him?”

“I know,” said Selchae. “I think it would not have been a bad choice. I think he is a good man, as men go. But it will never be as we thought, now.”

“What will happen? I mean, to the city... and to us also, but... What will happen?”

“Dalwhiel has a plan. He is... not what I thought him, either. If the city can be secured, he will make it happen.”

It was evening, again. Masters Gratingen and Lindoren, and Captain Kateran, as well as Dalwhiel and Tchikharn, were sat round the little table in the weavers’ cottage, while Selchae and Davrana served them – slices of baked tuna, served on a bed of rice, herbs and wild mushrooms. When food was on the table, Selchae served wine and knelt in her place at Dalwhiel’s feet, while Davrana returned to the kitchen to prepare dessert – peaches poached in wine and ginger – and an infusion of mint.

Around the table, Dalwhiel had proposed a meeting to discuss the governance of the city.

“But who would you wish to invite?” asked Kateran.

“At this stage, I can’t see how it can be less than every citizen. After all, we need them all to work.”

“Surely, representatives of the great families of the city are sufficient?” said Gratingen. “There is nowhere suitable to hold a meeting of all citizens...”

“We could hold it in the market place.”

“Not the market place, young Master,” Tchikharn objected. “Rothic’s archers command it, and you would be unwise wholly to trust him.”

“True. Outwith the walls, then?”

“There, we have to be wary of Selachen’s men.”

“True again. But who are these ‘great families of the city’, Gratingen? You represent one, I’ll grant. Master Pentarn another. Ariston Selachen would demand a place at such a meeting for himself, and his grandmother would no doubt command a fourth. Ariston Keren, too, would doubtless claim a place, and so would Ariston Fengul, but what contribution do they actually offer the city? And suppose you six did sit down and agree a plan, why should the rest of us follow it? You cannot fund either the garrison or the repairs to the wall yourself.”

“We should also invite Captain Kateran, for without him there would now be no city. But Dalwhiel, you would surely have a place, as depute for your father...”

“I would not take a place on such a council. I believe that the citizens are likely to see it as a council of self interest, and those who took part might well find they had little welcome in the city.”

“If you refused to take part, that is certainly likely. What if we offered to double your vote?”

“The citizens...”

“In all practicality, Dalwhiel, if there is to be a meeting of five thousand people, how are we to determine who is to speak?”

“Tell me, Master Gratingen, do you yourself see a clear way forward – for the city as a whole, I mean?”

Gratingen shook his head. “Without the city we’re all of us lost,” he said. “You or I could transfer our place of business to some other city, doubtless, but we could not take with us the networks of artisans and suppliers we have here. We would be, at best, very minor players.”

“Indeed. So you have no plan?”

“Not in any detail, no.”

“Kateran?”

“Nor I, sir, save it to be to sleep for a season!”

“Very well,” said Dalwhiel, “let me suggest a compromise. We, those of us present, invite all citizens to meet a week hence – we allow Tchikharn to name the venue, since he scorns my suggestions. You, Master Gratingen, will convene the meeting. You will call on those who do have plans – and I number myself as one – to speak in turn. Each who speaks will speak for the turn of a short glass, and afterwards answer ten questions from the crowd. At the end, you will ask the citizens to form groups to show which of the plans they support.”

“And the biggest group wins, irrespective of who is in it and who is not?”

“We don’t have the power to compel folk, Gratingen. We will see what the mood is. Then we must each of us decide what we will do.”

“Very well,” said Gratingen. “Your girl cooks well. This fish is delicious.”

The course was eaten. Selchae rubbed her head surreptitiously against Dalwhiel’s thigh, and got up to take the dishes out. Davrana carried in the peaches, and gracefully accepted both Master Gratingen’s praise, and his bronze coin.

“Master Gratingen, your warehouse is now secure, and much of it stands empty.”

“Indeed. I’m glad to say your father took with him a great deal of the brandy I had left.”

“Aye,” said Dalwhiel. “He’s left me the barge, upstream, with, among other things, the arms we will need for the militia.”

“If we can form this militia, yes.”

“May I bring them downstream and store them in the warehouse?”

“I would be most happy for you to do so.”

Selchae had, among her accomplishments, particularly beautiful hand-writing, and Dalwhiel had her write out three copies of the invitation to the public meeting. A wooden pillar, which had supported a first-floor balcony, still stood outside the ruin of the guildhall. Dalwhiel pinned up one copy there. Another he pinned outside the Land Gate, and a third outside the river gate. For the rest, he spoke with traders, and spread the word. The city would learn.

This passage isn't finished.

It was mid morning. Selchae, carrying a basket as for market, strolled down Land Street, as if without a care. She turned right into Weavers Row, a quieter lane. Still she strolled, her eyes flicking down the lane. There were spinners at some doors, she exchanged good mornings with two; but they were busy, and didn't hold her in talk. Halfway down the lane, she glanced carefully up and down; and then slipped in through a burned-out doorway into the ruin of the back offices of the guildhall. Ash and cinders crunched under her sandals.

A man was there, not much taller than her, in a hooded cloak.

"You came," he said.

"The more successful you can be, the more I am worth," she said. "The more you know, the more successful you can be."

"True. So, what can you tell me?"

todo: she tells him about the trip to Hans'hua, and the death of Falloch. She doesn't tell him key things which would be useful to him, but I haven't yet worked out what these are. It's possible that she lies about something, but I can't (yet) think what.

"You've still a mind to be tyranos?"

He laughed, drily. "You know I have."

"Then what becomes of the winter festival?"

"What of it?"

She started to say something, and bit it off. Carefully, she said, "is there any need to hold it? You do not believe in the Seal, mother did not believe in the Seal, I don't think father believed in the Seal, I don't believe in the Seal. It's a charade. Is there any need to hold it?"

"We are aristae, Selchae. The Seal is the peasants god; she's no god for us. We perform the rituals of the Seal to keep the peasants docile. You – because you are their precious

hereditary Seal Princess – perform the ritual of the seal. And I – because I will be tyranos here – I shall perform the ritual on you.”

“At midwinter.”

“Of course at midwinter.”

“But for the rest of the year?”

“What do you mean?”

“Will we live our own lives for the rest of the year? Mother was almost a prisoner. Will I live my own life the rest of the year?”

Selachen looked at her for a long moment. He pushed his hood back, and ran his hand through his short hair. He spat on the charred timbers.

“Don’t be naive, sister,” he said.

This time it was her turn. “What do you mean?” she asked.

“It’s your get who are the lineage of the Seal. If I want my get to be the lineage of the Seal, I need to get them on you. And if I want to be certain that your get is my get, I need to make sure no one else ploughs your furrow.”

“I won’t!”

“Won’t what?”

“Won’t any of it. I won’t lie with you. I won’t... I won’t do any of it.”

“If you won’t, I’ll force you. You must be used to being forced by now.”

She shook her head, angrily, her hair flying around her.

“I’ll give you no pleasure,” she said.

“All women are much the same between the legs, Selchae. If you are minded to be sullen, I’ll find pleasure with others. But you’ll bear my get.”

“Why should I help you?” she said, angrily. “If you treat me like this, why should I help you?”

He looked at her with derision. “I don’t need your help,” he said; and left.

In bed, possibly while having sex or immediately after it, Selchae probes Dalwhiel about why he wants her - trying to find out whether it's for herself, or for political ambition.

They were still in bed, a few mornings later, when there came a knocking on the street door, and the sound of voices below. After a few moments, steps sounded on the stair, and a knock at the room door.

“Come,” said Dalwhiel.

Tchikharn came into the room. “There’s a fellow below who says he’s brought your father’s barge...”

Dalwhiel yawned and stretched. “In that case I should go down to the warehouse. Selchae, I’ll send some chests up. Can you sort through them and make sure all’s good?”

When Dalwhiel returned, he found Selchae kneeling naked on the bed again. A golden chain hung round her neck, and from it hung her golden pomander.

“Ah,” he said. “You found it.”

She looked up, dropping her pose of submission for a moment.

“You knew that I would,” she said. “You intended that I should.”

“Yes,” he agreed, standing easily with his back to the closed door.

“And all my other things too – my clothes – from the Residence.”

“Those too.”

“You cannot have bought these things after you bought me – there was not time. And I don’t believe your father would have known to.”

“He did not, no.”

“So when you told me you had not bought these things, it was a lie.”

“It was, yes.”

“You intended to humiliate me.”

“I did, yes.”

“Later, on the ship, you made me believe that you would force me.”

“I did, yes.”

“You intended me to believe that.”

“That’s true, yes.”

“And yet you did not.”

He made a curious, wry expression. “I did not,” he said, “no.”

“Master, if I may ask, why did you not?”

“Absolve me, seal girl. I did intend to.”

“And you could have, so I ask again, why not?”

At last he strode across the room and siezed her hair in his hand, lifting her off the bed until she was forced to stand, awkwardly, off balance. He turned her, still off balance, and pushed her backwards against a wall.

“What I have felt for you, seal girl, has never been indifference. These several years.”

He crushed a breast with his hand, deliberately bruising.

“Hate is quite close to love,” he said, “lust to rage. I did not know then what I felt for you – I still do not. It is one of those things at any time, or all of them at once, but never none.”

He kissed her fiercely, his teeth cutting into her lip til blood ran. “The you who is arrogant, I wish to subdue. The you who is vulnerable, I wish to protect. The you who is chaste, I wish to despoil. The you who is wanton, I wish to fulfil.”

She stood as straight as she could, her expression haughty. “In that case, you slave’s get,” she said, “you’ll have none of me tonight.”

“Is that so?” he asked, coolly.

“Unless you force me,” she said, and grinned.

“It looks bad, sir, but it’s timbers that have gone.” The mason was a sturdy man, grey haired and walking with a limp, but with a keen eye. “The stonework is sound, sir, all but the chimney. And that can be rebuilt. For the most part it’s the carpenters you want, not my boys.”

“It’s not, Mason Takenar,” said Dalwhiel, looking up at the blackened walls. “It’s you. Take it down, stack the dressed stone aside against when we do rebuild, and take all the rest to use on the breach.”

“Are you sure, sir? It was a fine house, sir. And the other masters are rebuilding.”

“Take it down.” He looked at Takenar speculatively. “There’s little coin in the city, as you know. We need the wall rebuilt, and soon.”

“Aye...” The mason sounded cautious.

“How good’s my credit? I’ll pay your gang to work on the wall a month, but it would be one part gold and seven parts paper.”

“Your father backs your paper?”

“Aye,” said Dalwhiel, “he does.”

“I’ll take your paper, then. My men will be grateful of the work.”

At the back of the marketplace – to the east of it – new tenements crowded close between the inn and the bay, rising three stories from narrow, crooked lanes. It was not a part of the town that Selchae knew well. The poor lived here, and noisesome industries like the slaughterhouse and the tanpits, on the leeward side of the city where the prevailing wind blew the odours away; and so the rich rarely ventured here. Rarely, but not never. Because on the east side of the town, lost now among alleys north of the marketplace, was a building that had been there a long time, a building for the most part sunk into the side of the hill, with steps leading down to a low, arched doorway.

Dalwhiel led the way down the stair, and ducked through the doorway. A narrow corridor – or tunnel? led into a stone vaulted space. Coming in from the daylight it was very dark, but Selchae could feel smooth, closely jointed flagstones under

her feet. Dalwhiel held out his hand to stop her walking further, and knelt. He said nothing, but it she knelt also.

It was silent. Gradually their eyes adjusted to the dim light. The vaulted space stretched out in front of them; there was a heavy table or altar, and beyond it a screen or curtain. There seemed no decoration on the walls and ceiling. There was a little light – not much – and it seemed by its colour to be daylight. It did not all come through the tunnel behind them, but there were no other obvious openings.

Suddenly Selchae was aware of a third person in the room, standing between the screen and the altar. How long she had been there or how she had come, Selchae didn't know. No-one moved for a long moment.

The woman spoke. "What brings you here this day, Dalwhiel son of Dalmethan and Selchae daughter of Tanzathael?"

"My father entrusted some gold to the Mother's care."

"He did. Do you wish to take it?"

"Some at least of it, Priestess."

The priestess slipped silently away through the screen and after a few moments returned, a satchel slung over one shoulder.

"The mother holds nine hundred and sixty in gold, against your father's name."

"So much?" said Dalwhiel. "If it is acceptable to you, I shall take two hundred and fifty six now, and leave the balance against later need – although I am sure that there shall be later need."

The priestess took four purses out of the satchel, and laid them on the altar. "You are welcome to return."

Constitutional Convention

An awning had been erected against the outside of the city wall, west of the Land Gate, overlooking the unfinished New Sanctuary. Under it, on a platform, a bench. Some of Kateran's volunteers, armed, stood about the platform, while others leant over the wall-head above. Around it a crowd slowly gathered through the morning. On the edges of the crowd some entertained themselves with musical instruments. One enterprising citizen was serving bread and soup from a handcart with a charcoal stove, while a peasant sold peaches and pears from a farm cart. Folk gathered in knots, talking, and then broke apart to join other groups. There were fewer than Dalwhiel had hoped, nearer one thousand than two. Almost entirely an adult crowd, overwhelmingly a male one. Women and children, it seemed, were still mainly entrusted to family in the villages.

Beyond the crowd, five banners stood widely spaced across the pasture: Tchahua's seal sigil on blue for Selachen; the dragon of Hanshua for Rothic; Pentarn's shuttle and scales, Dalmethan's anchor and scales for Dalwhiel; and finally the

seal sigil again, this time on a gold ground, for the high priestess.

They stood in the shadow of the gate, Dalwhiel with Selchae, Tchikharn and Kateran. The other side of the gate, Selachen stood with the Seal Mother Gordala in her full priestly robes, talking quietly with Ariston Fengul and two or three other men Dalwhiel couldn't name. From time to time Gordala glowered at him, and Selchae would move uneasily to put Tchikharn between herself and her grandmother. Gratingen, Pentarn and two minor merchants formed another nervous group, while alone by himself, Rothic's clerk looked frankly frightened.

At last Gratingen walked out into the sunlight, looked around, cleared his throat and said "Seal Mother, gentlemen, I believe that it is time."

He led them in a loose procession over to the platform, where they took their places uneasily on the bench. One of Kateran's men blew an uneven fanfare on a trumpet, and gradually the crowd stilled, turning expectantly towards them.

"Citizens!" called Gratingen over the dying murmurs. "Citizens, I have been asked to introduce this discussion today. You know that our city has suffered gravely over the past months, and that its governance is in disarray. I shall invite Captain Kateran to start by outlining the problems before us, before asking Ariston Selachen, the learned Dolgol representing Ariston Rothic, Masters Pentarn and Dalwhiel, and our beloved Seal Mother, each to give you their counsel on the issues. I urge you to listen to each politely and with attention. After each has spoken, I will invite a few questions before moving on to the next. At the end I shall have a few closing remarks, and then I shall ask you to gather near the banner of the speaker whose counsel you consider best serves the interests of the city."

There was a stirring in the crowd while people identified the banners, and the trumpet sounded again.

“Without further ado, I call upon Captain Kateran to address you.”

Kateran got to his feet, and was obviously surprised at the prolonged and genuine cheering that greeted him. He made gestures to the crowd thanking them and urging quiet, and eventually nodded to his trumpeter. Again the fanfare. The applause died away.

“Citizens, I give you thanks for that generous welcome. I’ve been asked to speak first. Not that I have a plan – I don’t. I’ve done my best, and I and those who have stood with me are wearied; we cannot go on. I’ve been asked to speak first in that I have a clear view of the things that stand against us. And I’ll tell you what they are. First, as you know, our city stands sacked and looted. Many homes are damaged, many goods wrecked or stolen. There is no coin to defend it. But, still, it stands as a target for attack, since all our neighbours want the thing which we have and they do not – a place where great ships can come and land, or take on, cargo.

“So, our problems: Firstly, the fortress which controls our marketplace and our port is in the hands of a foreign mercenary whom we can’t dislodge. Second, our wall is breached. Thirdly, Selloch’s Folly, whose thirst for stone led to the breaches in the wall, stands as you see – so close to the wall that any attacker will use it as a fortification from which to shoot down upon us. Fourthly, we have no guard but untrained volunteers, and many too few of us. Fifthly, the city has no wall on the river side, to guard us from attackers coming downstream in boats. Sixthly, those folk with power and wealth – the aristons and the master merchants of this city – cannot agree on a plan to sort all this.

“I say again: I have no plan, although I have given heed to Master Dalwhiel’s and think it good. But unless we can, as a city, agree a plan, we are all lost.

“That is all I have to say.”

The captain collapsed back onto the bench suddenly, his face red and perspiring, to another roar from the crowd. Gratingen stood forward, waiting for quiet. When it came, he called for questions from the crowd. A voice called to know what word there was of Swift Company. Kateran stood again.

“They’re two days march north up the western bank,” he said, “holed up in a hilltop farmstead above Master Pentarn’s orchards that belongs to a man Tharuper. There’s been a deal of fighting, and we’ve killed some of them. But we’ve lost above a dozen men fighting them, and there’s been some women and kiddies killed, too. It’s bad, but it could have been a deal worse.”

There were a few other questions, about the whereabouts of people; most of these Kateran couldn’t answer. Finally, Master Gratingen thanked him, to another roar of applause. This died away slowly, leaving Kateran leaning back against the stone of the wall, a curious smile on his still-perspiring face.

When there was quiet, Master Gratingen called upon Selachen to speak, introducing him as ‘the heir to our late tyranos’. Selachen bounded to his feet, his breastplate burnished to catch the light, and spoke with a clear, authoritative voice, pitched to carry.

“Citizens, you all know that my father ruled this city well and open-handedly for twenty years before these foreign invaders foully slew him. You all know that through that period – under my father’s rule – this city prospered. You have all become more wealthy, and there were, before the late invasion,

more of you than ever before, so that we had begun to expand the city – an expansion of which the New Sanctuary yonder was to be only the first work.”

Selachen paused, gesturing dramatically at his father’s folly. There was a restive silence, and he went on.

“You know that I am my father’s heir, legitimate fruit of his seed in his Tyrrana’s womb; that I am, though yet young, a man of full age, and that I have sat under my father and learned from him the means and custom by which this city is governed. I ask you to have trust in me, to restore me to the rule which is legitimately mine, and to accept my direction in the ruling of the city, as you did my father before me.

“In ruling you I shall be advised, as my father was before me, by the greater citizens of my city; I shall rule clemently. You know that we need protection urgently, and some of that protection must come from the Gods. But some of that protection, too, must come from strong hands. This city will be wealthy, because of our port, and because of our energetic and long-sighted merchants who have developed that port and the trade routes from it. They will, again, be wealthy, as the port becomes once again secure. They have, in short, credit; and so I shall invite them to lend to me from their stock of credit, in order that we can hire a suitable garrison, and eject the usurpers from the Residence.

“You know this is right, according to our law and ancient custom. Some are appointed to labour, some to trade, and some to rule. I am your ruler, and I accept your loyalty to me with gratitude.”

There was cheering from a small group at the back who were clearly Selachen’s partisans, and some clapping here and there through the crowd. It quickly died away. Again, Gratingen asked for questions.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” a voice called from the crowd, “but what if the merchants don’t choose to give you your loan?”

“They will,” replied Selachen confidently. “They want to use my port.”

“And what of the folly?” another voice called.

“The New Sanctuary stays,” said Selachen. “It will be completed in memory of my father, but not until the city can afford it. Captain Kateran – to whom we all owe thanks – is right when he says repairs to the wall must come first. In due time, I shall build a new city wall to the north, enclosing a sufficient area to allow the city to grow, and that wall will include the sanctuary into the city.”

Again Gratingen thanked him, and again there was that limited applause. Gratingen cleared his throat.

“Ariston Rothic was invited to take part today, but he sends to tell us he is unable to attend in person. Instead, he sends the learned Dolgol to speak on his...”

There was an outbreak of derisive whistling from the crowd. Gratingen raised his voice.

“Citizens, please! The learned Dolgol comes to us as messenger only. Listen to him with courtesy, I beg you!”

The clerk stood grey faced, and spoke quickly, reading from a note.

“Sirs, I am appointed by Governor Rothic to attend this meeting, and give you his ruling. As you all know, this city stands conquered by Sinhua, and Governor Rothic is duly appointed by Tyrranos Fannish to rule over it. Therefore, you will obey him, since if you do not, Fannish will without doubt send another force to reduce this city to ruin. Even before such

a force is despatched, your Governor advises you that no trade will be allowed through the new quay until the city is peaceful and docile, and submits to his rule.”

The whistling grew again from the crowd. Gratingen gestured for silence, to no effect. He turned to Kateran, who got to his feet once more, and gestured, more firmly, for silence. The noise died down and the clerk continued, reading faster than ever.

“Your Governor also ordered me to advise you that the filthy sea animals which your priests regard as sacred are returning to the shore to spawn, and that they do so under the bows of the garrison. If there is further dissent and disturbance within the city, the Governor will commence the extermination of these vermin.

“Your Governor commands you to abandon this meeting forthwith, and to return to your business. That is all; the meeting is closed.”

The last words were almost gabbled. The clerk took a deep breath, and turned desperately to Master Gratingen, saying something in an undertone, before sinking to the bench trembling. Over the crowd, it could be seen that the dragon banner had been torn down.

After a few moments Gratingen clapped his hands and gestured for silence. Gradually the booing and whistling died away.

“Learned Dolgol informs me that he is not briefed to answer questions; I shall therefore call upon Master Pentarn, well known to you all as a former guildmaster of this city, to speak.”

There was a ripple of applause: polite, but not more than that. Pentarn had come dressed in his best brocade robe in dark green, sashed with silver; from his sash, a large purse and a

symbolic pair of scales hung, indicating his business and his rank. He spoke persuasively, and with confidence.

“I thank you, Master Gratingen, for calling us together to this meeting, and to Aristons Rothic and Selachen for making their positions so admirably clear. Fellow citizens, Selachen has partly the truth of it. This is a city of merchants – of, as he said, has energetic and long-sighted merchants, who have made this city progressively richer over the past generation and who will, as Selachen says, do so again.

“This city is blessed – partly by the Gods, but partly also by my friend and colleague Dalmethan – with an excellent port, which will increasingly allow us to trade with northern cities at great profit. Captain Kateran, and Ariston Rothic too, in his way – are also right to say that this port makes us a target for ambitious foreign invaders. Therefore, we must protect ourselves. Ariston Selachen claims that his father’s rule was clement, and indeed it was; and that he was advised by his senior citizens, including his energetic and long-sighted merchants. Fellow citizens, that too is true so far as it goes. What Selachen did not say was how little his father followed that advice.”

Pentarn turned to the west, looking, as Selachen had before him, at the half finished sanctuary. His face darkened, and an actor’s show of anger crept into his voice.

“Selloch’s Folly stands as testament to that. Master Dalmethan, as you know, paid for the new outer ward of the Residence. Master Gratingen paid for the new defences of the River Gate, and for my part I have been honoured to have the Land Gate rebuilt and refortified at my own expense. All the great merchants of this town – and many of the lesser – have paid from our own purses to its defence.

“And our Tyrranos? Our Tyrranos spent his wealth – his wealth that derived from our taxes and from yours – on follies and extravagances, last and greatest the New Sanctuary we see before us. When he ran out of money for stone, he had his masons tear down the wall to build it. And so the defences which our energetic and long-sighted merchants had striven to strengthen were undone by one foolish and vain man’s pride. We cannot allow that to happen again. We cannot allow one man alone – no matter who that man may be – to set the city at risk through his folly.

“Selachen was wrong to say that as his father’s heir he is your ruler. That is not the custom of this city. The custom of this city is that rule passes down the female line, not the male. So if custom were adhered to, it would be not Selachen but his sister’s consort who should inherit. His sister’s... ahem, consort, is here, and will speak for himself, but it is my understanding that he does not seek that honour. In any case, this city has outgrown the rule of a single Tyrranos. It is time for a council of the great citizens to take over.

“In this much, though, Selachen is right: it is the merchants who create the wealth of the city, and who will do so into the future. It is in everyone’s interests that our merchants should prosper, and should apply their energy and their long sight to the development and the protection of this our mutual asset. If this meeting will back the merchant’s guild in this, Master Gratingen and I will apply our credit to employing a new garrison and to the repair of the wall; and, if energetic Master Dalwhiel here is still wary of our plan, I’m sure his longer-sighted father will, on his return, stand with us.

“Fellow citizens, I thank you all for your support.”

There was more applause at the end of Pentarn speech than before it, but it was still polite rather than enthusiastic.

Nevertheless, he bowed left and right, acknowledging it. Again Gratingen called for questions. A voice called out “Master Dalwhiel does not stand with you, you say?”

Pentarn gestured ‘alas’. “Master Dalwhiel must speak for himself, on that. And, as he is due to speak next, I shall abandon the stage to him.” He sat down, and Gratingen introduced Dalwhiel.

Again, applause was a wall of noise – not as loud as for Kateran, not as unanimous. But still widespread and enthusiastic. Dalwhiel, in the plain jerkin he had worn for travelling, looked taken aback by it; startled. He bowed to the crowd, and the applause died down.

“Friends, this is our city,” he began. He spoke clearly, in a voice used to command on a ship in a gale, but still familiarly. “The city of all of us, mine as much as Selachen’s, yours – even the poorest of you – as much as mine. For most of us here, all or most of the property we own is in the city, and if the city should be lost, all of us lose. And all of us are needed to save our city and to protect it. Selachen has no money to hire a garrison, nor has Rothic, nor Master Gratingen, nor Master Pentarn, nor I. Yet without a garrison, there will be thefts, as there have been already. Without a garrison, we cannot protect the city against Sinhua, and we have all seen what Sinhua’s rule means.”

After each sentence he had to pause, to allow ripples of applause. Behind him, Selachen and Gordala exchanged glances.

“You have heard Captain Kateran say that his volunteers cannot man the wall alone – or, indeed, at all for much longer. They must have support, which means we must help them. I propose, therefore, that we all agree – all citizens of good health and fighting age – to serve in a militia. A militia to defend this city only, never to fight away from it. I can offer

weapons, which if this plan is agreed I shall give freely to the city. I cannot provide pay. But if all of us serve, each man will serve only one day and one night in every two weeks, and one evening each week training. Unless there is an attack, of course. If there is an attack, every man must serve.

“Within that militia, we should elect our own officers – elect our sergeants, and have them elect our captains, and them our captain-general – as the Red Company do it. For none know whom they would trust to follow into battle so well as the men who must follow him, and we all know that the Red Company are the best fighting force there is. Therefore, let us learn from them.”

This time, the applause was louder and more prolonged. Dalwhiel stood for a moment, looking out over the crowd, before gesturing for quiet.

“And, until the city is once more settled, peaceful and prosperous, I propose that we name no man tyrannos, but allow the captains of the militia, in council, to rule the city.”

Again there was a roar of applause. Dalwhiel looked around, amazed. At last he could speak again.

“Repairing the wall will be a great work. You know that my family has built many great works for this city – the Guildhall, the new quay, the Outer Ward. We have lost more in the sack than any other family – our home and warehouse are gone, and with them most of our wealth. I cannot alone pay for the work that is needed on the wall. But if the aristons and the other great merchants of our city will bear their share, I offer to pay in coin and letters of credit for one fourth of the cost.

“Friends, I ask you to support me in this. I offer weapons, and I offer such wealth as my family has left, to defend and make good our city. I do not seek to be tyrannos or to hold any

other office – rather, I shall serve alongside you on the wall as a common militiaman like any other.

“I ask you for your support.”

The applause beat against the wall. Kateran stood up and clapped, setting off another wave, and then Pentarn, apparently bowing to the inevitable, did so as well. At last the trumpet rang out, and Gratingen gestured for silence. Noise gradually died away.

But before Gratingen could thank Dalwhiel, the high priestess was on her feet, speaking in a harsh voice.

“He lies, as all of us knew he would,” she said. “He is the son of the man who defiled the birthplace of the seals with his great new quay. He is himself the man who has enslaved and despoiled the Seal Princess – the avatar of the fruitful God among us. He defiles her sacred person, spills his unworthy seed in her womb. He struts, he steals, he strikes poses, he lies. She is not – my grand-daughter is not – his property, nor had the Huandun pretender any right to sell her to him. She is his victim: he, her desecrator. And this is not his city. His great grandfather – you all know it – came here as a foreigner and a slave. He does not seek office, he says, but in that too you know he lies. Why else would he seek to get the sacred princess with child? Why, in better times, did he seek to wed her? He overreached himself there, for she rightly refused him, but it shows for all to see the scope of his ambition.”

The crowd were silent. On the platform, everyone’s eyes were on the priestess; everyone’s, except Selachen’s. He looked out over the crowd, and finding someone, raised his right hand above his head, and drew it down, sharply.

“The city is in ruins,” the crone went on, “because the luck has left it. The luck has left it because this man’s father, with

my poor foolish son's assent, despoiled the birthplace of the seals with his filthy commerce. The luck has left it because this man has defiled the virgin body of the sacred princess. What this city needs is not a garrison and walls, so much as a return to the blessing of the Seal: for the Seal to take it once more into her protection. This man's puppet – the so called captain – says that we should pull down the New Sanctuary. We should not. We should build it up greater than before, for without the protection of the God there is no safety.

“You should all serve on the militia, he says. He, too, will serve, he says. His family's wealth is all spent, he says, but yet he will provide the militia with arms, he says, and fund the repairs to the wall, he says. You fools, can you not see that he lies? He will use his wealth to bribe you – first his fellows within his squad, to be named sergeant. Next, the sergeants in his company, to be named captain. Next, the other captains, to be named captain general. And the captains in council, he says, will rule the city. What he means is that he will spend his coin to rule the city, and be very sure – for you know he is a merchant – he will expect to see every coin come back to him from your purses, through taxes and through trade monopolies.

“This is not Dalwhiel's city. But neither is it your city. It is the city given by the Seal to the first consort, and through their heirs to Selchae, your Seal Princess. It shall be her consort – her consort who wins the right to bed her in single combat against all comers. But until that day comes, you should follow Selachen, for not only is he heir to the Tyrranos who is dead, but also to your former Seal Princess who has also been so foully slain; and I believe, too, that the God has chosen him to triumph in the combat and to win his sister as consort. You – all of you – owe him for your protection. You must all serve the city as Selachen directs, and with gratitude; and worship the Seal. Thus and only thus shall you have safety. And I say to

you also: this man Dalwhiel is a blasphemer, a liar and a rapist. The man who strikes him down, who kills him, shall have the blessing of the Gods.”

Now there was a rising chorus of booing and catcalls. The priestess tried to speak again, but what she said was unheard.

And then the noise from the crowd changed. There was shrieking from the direction of the banner which bore Dalmethan’s anchor-and-scales mark. There were men on horseback there, hacking downwards with swords. Tchikharn and Kateran’s volunteers were on the platform, blades out, forming a wall around their captain and Dalwhiel. Someone thrust Selchae in through the press, and Dalwhiel caught her. Arrows started to whistle in.

The crowd had broken up. Some were streaming west towards the breach in the wall, some east to the gate. Gratingen was still on the front of the platform, calling for calm, when an arrow caught him in the eye and he went down. Riders were spurring towards them through the chaos, still striking left and right with their blades, but apparently now using the flats, causing few casualties; and then they were upon them.

A volunteer fell out of the line, blood streaming from his arm. “Here, sir,” he said to Dalwhiel. “Take my sword.”

“Guard the girl,” Dalwhiel replied, and turned to fight.

It was brief, bloody, frantic, confusing. Dalwhiel had not seen what had happened to Selachen, but now he was in the melee, on horseback, calling to other riders who were clearly his own men. His grandmother was also mounted, behind another rider. The clash was fierce, and the riders benefitted from their height. But from the wall head, Kateran’s volunteer archers were shooting down steadily and accurately, and riders were falling. Within moments Selachen was calling the retreat,

and the riders were streaming away across the corpse strewn field, pausing only to throw Dalmethan's banner down and trample it into the dirt.

There was shocked silence on the platform, broken only by laboured breathing and the quiet whimpering of a wounded man. Gratingen lay dead; so too did four of the volunteers. Another would die that night, and the man who had given Dalwhiel his sword would lose his arm.

By sunset that evening, there were a crowd of several hundred men gathered by the Land Gate, while Kateran numbered them off into eights and charged them to appoint sergeants. The squad that Dalwhiel was assigned to comprised two fishermen, a drayman, a wheelwright, two weavers and a dyer; one of the fisherman had held a sword before. They chose Dalwhiel as sergeant, unanimously; and later that night, when the newly appointed sergeants were gathered around a brazier in the street behind the gate, he was equally unanimously among those named as captain. His company of eight squads stood watch on the wall that night, but there were no alarms.

What Lies Between Men and Women

No watch was kept on the river. Men were tired, and there was a mist. No-one saw, or marked, one small boat slip down through the mist and come to land outside the empty house of Ariston Kellen. A single figure slipped up through the dark streets, and slipped in through the door of the cottage that had once been Barenan's. Tchikharn should have been asleep in the kitchen, but was not. The figure slipped upstairs into the weaving room.

Selchae suddenly awoke to find a figure kneeling on the bed. In the faint light from the big windows she could make out the dagger.

"Where is he?" A whisper. The timbre of the voice suggested a woman.

"Who? Dalwhiel?"

"Aye, him. Where is he?"

“He’s on watch,” said Selchae, backed up against the wall. “On guard... on the gate.”

“All chances turn against us! Listen, princess. Your grandmother sent me...”

“To Dalwhiel.” Selchae’s voice was still muzzy with sleep.

“Aye, curse him. To kill him. To free you... still, it will be better if it is known you did it yourself. That you avenged your own honour.”

Selchae said nothing, watching the dagger.

“You need not fear me!” There was a catch almost of laughter in the whispered voice. “I came to save you. To kill him. Will you do it? I can leave you the knife. Or I could come again.”

“Give me the dagger,” said Selchae, more firmly.

There was a shuffle of movement, and then the figure offered her the weapon. “I have sheathed it. Be very careful of it – there is deadly venom on the blade. A scratch will kill.”

“I will be careful.”

“Good. Then I must say farewell, my princess. We will meet again in happier times.”

There was a movement in the room, a sound of creaking from the stairs, the click of the downstairs door. The visitor was gone. Selchae’s fingers explored the sheathed dagger. Short, narrow, small, light, needing a pull to loosen it in its sheath. Not that she wanted to take it out. She made sure it was firmly home again, and tucked it, sheathed, down between the pallet and the wall.

She lay awake for a long time, staring at the beams and boards overhead, while the room gradually lightened. When Dalwhiel eventually came home, she clung to him tightly.

“Good morning,” said Selchae, coming down the stair.

Tchikharn looked up from his seat at the kitchen table. “It is a fine morning indeed.”

“Good morning, my lady,” said Davrana. “There is fish here. that I had from a boatman this morning, or there is porridge hot. Will you eat?”

Selchae sat across from Tchikharn. “Thank you,” she said. “I shall try the fish.”

There was a pause, while Davrana took a fish from a pail of water and laid it on the skillet with a loud hiss.

Tchikharn cleared his throat. “I did not expect you down so early.”

“No,” said Selchae. “He came up to bed and went straight to sleep. I came down so as not to disturb him. He is very weary – yesterday was a long day for all of us, and then he had the night on the wall. And Tchikharn, if you and he truly mean to school all the militia in the use of blades – he has only so much to give. Do not encourage himself to overweary himself.”

“It’s true. Yes, these are hard days, and there may be harder coming. I look to you, Princess, to watch him and to support him.”

“I shall,” said Selchae. “You may be sure of that. As much as he will let me.”

There was another pause. Davrana served the fish, and Selchae started to eat. After a moment, she cleared her throat.

“Tchikharn, you lay with Davrana last night.”

“I did, Princess.”

“You are very much older than her. Was it right?”

“My lady,” said Davrana, “when the Master takes you, you make the house ring with the joy you find in it. I lay above some nights, listening to you. And then I thought, there is a good man here, an honourable man, who doubtless has something of the same skill. So the night before last I came down to him, and last night I bade him come up to me. Have I done wrong?”

“I make the house ring?” asked Selchae, distracted.

Tchikharn grinned, a warm and friendly grin. “Princess, you are joyous, and not quiet in your joy. It has been so since Hans’hua.”

“I am joyous. I am. He uses me hard, and well... I did not think. When he takes me I am not... Tchikharn, should I strive to be less... do I disturb folk? Will he mind?”

“He will not mind,” said Tchikharn. “He is a young man. I know you make him proud, in many ways – and give him joy, in that way. And I think he likes it that folk around can hear his virility.”

“Oh,” said Selchae. “Yes. I think he would. Good. I would not wish to have to... when he takes me, I lose myself... I like to lose myself.”

She smiled, and looked away a moment, out of the open back door. After a moment she turned to Tchikharn again. “But, do you do right?”

“Princess, there are some things a man may not in courtesy refuse, when it is willingly and wholeheartedly offered. And I, too, have lain in the dark listening to your joy – of which I have been glad for you and for Dalwhiel – and felt the lack of a woman under me. And even before she came to me in the night, I had formed a good feeling for Davrana. She is well made and easy to look at, works hard, and seeks to please you; and she is both thoughtful and merry. I have not hurt her and shall not. Right? What is right? I think I do no harm.”

Davrana looked up quickly from where she was working by the hearth. “I am sure he does no harm, my lady.”

Later that morning, the captains met; already twelve of them, representing a regiment and a half. Nominations were called for captain general; Dalwhiel was named to the post, but he pleaded not, while Kateran and Tchikharn – also raised to captain – counseled strongly against.

“Remember what the old which said yesterday,” Tchikharn warned. “If we name Dalwhiel captain general, we will seem to fulfill her prophesy. We should not do that.”

After a little discussion, it was agreed that Kateran should take the job.

They then divided up watches between companies, and agreed to demolish the folly to repair the wall. Dalwhiel agreed to provide funding, with seven eighths of every payment being made in notes of credit.

There was a knock on the door. Davrana went to answer it.

From the kitchen Selchae heard a voice. "Oh, I'm sorry... it doesn't matter... I'll come another time."

Selchae ran through to the front room. "Come in, Karda,"

"It doesn't matter..."

"Davrana," said Selchae, "would you go down to the market? I think we have not enough ginger, and the Master will want some when he returns."

Davrana looked from Selchae to Karda, and back. "Of course. I'll go at once. I'll get some vegetables, and some fish too. It'll take me some time."

"Take the purse," said Selchae. "Thank you. Come in, Karda!"

A brief bustle in the doorway, and then quiet in the room. Selchae and Karda faced one another for a long moment, and then Karda started to sob helplessly. Selchae moved to hold her awkwardly, rising on tiptoes to get her arms round her friend's shoulders. She said nothing. Karda wept.

Time passed.

Presently the sobbing eased.

"Come through to the kitchen," said Selchae. "I'll make us an infusion."

"Do you..." began Karda. "Might I have... might I have a bucket and a wash-cloth?"

"Of course!" said Selchae. "Go upstairs. I'll bring it up to you; and then you can be alone."

When Karda came back down to the kitchen she looked calmer. Her hair was wound in the towel. There were beakers of hot ginger on the table, and she set the bucket down in a corner and accepted one with gratitude.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I feel so dirty – so defiled. Afterwards. And this morning...”

She stopped, helplessly.

“Something particular happened this morning,” said Selchae, calmly.

“When he was done with me, I left Master Pentarn’s private room. Grava was in the hall – as near as you are to me. She kept her eyes away from me. She wouldn’t see me.”

“Oh, Karda!” said Selchae.

“Last night my father didn’t come home, again,” said Karda. “I found him by the ruin of our house. Just sitting by himself with his back against the wall, staring. He did not seem to see me either – or anything. He just sat there, looking at nothing. I had to shake him. And even when I had his attention, I do not think he knew me.”

She was crying again.

“He would not come home. I tried to persuade him, but he would not. He did not say anything at all. He just sat, and stared at nothing. I sat with him for some time, but... I knew I had to go to Master Pentarn this morning. I could not face that without sleep.”

“No,” said Selchae, gripping her hand. “Karda, did he come home?”

“He had not when I left this morning. Selchae, I cannot thank you enough for that wash.”

“Come any time, Karda. Any time.”

“Thank you, Selchae. It cannot be better for you... when we were younger, we believed those tales where a woman takes joy in opening herself to a man. How could we have? Men are so gross, so vile.”

“No!” said Selchae, without thinking. And then, more carefully, “Karda, it need not be so. Believe me. It need not. What... what does he do, that repels you so much?”

Karda shook her head. “I cannot say.” She took a drink from her beaker, hiding her face for a moment. She put it down, carefully, and looked directly at Selchae. “Selchae, is it not so for you?”

“No,” said Selchae. “No.” Selchae looked down, twisting a strand of hair between her fingers. “I gave my maidenhead to Ariston Rothic while we were held hostage, hoping to lure him into marriage; but once he had had the use of my body it seemed that he took little pleasure in it – far less than he took in my father’s concubines. And that left me – as you feel now, or like to it.”

She paused, thoughtful, and then looked up. “Pentarn does take you – enter you, spill seed in you – sometimes?”

“Sometimes, yes.”

“And gives you no joy?”

Karda shook her head. “No.”

“Is he quick, or slow? Fierce or tender? Hard or soft? Strong or shy?”

“I cannot compare, Selchae, for I’ve had no other man, and when one sees folk rut in public – I think that is always partly a performance. When your father would take your mother at the

festival – do you think he would be so fierce and vigorous in their own bedchamber? Yet at a guess I would say more slow than quick, more tender than fierce. And Master Dalwhiel?”

“Rothic was – after first he’d had me, anyway – idle. And after first he’d had me, one woman was never sufficient for his pleasure. He would lie, and let a woman sit on him and writhe, until he spilled his seed into her. Or he would watch women pleasure one another, while yet another would take him into his mouth until I choked – she choked – and then he would spill seed into her mouth and make her drink it. Also – perhaps I was less skilled, or more prideful, or perhaps he just sought to humiliate me...”

Selchae’s voice petered out. She shook her head a little, and started again. “I had thought it would be good. To feel a man surge within one, to feel the power of him. With Rothic, it was not.”

“But Master Dalwhiel?” Karda’s face was interested.

“As we went north, one morning I went down to the river to bathe naked, letting him know I should be there. He came, and when he came I let him know that he might enter. He entered me as a man enters the home of a superior, where he is unsure of his welcome. He played me as a man plays an ancient borrowed harp, finely carved of pine and strung with catgut, to calm a fractious child. He rode me as a man rides a three summers’ filly, that he fears is not up to his weight. I thought I had made a mistake.

“But later, in Hans’hua, I begged money from him and bought with it this collar, and then it changed. He entered me as a man enters his own home after long journeying. He played me as a man plays his own sturdy drum hewn from oak and stretched with oxhide, to make the village dance. He rode me as

a man rides his own favourite warhorse in the summer games. And I knew – I knew – I had made no mistake.”

“You liked it hard?” asked Karda. “So hard?”

“So hard! I have walked a season feeling tightness in my thighs where he has pinned me down. I have sat a season feeling tenderness in my groin where he has pounded me. I’ve lain a season feeling soreness in my breasts where he has crushed me. I have smelt of his juices and my own, day after day, night after night – for no matter how often I have washed, he has used me again. I have watched other folk catching the taint of me on the air, and felt pride in it.”

“Truly? You think he is truly the man for you?”

Selchae shook her head.

“I don’t know. He’s a complicated man. Controlled. Very thoughtful. When he lets that control slip...”

She smiled, and hid her eyes behind her hair.

“Sometimes I think it is when he lets his control slip that I see the real man. That is the man... I am a strong man’s woman; a woman to be taken, and taken, and taken again. A woman to be used hard. He is the first man to have used me so. When I think of... when I think of a man in me it is his face I see. It is his plough my furrow remembers and longs for. Is he the right man? I cannot separate the man from the use he makes of me. It is the right use.”

She gripped Karda’s hands again, squeezing firmly. “It can be like that for you. It will be like that for you. With some man, some time. I’m sure of it.”

Karda shrugged. “What man will want me now?”

“The world is not as we thought it was,” said Selchae, “when we were girls and listened to tales. It is more brutal and more uncertain. But it is also changing. Do not lose hope.”

Dalwhiel closed the door carefully behind him, and turned, standing just inside it.

“The Huandun says,” his voice was quiet, tight, controlled, “that he had your maidenhead.”

Selchae looked up at him from where she sat on the bed, her eyes startled, uncertain.

“Does he lie?” asked Dalwhiel, not moving.

Her eyes went down. She shook her head. “He does not lie.”

“Did he force you?”

“He did not force me.”

The silence stretched.

“Master...”

“Do not call me ‘master’. Not now.”

She looked up at him, shocked. Her hands drifted up to hide her breasts.

“We were in the womens’ quarters a season and a half,” she said, carefully. “I knew that my parents were dead, and had no word of my brother. I did not think I should be ransomed.”

He nodded, his neck still tight.

“I did not lie to you,” she said. “I did not tell you that you were my first.”

“No,” some of the tension went out of him. “And you were not my first.” He shook his head like a wet dog. “I’m sorry, this is unfair. I was surprised. It came to me unprepared.”

She stood up, and walked to him cautiously, her hands falling to her sides – and then, her left reaching to him. “I do not know what to call you, if I may not call you ‘master’.”

He took her hand. “You called me ‘the boy,’” he was grinning, but it did not seem a happy grin, “before.”

“I did,” she said, looking up at him. “I am sorry. I was wrong. Wrong in everything I said that night. I did not know you, and I misjudged.” She lifted her right hand to his face. “But I was not wholly wrong. I said also that the man for me would be a warrior, a leader of men. I said his tread would make the rulers of distant cities trembled. In that I was right. The man for me is such a man. You are that man.”

Her hand traced down his body slowly, to his waist. “And more,” she said. “When you are within me, my body sings. When you are not within me, my body is empty and hungry for you.”

He didn’t move. His face was unreadable.

“Master Dalwhiel, I gave myself to you.”

He seized her collar, his knuckles curling through it, painfully compressing her throat. He dragged her face upwards. “You gave yourself to him, before. If I turn you out, to whom will you give yourself next?”

“This is unfair, Master Dalwhiel,” she lifted herself on tiptoes to ease the strain on her neck, “I am here by choice. Do not take it off me.”

He relaxed slightly, releasing the ring. “I did not put it on you,” he said.

“No,” she said. “I did. I chose to. I meant to. I did not do that for anyone but you. I would not do that for anyone but you.”

He rested his fingers on it again, more gently. “You choose this?”

She shrugged. “You know that I would rather be your wife than your slave,” she said. “I have not pretended otherwise. But I would rather be slave to you than nothing to you. And I would by far rather have your seed in my womb as your slave, than not have your seed in my womb.”

“As you had his before?”

“Master Dalwhiel, you know that I have bled since last I lay with him. You know that I did not quicken by him. This is unfair.”

“But you lay with him.”

Her eyes went down again. “I did.”

He pulled her against him, cupping her head into his shoulder with one hand. “I’m sorry, seal girl. I am jealous. Very jealous. And I was unprepared.”

She nodded, rubbing herself against him, her hand creeping to his belt; but he took her wrist.

“No,” he said. “Not yet. Put some clothes on, and let us go out.”

She shrugged, and turned away, lifting the tunic from the floor. Suddenly she stopped, and looked at him sharply.

“How came this up?” she asked.

“What the Seal Mother said yesterday,” said Dalwhiel. “And a garbled understanding of the old laws. The scribe – Dolgol – must have reported back to Rothic last night. He came again

today to tell us that as his master had had your maidenhead, he was now the legitimate ruler.”

“But... it doesn’t work like that. It’s never worked like that.”

“No,” said Dalwhiel. “I know. But he did not; and so he made the claim.”

He turned to the door. “I’m going out,” he said. “Are you coming?”

Quickly she pulled the tunic over her head, and went.

Of blades in the dark

A week must pass; stuff must happen; and I think the priestess should meet with Selchae again, in the daytime. But, why does the tension between Selchae and Dalwhiel persist? I do not wish him to be spiteful, or harbour grudges. Is he just overworking and very tired?

Davrana was not noisy when taking seed. All Selchae had heard of her that night were occasional small gasps, and a few whispers. Tchikharn, is seemed, did not use women hard – not as Dalwhiel did, in any case. The sound from the attic above was not loud. Slight creaks, a soft, rythmic, wet slapping, and those occasional gasps. But it was now deep into the night, and still the noises went

on.

Selchae was lifted on one elbow, looking down at Dalwhiel who slept soundly beside her. Tears ran down her nose to gather pendulously at its tip, and fall heavily to the woolen pallet. He lay between her and the door, as he always did; but tonight, on the extreme edge of the pallet, away from her. She reached her hand out to touch him, but drew it back again, uncertain. She wiped her eyes, instead. A gasp, again, from above, and she

buried her ears in the bedding; and then, after a few moments, lifted herself on her elbow again to look down at Dalwhiel, sleeping peacefully.

There was the faintest of sounds from downstairs, and Selchae was suddenly alert. She thrust her hand down between the pallet and the wall, and pulled out something slender. She slipped silently from the bed, stepping carefully over the sleeping man.

The door swung open silently. Selchae could see nothing in the darkness, but she could guess...

“What are you doing here?” she whispered.

“I have come to finish the job that you have not.”

“I have not it because I do not wish it done,” whispered Selchae. “I am your princess. Go.”

“You are his captive. He has forced you. You do not know what you say.”

“He has not forced me. I give myself freely to him. I order you to go.”

“It does not matter. You are the princess. Who you lie with must be fit to rule this city, and you said yourself he is slave’s get.”

“I am the avatar of the God. I choose who I lie with.”

“It is for the God to choose who you lie with, and you know – for the Seal Mother has told you – that she chooses your brother.”

“Who speaks for the God, the Seal Mother or me?”

“We the priestesses speak for the God, Princess. Who you lie with is our...”

There was a sound from above – a sharp movement. The shadow in the doorway froze.

“Help!” called Selchae. “Assassins!”

The figure from the doorway flew at her, pushing her aside – but as they struggled, Selchae pulled the knife from its sheath, and drove it home. And then there was a thump on the floor outside the door, and Tchikharn was in the room, sword gleaming in the faint light.

“What goes?” Dalwhiel’s voice, from the bed. He, too, was upright now, another shadow in the gloom.

“An assassin,” said Selchae, unevenly, breathing fast. “I think I’ve killed her.”

“Make light,” said Tchikharn, and there was a sound of flint and steel from where Dalwhiel knelt by the bedside stool. But before he had kindled the tinder, Davrana came down from the attic, carrying a candle.

The four of them were naked; Tchikharn and Selchae, with blades in their hands. The only clothed body lay on the floor: the priestess, Gonjina. She, too, held a drawn blade – but she was still. Dalwhiel moved to turn her over.

“Do not touch the blade!” Selchae’s voice was alarmed.

“Why not?” Dalwhiel looked up at her, sharply.

“It is poisoned. Her blade is poisoned.”

“How do you know?” asked Dalwhiel.

“I just cut her, and she’s dead.”

“But that was your blade, not hers,” said Dalwhiel, arrested, straightening up again. “Seal girl, where did you get that blade?”

“She gave it to me.”

“She gave it to you? When?”

“A week ago. After the meeting. When you were on the wall. The first night.”

“Why did she give it to you?”

“She came to kill you, but you were not here.”

“So she gave you the blade?”

Tchikharn moved. “Princess,” he said, his blade coming up to her throat, “drop the dagger and stand back against the wall.”

“Tchikharn, man, what do you?” Dalwhiel voice was crisp.

“She knew of the assassin a week ago, and did not tell you. Back against the wall, Princess.”

Selchae threw the dagger into the corner of the room, and walked backwards carefully. She was shaking.

“More,” said Tchikharn, “she knew I lay upstairs with Davrana, when I should have lain below to ward you, but she said nothing against it.” His face hardened, and he glanced suddenly over his shoulder. “Davrana,” he asked, “what knew you of this plot?”

“The blade,” said Dalwhiel, thoughtfully, still looking at Selchae. “She gave you the blade a week ago, you say. Where did you keep it?”

“In the bed,” said Selchae. “Between the bed and the wall.”

“In our bed?” Dalwhiel’s voice was shocked. “You kept a poisoned blade in our bed?”

“I was in bed when she came,” said Selchae, desperately, her voice rising. “I was in bed when she came! I just put it there because I didn’t want to touch it.”

“And you didn’t tell him,” said Tchikharn. “Or anyone.”

She looked at him along the length of his blade. “He was angry with me,” she said. “About Rothic. About my maidenhead.” She turned her head very carefully, pressed back against the wall. “I did not think she would come again,” she said, looking now at Dalwhiel, who was dressing quickly. “She had given me the blade, I thought she would wait until I had done it!”

“Done what?” Dalwhiel’s voice was sharper than ever.

“But I wouldn’t! You know I... Dalwhiel, you do know I wouldn’t?”

Dalwhiel looked from her to the dagger, lying in the corner of the floor, and slowly back to her.

“She didn’t tell you,” said Tchikharn, flatly.

“Dalwhiel, I saved your life tonight. If I had not killed her... I saved your life.”

“Yes,” said Dalwhiel to Tchikharn, uncertainly. “That is true.”

“She didn’t tell you.”

Dawn came slowly. Tchikharn’s blade was still in his hand, but he’d allowed Selchae to dress, watching her untrustingly the while. Dalwhiel had stood by the window, silent, a long time. Davrana had offered to make drinks, but Tchikharn had

ordered her against the wall beside Selchae, so Dalwhiel had gone down to do it.

“What I want to know – for myself,” said Tchikharn, looking at the women darkly, “is this. Were you in this plot, Davrana? Did you seduce me to lure me away from my post?”

“I didn’t... I didn’t...”

“There was no plot!” said Selchae, desperately.

“There was a plot,” said Tchikharn. “That much, we know. The priestesses were part of the plot, we know this too. Your grandmother, Princess, was part of – doubtless led – this plot. There was a plot. What I don’t know is whether either or both of you were in it.”

“She wasn’t...” said Selchae.

“How can you know that,” asked Tchikharn, “unless you were?”

When he entered the house, she was kneeling naked on the front room floor, shoulders back, arms behind her, knees widely parted, facing the door. Her hair was elaborately braided with ribbons of wine red and bright gold; her lips, eyelids and nipples were dusted with gold powder. Her dark bronze skin was oiled and gleaming; the bronze collar about her neck was polished until it, too, gleamed. To her left lay the woolen tunic he had given her the day he had bought her. Everything else she owned was neatly piled to her right, the golden chain girdle lying on top.

He paused for a moment in the doorway, taking this in. Then he shut the door quickly, and crossed the room to crouch within

touching distance. She didn't move. He lifted her chin with two fingers, until she met his eyes.

"I have brought your manumission, seal girl."

She lifted her chin off his fingers.

"It is not needed," she said.

"You are free," he said.

"No," she said. "You bought me, and you may rescind that if you choose. But I gave myself to you, and I do not take back that gift."

He sat back on his heels and looked at her; she met his eyes for a while, but then looked down.

He started again, laying a paper from his bag on the floor. "This is your manumission; it is notarised and witnessed."

She made no move.

He laid another paper down. "These are the deeds to this house: it is yours absolutely."

She looked up suddenly, in surprise.

"Master Dalwhiel, why do this if you no longer want me?"

He shook his head, not meeting her eyes. He got awkwardly to his feet. "I should go now."

"Master Dalwhiel, wait!"

He paused, looking back at her.

"Master Dalwhiel," she said, still kneeling, "if you truly mean this, all these things are yours. I beg you will let me keep your tunic, both because I shall have nothing else to cover my nakedness and because you gave it to me... But you did not only buy me, you bought all these things. They are yours."

“No,” he said. “They’re yours.”

“You should at least take the chain. It will pay for much work on the wall.”

“No,” said Dalwhiel.

“You must surely have paid more for that chain than for me!”

“No,” said Dalwhiel.

“Dalwhiel! You could have bought three concubines for the price of that chain!”

Dalwhiel shrugged. “Perhaps,” he said. “But not the one I wanted.”

Her eyes widened, and her spine straightened; and then her shoulders slumped.

“And you want me no longer.”

He shook his head. “I trust you no longer. I fear I am wrong to mistrust, that am doing you a great injustice, and losing something – someone – who I was just coming to truly appreciate the value of. But I have never been able to trust my own judgement where you are concerned.”



Recruit

OK, major problems with what I've written about training here. Defending a wall-head, spears have huge advantage over swords, so everyone will be trained in spears. The only reason for Selchae to be given a sword rather than a spear is that she may not be considered strong enough to use a spear against armoured men - but then why is she considered strong enough to use a sword? They may feel she's a morale benefit...

Also, swords are not really a great deal of use until the battle has (at least locally) gone to shit. Is there much point in training the volunteers with swords at all?

This of course affects the capture of the castle - Selchae's squad must take spears, even if she doesn't.

A long queue of men formed up inside the Land Gate in the late afternoon, as the sun sank slowly behind the hills on the further side of the river. They waited, for the main, patiently, with only low conversation. A figure walked up from Land Street.

"Come to join the line?"

"I have. Wait, don't I know you? Krenshan, is it? A yeoman from Lowcastle?"

"Well, I'll be... it is indeed, your worship. One of your father's own vassals. And honoured I am that you should know me. You've truly come to join the line?"

"Aye. I said so."

"Stay with us, then; we're all loyal men here."

Slowly the line shuffled forward; at last they came to the front. Krenshan went to the table, and announced his name and class.

"Ever swung a sword, yeoman?" asked Captain Kateran.

"I have, sir. Not these many years, but I was a caravan guard in my youth."

"Got one now?"

"No, sir."

"Balshar, issue him a sword."

A sergeant took a sheathed sword from a rack, and handed it to Krenshan.

“Yeoman, make a mark in the ledger to show you’ve taken it,” said Kateran. “Then join those two yonder and wait. Next!”

Another man went up. “Teravan, sir. Millwright.”

“Swung a sword, millwright?”

“An axe, sir, or an adze, but not a sword. A billhook, sir?”

Kateran shook his head. “Give him a spear. You’re first for a new spear squad, millwright; stand by me while I find another seven. Oh, mark the ledger. Next!”

“Selchae, sir.”

Kateran looked up at her slowly, an eyebrow raised.

“It’s as much my city as anyone else’s sir. I have a right to defend it.”

Kateran nodded, grudgingly. “More, some would say.”

“If we have unwed women on the wall,” said the sergeant, “we’ll get more of the boys signing up.”

“Aye,” said Kateran. “Ever swung a sword? I hear you can use a dagger.”

“I’ve never swung a sword, sir.”

“Spear then.”

The sergeant demurred. “There’s no weight to her, sir.”

“No, true. Very well, give her a sword. But you’ll need to learn fast, my lady, for if we are attacked the enemy won’t make allowances. Mark the ledger.”

Selchae signed her name with a flourish, and went to join Krenshan.

“Next!” called Kateran, and a slim youth walked up to the table.

“Tiranen, sir. Fisherman and egger.”

“Swung a sword?”

“As it happens, I have, sir, but not in anger. My uncle is Giraten...”

“Ah! And he taught you?”

“He did, sir.”

“Very good, fisherman. Take a sword, and join the group yonder.”

“What’s an egger?” Selchae asked, when the lad had joined them.

“In the spring, when the seabirds nest on the cliffs, there’s a market for the eggs...”

“Of course!” said Selchae. “I’ve eaten them myself.”

“Aye. So someone has to climb the cliffs to harvest them. That’s me.”

Later, when there were eight of them, they sat around a brazier to choose a sergeant. Selchae named Krenshan, and so did two other men who had come with him.

“No,” said Krenshan. “You’re not thinking, pardoning me, your worship. Lads, we’ll need a captain. I don’t doubt I could serve you for sergeant, but I don’t have the education to be captain. Her worship here, though – she’s been trained to lead. And she has the head for it, or so I hear.”

Men nodded thoughtfully, and when the vote was called it was unanimous. Sergeant Selchae went back to the house on

High Row with her new sword, and a green armband with a black stripe on it.

At sword drill the following night she saw Dalwhiel, teaching a group; and he saw her. She joined with her own squad and they were directed to join with another new squad. At a store behind the gatehouse they were issued with padded tunics and shinguards, banded leather helmets, and wooden swords. Presently Tchikharn came over to them. He started by lecturing them on safety, and showing them how to hold a sword.

He emphasised lightness. "One hand," he said, "not two. Speed, not strength. These are not axes." He showed them the positions, and counted them through them. He had them stand in a circle round him, and called the positions, watching them move. One after an other he called them into the middle to spar with him, never attacking, letting them attack him. Assessing them. No-one landed a blow, although Tiranen came close. If Tchikharn was impressed or disappointed, he did not show it. If he was surprised to see Selchae, he did not show it; but he did not acknowledge her.

Later, after she had handed back her padding, her helmet and her wooden sword, she waited in the dark for him.

"Captain Tchikharn," she called.

He turned, and saw her. "Good evening to you, Princess. I hope you are well?"

She shrugged. "You serve your master, do you not, Tchikharn?"

"I serve the old master," he said. "He charged me guard the young master, to keep him from harm. And so I do – in so far as I am able."

"You counselled him, I think, to put me aside?"

"Princess, you did not tell him. Of the assassin, nor of the dagger."

"No, I did not. It was not the right... Tchikharn, it had not been going well for us. He was... hurt, jealous. And very tired."

Tchikharn nodded. "Yes, that I believe."

"Then – can you tell him you have thought more, and changed your mind?"

"No, Princess," said Tchikharn, clearly. "For two reasons: one, it would do no good. If you think the young master is so weak that he put you aside because I told him to, you are wrong. You know his father counselled him not to lie with you, and you know that he chose to reject that counsel. Do you think he pays me more heed? And – no, wait, hear me out. Two, because I have not changed my mind. Mark you, the events of that night hurt more than you. Davrana and I have not spoken since; and although, as you said, I am too old for her, yet I miss more of her than just her body under mine. I do not know that either one of you plotted against the young master. But my task – my duty to the old master – is to guard him, to keep him alive. I cannot trust. And you did not tell him about the dagger."

"I saved his life, Tchikharn!"

"Possibly. Probably. I do not know what happened in that room before I came. I do not know how deep the plot ran. But someone was in that room that night with a poisoned dagger to kill the young master, and you had a poisoned dagger. And

I was not where I should have been, because I had allowed myself to be tempted by a woman.”

He shook his head, wearily. “I’m sorry, Princess. I like you well. Master Dalwhiel was more full of life when he arose from your bed than at any time I have known him. Mistrust, I know, harms us all: you, him, the girl Davrana, I. And yet, you hid a poisoned dagger in his bed for a week, and you did not tell him.”

“Master Dalwhiel! A word, if you can spare time.”

The voice – a female voice – came from of a dark alley on the east side of Land Street; the last of the gloaming was fading from the sky. Dalwhiel stopped, but he stayed in the middle of the street, to have space to swing a sword and the best of the light that remained. He faced the alley, and waited.

A figure ventured out nervously. Tall; slender, and robed.

“Master Dalwhiel, it’s me, Karda.” Her voice was low, quiet, not pitched to carry.

“I greet you, Karda. Is all well with you?”

“I heard that you were lodging in the gatehouse. I heard that you’d given Selchae the house on High Row, and her freedom.”

“The captains wanted me to lodge somewhere I could be guarded,” said Dalwhiel. “The gatehouse seemed safest.”

“Master Dalwhiel, my family has lost everything, and I must raise money to feed my siblings and pay our debts. Do you need a woman to warm your bed at night?”

“Karda!” For all his surprise, Dalwhiel also kept his voice low. “Forgive me, I had not known it had gone so ill with you. I could give you some money...”

“I don’t want charity, Master Dalwhiel. I will warm your bed, for a fee...”

“Forgive me,” he said again. “I had heard you had an arrangement with Master Pentarn...”

“From which I wish to extract myself. Selchae says you use women well.”

“Selchae says this?” Again there was surprise in Dalwhiel’s voice. “I have used her harshly.”

“I know,” Karda looked down. “She said that she took pleasure when you lost control. I think I should prefer it when you did not.”

“Karda, the thing with Selchae – she was not merely a concubine. I do not know my mind – my feelings are strong and dark, but they are not dead. The thing between us still has life in it. And I am not ready to enter another woman.”

“Truly?”

“I could give you...”

“I thought a man would always find an excuse to enter a woman who opened herself to him.”

“No. Not yet a while. Karda...” Dalwhiel paused. He began again. “In school, you were good with both writing and number?”

“Aye,” said Karda, surprised in her turn. “I am. I keep my father’s books.”

“Would it shame you to serve as a clerk?”

Selchae found Mason Takenar and a gang of seven men working at the breach in the wall; they already had the outer face of it up to breast height. "I wanted to get them a barrier to defend, quickly" he said. "It wouldn't stand a ram, like this, but we'll fill in as we go up."

"You've worked fast," said Selchae.

"Aye, we have. It's good to have work, and the city needs it."

"True," said Selchae. "If you had more money, could you work faster?"

"Master Dalwhiel has promised enough, for here. And there are not many skilled men."

"Only Dalwhiel?" asked Selchae. "Have the other merchants not put in any?"

Takenar spat. "Master Gratingen promised, but he's dead. What his heirs will do, I can't say. The rest of them? Pentarn offers paper, but if paper is all I'd rather take Dalwhiel's."

"I have this," said Selchae, uncertainly. She held out a leather bag, and Takenar took it and drew out the chain.

"It's more than one hundred and twenty eight coins weight..." she said.

"Aye," said Takenar. "That's generous, Arista, and I won't forget it; but it would be a shame to cut so beautiful a work as this, and so much gold is not of much use to plain men like me. Keep it, for now. We'll manage."

The house on High Row seemed empty, now, and quiet. Selchae sat in the kitchen. It was dark; she had not lit the fire.

She had not eaten. She was tired from sword training, and bruised – the men went easy on her, she thought, but in the past four nights of training of course some blows had got through. Her hair was still in the loose knot she'd put it in – when – three days past? Her tunic was dirty, and she smelt sweaty and unwashed.

She sat, unmoving.

Outside, the city was settling towards sleep; fewer voices on the air, fewer feet on the streets. Beyond the open back door, stars were showing over the rooftops.

There came a knock at the front door. She got up, and opened it. There were two men there, wearing militia armbands over leather jerkins; they had swords at their belts. She looked at them, warily.

"Begging your pardon, Princess," said one of them, "the captains are meeting by the Land Gate, and they ask that you attend."

"What," she asked, "now?"

"If you please, Princess."

She looked at where her sword lay, cast aside in a corner. She picked it up, and buckled on the belt. She closed her eyes for a moment, facing the wall, and then shook her head, briskly. She turned to the door again.

"Lead on," she said. "I'm ready."

Inside the Land Gate, the brazier was burning again; a circle of men sat around it. She recognised Dalwhiel, Tchikharn, Kateran, Pentarff, Kollim, [and others]. Karda sat behind Dalwhiel, making notes on a slate. A man she did not recognise gave up his stool to Selchae, and she sat. They were listening to a man in a homespun kilt, who was standing to address them.

“He’s crossed to the west bank, with a force above a legion strong; mostly yeomen and peasants, but some seasoned fighters. He is moving south. He must by now be close to where Swift Company are encamped.”

“Aye,” said Kateran, “do we know what he intends?”

The standing man shook his head. “He keeps his counsel, sirs. I do not know.”

“How are the men with him armed?”

“He has two full companies of horse, sirs, and they mostly have swords and at least light mail. The footmen – he has at least another company of swordsmen, but the rest have spears.”

“Archers?” asked Tchikharn.

“Many of the spearmen also carry bows, sirs, but there is no separate company of bowmen.”

“H’m,” said Kateran. “Goltinen, what do we know of the condition of Swift Company?”

The man who had given up his seat to Selchae stood. “Still at Tharuper’s farm. We don’t have a good count, but I’d guess they still form three full companies. They have stolen some clothing, but few of them are clothed. But they have been making arms. They have many spears, and increasingly they have bows. Also, they have axes they have stolen, and other farm tools – although at a guess they’ve reforged a good few of those into spear points. They’re raiding now with more confidence, half a day’s march from base; we’ve had to move a lot of folk back to keep them out of harm.”

“Not much of a force, then,” said another man, “if they have only spears and axes.”

Goltinen disagreed. “They are trained men. Disciplined, with a good knowledge of tactics. Master Dalwhiel beat them here when they were drunk and unprepared, and that broke their morale a while. But they are regrouping, and they are desperate. They need at least clothing against the coming winter; and likely, they will need food, too.”

Kateran turned to the first man, who was still on his feet. “What think you? Does Selachen mean to take the fight to Swift Company?”

“Sirs, I cannot say.”

“I do not see that it would help us, sirs,” said Goltinen. “If Selachen were to drive them out of Tharuper’s, they would not go west, for the Gor defend their frontier – and, besides, that would take Swift Company even further from home. They would come south – and, frankly, that would be another problem we don’t need.”

“What if he were to recruit them?” said Tchikharn. “Half a legion of veterans – even veterans such as Swift Company – would make his force far stronger.”

There was silence. At last Kateran cleared his throat. “Now that Arista Selchae has joined us, should we go on to the matter of the Seal Mother’s embassy?”

There was a rumble of assent.

“The season for the ceremony of dedication approaches. The Seal Mother has sent word to us that she desires safe passage into the city to begin making arrangements for the ceremony. Seeing that the former Seal Maiden, Tanzathael, is dead – so we believe, at least – the custom of the city has it that Arista Selchae should take that role.”

For a long moment, no-one spoke.

Kateran looked directly at Selchae. "Arista, do you wish to speak on this?"

"That is the ancient custom, certainly. But the laws of the city are contested."

"What mean you, Arista?"

"There are at least five laws which might be followed. Or we might make new ones. But the merit of any law of succession is that if all acknowledge the law, succession may take place without open conflict. Not all acknowledge any one of these laws, and we have open conflict. Thus the law does not serve."

Pentarff stirred at this. "Five laws?" he asked.

"It does not matter," said Selchae. "They do not serve. In any case, a ceremony cannot be held in the old sanctuary unless it serve Rothic's purpose, nor in the new unless it serve Selachen's. What says the Seal Mother?"

"Nothing, yet," said Kateran, "but that she demands of us safe passage."

"But not of Rothic?"

"No," said Kateran. "No messenger of any kind has sought to go to the Residence."

"Then you are answered," said Selchae.

"Hold," said Kateran. "You said we had open conflict..."

"We have. The Seal Mother's people sought to kill Master Dalwhiel."

"If a compromise could be reached," said Pentarff smoothly, "there need be no further open conflict."

There was an expectant silence. It stretched.

Kateran cleared his throat, and said, "Arista Selchae, such a compromise would depend on you."

She stood, slowly, small, grubby, weary, strained. "Outline this compromise to me, Captain Kateran," her voice was dangerous. "I do wish to serve my city, and I do wish to see peace, but I do not see what compromise I could aid."

"Arista," said Pentarff, "your brother holds the road north, and already few peasants from the north are bringing their harvest to market in the town. Now he moves west, to cut our west road, and we may be sieged."

"I did not know this before tonight, but you do not surprise me."

"He seeks to become Tyrranos."

Selchae looked at Pentarff, making no move.

"It's the custom of the city," said Kateran, "that the consort of the Seal Maiden..."

"No!" said Selchae. "It is not. It is the ancient law of this city that I rule, because I am, through no merit of my own, descendant through the female line of the God. That's ancient law, which no-one now supports, and all seem to want to forget. It is ancient custom that the avatar chose her champion at a contest held on the shortest day, the day the city is dedicated; and it happened commonly that her champion fathered children on her and on other women of the city, as the strongest bull fathers pups on all the seals on the shore. It's been the practice in this city since the first ariston came here and slew the champion that the tyrranos hold the avatar more or less prisoner and force his seed upon her – call it marriage if you will. But it is the practice of the aristons that son succeed his father, and of the city that daughter succeed mother, and so we have this dreadful succession of men bedding their mothers and sisters

and daughters, and false contests where an armed and armoured ariston faced unarmed and drugged ‘champions’ in a slaughter on the shore.”

“Let us then say it has been the practice...” tried Pentarff. Selchae looked at him, and his voice petered out. She looked across the circle at Dalwhiel, but he avoided her eyes.

“Is it the will of this council,” she asked, “that I surrender my body to my brother to have him force his seed on me, so that you can turn this city over to him and abandon all that you, Kateran, and you, Dalwhiel, have worked so hard for without a fight?”

“War is costly!” said Pentarff.

Selchae looked at him. She looked, slowly, round the circle.

“It is late, Captains,” she said, “and I am weary. I shall retire.”

She marched briskly across the circle to where Dalwhiel sat, and spat in his face; and then turned on her heel before anyone could react, and walked back down the hill.

? At some stage in this chapter Pentarff propositions Selchae to act as his courtesan, offering an amount of money she considers insulting – possibly when she is in the house to visit his wife ?

Selchae offers the chain to Master Pentarn, but he will not pay her anything like its worth

They sat again in the yellow withdrawing room, in the bay window above the river, on the little brocade-upholstered settles. Outside, on the water, a squadron of swans were gliding. Selchae scooped honey from a little silver dish, and let it swirl into her glass beaker of ginger infusion. The glass sat in a cunningly made cage of silver wire, with a wooden handle, so you might lift a hot beaker without scalding. Another new, and beautiful, idea from the north.

“I grieve at your father’s death, Grava. He was a good man, and died serving our city. I grieve doubly that it was my brother’s men who slew him. You know that I do not sit in my brother’s camp...”

“I know. And... We two have lost fathers. I know that. I am glad that you came, today. But you are a free woman, now?”

“Yes.” Selchae’s response was closed. Her hand went to the slave ring she still wore.

“You are not pleased? I had thought... why are you not pleased?”

“He left me,” said Selchae. “It’s not an unalloyed joy.”

“This spring, you would not wed him – you were...”

“Rude,” said Selchae. “Dismissive. Worse, cruel.”

“Yes. So, why...”

“I didn’t know him then as I do know. He is not what I thought – he is not the boy he was in Master Kollirn’s schoolroom.”

“Would you wed him now? If he were to ask?”

"I don't know." Selchae made an impatient gesture. "My body craves him. But I am not sure that I want to be any man's..."

"Wife?"

"Property, I was going to say. But yes, or wife. If there's a difference."

"If you're wed, he cannot just leave you, without a settlement."

Selchae shrugged. "He has not been ungenerous."

There was silence. Selchae broke it.

"Grava, Karda was here last week."

"Yes."

"She said, you did not acknowledge her. It hurt her."

"It's hard. I do not know what to say... She's a whore, and she's opening herself to my father in law."

"She is not a whore from choice. And she does not open herself to your father in law from choice. We were friends, Grava! And also, you live here in some comfort. I have a house – a small house, but decent. Karda is feeding her whole family on what she can earn spinning."

"I did not know. But, she opens herself to my father in law, and my mother in law is hurt by it. I cannot ignore that!"

In Training

“You cannot!”

The squad were gathered around a brazier outside the Land Gate. The wooden staves they’d been training with were stacked against the wall. The men relaxed, teasing one another about their performance. They waited for Captain Kateran to come out, to tell them their rota assignment.

“I tell you,” Tiranen’s light voice came from by the fire, “I can. It isn’t hard.”

“Get away with you! Four bronze says you cannot!”

“It would be robbing you.”

“Four bronze says you cannot! Climb it, or eat your words.”

“Very well,” said Tiranen, and grinned. “Get your purse out.”

Selchae hadn’t been paying attention. Her shoulders hurt, and she had a painful bruise on the hip where a wooden sword had landed hard. She was tired. He was two manhieghts up before her eyes widened, and her attention focussed.

He didn't climb as she would have expected a man to climb a wall, pressing his breast close against the stone to keep his weight above his feet; instead, his body hung out, away from the wall, as he explored the edges of stones above him delicately with fingertips, seeking pockets he could ease his fingers into. It looked precarious, suicidal; and yet he climbed quickly and with sureness.

There was a slight overhang below the wallwalk. He paused there, one hand hooked, the other exploring. Then he hooked it, too, firmly, and swung a foot up, jamming not his toes but his heel into some unseen recess. Then, another quick explore with a hand, a grip, and the other foot came up. The city wall was only three manheights here; a moment more, he'd vanished over the edge, and she could hear his sandals pattering down the steps on the other side.

He trotted easily out through the gateway, and threw himself down again on the grass by the brazier. "Four bronze," he said, between amused and triumphant.

"Tiranen," called Selchae, standing, "a word?"

He collected his four coins and came over to her. "Sergeant?"

"You did that very swiftly. Was this wall particularly easy?"

"Thank you, Captain. It was not hard. Any wall built by men is easier than the sea cliffs, for the joints are regular. All you need do is find them. It is not high. And very often a bit of mortar has fallen away, as here."

"Aye," said Selchae. "It seemed to me you used your fingertips more than your eyes?"

"When you climb, you cannot see your grips anyway, for they are above you. Yes, eyes help, but it is mostly fingertips, as you saw."

“Could you climb it at night? In fog?”

“Night would not make it much harder. A bit. Fog? If it is very high, and it is cold, your muscles may cramp, and that is not good. How high are you thinking?”

“A manheight above this?”

He looked at her with sudden attention. “Aye. The old part of the ward – the south-east corner – is weathered, and the joints are open.”

“That’s what I was thinking.”

“You should not have that.”

“I know, Princess. But I do have it, and you should.”

“But you can make armour from it?” Selchae, running her hands over the fine, short fur, looked doubtful.

“Not of it,” he said, “but with it. You cannot wear bronze armour in any case; it is too heavy, and would tire you. And no armour is perfect.”

“So what do you suggest?”

“You say you want it quiet, and dark?”

“I do.”

“So I infer you are planning a night assault – no, there is no need to tell me. A tunic of this; it will neither stop a blade nor turn one. Spaulders of oxhide flared up at the neck, scaled onto the upper arms, and then bracers of the same; that will hinder a cut from above, or the side. I’ll do the shoulders and bracers double thickness with bronze rods sewn in; bronze catches a steel blade and stops it scraping sideways. A gorget under that

but over the tunic. Bronze would be too heavy, but I have some steel plate that might do. That hinders a thrust to the throat or upper chest...”

“Will steel not reflect light?”

“Not if I blue it, Princess. Or if I enamel it black, but that would cost more. A kilt of oxhide straps – they aid against a cut to the thighs. Grieves of double leather, again with bronze rods, will hinder a low cut to the legs – or I could make you boots in the northern style, if you’d prefer? None of this will save you against a heavy blow from a sharp weapon, and none of it will save you from a firm thrust. There’s a balance between weight and protection. You aren’t strong, Princess.”

“No,” she said, “and if I am to fight I shall need freedom to move. I must be able to fight, and to keep fighting. Yes, use this. Keep it light. But XXXX, can you make it look regal? Something about it to catch the eye? I need to be able to fight, but I also need to be able to lead – and, as you say, I’m not big.”

“Some gold leaf detail on the oxhide? A crimson satin lining, showing at the collar and hem? I can emboss the leather, too, on the spaulders.”

“What will this cost me?” asked Selchae.

“None of these materials are cheap. And there is time – I shall have to bring several other men in, if you want it quickly. Do not fear, I can find men with the right skills – not one man who has all the skills, indeed, but I can find good leather workers, a man who can beat the steel, and another who can enamel – if you want enamel? Blued would look well, and be less costly.”

“Blued would look well. Yes, blued would do me. But, I say again, how much?”

“Thirty gold, Princess. I know it is a lot, but you need good armour.”

“It is a lot, and for all now gold is scarce. If I pay you all in coin – no paper – does the price come down?”

“It does, yes. Twenty seven?”

“What, in what you have set out for me, is the most expensive piece? Where could I save?”

“The steel,” said the craftsman. “I could do you an ox-hide gorget for four gold less. Without bronze rods, your bracers and grieves would be four gold less, too, but I wouldn’t advise it. And grieves rather than boots would be one gold less.”

“Aye,” said Selchae. “I am the Seal Princess, the luck of the city. If this goes well, my goodwill will be valuable to you.”

“True. If you live.”

“Then make me good armour. Make boots. Save the steel, I cannot afford it. Twenty gold – in coin, no paper – for the rest?”

The craftsman shrugged, and offered his hand. “You drive a hard bargain, Princess. Come back for first fitting in four days; it will be done in another week.”

“There’s a body been found down by the river, Captain.”

The man was weary, but he’d come half across the town quickly in the dark. Tchikharn worried about the volunteers’ alertness towards the end of the night – working all day in their trades, and then coming on watch only one night now in twelve. This man had managed to stay sharp, though.

“Drowned?” asked Tchikharn.

“No sir. Hung. In one of the burned buildings.”

“Lead on, then,” said Tchikharn. “You others, stay alert! I’ll be back as soon as I may.”

They set off quickly along the wall walk; it gave Tchikharn the opportunity to check on those men who, in pairs, were watching their sixty-four manheights length of wall.

“Has he been there long?” asked Tchikharn, not breaking stride.

“I wouldn’t swear he wasn’t there when first we patrolled tonight, for the body is in the shadows of the building; but I don’t think he was, and he cannot have been there much longer for by daylight he’d be easy seen.”

“Aye,” said Tchikharn. “Do you know who he was?”

“One of the masters,” said the man. “One of the boys knew him and gave a name, but it meant nothing to me and I don’t recall it.”

They came to the section where the breach had been; the outer skin of the wall was full height now, and the inner nearly up, but the walk wasn’t completed and the gap was still bridged by a wooden scaffold, over which they clattered. The river gleamed pewter in the first of the dawn gloaming. They ran down the steps at the River Tower, and down the riverbank past the neat pile of masoned stone which was all that now remained of Dalmethan’s house. By the ruin of the next house a group of men leant on spears, or sat on the grass. As Tchikharn approached, they got quickly to their feet and straightened.

The sergeant, a man named Konturin, greeted Tchikharn. “In here, sir.”

They ducked through a doorway in the still-standing stone undercroft wall. A heavy wooden beam, falling from higher

up during the fire that had destroyed the building, had lodged across two stone walls, and though it was very charred it still supported weight. Now it supported the weight of a man hanging by the neck from a loop of ragged rope, rope that looked in the light of the sergeant's lantern as though it might have been discarded as waste from a fishing boat.

"You didn't cut him down?" asked Tchikharn.

"No. I thought it best not to touch him. He was dead, sir, I did ascertain that."

"Aye," said Tchikharn, looking up at the body.

"Shall we cut him down now, sir?"

"No," said Tchikharn. "Best wait for daylight; it'll not be long. See if there's anything to say there was another man here."

"You think murder, sir?"

"I don't," said Tchikharn. "It looks to me as though he chose his end. But we should do our best to check."

"Aye."

"Do you know who he was?" asked Tchikharn, turning to leave.

"Aye," said Konturin. "A merchant, Master Kardurin. This was his house. His wife died at harvest time, I hear, bearing a child in the woods."

"Aye," said Tchikharn. "He might well choose his end."

Dalwhiel stopped in the doorway. "I am sorry, I had not thought to find you here."

“No,” said Selchae, getting up quickly. “It is I who am sorry. This is your lodging, not mine. I should not have come.”

“She came to... because of my father,” said Karda, explaining.

“Of course,” said Dalwhiel. “Sit. You were talking. I shall make an infusion. Ginger?”

“If you please,” said Selchae, carefully polite.

“Karda?” asked Dalwhiel.

“Thank you, Master Dalwhiel, I should like ginger also.”

Dalwhiel went out again. There was a moment’s silence in the room.

Karda spoke. “You are no longer easy with one another.”

“You cannot expect it. He left me.”

Karda reached across the table to her. “He says the spark is not dead between you?”

“No,” said Selchae. “It’s not. But I do not know where we will find a place to start again.”

Dalwhiel came in with a wooden tray of beakers. Karda closed the ledger she had been working on to make room, and he put it down on the table. He gave a beaker to Selchae.

“You are too thin, seal girl. Are you eating enough?”

Selchae shook her head angrily. “How am I to earn the coin to eat? I cannot even spin.”

“I could give...”

She cut across him. "If you dare to offer me coin for the use of my body..."

"I would not..."

She got to her feet again, the beaker of scalding ginger dangerously in her hand. "So am I no longer good enough, now you have used me and discarded me?"

"Selchae, I swear it is not..."

"Then why did you not come? The night I spat on you, why did you not come?"

"I did not take that for courtship, seal girl. I was angry. Had I come, I would have forced you."

"Idiot man," said Selchae, the venom fading out of her voice, "you could not have forced me that night. I left the door unbarred, and lay wet and open and aching. And when dawn broke and your seed was not in me, I wept. No! Don't touch me now. I am not open to you now. But if I should open to you again and you do not fill me, matters will be over between us. For ever."

"How am I to know when you are open to me?" Dalwhiel sounded wary.

"If you do not know, you are not worthy of me." She took a sip from her ginger, and put it down. "I should go."

"Will you not stay to eat? The time of the dusk meal is upon us."

She looked at him cautiously, and at the door. She glanced at Karda, and then, for a moment, at her still steaming beaker. She looked up at him.

"Thank you. If you can spare it, I should be grateful."

He nodded. "I'll go and cook."

Karda moved quickly. "I'll do it."

"No," said Dalwhiel. "Rest, and talk with Selchae. I can manage."

After he'd left, the two women sat looking at one another across the table in silence. A tear rolled down Selchae's cheek, and she scrubbed angrily at her eyes with the back of a hand. Karda reached across the table and took the hand in both hers, stopping her. Selchae took another sip of ginger.

"Selchae," said Karda, carefully, "has any man offered you coin..."

"Aye."

Only five men waited by the gate that afternoon, when Kateran, his sergeant and his clerk arrived to sign on more volunteers. The first three were processed swiftly. When the fourth man walked up to the table, the sergeant looked up at him curiously.

"This is a young man's task, grandfather; you are not called to serve."

"My nephew told me the luck of the city leads a squad here," said the old man. "I've a mind to join it."

Kateran looked up in turn. His expression was suddenly different. "Sir, as Balshar says there is no call for you to serve, but we would benefit greatly from your experience. In truth, the Princess's squad is full, and in any case your knowledge of the craft of war would serve us better as an officer than as a man. That sword you carry – that would be the one you won at the Black Ford, in the Dragon's Egg War?"

“It is, aye.”

“They say you had it from the Tyrranos of Huandun himself?”

“In defeat a man is just a man. He did not fight badly; it was strategy, not courage, that failed him.”

“Do you wish a militia sword?” asked Kateran. “They are good enough northern make, but not of that quality.”

The old man shook his head. “I have enough swords, and more than enough. Keep it for a man who has none.”

“Very well, sir. We shall have a full new squad by the end of the afternoon. Would you care to join them? I can introduce you to them at training this evening.”

The formalities were completed, and the old man left.

The sergeant looked at Kateran with awed eyes. “Was that Master Giraten?”

“Aye, sergeant, it was.”

“But he must be seventy years...”

“Most of that, certainly. But I would not wish to meet him in a fight – and nor, my lad, would you.”

“Right, sergeants,” said Kateran, “you’re a full company now. Go over to the fire yonder and choose yourself a captain. Take your time, there’s no hurry.”

They went over to the brazier in a slightly tense group. Master Giraten sat on one of the stools. A man Selchae already knew as Tyrian, once one of her father’s grooms, chose another, while three men she didn’t know shared a bench. Another sat

cross-legged on the ground, while the last put more wood on the fire, and poked at it. Selchae herself leant against the wall, standing to make up for her want of height.

There was an awkward silence.

Selchae broke it. "Friends, we have an easy task tonight. It is clear that we must choose Captain Giraten, for he knows more of war and leadership than anyone else in many days travel. He is, I'm sure, known to all of you, at least by repute. But for the rest of us, we're probably not all known to one another. My name is Selchae; I'm just a volunteer, same as the rest of you. You, sir, who are you?"

"I'm sure we all know who you are, too, Princess," said the man on the ground. "I'm called Rettan. When I'm not doing this, I'm a fisherman; I skipper my own boat."

The others introduced themselves: Bennion, a cooper; Stannen, a tanner; Sidarel, younger son of an Ariston.

"So, we are all known to one another," Selchae said. "May I call for hands for Master Giraten as captain?"

"Not so fast, my lady," said Giraten. "I joined the militia when I heard you had joined it, to serve you. You are the avatar of our goddess, luck of our city. I have led armies in the past, it's true, but I joined this one to serve; and to serve you. So, by your leave, I'll see hands for you to serve as captain."

"Master Giraten, this is no time for deference," said Selchae, stepping forward from the wall. "You know how to lead men, and I do not. I may be all the things you say, but nevertheless I am small, inexperienced, and not strong. I will follow you to the end of my ability, but we need your experience. I need your experience."

“Aye, Seal Princess. And you shall have it, I pledge you. All I can give you. But you are our leader: you were born to be. That is my vote.”

Selchae looked shaken. “Friends, then, we have heard Master Giraten named, and I have been named. Do we have other names?”

There was silence.

“Master Rettan, how do you vote?”

“I say that you should lead us, Princess. Why, you already do, as we have seen this evening. And Master Giraten is right: you are our luck. The men will follow you.”

She went round the circle. It was unanimous. The sergeants wanted her to lead.

“Friends,” she said when all had spoken, “you honour me far beyond my deserts. I pledge in turn that I shall do my very best to lead you well. You make at once proud, and humble. I thank you all.”

“I’m sorry,” said Selchae, standing in the doorway in a loose robe, her hair falling anyhow, “Come in! I was abed. Sometimes, these days, it is not easy to sleep – or, having slept, to rise. Come in! I have not yet broken fast. I shall get the fire lit,” she said, leading the way through to the kitchen. “There will be ginger. And you will tell me...”

“Selchae,” Karda interrupted gently, “might I borrow your wash-cloth again?”

“Of course,” said Selchae, lifting the cover of the pail and looking in. “Let me fill a kettle, and then you can take the rest of the water.”

She filled the kettle; Karda took the pail and clattered up the stairs. In the silence, Selchae knelt before the fire, making a small tent of kindling over tinder, and carefully arranging lumps of charcoal over it. She was still struggling with flint and steel when Karda came back down.

“You’re not very good at that.”

“No,” said Selchae. “At home – I mean, before – there were always servants.”

“I know. Look, let me do it.”

Soon, a small fire was licking under the kettle.

“I would offer you breakfast,” said Selchae, “but there’s not much food.”

“Selchae,” said Karda, “what are you doing for coin?”

Selchae bent over the ginger she was grating, her face hidden. “It’s not that I have none,” she said. “I have... things I can sell. Jewellery. But when it’s gone, it’s gone, and I have no skill to earn more.”

“Are you eating enough?”

“I must do so,” said Selchae, seriously, pouring water from the kettle into beakers. “The militia training is demanding, I have to keep my strength.”

“Selchae,” said Karda, cautiously, accepting a beaker, “would you come to our flat for the evening meal?”

“You’re on your way back from Master Pentarn,” said Selchae.

“Yes.”

“I thought you were working for Dalwhiel now?”

"I am," said Karda. "I offered Pentarn half the money Dalwhiel pays me – I must feed the children! – but he says it is not enough, and pressed his debt."

"Does Dalwhiel know you lie with Pentarn, too?"

"I do not lie with Dalwhiel!" said Karda, quickly. "Dalwhiel does not know – I hope he does not – that I still lie with Pentarn, but... I do not lie with Dalwhiel."

"Why not?" asked Selchae. "You have said that in our youth you desired him, and he is... good, to lie with."

Karda looked at her directly, over the steaming beaker.

"In truth," she said, "he said that the matter with you was not over, and that he was not minded yet to lie with anyone else."

"Ah," said Selchae.

There was silence; both women sipped their ginger.

"Ah?" asked Karda, at last, prompting.

"I should like to come and share your meal, but I do not know where it is you stay."

"You will be at militia training tonight?"

"I shall," said Selchae.

"If you can persuade a man to walk with us, I shall wait at the gatehouse for you – for it is not entirely safe in our part of the town at night."

"I have a sword," said Selchae, offended.

"I cry pardon!" said Karda. "I shall await you and your sword, and put myself under your protection."

“It’s an exercise for my company,” said Selchae. “To help bond them as unit, to help them work together at night. But it’s an exercise for another company, too.”

“Aye,” said Kateran. “But I don’t want our men killing one another. How do we tell you from a real attack?”

“Let the men on the wall know we’re coming. That makes it harder for us. And, if we find another force out on the commons at night, we’ll blow horns to warn you, and let you know the practice is off.”

“Very well. And what you say is, you can get a squad of men over the wall to open the gate from the inside. Do you carry weapons?”

“Wooden staves only, as for practice. Have the men on the wall carry wooden staves also – but have their blades stacked, in case a real attack should occur.”

“I can agree to that. You’re planning to take a boat round the end of the wall?”

“I shan’t tell you what I’m planning, Captain.”

Something swift and dark scuttled across the road ahead of them, more heard than seen.

“I don’t wonder you choose not to return home late,” said Selchae, her voice low.

“It’s not the rats I mind,” said Karda, equally softly. “Left here, and then the alley gets narrow – take my hand, and follow close.”

“You must know your way well.”

“I don’t like to carry a lantern. It makes one very visible; those who choose to hide in the shadows see you easily, but you do not necessarily see them. Up here, and have a care: the steps are steep, and the handrail is rotten.”

“Judging by the smell, it’s not just the handrail.”

“No, the tanpits are not far. And the nightsoil cart does not come round this part of the town as often as it might.”

“Uhhhgh... what did I just put my hand in?”

“Better not to know. Only two more flights of stairs.”

“Two more flights? By the seal, Karda, how high is it?”

“It’s at the top. No-one wants to live on the top floors, and so... no-one’s tried to kick us out, yet. Also, it’s up in the wind, and the smell is not so bad.”

A door opened, and at last there was a little light. There was a small room, with a bare wooden floor. The walls were of wattle and daub between studwork, and the daub was not thick; the withies from which the wattle was woven showed through, like ribs on a starveling. A small fire flickered in a fireplace, under an iron pot. Karda’s sister Karinna got up from the floor beside it, and came quietly to greet them.

“Hush,” she said. “The little ones are all asleep, but the baby has been restive. The meal is ready, and there’s water hot.”

Karda hung her coat on a peg on the wall, and drew a stool towards the fire. “Selchae, sit. Karinna, is father home?”

Karinna shook her head, her hair forming a cloud in the air. “He’s not; I have not seen him today. There’s food enough for him, if he should come.”

“Have you been out?”

“We needed water. I was not... no-one troubled me.”

more here: establish the conditions under which Karda is living

Selchae visits the House of the Mother to try to pawn the chain. There is a considerable discussion between her and the priestess. She leaves with a loan of sufficient gold, and does not have to pawn the chain.

Historically, rapiers were as heavy as contemporary edged swords, so this detail is wrong

“That sword is too heavy for you.”

Selchae looked rueful. “Aye. I tire quickly. But I have no other, so it must serve.”

“Try this,” said Giraten. “It is a northern style, called a rapier: you fight with the thrust only, never with the cut. It has a fine spring to it and parries well. That same spring means the edge is of little use; but it is light.”

She took the offered sword; it was light, the difference was startling. She tried a pass with it. “It has fine balance.”

“Aye, it’s a good one.”

She tried again, miming a parry – riposte. “Can you teach me to use it?”

“It will be a pleasure, Princess. With this and your left hand, you could be dangerous.”

“You climbed the wall without a ladder?” asked Pentarff. “I don’t believe it. That can’t be done.”

“My first man went over without a ladder, yes. He is from the long cliff, and learned climbing on the sea cliffs in his youth gathering seabirds’ eggs. He took up a light line, and with that drew up a rope, which in turn drew up a rope ladder. We made

the rope fast to some hitching eyes there are on the inside of the wall there, for horses.”

“And no-one saw you?”

“The moon was down. And Captain Kateran had guessed – as I calculated he would – that I meant to attack by the river, so he had three squads of his men there. Which was not a bad thing, for we are certainly vulnerable to a river attack. But no, I was surprised we were not seen at all.”

“Kateran, what have you to say?”

“It was well planned, and well done. As she says, I sent three squads to the river and one to the gate, so there were only four squads on the wall – and when we saw the boat on the river I moved another squad from the centre of the wall to the river end. But we were patrolling regularly. It was done well.”

“I think,” said Selchae, “the real lesson is that one company on duty at night is not enough; we should have two.”

“I said to save the steel, I thought?”

“Aye, Princess. But you said to make you good armour; and if it does not keep you alive, your goodwill is of little worth.”

“True. But this is fine work – it is beautiful! This mother of pearl...”

“It is not so costly as gold leaf, but looks well; and I thought it would be what the Seal Princess should wear. I have made a black silk half-cape to cover it for your night assault, see?”

“Aye, it looks very well. Master XXXX, this must surely have cost you more than we agreed?”

“Twenty, we agreed. I’ve seen your company training on the wall, I think I guess what you’re at. And the city needs it.”

“You have my thanks, then. And I shall not forget this.”

Hearing

Karatan cleared his throat, and rapped on the table.

The city no longer had any large public buildings. The guildhall was gone; so too were the inns. The residence was held by the Hunadun; so the hearing was held on the riverbank, between the pile of masoned stone that was all that remained of Dalmethan's house, and the wreckage of Kardurin's. That, after all, was the matter in hand. The captains sat at the table; citizens with an interest in the case, on benches on the grass. Behind and around them stood other citizens, onlookers.

"Fellow citizens," Karatan began, "We're here to discuss the disposition of the assets and goods of Master Kardurin, merchant of this city, lately deceased apparently at his own hand. We'll hear claims from Master Pentarn, from the weavers Sellin, Trannish, Pantelon, Zovran and Carnesh, and from Kardurin's daughter and heir, Karda. But first I'll ask Sergeant Konturin to speak, for he found the body. Konturin, please tell us how that came about."

"I am of Captain Tchikharn's company," said the sergeant, standing in a cleared area in front of the table. "We were on

patrol. The captain had ordered us to do circuits of the city, down Marsh Street, across the Marketplace, up Land Street, back down River Street, again up Land Street and so round. You'll appreciate such a round takes a fair while."

There were nods and sounds of agreement. Many folk present had joined the militia; they understood patrolling the town at night.

"We were on our fourth circuit," Konturin went on, "Not so much late into the night as towards the beginning of morning. The black was not quite so black, if you take me?"

Again, a murmur round the audience.

"I don't know what it was I first saw. I was – well, to be honest I was tired. Weary. And I was concerned my men were losing sharpness, so we went perhaps more slowly than we had earlier. There is a passage through the ruin, there, and from the road you could see through it to the water – the river was perhaps not quite so dark? The shape of the passage seemed odd. I halted the men and went to look."

"And what did you find, man?"

"A man hanging. Not cold, but... quite dead."

"Had you seen him at all earlier in the night?"

"No, sir, I had not."

"Did you know him?"

"I did not at first recognise him, sir. It was full dark, and I had left the lantern with the boys in the street."

"But when the lantern was brought you knew him?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

“Thank you,” said the captain-general. “Has anyone else any questions for Sergeant Konturin?”

Selchae, seated immediately beside Kateran, made a gesture; and Kateran nodded to her.

“Did you see anyone else around River Street, that night?”

“There was a boat in from Sinhua with wines, Princess; she came in late on the tide and had not unloaded. She lay at the old quay by Master Gratingen’s warehouse as was, and there were two of her crew on watch each time we passed; I couldn’t say whether it was the same two. And there was a couple of fishing boats went out, too, also from the old quay. But that was earlier in the night. The tide would have been a little after sundown, and they went out on the back of it.”

“I have no further questions,” said Selchae.

Kateran thanked the sergeant politely, and then called on Tchikharn.

“Captain Tchikharn,” he said, “when dawn had broken you inspected the area and then had the body taken down. Will you describe what you saw?”

Tchikharn left his seat at the table and went to stand on the grass. Behind him, on benches, interested townsmen looked on.

“The house has, as you can all see,” Tchikharn pointed to the ruin, “a stone undercroft, which before the fire had been mainly storerooms. The undercroft is largely firm, although the wooden structure above has gone. Some of the larger timbers of the building had not burned wholly. In particular one lay across a passage, as RRRR has described, not quite two manheights above the floor. Two old wooden crates lay tumbled, as though they had been stood one upon the other, and then one had been kicked away. These crates were damp as from the river, and in

part rotted, but not charred. The rope from which the body hung was old and worn; at a guess it had been lying in the water for some considerable time, and I was surprised it had not broken under the load. I formed the opinion that Master Kardurin had stacked the boxes, climbed upon them, looped the rope over the beam and round his own neck, and then kicked the upper box away."

"You saw no evidence that anyone else had been present?"

"The buiding had burned, and I think burned very hot. The floor was composed of ashes and charred wood, soft and dark, and with the rain we've had it held footprints well. But the sergeant and his men had walked through before me. I saw no footprints that cannot be accounted for innocently, and nothing that spoke to me of struggle."

Kateran thanked him and again asked for further questions. There were none, and Tchikharn returned to his seat.

"Mistress Karda," said Kateran, "can you tell us how your father was in the days prior to his death?"

Karda had been sitting together with her siblings and a few friends in a close group on one of the benches. Now she came to stand in front of the table, dressed simply in her plain grey robe.

"He was... I think his mind was overset by the death of my step-mother," she said. "He did little, ate little, said little. He was very anxious for the return of the ship called the Raven, for he had sent some fine cloths north with her and hoped for some profits from that venture. But, as you know, the season when the northern ships ride the seas is past, and she had not come. He had tried to reach agreement with Master Pentarn over his debts, but had not done so."

Dalwhiel intervened. "Mistress Karda, I know you kept your father's ledgers, of recent years. Do you know what is become of them?"

"I don't, sirs. My father said that he had left it in a strong box in the basement of the house, along with the clays of the mortgage and other things of value. And indeed, of my own knowledge I can say that that is where they were generally kept. But my father had searched the wreck of the house, but had not found them. And I have, too. I believe that the box – or the remains of the box, which should surely include the clays – is not there."

There was a murmuring round the hall.

"The mortgage was with Master Pentarn, I believe?" Kateran asked.

"It was sir, yes."

"Mistress Karda, tell us as clearly as you can what you understand to be the terms of the mortgage."

"I know it was for a great sum, to be repaid over fifteen years of which three had run. I know that there was a fixed amount to be repaid, but not fixed annual payments. I know three payments had been made. More I cannot say."

"Mistress Karda, you have seen the clay which Master Pentarn has placed into the court regarding the mortgage?"

"I have."

"Can you say whether it is a true copy?"

"Sirs, I cannot. As others have said, what should be the imprint of my father's signet is smudged and I cannot declare it is his; but equally I cannot declare that it is not. The terms of

the mortgage as described on the clay are consistent with what I know, although the sum is a shock.”

Dalwhiel nodded, and looked to Kateran.

“Thank you, Mistress Karda,” said Kateran. “Does anyone have any questions they would put at this stage?”

There were none. “Mistress Karda, would you take a seat; we shall want to talk with you again later. Master Pentarn, pray step forward.”

There was a shuffling from the benches. Master Pentarn stepped into the open space in front of the table resplendent in robe of wine and gold brocade, belted with gold chain, and with an elaborate fur hat with a large brooch of gold and amber. He bowed to the table, put his hands together, and waited.

“Master Pentarn,” said Dalwhiel, “the captains have asked me to question you as I am more knowledgeable of the ways of merchants than some of my colleagues.”

“Captains,” said Pentarn, “you know that Master Dalwhiel now employs the girl Karda to keep his books, and doubtless – though I know it not – she serves him also in other more personal ways. Ways in which I know for certain she is used to hire herself out. I question whether Master Dalwhiel can act without interest in this matter.”

Dalwhiel looked to Kateran, who signalled to him to carry on. He turned again to Pentarn. “Master Pentarn, we commit contracts to clay because it provides an indelible and unalterable record.”

“We do,” said Pentarn, “yes.”

“And so we use it for important contracts – ones where it is important to be certain of the terms.”

Again Pentarn agreed: “yes.”

“So it’s usual to check a clay carefully before it’s committed to the kiln?”

“Yes,” agreed Pentarn. “Of course.”

“Yet you will agree that Master Kardurin’s signet is not clearly imprinted on this?”

“Sirs,” said Pentarn angrily, “I resent the imputation that this clay is other than a true record. The girl has told you clearly that she was aware of the terms of it.”

“The general terms, indeed. And turning to the tablet, I see that Master Kardurin warranted that he would keep the property in good order, and do nothing to decrease its value.”

“That’s correct,” said Pentarn.

“Do you contest that Master Kardurin did not keep the property in good order, or that anything he did decreased its value?”

“It is not in good order now, nor is it valuable.”

“Indeed.” Dalwhiel paused, and then looked up again. “Master Pentarn, would you tell us clearly what judgement you wish this court to make?”

i.e. 3,600 coins. An average artisan earns slightly more than one gold a month, although the skilled weavers earn significantly more – about 6-8 gold. So this mortgage implies the house cost 240 man-years of artisan time to build. Think of it as Â£5.4 million. Of course, some of the work will have been highly skilled and presumably higher cost, but still this is an eye-watering amount and I'm not suprised there's skepticism

“Sirs, I am owed more than seven stones in gold. I desire that the court should award me, should the ship called the Raven return, all profits from Master Kardurin’s adventure thereon; and in the meantime, that all those goods of which Kardurin died possessed be sold at open auction, and the proceeds awarded to me.”

“Master Pentarn, you know – for I see you sit with weavers Sellin, Pantelon and Trannish – that you are not the only claimant on Master Kardurin’s estate. Why should the proceeds be awarded solely to you?”

“Why, sirs, of course all claimants should be recompensed in full measure. But here is the rub: there are not sufficient monies, and we cannot any of us be. Yet I was a secured creditor, so, surely, Captains, my claim must be settled first.”

“But the security for your loan was the house, which, as we understand, both Kardurin and, since his death, Karda, have freely offered to surrender to you?”

“The house is no longer worth what was secured on it.”

“Indeed not; I did not say it was. But it was your security, so in so far as it has been offered back to you, are you not now, for the balance of the monies owed to you, just as much an unsecured creditor as these other claimants?”

Pentarn frowned, and paused for a moment. “That is for the judgement of this court,” he said at last. “But even if you so find, the monies owed to me outweigh those owed to these others by many times over; so the majority of any value realised must be mine.”

“And what of Kadrurin’s family? What of Mistress Karda and her siblings? Would you have them destitute?”

Pentarn looked angry for a moment, and his fist clenched on the buckle of his belt; but his voice remained smooth. “Master Dalwhiel, sirs, surely no-one here imagines that Master Kardurin’s profit from the Raven would be seven stones, even of silver. No: even should the Raven yet return, I – and my fellow claimants – must need be greatly out of pocket. And the Raven is now fully a season overdue. We know that the sea passage is risky, and there must be fear that she will not return. Therefore all there is of value wherewith to settle even a small fraction of Kardurin’s debts is his daughters. The three elder, at least, should find a market...”

There was a murmur round the crowd – a mix of shock, surprise, disfavour. Selchae leaned forward in her seat.

“Master Pentarn,” she said, “say this clearly so that all may hear. Are you proposing that Master Kardurin’s daughters be sold into slavery to pay his debts?”

“Madam,” said Pentarn, “I am.”

“Master Pentarn, you claim that you are yet owed seven stones in gold, and these weavers together claim the best part of another. While I have heard tell,” she said, glancing at Dalwhiel, “of far more being paid for a particularly desired slave, I believe – for I have heard him say so – that none of my father’s concubines cost him above sixty-four gold. So even if Karettae is considered old enough to have value in the market, selling the three elder daughters would not pay off one sixteenth part – four bronze in the gold – of the amount that is claimed. Is it right to sell young women into rich mens’ beds for such a small return? And what of the younger? Would you leave them as babes on the street, to beg what they might or starve?”

Pentarn hooked both thumbs into his belt, and stared back at her. "The life of a concubine, Madam, is not so harsh."

"Do not presume to tell me," Selchae replied, "of the life of a concubine. Do not presume to tell me of the life of a slave. I know these things far better than you. And I ask you again, do you consider it right that these girls should be sold?"

"Madam," said Pentarn, "I see no alternative."

"I see," said Selchae. "In that case I have no further questions."

The weavers came next. Zovran recounted that Kardurin had had eight bolts of figured silk from him for cash – four gold the bolt – and had taken another four bolts against a note of hand, which he produced. [the schoolmaster] noted that Zovran was owed sixteen gold, and he returned to his seat. Trannish stood next. He was known as a weaver of brocades. He'd sold Kardurin eight bolts at six gold and four silver each, taking half the payment in coin, half in paper. Again, he had the paper, and his debt was noted.

After him came Carnesh, a younger man who had only become an independent weaver in the past two years. His story was similar, although his cloth was plain undyed silk twill, and he'd sold it at only three gold a bolt; but he had, he said, sold twelve bolts. His house had been one of those on Land Street that had burned, and he had lost the paper – along, as he said sadly, with his loom and four more bolts of twill. Kateran questioned him sharply on the price, but Carnesh held his ground, and Dalwhiel nodded, clearly satisfied. Carnesh's debt was noted and he sat down.

Next called to the table was weaver Pantelon. Pantelon said that Kardurin had had from him twelve bolts of heavy brocade, woven of silk but with threads of gold – wonderful stuff, he said at length, of great beauty – a pattern of golden willow twigs on a lake of azure; and another with golden roses on crimson. Fully worth the price of eight gold the bolt that Kateran had willingly offered – but in paper, not in coin.

There was another rustle of muttering round the hall. Karda stood from her seat, and asked if she might put a question.

“Captains,” she said, “you have already heard that I was used to keep my father’s ledger. I recall clearly the debts to these other weavers, because I was anxious about the level of debt he was carrying. But Weaver Pantelon, indeed I do not recall any note of this transaction with you. At what season did you agree it?”

“Why,” said Pantelon, “I understand that your father might not have told you, for I well remember him saying to me how much you nagged and worried at him about his owings. But it was as the Raven lay at the quay.”

Now Dalwhiel put a question. “Weaver Pantelon, when Shearwater went north this spring, we took with us eight bolts of your brocades, which you directed us to deliver to your agent in Galakhan. And you’ll recall I gave you his purse for them, not two seasons ago.”

“Of course, sir. I remember it well.”

“The brocades you sent with us – for I inspected them later, in the market at Galakhan – were of fair quality, but not of the quality you have described. I recall no golden thread.”

“Indeed not, sir, for I began on the finer stuff only after you had left. I took very great pride in it.”

“I see,” said Dalwhiel. “So you wove twelve bolts of very fine heavy brocade between the Eye and the Foot?”

“Well, to be truthful, sir, I had of course woven the most of them before...”

“Yet you waited for the Raven to sell them? And when she came, you sold them to Master Kardurin rather than shipping them to your agent?”

“Well, sir, in truth, I’d laid out a great deal on gold thread, and needed the coin...”

“I see. Yet you took paper?”

“Well, sir, I did. You’ll recall that Kardurin was a persuasive man, and free with the wine. And it was a good price, sir.”

The guard room in the River Tower was crowded with all the captains gathered round its table. Seats scraped. Kateran rapped the table, and there was hush..

“Captains, we should be as brief as we may, for the citizens will want a judgement today if we can reach it. Who would speak first?”

“There are two matters to decide,” said Dalwhiel. “Whether the mortgage should stand, given that the house was lost in war through no fault or want of care on Kardurin’s part; and whether we give any credence to Weaver Pantelon’s tale.”

“Three matters,” interrupted Selchae, sharply. “Whether we will stand to see women of this city guilty of no default or hurt sold as slaves to settle someone else’s debt.”

“I stand corrected,” said Dalwhiel. “Three matters.”

“In established law,” said Kateran, “how read you the first matter?”

There was silence round the table. The schoolmaster broke it.

“I think there is no precedent,” he said. “Mortgages are a new thing in this city. In the past when a loan was secured on an item, the lender would hold the item, and was responsible for its safe keeping.”

“Master Kardurin warranted he would keep the property in good order,” said Pentarff. “He failed to do so.”

“True,” said Kollirn. “But not through his fault.”

“Luck is as you make it,” said Pentarff. “My father made compact with Swift Company, and our house was not burned.”

There was a silence.

“And therein hangs another matter,” said Kateran. “Your family has suffered relatively little in this war, and has contributed relatively little – far less than Master Dalwhiel here, for example – to the protection and restoration of our city. Should we benefit your father – who was richest in the city before all this began, and has suffered less loss than most – and leave weaver Carnesh, and young Karda and her sisters, destitute or worse? I see little of justice in that.”

“A man must stick to his bond,” said Pentarff. “His signet is on that clay.”

“Aye, there’s the rub,” said Kollirn. “He’s dead, and we cannot say for certain that it is. Just as we cannot say for certain what, if anything, Weaver Pantelon sold him. A weaver does not weave twelve bolts of very fine brocade in a season. Nor would he send it at another man’s adventure when he already has his own agent. Nor do I understand why Kardurin

would pay one weaver all in paper, when he paid the others half in coin. So I do not credit Pantelon's tale. And though all acknowledge there was a mortgage, it is a careless merchant that consigns a clay to the kiln so flawed. There was a mortgage, this we know. But is that a true copy of it? That, I don't."

"Do you question," said Pentarff, rising sharply from his seat, "do you dare to question, old man, my father's word?"

"Sit down," said Kateran. "He does, and so do I. This all smells of greed."

"There was a mortgage," said Dalwhiel.

"Aye," said Kateran. "Well, your a merchant, you understand these things. What is your judgement on the mortgage?"

Dalwhiel shrugged. "As Pentarn said, I'm not a neutral judge. Kardurin was my friend, and his daughter is my friend. But for myself, I'd say the mortgage was secured on the house, so let Master Pentarn take the house in settlement of it."

There was a murmur of agreement.

"Shall we take a vote on that?" asked Kateran.

"I protest!" said Pentarff. "The house is worthless."

"Aye," said Kollirn. "Like many other folks property in the city, thanks to Swift Company, with whom your father compounded. Yet his house is not, and you have inherited Master Gratingen's besides; so your family does not come out of this so ill."

Pentarff shifted uneasily in his seat. Kateran looked at him along the length of the table, waiting to see if he'd speak. He didn't.

“The matter of the weavers, then,” said Kateran. “Do we contest any of their tales save Pantelon’s?”

There was silence.

“Do we accept that there is any debt owed to Pantelon?”

“No,” said Tchikharn, speaking for the first time. “The man clearly lied.”

“Aye, but was it all untruth?”

“Item, he had never woven with gold thread before,” said Dalwhiel. “Item, Kardurin paid everyone else at least half in coin. Item, the cloth I’ve seen him sell before is only fair. Item, he would not send his goods by a merchant when he had his own agent.”

“That’s damning,” said Kateran. “So you wholly disbelieve him?”

Dalwhiel shrugged. “How can we know?”

“Either he’s owed nothing because he sent nothing,” said Tchikharn, “or he’s owed nothing because he lies. Either way he’s owed nothing.”

“And the last matter?” asked Selchae.

“There is no question,” said Dalwhiel. “We do not sell one person for another’s debts. Do we?”

There was silence round the table. Again Pentarff shifted uneasily, and was silent.

“That isn’t enough,” said Selchae. “Karda has five sisters younger than herself to support. She must have what returns with the Raven – assuming the Raven returns, which I trust she will. Do you not agree?”

“Weaver Carnesh is also left destitute,” said Dalwhiel, “and he has an elderly grandmother to keep. The other weavers are not rich men – although, equally not poor, but of a middling way. They cannot afford to lose the fruits of half a years work.”

“Many have lost more,” said Selchae.

“Aye,” said Dalwhiel. “But – if the Raven returns – a joint adventure on the cargo we know Kardurin sent should pay all the weavers coin and leave a comfortable sum beside.”

“Very well,” said Selchae. “So be it. But the debt is against the cargo on the Raven, and not against the womens’ freedom.”

“The weavers sold their cloth,” Pentarff protested. “They could have sent it joint adventure, but did not. They are due their coin!”

“They are,” agreed Selchae. “But there isn’t any.”

Again, there was silence. Kateran let it stretch for a long moment.

At last he said, “is that our judgement?”

There was a rumble of assent.

The Castellan

Tiranen looked out into the thin, driving rain. “Tonight? She wants to go tonight? I thought we were waiting for fog.”

“It is foggy,” said Krenshan. “And the sentries will all be sheltering out of the rain. It’s pissing cold.”

“Aye,” said Tiranen. “Lovely. All right, I’ll go tell Bennion and Giraten. Meet you at the boats before... well, we’ll not see moonrise in this. But thenabouts.”

“Quick as you can. No-one will want to wait around in this.”

The two fishing boats, masts lowered, scraped through under the arch of the bridge nearest the eastern shore. One remained under the shelter of the bridge, staying out of the rain; the other made a wide arc across the river, keeping as far as possible from the brooding bulk of the Residence just visible though the murk, and crept round the point past the sacred steps and the seal colony, to come to land again in the shallow muddy bay to

the east. Dark, wet figures crept across the dark, wet rocks into the shelter of the eastern wall.

Above, the sound of boots faded; the sentry had passed on his wallhead patrol.

Selchae, her seal-fur armour running with water, looked up at the wall. She turned to Tiranen. "Are you sure you can do it in this rain?" she whispered.

Tiranen unwrapped the long cloak he'd worn to keep him as warm and dry as possible as long as possible, and nodded. "I can do it, Princess. I'll not let you down."

He tied the end of the silk line around his waist, handed her his sword-belt, and kicked off his boots.

"Good luck," she said. "The God is with you."

"The stonework on that corner is weathered by the wind," Selchae had said. "It's rough, much rougher than the city wall." She was right: it was.

Tiranen went up quickly, feeling for and finding toe-holds and finger holds in the dark. The stone was gritty, harsh on the skin, but not slippery. It helped that the east wall was out of the wind, so he had some shelter from the rain. It helped that somewhere above the cloud there was a three-quarters moon rising in the east, giving a little illumination to the pale stone. Below him, on the rocks, the company pressed themselves against the wall and waited silently, as Selchae, peering up into the dark, paid out line.

Clinging by his finger tips, Tiranen lifted himself until he could just see over the parapet; both ways were clear. He

glanced nervously up at the tower head, half obscured by the driving rain: no movement. He rolled over the top of the wall, and crouched.

“At the corner,” Selchae had said, “there’s an iron stantion leaded into the stonework. It will easily take the weight of two rope ladders.” She was right; there was.

Quickly, Tiranen drew up the silk line, and the rope ladders came up. He made them fast to the stantion, and jerked each once to say it was fast. Moments later, Selchae was on the wall, and then Kateran. Selchae handed Tiranen back his sword belt, and Kateran gave him his boots. They went quickly along the wall into the shadow of the keep, even as the rest of the squad followed.

“The lock on the door there is broken,” Selchae had said. “If you pull the door towards the jamb, it opens.” She was right; it did. She swung it wide, they went in. “First squad, the upper floors,” Selchae had said. She and Tiranen went at once up the stair.

Rothic was lying on the bed with a concubine riding him, while another knelt astride his mouth and two more were lying beside. One of the girls screamed. Rothic heaved himself off the bed, knocking the girl who had ridden him flying, staggering backwards against the wall, dragging another with him.

Selchae grinned, and nodded. “All of you against that wall,” she said. “Hands where I can see them.”

Rainwater gleamed on her helmet and her hair, on the leather and sealskin armour, on her long, bright blade. Small as she was, she was determined, prepared, dangerous. The concubines backed quickly. Outside on the stair, other feet went up rapidly; XXXX and YYYY, going for the lone sentry on the roof.

Below, another tramping of feet – Stannen’s squad, in. “Second squad, the corridor,” she’d said; and they were there.

Rothic still held the girl in front of him, shielding him. Others lined shivering against the wall beside him. There was a pause, and in that pause a scuffle was heard above, and a choked off cry. Then XXXX’s voice came clearly, calmly, “Boat there, what boat?”

Selchae grinned wider, and looked at Rothic. “The castle’s mine. I’ll take your surrender.”

“I thought you’d come back to give me pleasure?”

“I’ll take your surrender,” said Selchae.

“Damned if you will!” Rothic hurled the girl he was holding at Tiranen, who stumbled back, trying not to cut her, and ran at Selchae. The point of her sword went into his chest just above his heart, and he stopped, his eyes wide, looking down at the blood.

“Hands behind your head,” said Selchae, as Krenshan came in through the door. “Walk backwards, slowly. You don’t want this sword going any deeper. Before he’d got to the wall, XXXX was there, too.

“Roof’s clear, Princess,”

“Good man,” said Selchae. “The sentry?”

“Went over the edge.”

“Bennion’s squad have the corridor, Princess,” said Krenshan. “Rettan’s have gone downstairs. There were two sergeants in the offices. I had to kill one of them.”

Selchae nodded. She looked at Rothic down the length of her blade. “Turn around slowly,” she said.

“I surrender, Princess.” His eyes were still on the blood, leaking down his chest from the tip of her sword.

“Too late. Turn around.”

He turned very slowly; she pulled the sword back just enough to let him, but let its sharp tip trail against his skin as he turned. “Hands behind you. Tiranen, bind him. Girls, into your dormitory, lock the door and slide the key out under it.”

Tiranen knelt, and tied Rothics wrists viciously tight with the thin silk line. He stood again, ducking away from Selchae’s blade, and she sighed, stepped back, and sheathed it. “Good work all of you,” she said. “And judging by what I can’t hear outside, good work everyone.”

Outside was only the sough of the wind; there was no clamour of arms.

“Your plan went well, Princess,” said Krenshan. “I had faith it would.”

“Did you?” She grinned, a different grin, less fierce, more relaxed. “I didn’t. Come, I must go down and check we have the hall secure. Bring the prisoner, he can lodge in the dungeon for now. XXXX, stay here and guard the women, I’ll send relief for you presently.”

She clattered off down the stairs. Stannen’s squad did indeed hold the corridor, as she’d ordered. She congratulated them, and Stannen confirmed that Giraten’s had seized the south gatehouse of the outer ward, without a fight. She ran lightly down to the hall, and found RRRR’s men reporting no trouble. She let Krenshan and Tiranen go past her down to the dungeon with Rothic, and then ran back up to the corridor. As she got there, one of Tyrian’s men came in from the wall.

“The sentry came round again. We weren’t able to take him; he got away, and will have raised the alarm.”

“Are all the men up?” asked Selchae.

“Aye, Princess, they are.”

“Then it hardly matters. We’ve twice the men they have, and the only places they can attack are at the south gatehouse and at the corner your squad hold. Come, I’ll join you.”

The wall walk was crowded, now. Another squad were coming into the keep, while KKKK’s had gone to reinforce Tyrian. Selchae got past, and hurried on to the north-east corner. When she got there, KKKK was urging Tyrian to attack, and take the outer ward.

“What were my orders?” she asked.

“Hold the postern, Princess, and I’m holding it.”

“Aye, and you’ve held it well. I am pleased with every man, tonight. KKKK, take your men to – wait, who’s that?” A dark figure was struggling with the bar on the inner ward gate.

“Damn!” said Selchae. “It was going so well. Anyone who dares, follow me!” She jumped off the wall walk and half ran, half tumbled down the steep tiled roof of the stable. At the eaves, she grabbed at the gutter in passing, and used it to break her fall enough that she was able to jump down onto the cobbles with her ankles intact. Winded and unsteady, she drew her sword and ran across the yard at the man by the gate.

He’d heard her coming, and turned; he had no sword, but a sturdy cudgel. Behind him, the postern swung open and another man stepped through – and this one had a sword. Selchae paused, breathing hard. They advanced on her, separating. She looked from one to the other, and judged the swordsman the more dangerous. She engaged him fiercely, her sword hissing,

light in her hand. Surprised, he parried and backed, and she followed her advantage, not knowing what had become of the man with the cudgel. Again she attacked, and again he parried, and took another step backwards, against the boards of the gate. There were confused noises behind her. She attacked again, using the point of her light sword. He beat it away again but this time came through with a hissing riposte she only just avoided. She staggered backwards, winded and breathing hard. Now he came on in an attack, and her left epaulet took a heavy blow. She fell back again, knowing she had not the strength to parry his blade.

And suddenly her own men were around her and her attacker was overwhelmed.

She looked around, quickly. The cudgel man was down, dead, it seemed; her own attacker and another Huandun were fighting fiercely with her men, but being driven back. "The postern," she called. "Secure the postern!"

Someone did. One of the Huandun was down, and the other had surrendered. There was shock and heavy breathing in the courtyard, and wild cheering from the walls. Selchae walked up the steps to the keep door, and rapped the great knocker.

"Open up, RRRR!" she called. "It's Selchae."

There was a clanking of bars, and the door opened.

"Inside, everyone," she said. "Get the prisoner down to the dungeon. And, RRRR, when they're all in, bar the door again. I think all's well, but let us not be over-confident."

The smell from the oubliette was rank. It smelled of shit and spoiled meat and worse things. Krenshan lowered the lantern slowly through the hatchway, and what in the gloom what

they'd taken for the floor started to gleam. It was not exactly water, not exactly mud.

There were bodies of rats in it, drowned. As the lantern lowered further they could see rats running around a ledge in the wall: dozens of rats. In the corners where the surface seemed firmer, rats were climbing down off the ledge and venturing out across it. At an oddly shaped lump in the surface the rats clustered, gnawing at something. Something dark, something reddish.

"See there, where the rats are gathered," said Selchae curiously. "Can you get the light nearer?"

Krenshan suddenly pulled the lamp up, fast, hand over hand, and the rats were lost again in the dark.

"Krenshan!" said Selchae. "Lower it down again. I wanted to..."

"No, Princess, you did not. Trust me on this."

He looked across the basement at the barred cell, where Rothic sat against the wall. "Huandun, who was in the oubliette?"

Rothic ignored him.

Selchae walked slowly across towards the bars, a look of horror gathering in her face. "Ariston Rothic," she asked, "who was in the oubliette?"

Rothic kept his eyes studiously down, and said nothing. Selchae looked at Krenshan.

"We'll have to send someone down to fetch the bodies up," said Krenshan, practically.

Rothic shuddered.

“Are you volunteering, Huandun?”

“Please!” said Rothic. “Please not that. Anything but that!”

Selchae looked at him, shocked and hollow. “It’s my parents, isn’t it? You had my parents down there when I was in your bed – when you took my maidenhead?”

Rothic turned his face away, and said nothing.

“It’s my parents.”

“You can’t know that, Princess,” said Krenshan.

“Look at him,” said Selchae. “It’s my parents.”

“I’ll get the boys to bring the bodies up,” said Krenshan. “Then we’ll see.”

There were, indeed, two bodies. The male body still wore a ring. A very identifiable ring. Selloch’s ring. Krenshan himself cleaned them up as best he could, but they were put in the stables, because the smell was too awful to bear.

It took six men to get Rothic down through the hatchway; he screamed, wailed, threatened, begged. It did him no good. Selchae was implacable, and her men were of a mind with her.

By daybreak the storm had blown through; dawn found the sky clear. First light shone in through the windows of the Land Gate lodging, and woke Tchikharn. He got up slowly, stretched, and scratched an itchy calf. He pulled his long trousers on, stepped into boots, looked out of the window: first east, towards the rising sun. He stretched again, and then looked south, out towards the sea. The horizon was clear; with luck, there would be no more rain for a while.

He turned away to find his shirt, and suddenly halted. He looked back. He leant on the sill with his head out of the window, eyes narrowed. He ran out of the doorway, his shirt forgotten, and up the stair to the wallhead.

“Sentry!” he called. “Sentry, what flag is that?”

The sentry looked towards the Residence, looked carefully, and suddenly let out a whoop. “That’s our flag!” he yelled. “That’s our flag!”

Tchikharn took up the great mallet in both hands and beat eight strokes on the gong.

By the time three companies had formed up to march down to the marketplace and another had gone downriver to the quay it was all over. Rothic’s remaining men opened the gate and surrendered their weapons, asking only to be allowed to leave. They marched steadily up Land Street, and were gone from the city before most folk had finished their breakfasts. There was still a crowd along the street to see them go, and jeers to hurry them on their way; but few missiles were thrown. Tchahua was happy to see the back of them.

As soon as the Huandun men were out of the gateway, Kateran led a company in, and met Selchae in the gateway to the inner ward. He congratulated her. There was nothing else to do.

“We used the dark of the night and the rain for cover. I had the men well briefed – each squad was given a task, and all knew what their tasks were. Each man carried food for a week. Had it gone ill, my plan had been that we would have retreated to the upper floors of the keep, which we could have defended

easily, and we had enough bows that from there we could have kept the Huandun off the wallhead. So even if we had been unable to take the whole residence, I thought we could have made it untenable for them.”

Selchae sat in her father’s chair, at the centre of the dais. The council of captains sat around the high table.

“Provided you got in at all,” said Kateran. “And the outer ward would have been hard to take.”

“It was not part of my plan to take the outer ward,” said Selchae, looking tired. “Once we had the inner, we could be resupplied by rope over the east wall, and again, the Huandun would have found the outer ward untenable.”

She paused, and pushed her hair back off her face. “But, we did get in. Apart from the fight in the courtyard, all went better than I’d hoped,” she said. “If we had not, we could have returned to the city; small loss, and it would still have been a good exercise for the company.”

“From what I hear, you more or less won the fight in the courtyard yourself?” asked Tchikharn.

She shrugged. “I’m little use in a fight. I’m too weak, and not big enough. But it’s a captain’s task to lead, and so I led. Men followed. Had they not, I should not be here.”

“Aye,” said Kateran. “It was a big risk. You should not have done it without consulting us.”

“Someone had to,” said Selchae. “We have but ten days until the festival.”

The council of captains were silent.

“Perhaps I had more need than anyone else. It is, in part, my body that is being fought over.”

No-one responded. Dalwhiel looked more uncomfortable than most, but all kept their eyes down.

“I lost only one man killed. His loss is grievous for his family, and I grieve for them. But he is only one, and now we control the Residence and have safe, open access to the quay. I have only three men injured – two broken legs, which I’m told will heal well, and one minor sword cut. Captains,” said Selchae, “we have the fortesss. Does it not greatly strengthen our position?”

“It does,” said Kateran, seated on her right.

“Who,” asked Pentarff from across the table, “is ‘our’? Who exactly is ‘we’?”

“We,” said Selchae, looking around the circle, suddenly anxious. “Us. The people of Tchahua. The council of captains. We. Surely?”

“Who holds the castle,” asked Pentarff. “Who is Tyrranos? Is that ‘us’?”

“The castle is two things,” said Selchae, carefully. “The castle is the Residence – the home of my family. And as a home, I claim it is mine, both by right of inheritance – although my brother might contest that – and as spoils of war, captured by my hand. As residence, I claim that it is mine. But it is also a stronghold, the stronghold of this city. I do not hold it against the city – I could not, my men are unpaid militia of this city, just as are all of yours. Let us not fight over this!”

“If you hold the Residence, Princess,” said Kateran, “if you do – and I don’t contest your right to – but if you hold the Residence, who rules the city?”

“We rule the city – as elected captains,” said Selchae. “Is that not what was agreed? Was that not Master Dalwhiel’s

proposal? I am a captain, elected as you are. I am also the Seal Princess. But the Seal Princess has not ruled this city these many years.”

“You said yourself, though,” said Pentarff, “that the reason the seal princess no longer ruled was that over the generations the Tyrranos had made her, in effect, their captive.”

“That is the point.” Selchae leant on the table, and got to her feet. She looked slowly around, her eyes hard. “Forgive me, captains, if I am crude. I wish to choose whose plough opens my furrow. I wish to choose who sows his seed in my womb. I shall not be a captive. And so I hold my residence, as I wish to hold my body, inviolate save for those I choose to welcome into it. I do not wish a man to rule me, to bend me to his will, to force himself upon me. And so I do not wish a tyrranos to rule my city. For if I am the avatar of the God of this city, as I am free so is the city free, and as I am captive so is the city captive.”

“Princess,” said Tchikharn, “you wear a slave collar.”

Her eyes flicked from him to Dalwhiel, who sat next him, and back again. “I do,” she said. “It was not forced upon me, but chosen by me. It marks something which is important to me – a gift freely given.”

“To be clear,” said Pentarff, “you do not dispute or contest the rule of the council of captains?”

“No,” said Selchae. “I have never sought to. So long as it is understood that my residence is my residence, as your residence is your residence, I am content.”

“Your residence, Princess, is somewhat special.”

“As is your father’s, Master Pentarff. But would you have the council of captains contest his ownership of it?”

There was silence. Pentarff looked down. After a moment, Selchae sat carefully back in her father's chair.

Kateran looked around the table. "Has anyone anything further to say on this matter?"

No-one spoke.

"There is another matter," said Kateran, "and it is not unrelated to the last. We had word last night from your brother, Princess."

"You did? What had he to say?"

"He says Red Company are back; they camp to the east of the river, a days march north of Sind Ferry. He says that he and those with him wish to make common cause with us, and return to the city."

There was murmuring round the table; it was clear that some already knew, but most were surprised.

"Does he still claim to be Tyrranos?" asked Dalwhiel.

"He does."

"In what number?" asked Tchikharn.

"Substantially as they went north, it would seem. Selachen says eight legions."

"Does he say what they are doing?"

"He does not."

"This is ill news indeed," said Pentarff.

Selchae, who had slipped away from the table, returned. "Captains, might I invite Sergeant Giraten to our discussion? His experience might aid us."

There a murmur of assent, and Giraten took a seat between Tchikharn and Kollirn.

Pentarn broke in again "Can we hold them at the ferry?"

"We don't know their intentions," said Tchikharn.

Giraten agreed. "Remember, a legion of theirs will beat a legion of ours in the field – easily. Probably all of ours. If we venture forth from our walls, we risk being outflanked in the field. The ferry is not the only place they might cross."

"More to the point," said Dalwhiel, "can we hold them at the wall?"

"It depends what they intend," said Tchikharn.

"He's right," said Giraten. "The wall will hold a frontal assault, if the men are steady. It won't hold against treachery, as we've seen; and if the men are not led well it won't hold. It cannot be outflanked by the marsh – at least, not in such a manner that we cannot defend – but it can be outflanked by the river, if they have time to gather barges or build rafts. If I had so many men, against this city, I'd place enough on the common to keep us busy on the walls, and send the rest downriver in barges; and when the barges arrived I would mount one assault on the wall towards the marsh end, and one assault from the river."

"Would you win?" asked Dalwhiel.

"At cost," said Giraten. "Unless the defence broke early, both assaults would be costly. But, further, I might simply build seige engines and beat at the wall until it breached, and then assault the breach in great force. That would be costlier in time – much costlier – but not so costly in lives. For the attackers, anyway."

"Then all is lost," said Pentarff. "We should surrender."

“We don’t know their intentions,” said Tchikharn again. “We don’t even know that they are there, save that Selachen says so. But they are mercenaries: they will not risk great loss except for great pay, and this city no longer contains much treasure. So unless someone is funding them with an eye to its strategic value, it is not likely that they will mount an assault – if we make clear it would be costly to them.”

“To the matter at hand, then,” said Kateran. “Do we admit Selachen and his band to the city?”

“How many has he?” asked Kollirn.

“Some legion and a half of fighting men,” said Kateran, “he says – and that agrees with what others have reported. Also, some two thousand other folk – families, and others who desire the protection of the wall.”

“Can we house so many?” asked Pentarff.

“Many dwellings still stand empty,” said Kateran. “But there are many,” he glanced at Karda, who was keeping notes, “whose tenancy might be contested.”

“We cannot feed so many,” said Dalwhiel. “They would have to bring their own food – sufficient for a siege.”

“So,” said Selchae, “the matter is this. A legion and a half would bring us up to four on the wall – which would help. But a legion and a half would also be enough to start a civil war within the city, which would not. He cannot come in while he claims to be Tyranos. He must swear – and those with him must swear, also – to abide by the rule of this council, and to renounce any claim to rule.”

“You think he will agree to that?”

"I don't," said Selchae. "Nevertheless, he must. If he comes within the wall with ambition, he is more dangerous inside it than the Red Company outside."

"I fear you may be right," said Dalwhiel.

"I am," said Selchae. "Also, we have very good reason to believe that my grandmother was behind the plot to kill Dalwhiel. It is my view that she may be permitted to return, save as a prisoner."

"Selchae," said Tchikharn. "You know your brother. If we accept his word, we put many peoples lives at risk by it. Is he to be trusted?"

"I am not certain that he is. Kollirn, you taught him?"

"I am not certain that he is, either. But if Red Company seige us here, are out present militia sufficient?"

"If Red Company mean to seige us here," said Giraten, "then as I say we are lost with Selachen or without him. Nevertheless, I say we bring Selachen inside the wall for three reasons: first, with his men we make the city more costly for Red Company, and thus make the price higher for their customer. This is a merchant's war: assaults may be deterred by cost."

Heads nodded.

"For a second thing," Giraten went on, "if he is within the wall he is under our eye. If we do not intend him to be tyrannos, we must watch him. For a third, the men with him are not loyal to him for reward. Some are loyal because he think he may be able to reward them in future, and some are loyal first to the Goddess and the city. And those men can be persuaded to transfer their loyalty, over time. If they're here."

"It's true," said Kateran. "But he's still dangerous. He has half as many men as we do."

“He does,” said Giraten. “If the Princess will permit it, I would suggest we use the Residence as a fortress. That we fill the barrack blocks with all those militia who do not have wives and families within the city; and that instead of moving horses back in, we clean out the stable blocks and make of those barracks too. If the residence is strongly garrisoned, we can control the city; and if those whom Selachen and his party might want to attack – I include you, Captain General, as well as the Princess and Master Dalwhiel – lodge within the fortress, assassins are less likely to succeed.”

“We should send someone to find what Red Company intend,” said Kateran.

“Aye,” said Giraten.

“I met with their Captain General at Tcha’hua,” said Dalwhiel, “and had easy talk with him. I could go up under banner of peace; I could deliver our reply to Selachen on the way.”

“I should go with you,” said Tchikharn.

“There is much to do in the city,” said Dalwhiel. “You’ll be needed. Selachen won’t act against me now if he desires to be admitted, and Red Company won’t act against banner of peace. And we’ve enough horses that I can take two squads from my company. It will be good exercise for them, and good for them to know that they are trusted.”

“Very well,” said Tchikharn, doubtfully.

“Are we agreed on this,” asked Kateran.

They were.

“Has anyone any further matters to discuss?”

"I have," said Selchae. "It is a related matter, and it will not wait."

"Go on."

"We have, as I said, but ten days until the festival. We should hold the festival. It will raise morale in the city, and it will establish the legitimacy of our rule. But I will not have my grandmother control it, for those days are past."

She looked around the table thoughtfully, from one man to another. She had their attention.

"I must celebrate the festival. That is my duty and my fate. But I shall celebrate it in my way; that is my right. I ask you to support you in this."

"Indeed, you must celebrate it," said Kollirn. "And indeed we must support it. So as we cannot force you to celebrate it in a manner you do not choose, I agree we must support you in this. But still, you must have a champion."

"I must," said Selchae. "We know that of old the champion was chosen at a winter games. We know that of old the games were not lethal, for we know in history that there were men who were champion in one year, then for some years not, then champion again. We know that my six-times great grandfather slew the champion at a festival and took his place, and we know that since that day each year some poor convict has been filled so full of brandy he could barely stand, and sent out onto the rocks as 'champion' to be slain by the tyranos."

"But I think that we do not know how of old the champion was chosen. We do not know if he was the winner of some particular game, or selected by some other process. Am I right, Master Kollirn?"

Kollirn nodded. "I do not know. I think it was not always the same, or else it changed over time. Tradition has it that GGGG won a horse race, and there is the story that FFFF, who was champion although he was blind, won the attention of the seal princess by his singing."

"Nor do I think it matters," said Selchae. "What matters is that the avatar of the God meet a man who represents the city, who the people of the city will see as their representative, their champion."

Pentarff cleared his throat. "And this champion should be slain by whom?"

"Of old," said Selchae, firmly, "the champion was not slain. Under the rule of my fathers, the champion was slain as symbol of the tyrannos' conquest of the God as well as of the city, but I am the avatar of the God and I shall not be conquered."

"So how," asked Kateran, "is the champion to be chosen?"

"If the champion is to represent the city," Pentarff put in smoothly, "he must be of one of the old families of the city, a family which has been part of the city for generations."

"Or else," said Kollirn, "he must be someone who has done great service for the city."

"It is for me to choose my champion," said Selchae.

Pentarff moved in his seat as if to speak, and then sat back.

Kollirn stood, as though unwillingly. "This council represents, if any does, the city, yes?"

There was agreement.

"I think that the champion must represent the city, and so that it should be seen that the champion is named by this council, as this council was named by the city."

Again, he waited for agreement before going on.

“But it would seem natural – and many will wonder if this is not the case – that the champion should be the leader elected by this council.”

Several people sought to speak at once. Kateran banged his fist on the table. “One at a time!” he called. “Selchae?”

Selchae shook her head. “I have said what I have to say.”

Dalwhiel moved to speak, but Tchikharn, beside him, took his wrist, firmly, and shook his head.

Pentarff took his opportunity. “Captain-General Kateran would be a worthy choice, but perhaps someone from one of the great families of the city would be better?”

Selchae looked at him with an expression of disdain. There was silence round the table. Finally, Kateran got slowly to his feet.

“Very well,” he said. “I hear the merit of all that has been said. It is right, as Kollirn has told us, that the captain-general should be the champion. But all here know that, were it not for the words of Seal Mother Gordala, we should have elected Master Dalwhiel captain-general when first we met.”

He took off his armband with its three black stripes, and laid it on the table.

“It has been an honour to serve this city, and I have taken pride in this armband. But it is time to pass it on. May I have nominations for captain-general?”

“Wait!” Selchae was on her feet again. “This is not wise. Even if it were the case that, in this year, the same person might serve well as champion, and do those things the champion must do, and also as captain-general, to lead the city in counsel and

in its defence, it may not always be so. I think we should not set a precedent that it will be hard later to unset.”

She paused, and went on. “It is my will that I should choose my champion, and I urge you to consider my will in this. We have agreed that this council should rule, and I will bow my will to that of the council. If it is the will of this council that Kateran is named champion, I will accept the will of the council. But I do not think he should be champion because he is captain-general, nor that another should be captain-general because he is champion. These are two different roles, with different demands, and in future the city may need different men to hold them.”

“Yet the armband is on the table,” said Pentarff. “We might name Master Dalwhiel captain-general, and another as champion...”

Trekshtan spoke for the first time. “We might,” he said. “And we might not. Our Princess has spoken, and her word should have weight. She has learned wisdom, this past year. I move we confirm Kateran as captain-general, and allow the Princess her choice of champion.”

“Thank you, Tchikharn,” said Selchae. “That also is my counsel.”

Dalwhiel spoke. “I would not take Kateran’s armband from him.”

Kollirn nodded, slowly. “Both men are suited to the role.”

Pentarff moved again, and sat back. There was silence.

Selchae stood again. “Very well,” she said. “As I am candidate for neither post, I shall take the vote. We have heard both Kateran and Dalwhiel named for captain-general. Are there any other names for that office?”

She looked around the table.

“None? Good. Who here would have Kateran as captain-general?”

Dalwhiel’s hand was up at once, followed by Pentarff’s [and others]. Selchae looked hard at Tchikharn, and his hand went up. Kollirn’s and Kateran’s remained on the table.

“Carried, then. Captain-General Kateran, be so good as to put your armband on. Will you agree to accept my choice of champion?”

“Who is your choice of champion, Princess?” asked Kateran.

Pentarff leant forward in his chair. “My Princess, you know that I should be honoured to serve you in this.”

She looked at him again, disdainfully. She let the pause grow, and then she looked around.

“I shall not say – yet. For two reasons: because I wish to take counsel with friends whom I trust before I finally decide, which I hope to do today; and because I have not yet spoken of it with my preferred candidate.”

“Might we suggest a name to guide you, Princess,” asked Pentarff.

“You may. I have said I will submit my will to the will of the council. But I urge again that you name no-one, that you allow my choice in this.”

“May I see hands that we leave this matter to the Princess?”

Tchikharn’s hand was first up, followed by Kollirn’s and Kateran’s. Dalwhiel raised his, and others followed. Selchae looked hard across the table at Pentarff, but he looked steadily back and left his on the table.

Folk stirred in their seats, but no hands went up. Selchae smiled. "We are decided, then," she said, and looked to Kateran.

Kateran picked up the armband, and put it on. "Have we any further business this morning?" he asked. There was silence.

"In that case, may I offer our thanks to you, Princess, or Captain Princess, or Princess Captain, for your hospitality this morning, and our thanks and congratulations for your magnificent victory of last night."

Selchae stood again, smiling. "It has been a pleasure – truly – to invite you into my home. A pleasure I hope to repeat on many occasions to come. But for now, I am weary. I bid you farewell, and the blessings of the God go with all of you."

There was a shuffling of chairs. Men stood. Some started to move off towards the doorway; others came to congratulate Selchae personally. Her eyes caught Dalwhiel, standing irresolute. "Master Dalwhiel," she said, "and you, too, Kollirn, could you return this afternoon, after the noon meal? And Karda – please – if you would come also?"

"We are your friends?" asked Karda, sounding surprised.

"Yes," said Selchae. "Some of them."

On the Forms of Sacrament

“Your name is just Dûn?” asked Sechae.

“Yes,” said the priestess, looking out through the solar window at the seals on the rocks below. The evening light cast long shadows.

“Not Dûnae or Dûna?”

“No,” said the priestess, turning and smiling, “among my people we believe we can tell male from female without suffixes on names. But also, perhaps, among my people it perhaps matters less.”

“Matters less,” asked Selchae. “In what way?”

“I lie with men and women with equal pleasure” said Dûn. “Among my people that is not strange, nor frowned upon. It is true that there is a sacrament between a man and a woman which is not present when a man lies with a man, nor when a woman lies with a woman. But there is still joy, and sharing.”

“I see,” said Selchae. She picked up a paper off the sheaf she had brought, looked at, and laid it down again. She looked up at the priestess curiously, about to say something else.

Karda ducked in through the doorway. “We are here,” she said. “Dalwhiel is speaking with Kateran below, but will be up at once.”

“Let us sit, then. There is ginger in the jug; it should still be hot.”

Dûn and Karda sat, and helped themselves to beakers of ginger. Selchae still stood, turning through her papers.

Dalwhiel came in, and Selchae looked up at him searchingly. He smiled at her, and took a seat. “I am here,” he said. “I fear I cannot stay long.”

Kollirn followed him in, and shut the door.

“We are all gathered, then,” said Selchae, still not sitting. “Thank you all for coming.”

She looked down, fiddling with paper, and then looked up at Dûn.

“Priestess, you do not object to aiding me in this?”

“Not at all, Princess. You are the avatar of the God, I am a priest of the God. It is surely my duty to serve you.”

“But are these not different gods? The God you serve is not the Seal Goddess.”

“All gods are one God. The God has many aspects, but there is only one God.”

“So the seal and the dragon are one God?” asked Selchae, surprised.

“So we believe, yes.”

Selchae shrugged awkwardly, and sat.

“My friends – I have asked you here because you are my friends – thank you all for coming. You know that the shortest day is almost upon us, when by custom the city holds its festival of dedication. And I think that this year of all years we must keep the festival. But the festival says much about the nature of the city, and the manner of this years’ festival is certain to be contested. What is not contested is that I must celebrate it, and I wish to control the manner of the festival.”

She looked around the table. The others returned her look attentively, expectantly.

“The festival – all my life, and, from what I hear, for many generations before mine – has spoken of one thing: of the subjection of the avatar of the God to the person of the tyrannos. And I want to know how we can mount a festival which will satisfy the people and the tradition of the city which does not do that. For we do not have – and I do not wish us to have – a tyrannos.”

“Your grandmother,” said Kollirn, “wishes to have a tyrannos.”

“My grandmother will have no part in this ceremony.”

“Can you prevent her?”

“I shall,” said Selchae, forcefully. “She cannot hold the ceremony without me. I will not perform it with her taking any part.”

“The core of the festival,” said Kollirn, “is the act of generation.”

Heads nodded.

“Yes,” said Selchae. “That is essential?”

"I think so, Princess," said Dûn. "It is a sacrament."

"I agree," said Karda.

"Yes," said Selchae. "You're right. But it is also an act of theatre. All my life... at the festival, my father took my mother with great force. Vigour. Even brutality. She had no..."

"Choice?" suggested Karda.

"That too, but agency. She had no agency. She was – more a prop than an actor. All she could do of her own volition was cry out, and sometimes afterwards weep."

Selchae looked down. "And yet I know that she also looked forward to it. Some of you know that that is how I, too, prefer the act of generation. I like to be taken hard. I like to be taken suddenly. I like to feel the power of my man within me, to feel my own helplessness under him. And yet I wonder," she said, looking up again, this time directly at Dalwhiel, "whether I like it so because that is what I have been taught – through watching my parents – is the proper way."

"It need not be so," said Dûn. "The act can be slow, gentle, langorous."

"Yes," said Selchae. "I know that, in my head. But – it does not stir me, so. But that is not what I meant to say."

She turned papers again.

"The matter is this: in the ceremony, the avatar – I – I represent more than the God. I am also the mother of the city, and in being the mother of the city I also represent the city."

"The champion," said Kollirn, "also represents the city."

"That's true," said Selchae. "And the champion is chosen by the avatar – or is he the winner of the games?"

“Different stories say different things,” said Kollirn. “But when the champion was the champion, and not merely someone for the Tyrranos to slay, what mattered I believe was that he was chosen. The games might be a means through which he was chosen.”

“If I may say,” said Dûn, “I think it matters that he is chosen. The God should not be seen to lie with someone with whom he does not choose to lie.”

“He?” asked Karda.

The priestess shrugged. “The God is all things, so is at once male and female. But among my people it is the custom to see the God in the other gender to one’s own. For me the God is ‘he’, as a way of acknowledging that my body is open to him.”

“Very well, so in the ceremony I lie with a man whom I have chosen,” said Selchae. “But how do I lie with him? Is it a blasphemy if I lie with him in a way that I know will not satisfy me? Alternatively, is it a blasphemy if I lie with him in a way which others might interpret as the male subjugating the God?”

“When the act is a public sacrament, it as you say a performance. You may not be able to relax into it as you would otherwise,” said Dûn. “You will be nervous. You should not expect to be satisfied. You should seek to make it look to those who watch as though you were satisfied.”

“This affects also the champion,” said Kollirn. “He may not be able to rise for you, so you should choose a means of mounting which would conceal this from the onlookers.”

“Thank you,” said Selchae, looking at him. “I had not considered that.”

“In my land,” said Dûn, “when this is done, it is common to have another priest to help the man prepare. To help him to rise.

I have done that in the past. This ceremony is your ceremony, of course, but if I could help you in that way..."

"I see," said Selchae. There was a pause.

"I think," said Karda, "about the blasphemy, I mean. I think that it is important that it is clear throughout the ceremony that you choose, that you are at least equal – that you have, you said, agency. Agency which is at least equal. As you have said, the children of the city see this, and learn from it."

"Yes," said Selchae.

"We have five days," said Dûn, "and there is much to prepare. The sanctuary – you will use the old sanctuary?"

"Of course we shall use the old sanctuary," said Selchae, sharply. Other heads nodded.

"The sanctuary must be prepared. It must be clean, and furnished. The statues are gone, of course, and could not be replaced in time even if you had the bronze and gold, which you do not. But it should be as clean and orderly as it can be, all damage hidden."

"Yes," said Selchae. "I have some of my men at that already."

"A good altar cloth would cover some of the damage," said Dalwhiel. "There are some fine bolts I have bought lately that might serve."

"Thank you," said Selchae.

"Have you given thought to how you will choose your champion," asked Dûn.

"My champion is chosen," said Selchae, looking up at Dalwhiel, her fingers on her slave ring, "if he will serve?"

“Me?” asked Dalwhiel, surprised.

“I chose you,” said Selchae. “I gave myself to you. You know this. And although I think it can’t now be as I thought then it would be, and although you have chosen to leave me, nevertheless that gift is not yet withdrawn.”

“I should be honoured to serve you, Princess.”

Selchae smiled, for the first time. “Good,” she said. “Thank you. And yes, Dûn, I should be grateful to have you by us in this, to help in any way you can. You, too, Karda, if you will.”

“Of course. You cannot doubt it?”

“I didn’t. But I’m nevertheless grateful.”

“Dalwhiel,” said Kollirn, “when must you leave to discover what Red Company mean?”

“Directly,” said Dalwhiel. “I should have gone already were it not that the Princess asked so urgently.”

“We shall need to plan this in detail, and we must have a rehearsal before the ceremony.”

“In that case you must plan without me. I shall return as soon as I may, and surely we can rehearse on the eve?”

“The ceremony may not be delayed beyond the shortest day?”

“It should not be,” said Selchae.

“Very well,” said Kollirn. “You must go, and we must plan. And prepare, and clean!”

“I must,” said Dalwhiel.

“Yes, you must,” Selchae looked at him directly. “Be safe, my champion.”

Another homecoming

A fishing boat set out from Bridgend, crossing below the bridge to the deep water quay. Selchae, watching from the solar window, saw the gleam of bronze armour.

She got up with a sigh. “Karda, of your goodness, would you find Kateran or Tchikharn – ideally both – and ask them to come with a well armed squad to the great hall? Also, send for two squads of my company and have them come to the hall, too. And...”

“Refreshments?”

“Yes, those too.”

In her own chamber, Selchae stripped off the gown she had been wearing, and with help from Dûn, quickly armed herself, cursing the awkward buckles of her bracers. Stamping into boots, she buckled her sword-belt, and fled down the spiral stair.

Sergeant Giraten rapped on the door of the great hall, and it was opened. He led in Selachen and the aristons Keren and Fengul; they came forward and stood before the high table.

"I greet you, brother," said Selchae, coolly, from the high seat.

"You are risen high, sister," Selachen replied. "A tyranna for our city? That will be a novelty."

"No, brother, not tyranna; avatar of the God, only. The Captain-General, on my left, speaks for the governance of our city. But how may we serve you?"

"I had requested entry into the city, for myself and my forces; we are threatened, and all the people of Tchahua must stand together."

"That's true," agreed Kateran, speaking for the first time. "But the question, Selachen, is do you stand with the city or against it?"

"It is customary that you should address me by my title."

"And you, me, by mine," said Kateran. "But I am unsure what title you now claim?"

There was a long pause.

"My father was tyrannos of this city," Selachen said.

"He was," said Kateran. "But as all know, inheritance of that title was to the consort of the avatar, not to the son of the old tyrannos."

"Also," said Selchae, "our father was defeated in war, and died in consequence. The city was captured by Sinhua; it has been recaptured and secured, not by anyone of our family, but by its citizens acting together. So you may not enter this city as Tyrranos. You may enter it as a citizen, with your men

as citizens, but only if you swear allegiance to the city as represented by the council of captains.”

“On which, presumably, as leader of a substantial force, I shall sit?”

“Not necessarily so,” said Tchikharn. “Your men are welcome to join the militia, and, when they do so, to elect their sergeants and captains, as is our practice. And their duly elected captains – of which, if all join, there will be two – will have places on the council. But you may not assume a seat, unless elected.”

“And who are you to tell me this, northerner?”

“A duly elected captain of this city, speaking here as a representative of the council; which can deny you entry. but the Captain-General asked what title you claim?”

Again there was a pause. Selachen looked at his companions, but got no response from them.

“I assert that by right of inheritance, I should be tyrranos,” he said, eventually, “but I will not push that claim at this time because the defence of our city must come first. Accept me as mere Ariston Selachen.”

“Ariston?” asked Selchae. “Of what estate?”

“Why of our family estate,” said Selachen. “The estate of the Seal.”

“Which is, as you know, inherited by the female line, by the avatar.”

Again, silence.

“As you say,” said Tchikharn, “matters are urgent, and this city must stand together. So my vote is that as courtesy we

acknowledge Ariston Selachen at that rank for the present. The detail may surely be settled later?"

Tchikharn looked at Kateran; Kateran at Selchae. Selchae nodded, decisively. Kateran nodded.

"Very well," he said.

"So, brother," said Selchae, "after that long digression, how may we serve you?"

"As I said, sister, I and my forces desire entry; yet the draw-bridge is raised."

"And you swear allegiance to the council of captains?"

Selachen looked left and right; his companions, still, said nothing. He clapped his right hand to his chest.

"I swear."

"You all of you swear?"

Again Selachen looked left and right, more fiercely. Keren and Fengul also raised their hands to their chests, and swore.

"That brings us to the matter of our grandmother Gordala," said Selchae. "Is she with you?"

"She is with us; she wishes, as you may imagine, to make immediate preparation for the rededication of the City on the Longest Night."

"She is suspected of attempted assassination of a captain of the council; she will enter this city only in chains, and only to be escorted immediately to the dungeons of the residence, where she will remain until her trial. Am I clear?"

Selachen's laugh rang false.

"Sister," he said, "to listen to you, I could form the impression we were not really welcome in the city."

"Brother," she replied, "every citizen who wishes to join wholeheartedly in the effort of defending and rebuilding this city for all of its citizens is welcome. What I am uncertain of, is whether you are such a citizen. Captains," she, too, looked to left and right, "what is our decision here."

"We lower the draw-bridge," said Kateran. "As we discussed, they're safer in than out."

"But each man must swear allegiance as they cross the bridge," said Tchikharn, "or not be admitted."

Kateran nodded. "And Gordala enters in chains or not at all."

"You may enter the city, brother," said Selchae. "Your men may encamp on the river bank, where Dalmethan and Kardurin's houses once stood; or there are empty buildings still in the city, some of which will rightly belong to some of your men. Anyone who wishes to join the Militia may do so as they enter the city; any who do not, must durrender their arms. I bid you good day, aristons."

The silence stetched still longer.

"Very well," said Selachen at last. "For the good of the city, we shall accept those terms. For now. Good day, sister, captains."

He turned, and, accompanied by the aristons and by Sergeant Giraten, marched out.

The refreshments that the kitchen staff had hastily prepared were never called for, and in the end were sent to the barracks, where they were consumed eagerly by hungry militiamen. But

the barracks soon emptied, because the draw-bridge was ordered down, and a whole company of militia were mustered in the marketplace to process the incoming force.

A table was set up at which Kollirn administered the oath of allegiance, recording each man as they signed; no-one was turned away here. Presumably those unwilling to swear had chosen not to cross the bridge. At two further tables, men queued to sign up to the militia; very few chose the alternative of surrendering their arms. As they signed, they were numbered off in eights and told to choose sergeants.

A bench was set up by the wrecked guildhall, on which, by evening, twelve newly-elected sergeants were gathered. Kateran numbered them off into two groups of six, one of which included Selachen and Fengul. To each he added two sergeants of existing squads which had yet to be assigned companies. He sent each group off to pick a captain.

And waited.

The sun went down; the draw-bridge was raised. Of Seal Mother Gordala there had been no sighting, with chains or without.

A gibbous moon washed the marketplace with silver light. Some of his company had brought a brazier to stand near the bench where Kollirn waited; they brought flagons of ale from the brewery behind the still-ruined Ship Inn, which had just tapped its first new barrel since the fall of the city.

They waited.

The second new company returned first. They had elected a fisherman, Gareneth, as captain. Kateran noted their decision without comment, and wished them a good night.

And waited.

One of his men was sent to fetch more firewood for the brazier. Selchae, still in armour and with half a squad of her men around her, came out and sat on the bench, talking in a low voice with Kateran. Kollirn joined them.

They waited.

From the old quay, where the sergeants of the other new company had gone, came the sound of raised voices. Selchae sent word back to the residence, and very shortly her full company joined them in the marketplace.

And they, too, waited.

Finally, as the moon reached its zenith, five of the sergeants of the new company appeared. Selachen was not among them; neither was Fenful. They'd elected a well-known and experienced caravan guard captain, Torened, as their captain. Kateran thanked them, duly noted it, and gave Torened his captain's armband. Kollirn and Selchae exchanged glances, but said nothing.

Until goodnights had been said, and they had returned to the residence.

"So Selachen is not popular even among the troops he led?" asked Selchae, as they stood in the inner ward, at the foot of steps up to the keep door.

"None of the aristons," said Kateran.

"It makes him less dangerous," said Kollirn.

"Perhaps," said Selchae. "Less dangerous in large ways; less capable of civil war. But perhaps more dangerous in small ways: in treachery or spite. He still believes he should rule here. More: he still believes he can. He should be watched."

"Aye," agreed Kateran. "Good night, Seal Maiden."

“Good night, Captain-General, Captain,” said Selchae, smiling.

She turned, and ran up the steps to the keep door, which two of her company, standing guard, opened for her.

The Tyrranos and the Champion

The Red Company have set up winter camp a day's march up the Sind valley

After crossing at Sind Ferry, Dalwhiel rode east along the northern bank. The peasants and villagers were relaxed and unafraid; they told him, yes, the Red Company were ahead, but they were buying supplies, not looting. Buying with paper, right enough, but there was confidence that Red Company paper was to be trusted. They were good for it.

The camp was set up on what had been a level wheat field; a newly erected turf wall, with a defensive ditch outside it, surrounded the neatly ordered lines of tents. A straight corduroy roadway led through the camp from one gate to the other; quickly counting tents, Dalwhiel saw that there were four legions encamped either side of it, a total of over four thousand men. Each legion had its own track leading off the corduroy road, with four companies encamped on either side.

Between the tented encampment and the perimeter wall, wagons which must form the supply train were parked in a continuous line, making an inner defensive line, with picket lines for the draught horses between the lines – although, it being daylight, most of the horses themselves were grazing in adjacent fields.

The whole encampment was in extraordinarily good order, well organised and quiet.

In the centre was an open square, and at one side of it a larger tent, to which the soldier who had brought him from the gate led Dalwhiel. Outside the tent, sitting around a camp fire with some other officers, Dalwhiel found Golneth.

OK, there are a number of problems with this as it stands.

- They're under serious time pressure at this point;
- I'm not sure I want the Dalwhiel/Selchae affaire to be strictly 'on' again;
- Why is Tchikharn not with Dalwhiel?

Possibly rewrite - Dalwhiel is returning from his expedition to check on RedCo, heading for the Residence because all single men in militia now lodged in Residence barracks because of Selachen's men being in town, expect to meet with Kateran there.

Selachen appeals for his men to be allowed into the city to aid its defence; the council of captains agree provided he swears to abide by their rule

As a city constrained by a wall grows, its buildings grow taller and crowd closer. Its streets become narrower, more cluttered, at night darker, with closes and alleys in which to hide. They become, in short, a theatre for ambushade; a place where wise men do not venture at night without a lantern and company.

Tchahua was not yet grown to that condition. Its buildings stood two, or at most three storeys tall; to the west on Land Street, at least, the plan was regular, with the weavers' rows running down the slope from Land Street to the river. And, of course, in its lower half, Land Street had lost half its buildings. Charred timbers stood in the moonlight; some of the wrecks still had the skeletons of upper floors. Where there had been brick or stone lower storeys, some irregular remnants of those walls still stood. And within the wrecks, untidy heaps of fallen wreckage, of tumbled timbers, burned plaster, shattered slate cast odd shadows.

In many a city there are some folk held in such regard – or such respect – that they may go anywhere at any hour without fear. If any held that status in Tchahua it must surely be Captain General Kateran, or the city's new champion, Dalwhiel. In any case it was Dalwhiel who walked alone that night down Land Street from the gate towards his lodging in the Residence. It was, in truth, a

fine night, the moon almost full and winter high. The city slept;

above the rooftops only a few faint smudges of smoke curled from drowsing chimneys.

He step was light and easy. He was dressed for travelling, but in rich northern style: a fur-lined leather jacket hung open showing a painted silk shirt, slim-cut woollen trousers tucked into high leather boots. Dressed for travelling in uncertain times, to a place where he was uncertain of his welcome; from the left side of his belt hung his light northern sword, with its curious basket hilt and the poignard sheathed beside it.

The man who stepped out of New Row, as if by happenstance, was equipped differently. He wore a bronze helm with nose and cheekguards; beaten bronze breastplate over a blue silk tunic, with heavy bronze epaulets protecting his shoulders and bracers for his forearms; about his waist a kilt of heavy leather straps reinforced with bronze. Above his sandals were bronze grieves. In his gauntleted hands, a long, heavy sword – of northern make, indeed, but in the southern style.

Land Street was broad enough for two wagons to pass. Dalwhiel stopped in the middle of it, still looking relaxed, his hands hooked into his belt.

“Ariston Selachen,” he said. “A pleasure to greet you, on such a night.”

“Tyrranos Selachen, if you please. And I hear you are named champion?”

“I have that honour, Ariston. Were you walking for your pleasure?” If Dalwhiel was not deaf to the sounds of men behind him, he did not show it.

“Tyrranos, if you please,” said Selachen, grounding the tip of his sword on the cobbles of the road. “Say rather, waiting to complete an ancient ritual.”

“Indeed, Ariston, and what ritual might that be?”

“The Tyrranos asserts his rule over the city,” said Selachen, “by slaying the champion.”

“But Ariston,” said Dalwhiel, still standing relaxed, “you have brought only eight men. Do you not think you should fetch more?”

“My men merely hold the ground,” said Selachen. “I shall take you in single combat.”

“What, with that great cleaver?” asked Dalwhiel. “Can you even lift it?”

“It will make short work of your toy.”

“Perhaps,” said Dalwhiel, bowing slightly. “If you will begin, we shall see.”

“Draw, then,” said Selachen, “and we shall begin.”

“I see no need to draw. Show me that you can use that thing, and I may.” Dalwhiel’s hands were still on his belt, his stance still easy.

Selachen swung the long sword up with both hands and ran at Dalwhiel, launching a scything blow. But Dalwhiel just turned away, as if dancing. The momentum of the sword spun Selachen round so that his unarmoured back was briefly towards Dalwhiel; he let the spin continue, raising the sword back up above his head, scanning for Dalwhiel.

Dalwhiel had moved a few steps up the street, the direction Selachen had attacked from; the two men had almost exchanged places. Again Selachen swung; again, Dalwhiel was smoothly absent, and the blade clanged off the cobble stones, sending sparks skittering. Again, Selachen recovered off

balance, peering through the narrow eye-slots of his helmet for his foe.

Dalwhiel had moved towards the west side of the street. Behind him stood the charred skeleton of a building which once had open fronted booths onto the street as its ground floor. Now, four blackened pillars still supported a heavy oaken wallplate which, in turn, held up a tracery of heavy studwork like the ribcage of a long dead whale. Within, the upper floors had collapsed, and the heavy tiled roof had collapsed on top of them, in an uneven, unstable mound, barred with harsh shadow.

Still he stood easy, his hands hooked into his belt.

Selachen advanced slowly this time, the sword high over his right shoulder. Coming within reach, he swung. Dalwhiel stepped backwards and the sword bit deeply into a wooden pillar, causing the whole structure to shake. As Selachen tugged mightily on his sword to free it, a stud, a span square and over a manheight tall, toppled gracefully from above to smash into the street beside him. Selachen jumped back, stumbled, and fell over backwards, his armour jangling. The sword, loosened from both the pillar and hands, fell clanging onto the road.

Dalwhiel laughed.

Selachen scrambled awkwardly to his feet, and picked up his blade. "You won't laugh long, merchant!" he said. "Defend yourself."

"When I see something to defend myself against," said Dalwhiel, "I may."

Again Selachen advanced more cautiously. Between the pillars the swing of his long sword was restricted, so he held it ready to thrust, one gauntleted hand on the hilt and the other on the blade just in front of the guard. Dalwhiel backed onto the tiles, which slid and rattled noisily under his feet. Selachen

was inside the perimeter of the building now, and made again to swing, but a tile tipped awkwardly under his foot and he had to scrabble for balance.

Dalwhiel's belt fell to the ground, his purse opening and two gold coins rolling out.

"A merchant drops gold!" said Selachen. "You must be desperate."

Dalwhiel moved so the shadows fell differently. A light sword was in his right hand, a slender dagger in his left. He circled towards his left, higher up the mound. Again Selachen strode forward to attack, but the uneven surface moved under his sandals and the force was out of his blow; Dalwhiel parried easily.

There was a sound of shouting in the street, but the fighters ignored it, their attention locked on one another. Dalwhiel continued to circle left, his sturdy northern boots seeming to find firmer footing, half disappearing into a patch of shadow. Selachen attacked, swung, stumbled, fell.

Dalwhiel, who had again parried easily, stepped back into the light near the crest of the pile, and waited, politely, with an air of patient boredom.

Selachen rolled to his feet in a torrent of shattered tiles, and looked up at Dalwhiel, breathing hard. "Come out into the street and fight me," he said, "instead of skulking in the ruins like a coward."

"You chose the ground," said Dalwhiel. "But a man who cannot fight on the ground he is given, cannot fight. Do you wish to concede?"

"You shall regret that!" said Selachen, and launched himself up the slope again, sword high for a wicked cut. Dalwhiel,

again, wasn't there; and as the heft of Selachen's sword swung him round, they stood for a moment almost back to back. Dalwhiel's left hand struck backwards, sharply, once, and then he pirouetted away again, his sword at an easy guard. Black blood dripped from the slender blade of the poignard.

Selachen slid slowly to his knees, a look of surprise on his face. He raised his sword to a shaky guard.

"Do your worst, merchant," he said, his words more clipped than usual. "You shall not take me easily."

"No need," said Dalwhiel, turning away to look for his belt. "I'm done here."

He picked it up, and sheathed his sword. He looked at the blade of the dagger, and unwound the silk scarf from his neck as though to clean it. Then he looked back up at Selachen, still kneeling at the top of the mound, still surprised, his sword now sagged to the rubble.

"You're dead, Ariston," he said. "You may not know it yet, but a man does not survive a blade through his kidney and into his gut. Would you have your death quick, or slow?"

"You lie," said Selachen, shortly.

"Not I," said Dalwhiel, as though regretfully, "but you will, soon."

He buckled his belt and turned away, cleaning the dagger on his scarf. He walked easily down the pile, and then, carefully, into the street. Militia were there; four of Selachen's men were surrendered, their blades on the ground. Another lay wounded, groaning. A sergeant Dalwhiel knew only slightly, from Pentarff's company, apologised for not coming quicker.

"You should have called," he said. "We came as soon as we heard the sound of blades."

“It doesn’t matter,” said Dalwhiel, suddenly tired. “Well, perhaps it does. I’ve killed him – or I shall have, for he may see morning. But I had little choice.”

“You’ve killed who?” asked the sergeant, suddenly anxious. “Who have you killed?”

“The Princess’s brother,” said Dalwhiel. “It was forced on me. I did not wish it.” He slipped the poignard into its slot in his scabbard. “It may be for the best,” he said.

Suddenly he shook himself. “Fetch [the doctor] for him, he will not pass easy.” He looked back towards the Residence, and shook his head. “And send someone to tell his sister. I should go, but...”

“I thought you lay there, too sir?”

“Aye,” said Dalwhiel. “I’ve a mind to walk a bit.”

Festival

“Time for you to go, Princess,” said Rettan, not looking at her. “Good luck.”

Selchae looked up from where she sat in the bottom of the boat, seeking the tower of the Residence. She nodded, and struggled out of the mound of blankets and quilts in which she was wrapped. Her fingers strayed to her neck; somehow it seemed especially naked to be without the bronze collar she’d worn so long.

The wind was cool. From ashore, the sound of the crowd calling and chanting seemed louder than ever. Rettan turned the boat through the wind, and in the business of the manoeuvre she slipped quietly over the side of the boat away from the city, diving under the keel and swimming underwater towards the shore, staying down as long as she could. The water was cold; it was mad to do this at midwinter.

She rolled her head out of the water for just long enough to catch a breath and check her course, and slipped under again, swimming smoothly and swiftly. All around her were seals – of course there were, here off their birthing rocks, it was no

miracle, not really – but next time she surfaced to take a breath, two seals surfaced with her. She reached out to touch one, and felt the sleek fur and smooth muscle under her fingers. And then slipped under again, swimming for the steps.

The seals swam close, weaving around her. Of course – they are playful, curious animals. It wasn't a miracle, but... And then the steps were there. A seal nuzzled at her for a moment. She climbed out of the cold water into the raw wind. The noise of the crowd was different now, more rhythmic, more urgent, calling, calling.

The sealskin robe was neatly folded in its basket on the lowest step above the water. Teeth chattering, goosebumps racing across her streaming skin, she pulled it on, feeling its smooth silk lining. She annointed herself quickly with the jar of sweet almond oil, smoothing it deep between her legs and into her opening. She stood up, slowly. A seal surged out of the water by her feet, and looked up at her. She looked at it amazed, and rested a hand on its head a moment. There was a crescendo of noise from the crowd. Selchae dropped her head and grinned, and then raised it proudly and started to walk smoothly up the steps. The seal climbed with her for a short way, but soon dropped behind.

Ahead, under the tower of the sanctuary, by the altar, a small group of people – Karda, Dûn, Dalwhiel – and ranged around them outside the sanctuary wall, a crowd which seemed greater, surely, than the whole population of the city, still chanting rhythmic as surf. Dalwhiel stepped forward from the group and let the fine sea-green silk robe he was wearing slide off his shoulders to the ground. He knelt on the smooth stone, and waited for her, head bowed. She let her own robe fall, and walked to stand in front of him. She put one hand on his head, just as she had with the seal.

He bowed his head and kissed her feet – that hadn't been in the script – and raised himself smoothly onto one knee. She grinned a small grin – at least he was not deviating too far. She moved forward so that she straddled his raised leg, and, yes, he had risen for her – risen well. She did not know whether she had Dûn to thank. It didn't matter. She bent her legs and felt him slide in, eased by the oil. She kissed him, very seriously, on the lips – that wasn't in the script either – as he lifted her under the buttocks and stood.

The crowd still chanted, and it seemed natural to Selchae to match her movements to that rhythm. Holding Dalwhiel loosely with her legs round his waist and her hands on his shoulders, she closed her eyes and let her head hang back, urging him on by the pressure of her crossed ankles in the small of his back. She relaxed into the sensation, feeling him surging within her. She had planned to cry out, but it came to her naturally, as it always had with him. She caught herself, momentarily, self consciously, and grinned, moaning louder. In that moment her eyes were open and caught his; and he grinned at her. She ground herself hungrily on his root, and closed her eyes again.

What she had not expected to happen, happened. Her nerveless hands lost their grip on his shoulders, but he was ready and somehow had his hands under her waist, still supporting her, still moving in her, still holding the rhythm. She let her body hang from his hands, eyes still closed. She was aware that he was walking, and let them open. He was standing just within the circle of the sanctuary, showing her – showing their union – to the crowd, who bayed louder. This, too, was unscripted.

She raised her hands to his forearms, and pulled herself upwards, leaning her head into his shoulder.

“Let them touch me,” she said, and lay back again, closing her eyes.

The walking movement of his hips came again, and then he stood still, but for moving rhythmically within her body to fill her. There were fingers on her, gentle, tentative, and then more. She smiled, and let her arms spread wide, reaching out so more could touch her.

After some time – she didn’t know how long – he was walking again. The movement of his hips triggered her, and she lost awareness as her body shuddered around him; and then they were on the other side of the circle, and he was again offering her to the crowd to be touched. This time she kept her eyes open for a while, meeting the eyes of the women – it was mainly women – who touched her.

Then he was pulling her up, one hand moved higher on her flank. She gripped his forearms to help him.

“I can’t hold much longer,” he whispered in her ear. “The altar?” She nodded. The script had said only that, once he was in her (or, had he not risen, was pretending to be in her), he would lift her onto it, and there finish.

And there he finished, driving into her with a fierce accelerating rhythm that the crowd took up and lifted them with, until with a shout he shuddered into her shuddering body, and collapsed onto her, twitching and panting.

She looked up at him, dark against the glowing sky, his cheek too close to focus on. She took his head between her hands, lifting it and turning it until she could kiss him.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you.”

The smooth altar cloth was cool under her back, the stone of the altar beneath it hard and uncomfortable. His weight crushed

her into it, but somehow that was good – was appropriate – was what she desired. Slowly his breathing steadied. The noise resolved itself into the crowd cheering, no longer rhythmically. Dalwhiel placed his hands on the stone on either side of her, and pushed himself to his feet. Avatar and champion grinned at one another, and then he offered her a hand to help her up.

Dûn came forward to offer her the sealskin robe, but she shook her head. Still holding Dalwhiel's hand, she walked to the crowd at one side of the circle, reaching out to touch people, squeezing hands, smiling, thanking. Slowly, together, they walked round the inside of the circle, reaching out to hands in the crowd. This wasn't scripted, either – could not have been. She hadn't known – could not have known – it would be like this.

When they came back around to the top of the stair, Karda was there with her sisters. Selchae lifted the baby onto her hip, and took three-year-old Karlin's hand. Dûn, still holding the sealskin robe over one arm, offered Dalwhiel the torch with the other; and together, slowly and ceremoniously, they walked up through the crowd – which parted round them, and followed behind – to the easternmost summit of the rock, where a great pyre had been built. Selchae gave the baby back to Karinna, and, still holding Karlin by the hand, took the torch from Dalwhiel.

She said a short prayer to the seal goddess – the crowd had fallen silent, and now seemed more attentively silent to listen, for she did not speak loudly – and then thrust the torch deep into the pyre. She stood back as it caught, and started to burn.

Someone in the crowd started an old lament for the dead – a hymn they all knew – and slowly it spread through the congregation, more and more voices taking it up, as the south-

west wind whipped the smoke and flame away out towards the marsh.

“It is warm here by the fire,” said Dûn, quietly, “but the air is cooling. You should put on your robe.”

Selchae shook her head. “No, that feels wrong. I am – tonight I am – the Goddess. I think I should stay naked as long as I may. I think when I dress the Goddess will leave me.”

Dûn looked at her curiously. “Yes,” she said. “I think that you may be right.”

The sky was slowly darkening. In the west, the evening star hung low, while to the east the full moon was lifting itself into view. Even so close to the fire, the cool of the wind was raising goosebumps on Selchae’s skin. There should be some end – some climax – to this ceremony, but they had not scripted one. It had seemed that lighting the pyre would be enough, but somehow now it was not.

It was Tchikharn, the stranger from the north, who found the right gesture – found it quietly and simply. He came up to Selchae as she stood at the fire, knelt, and kissed her feet. He got up quietly, not heeding her thanks, and melted back into the crowd.

Giraten came next, in silence, and did the same; and then Tiranen, and a young woman Selchae couldn’t name, and Sidonan, and suddenly a queue was forming. Selchae looked on with wide eyed surprise, reaching out to touch each head in blessing.

In silence they silently shuffled forward; in silence she stood, and blessed them. Dûn stood behind her, watching anxiously; Dalwhiel stood at her side, also naked, trying to suppress

shivers. The sky darkened slowly, and more stars showed. The moon cast their shadows onto the grey stone. Still the people came.

The fire was out, the night full dark, the queue thinning. Dûn again urged Selchae to dress. "You cannot stand here all night," she said. "You are cold." Selchae, blessing an old woman, seemed not to hear.

Her company were forming up around her, in an open square, gently turning the queue away.

"Princess," said Giraten, "you are cold, and Master Dalwhiel is colder. You should come."

"You should dress," said Dûn. "It is cold."

Selchae turned to look at them, seemingly startled. "Yes," she said, in a calm voice. "It is. I should go. But I must remain the Goddess yet awhile. The men who man the wall..."

"You are cold," said Dûn again.

"Yes," said Selchae. "I am. Let us go." She looked at Dalwhiel, briefly, her eyes not quite focussed. "Master Dalwhiel, clothe yourself. That is an order."

Still naked, with her friends and company following, she walked through the outer ward and across the market place, quietly thanking and blessing each person she met. Up river street, she climbed the steps to the wall, and, walking the length of it, thanked each militia man in turn. By the time

she had reached the eastern end, the sky in that direction was lightening.

Suddenly, she started to shiver. Dûn, without asking permission, wrapped the heavy robe round her, and Dalwhiel lifted her into his arms. As they walked back through the city towards the Residence, she nestled her head into his shoulder and fell into boneless sleep.

She woke to full morning light in her own bed, naked and alone.

In Sickness and in Health

Selchae found Dalwhiel on the site of his father's demolished home, supervising the erection of rough structure of tree-trunks and boards. She stood for a while, watching and listening, as he worked with the men, boring holes with an auger for another man to hammer in treenails that yet another was splitting from a block. Despite the season he was wearing only trousers and boots, his torso gleaming with sweat. They were all working hard.

Above, on the skeleton of a roof, other men were fitting shingles, also roughly cut from blocks. The site was busy, noisy. She hung back, making no move, and it was some time before Dalwhiel glanced up, noticed her, said something quiet to the men beside him, laid down the auger, and came over.

“Good afternoon to you, Princess.”

“And to you, Master Dalwhiel. What do you?”

“The river is higher, and more boats are coming down from Sinhua with wines. Master Pentarn tells me that he no longer has space in his warehouse for anything of mine. It is time I

was building up a stock of cloths and other goods for the ship when she arrives. Also, there are weavers with cloth they must sell, to feed their families. If no-one else has anywhere to store cloth in safety, Master Pentarn can bid as low as he likes for it. So I must have a warehouse.”

“But why here,” asked Selchae. “Why not down at the old quay? Would it not be more use there?”

Dalwhiel nodded. “It would, of course. But I have neither time nor money to build well. We will need a better warehouse soon, and I wanted to leave that site clear so we could, in due course, build the better one there.”

“I see,” said Selchae.

There was an awkward pause.

“You no longer wear your ring,” said Dalwhiel, seriously. “Is the gift withdrawn?”

“You did not lie with me,” said Selchae. There was almost a whine in her voice.

“You no longer wear your ring,” he said again. “I was not sure of my welcome.”

“After yesterday? After what we did yesterday?”

“Princess, I was greatly honoured to serve you yesterday, honoured to be chosen to serve you. And it would be a lie to pretend I did not greatly enjoy it, as I have always enjoyed it when I have taken you. But what we did yesterday was a sacrament for the city. It did not necessarily mean I was welcome in your bed.”

“When we were good,” said Selchae, passionately, “you did not care if you were welcome. You just took me. Filled me. Used me.”

"I know. I apologise. I should not have. It was wrong."

"No!" said Selchae. "No, no, that is not... You were welcome, then. You know it. You knew it!"

"And now?"

"You didn't lie with me."

"No. Should I?"

"You should have done."

"Selchae, is your gift withdrawn?"

"I don't know," she said, fractiously. "I don't know. It isn't easy. You should have lain with me."

Possibly Selchae falls sick after having been cold so long; that solves part of the time problem.

Selchae thinking about what her role is in life, and in the life of the city. Perhaps the parents of a sick child call on her to bless the child, and she does, and it recovers?

The Shipping News

There came a shout from above, and moments later a knocking on her door. Selchae rolled out of bed, and pulled her robe around her. “Come,” she called.

Stannen opened the door and looked in, “My lady, there is a ship off. Two of them.”

“A ship? Is it Shearwater?”

“I don’t know, my Lady. It is one of the northern ships.”

“Then I shall come.”

There was a slant of southerly in the always westerly wind, and over the taint of the seal colony it brought a sharp tang of the sea. It rolled the waves ponderously onto the ragged rocks of the point, throwing up occasional plumes of spray. Young seals still lay on the rocks or played in the waves, but the adults were mostly gone. Selchae looked out at the ship.

Dark against the water, in the northern style, and three masted – although the sail on the central mast was already

furled; punching into the lumpy swell, with a roll of white water under her bow.

“Is it Shearwater?” asked Stannen.

But Selchae couldn’t tell, either; it was a northern ship. Beyond that, she couldn’t say.

A drum beat from the river pulled her attention, and she saw the big new rowing boat that Dalmethan had ordered going swiftly downstream, with half a company of men at the oars. She watched as ship and boat converged, out where sea became river, where the lumpy waves started to calm; she watched, straining her eyes, as the warp was passed. The remaining sails came down, and the new pulling boat led the ship in towards the point, to the turn of the river, to the harbour.

“I must go,” said Selchae. “I must dress, and go down.” She ducked in through the little door over the stairhead. “Karda,” she called. “Has anyone seen Karda?”

But it's only Raven. She's early, because she overwintered at the Great Place, having damaged some vital gear on her autumn voyage. Still, this is good news for Karda, who comes into the profit of her father's joint adventure.

There came a shout from above, and moments later a knocking on her door. Selchae rolled out of bed, and pulled her robe around her. “Come,” she called.

Stannen opened the door and looked in, “My lady, there are ships off. Two of them. And one is very large.”

The ship returns, echoing the opening of the narrative. Dalmethan is on board, as are Karakhan and Daltorae, who are married.

MERCHANT

The Gotanae side-plot, if I pursue it: is she present? What is her status at this point? Does her story get any resolution yet?

Chronology/co-ordination side issue: this must happen at approximately the same time as Karae pulls off her coup in Hans'hua. Is it before/after? Do these characters know of the liberation of Hans'hua by this point in the narrative? Does it matter? It's at best a noise off. It would be kind of nice if there was someone from Karae's party who could 'just happen' to be visiting Tchahua at this time, possibly on an information-seeking mission, to balance Goratin and Gotanae in the opening segment. But I'm not at all certain who that person could be.

A thought: could it be meeting with Kunerakhan that makes up Selchae's mind to propose? If so, what could Kunerakhan say to convince her?

Epilogue

It was spring. The evening air was fresh and hopeful. On the north side of the market place, the ruin of the guildhall had been cleared, and in that cleared space tables had been erected. From one end came the music of fiddles, of pipes and of tambour. And there, by the light of many candles, a feast was being held to give thanks.

A great feast, and well attended. Up on the dais, at the high table, the leading citizens sat. In the centre, as host, Captain General Kateran – leader of the militia, and chair of the militia council which ruled the city – his trim body made martial in a tunic of undied linen reinforced with ox-hide.

He was listening attentively to the man on his right, his guest of honour. Master Dalmethan, shipowner of the city, was clad in a gown of deep crimson silk, with collars and cuffs of white fox from the furthest north. Beside him, a tall figure with pale skin and hair, was his partner Kunerakhan in matching dress. Beyond her sat her merchant-adventurer son Karakhan and his new wife, Dalmethan's daughter Daltorae, big with child. The family group was completed by Dalmethan's son Captain

Dalwhiel, a tall young man in northern plaids, his hair and beard trimmed short in the northern style; and Dalmethan and Kunerakhan's mutual daughter Dalenakhan, just old enough to attend her first grown-up feast.

Next to the right, Schoolmaster, now Captain, Kollirn still wore his quiet grey robe, and, beside him, the priestess Dûn still wore little enough to catch the eye of many men, well enough to arouse the envy of many women.

Further to the left, beyond other merchants and craft-masters of the city, [TODO

On the other side of the table, beyond Kateran, the late Tyrranos Selcharen's daughter Selchae, wore a long, hooded robe in the Hans'hua style, of white silk, with a golden pomander showing at her throat. She was talking quietly with Captain Tchikharn, who sat with his new wife Davrana. Beyond her the city's other swordmaster, the famous Master Giraten, cut an un-martial figure in one of the brightly patterned woollen tunics imported from the north.

Next again, the Arista Xinta from the turbulent city of Sinhua, in a simple cream-coloured robe, silent and withdrawn as ever; and beyond her, attentive, her companion [Rooftop Thief, who REALLY needs a name!]. Beyond her, another family group: the city's richest citizen, the cloth merchant Pentarn, sat with his wife Palena, their son Pentarff and his wife, Grava, also with child.

The servers stood back, and the musicians fell silent. Captain-General Kateran got to his feet, and called for a toast to the princess who had planned and let the assault which had recaptured the citadel, and who had done so much to restore and develop the morale and self confidence of the city and its people, and to restore to it a sense of justice and value.

Throughout the open space, all the guests got to their feet and drank. As soon as they were all settled again, while servers were still refilling glasses, the Princess stood. She thanked her host. She spoke of the efforts of everyone – but especially of the militia, and its captain general in particular – in restoring the peace and security of the city. She proposed a toast to the militia. Again, everyone drank, and looked back up to the dais – to see that Selchae was still on her feet.

“Our city has changed much in the past year. We have all of us faced tough challenges, travelled hard roads, suffered bitter losses, learned painful lessons. And yet of all of us none has travelled further than the man who has returned to us with the new great ship we have all admired, and the new – to us, at least – partner and daughter that we shall, I am very confident, all of us make welcome. Master Dalmethan, let us remember, may be fortunate in not having lost anyone from his immediate family, but he has lost more in terms of wealth than any of us here.

“His fine house is gone. The warehouse which he did more than anyone else to build, and which was the core of his business, also gone. And not least, the guildhall which stood in this place, which was his gift to our city, it too is gone. And yet, having lost so much, it was Master Dalmethan – and, let us not forget, Master Dalmethan almost alone – who put all that remained of his wealth behind the rebuilding of our wall, the equipping of our militia. Behind the effort by which we have recovered so much of what we had all lost.”

She paused for a moment, and looked around the hall.

“Of course, Master Dalmethan was wealthy to begin with, and so he could,” she said. “But he was not alone in that; and, also, he had made his wealth. But he had made his wealth in more than gold. The gift he gave to me this spring was not gold but wisdom. The wisdom to understand that what makes

a man's quality is not his blood but his deeds. The wisdom to understand that what makes my own worth – such as it is – is not what I have inherited, but what I can do.

“I have changed much in the past year. Before I was given the gift of wisdom, I was a fool, and proud in my folly. I have learned that what I have inherited – and not from my father, but from my mother and her mother and her mother before her – is not privilege but responsibility. Responsibility to this city and to the people of this city. To be its luck. To watch over it as avatar of the God, to succour it in time of need, and to tend its hurts after. Responsibility is a burden. It is my burden, and I shall not lay it down, but a burden is easier shared.

“Before I was given the gift of wisdom, I was a fool, and in my folly rejected a great gift freely offered. But now there is something else that Master Dalmethan is wealthy in that I have need of. For Master Dalmethan is wealthy in fine children. I welcome to our city his bright daughter Dalenakhan, symbolic of the friendship that is growing between our city and our trading partners in the north. I welcome back to our city my dear friend Daltorae, who also has strengthened our bonds there; she has – as she knows – my congratulations. And yet, with these fine daughters, I hold that Master Dalmethan is richest of all in his son. I ask you all to raise your glasses now to Master Dalwhiel – to Captain Dalwhiel – to our champion, Dalwhiel. And to him, I say this: Master Dalwhiel, will you be my husband?”

There was an excited buzz which quickly died, replaced by an attentive silence; from all the tables, eyes turned to where Dalwhiel sat. Or rather, stood, because he was quickly on his feet, lifting his glass.

He looked down for a moment, apparently gathering his thoughts. And then he looked up at her, with a grin.

“The girl is right,” he said. “This has been a hard year, and we have all been changed by it. The girl was indeed a fool and proud in her folly, but she was not alone in that. The boy was, too. Whether he has grown as much in humility, in wisdom, in responsibility and in worth as she has, I cannot say. But this I can say: there was one person I thought of with longing through the long voyages of my youth, one person I was delighted to have with me on my journey to Hans’hua last year – and no, Captain Tchikharn, I do not mean you. In this city there is one fairer – and nearer to my heart – than all others. I speak of our princess, boldest captain of our militia, mother of our city, avatar of the goddess from whom she is descended and who protects us all. And to her, I say this: seal girl, I will.”

Appendices

Numbering

The world in which this story takes place uses an octal (base eight) numbering system. However, writing using base eight numbering is just too confusing for a reader accustomed to base ten, so I've used base ten numbers in the text. You will see artefacts of base eight numbering cropping up, however, for example in military organisation.

Clearly, there are words in both coastal and northern for sixty-four and for five hundred and twelve which are analogous to our 'hundred' and 'thousand', but wherever possible I've ignored these and simply converted numbers into familiar terms.

Linear measure

In linear measure the smallest unit in common use is the thumb, about 28 millimetres in our reckoning. Eight thumbs make a span. Eight spans make a manheight, just under 1.8 metres. Eight cubed manheights, five hundred and twelve manheights in base ten, is their basic unit of distance – about 8% less than a kilometre, but I've used 'kilometre' in this text as translation for convenience. Eight squared of these units – sixty-four in base ten – make a unit which is called a 'day', a distance one might reasonably ride in a day; although a man in a hurry would do more, and the caravans typically much less.

Weight

Similarly in finance eight bronze coins make one silver, eight silver coins one gold. The prototypes of the gold and bronze coins was the coinage of the Great Place, but the major cities of the coast are by this stage in their history striking their own coins of the same weight as those of the Great Place. The metal quality was not always so high, though, and many merchants preferred to work in the coin of the Great Place only, or to discount to varying degrees the coinage of the different cities.

Silver coins were typically minted in Andale in the west, as that was the site of the principal silver mines; however, supply was controlled in agreement with the mint in the Great Place so that the approximate conversion rate of eight silver to one gold was maintained. At some times, however, the relative value of silver coinage in the east rose above this 'standard' exchange rate, or declined below it in the west.

This common standard of coins lead in turn to a common system of weights. All the coins – bronze, silver, gold – have the same weight, about eleven of our grammes. Eight cubed times the weight of a coin – five hundred and twelve coin weights, about five and a half kilograms or twelve and a half pounds, was the standard unit of weight. I’ve translated this unit in the text as a ‘stone’. There is a further unit which is 512 of these stones, about 2.8 tons, but in translating references to this unit I’ve converted to tons for simplicity.

Calendar

The calendar used in the Cities of the Coast is based on that used in the great place, where nine aspects of the God, each named after an organ of the body, are worshipped.

The year length is similar to Earth’s, but because of the octal numbering system it is broken into eight-day weeks. These in turn are organised into nine forty day (five eight-day week) ‘seasons’. This makes 360 days, leaving five or six days over; these left over days, which are not part of any weak or season, are known as ‘Waiting Days’ and are used as festival.

The eight days of the week are named after eight of the aspects of the God. The literal names of two of these aspects are words for genitalia, which are considered indelicate in English; so I’ve translated the names in order as follows:

- Foot
- Nose
- Hand

- Ear
- Mouth
- Stomach
- Mother
- Plough

Seasons – or months if you prefer – are similarly named after the aspects of the God, but in a slightly different order and including the ninth aspect, thus

- Foot
- Nose
- Hand
- Ear
- Mouth
- Stomach
- Plough
- Mother
- Eye

The calendar starts on the Summer Sostice, with the first foot of the foot; it continues through to the fifth plough of the eye.

which is five (or, in leap years, six) days before the cycle starts again.

Military Organisation

Military units are organised as ‘squads’ of eight, led by a junior officer (I’ve used the word ‘sergeant’) who is not supernumary – he is one of the eight. These squads are organised into units of eight squads, which I’ve translated as ‘companies’, led by an officer whose rank I’ve translated as ‘captain’. Companies are in turn organised into units of eight, which I’ve translated as ‘legion’, led by an officer whose rank I’ve translated as ‘captain general’.

Differences between the Red Company and other units

The Red Company are an elite mercenary unit with a slightly different organisation than the conventional organisation of military units of the time. In other units, captains and captains general are drawn from the ariston class and are supernumary (not counted in the count of the unit) – so a company comprises sixty-four men (including sergeants) plus one captain, plus (sometimes) an aide or aides to the captain; and the captain general is again supernumary.

While other mercenary armies are led by an ariston who owns the army and employs the soldiers, the Red Company is organised as essentially a workers’ co-op, although there is no

phrase for that concept in the language of the time. Sergeants are elected by their squad, and elect one sergeant from the company to be their captain. Captains within the regiment then elect one from their number to be captain general. Each officer is first and foremost a soldier – expected to bear a spear in the line, just like any other – and is not supernumary; so a full legion of the Red Company comprises exactly five hundred and twelve fighting men (although cooks, surgeons and wagon drivers are supernumary).