

The Bloodbaths

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Book One of the Aqua Pura Trilogy

Steve Libbey

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The Aqua Pura Trilogy

The Bloodbaths (2007)

The Quartz Odalisque (2008)

The Good King's Tomb (2009)

To Kenneth and Barbara,

for putting me to work on the world.

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this novel are either fictitious or are used fictitiously.

THE BLOODBATHS

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1. Water

Crixus Oraan and his two assistants lounged downhill from the dowsers and his entourage. The water shaman chanted, anointed himself with pungent oils, cast wild eyes about the hillock, and in general gave a good show for the nobleman who hired him. Salty wind tickled their hair, relieving the humidity common to Rond in summer.

“The usual wager?” Stamm produced a sestric, its silver plating scratched from decades spent in belt-pouches. Crixus dug out a sestric. They held the coins up between thumb and forefinger.

“Two hundred yards,” Crixus said.

“You’re too gentle,” Stamm said, wagging the coin at him. “Three fifty and not one less. He’s got the sense of an aurochs.”

The hill overlooked Restia, a coastal town beginning to bloat with nobles and their summer households. Since the completion of a paved road between Restia and the capital city of Greater Rond, money and business flowed into the town like wine at a wedding celebration. In the last two months, Crixus had made the day long journey every week to arrange contracts for aqueducts and plumbing to the new estates. It brought him into contact with dowsers far more often than he preferred.

For Kharrina, however, it was worth the headache.

He had been haggling with Councilman Stada over costs for running pipes to the main house, the servants’ quarters, the bathhouse, the fountains, and the surrounding vineyard. Crixus had explained the necessary steps so many times that he grew tired of his own voice. Stada’s gaze would wander off after ten seconds of explanation, until the word “sestrices” came up—then he would snap back in a display of decisiveness.

Crixus found himself talking to the bald patch on the older man’s head. Though just a few inches taller than the average Rondan, he towered over the councilman, who refused to look him in the eye as he spoke; thus, the bald patch took on a life of its own as the councilman’s gaze wandered throughout the

imaginary work site Crixus described. It irked Crixus now to watch Stada gaze in awe at the water shaman.

“He may have the sense of an aurochs, but he’s got the showmanship of a trained bear,” Crixus said. “Look at him. If he did that in a tavern, we’d call him a drunkard.”

Behind them, Gavri sorted the soil samples she had collected from the far side of the hill, past the stand of trees. At Crixus’ urging, the girl wore her dark hair in a plain pageboy cut and forsook makeup. This, along with the shapeless worker’s garments, hid her femininity enough that she might be taken more seriously in the Guild. Gavri knew stone as well as masons twice her age.

“Ser, I know the man is a fraud, but what’s the harm? Councilman Stada has more money than wit,” Gavri said. They chuckled at her matter-of-fact tone. “It’s not the Water Guild’s problem if he wastes good silver on dowsers. We know where the water is.” She presented the soil samples, arranged in rows in a wooden box separated into a grid of compartments by slats. A metal arrow inset on one side marked cardinal north, so that the box was a miniature cross-section of the hill itself. “Or we soon will.”

In three of the compartments, she had placed a tiny white flower. “We will indeed! Good work.” Crixus lifted a blossom. “However, our mystical friend does more than waste the old man’s money. When his prediction turns out to be wrong, we’ll have dug a well needlessly. We’ll charge the client extra then go dig where there is water to be had, but we’ll have lost his goodwill. If you really want to spend the next year bickering with Stada, I’ll put you in charge.”

Gavri considered this. “Then why do we tolerate him?”

“I don’t,” Stamm said, spitting.

“He has ties to the priesthood. You should know by now that everything is connected.” Crixus’ fingers danced across the sample box, arriving on the section that contained the white flowers. “I wouldn’t mind cutting those strings, though. I can see he’ll be trouble.”

He noticed that the shaman had, after many histrionics, produced his forked dowsing rod, cut from a hazel branch.

“Go back to this parcel, here,” he pointed to the three flowered compartments, “and set up stakes where you think digging will be easiest. I’ll meet you there.”

Stamm and Gavri set off with the sample box, map, and tools. Crixus watched them disappear into the trees. Neither was accorded much respect in the Guild. Stamm was a lazy and unrepentant drunk. Gavri was young, inexperienced, and female, thus not given all the training she deserved. Nevertheless, Crixus liked them better than the veterans he’d worked with, perhaps because they didn’t intimidate him.

And now intimidation was what Crixus needed to muster up. He unbuckled his mason’s hammer, passed into his care by his father. The epidemic that had swept through Greater Rond was so swift and brutal that it even struck down a strong man like Simic Oraan in less than a week. A teary-eyed Crixus had been forced to recite the ceremonial words for his father as the dying artisan coughed his life away.

The gold appointments on the handle depicted the Oraan family crest, a few elements of the Rondan flag, and a bull, the family’s symbolic animal. The head of the hammer weighed five pounds; it was heavy for delicate stonework but so sharp on the wedge-end that he could use it in place of narrower chisels. The steel alloy was many times harder than the average iron smelted for a workman’s tool. Such a hammer cost half a year’s wages, and Crixus took fastidious care of it. He preferred to dent a common mason’s hammer on standard jobs, yet he always wore the family hammer at his side. He hoped the sight of a thick-set, heavily muscled man with a hammer in his hands would elicit a primal fear response in the shaman.

Taking comfort in the hammer’s weight, he approached the shaman’s followers. Up close they looked just as absurd: a half dozen boys in face paint and robes, holding incense; a woman shy of garments, waving a handful of ribbons; an oracle with a gutted goose; the shaman himself, middle-aged but powerful of carriage. Dowsing must have paid well; the man’s fleshy frame and smooth face implied a rich diet. An embroidered robe of azure silk tinkled with tiny bells sewn into the hemline.

He held the forked hazel branch cut fresh that day, no doubt by one of the weary assistants hauling his materials. Magic, apparently, weighed as much as science. The dowsing rod wavered as if controlled by something other than the man’s

hands. Crixus scanned the location the man had chosen to focus his efforts. It offered a lovely view of the valley where the councilman's estate would be, but the dry dirt crunching at their feet told him all he needed to know about the hellacious digging project about to unfold.

The shaman murmured prayers, eyes closed, until Crixus cleared his throat. Councilman Stada, attended himself by young servants, grumbled at Crixus' interruption.

"Your pardon, most revered one," Crixus said, keeping the sarcasm out of his voice. "I'm Artesi Crixus Oraan, the engineer responsible for water resources for House Stada's new estate. I think it would benefit our client if we could have a brief consultation."

The shaman opened his eyes with supreme, patient dignity to look down his nose at Crixus.

"Artesi? I expected a senior engineer, not a minion." His gaze drifted away. "Your services are not required until later."

"I speak for my Guild, ser," Crixus said, dangling his hammer conspicuously at his side. "Should your predictions fail to identify the underground spring, I fear our client's money will be wasted."

The shaman cut him off with a wave of his hand. "They are hardly predictions. The spirits of the land convene on holy days near the purest of water sources. This has been proven time and again. Your inability to understand the innermost workings of nature does not give you the right to judge our work." He sniffed. "I am most tolerant with my explanations, for which you need not thank me. I trust you do fine work. Now let me attend to mine."

"Crixus," Councilman Stada hissed, "leave us alone! Don't disturb his concentration. The spirits are ephemeral in the extreme, and ephemera costs silver."

The shaman raised his hands to the sky. "This Artesi is blessed by the water spirits. They flock to him and sing praises to him. Right here"—he dipped the dowsing rod to the rocky ground—"they gather in the greatest numbers thirty yards below our feet. Your interruption has been most opportune," he said with a mischievous smile. "Do you see where you should dig?"

The councilman's eyes lit up with gratification. Crixus thought of Stamm and Gavri, staking out the ground where the bastianae flowers had shown them the true location of the wellspring by dint of their attraction to substratum moisture.

"The Water Artesan's Guild has more tried and true methods for finding water than shaking a stick at the ground." He felt his face flush at the shaman's frown. "We'll be happy to note your recommendation, ser. In fact, you're welcome to meet me here at dawn to see whether water vapor arises from the ground. But I can't in good faith disregard scientific methods for superstition. Not when a noble's hard-won austruces are at stake."

The shaman chuckled. "Of course not. Your skills are unquestionable." With a grand gesture, he offered the rod to Crixus. "See for yourself. You are a spirit magnet."

Crixus hesitated, sensing he was losing control. He returned his hammer to its belt loop and took the rod with an awkward smile. It was light and brittle, no different than any stick found in the woods.

"In both hands," the shaman urged. "Then concentrate on the essence of water. You, of all people, should be closely attuned to it."

The water is hundreds of yards away, he thought. There is nothing here but some damp rock at best. Even if water spirits existed and frolicked underground, they would be doing so where Gavri and Stamm planted stakes.

Holding the rod in both hands, Crixus envisioned the location he had picked out for digging. The rod jerked, ever so slightly, inching downwards. Crixus' eyes went wide.

"Do you feel it?" The shaman leered at him. "The natural power beneath your feet?"

The rod curved down, even as he tried to hold his hands still.

"Relax your hands. Let the rod use you as a conduit." The shaman's entourage smirked at him; the rivalry between water engineers and the dowsers had turned violent at times.

There was no question that the rod moved of its own accord, despite his efforts

to relax his hands. The engineer in him balked at the phenomenon and sought to explain it: the forked branch might channel any pressure downwards, or the wood was heavier at the intersection of the two branches. The shaman's explanation simply could not be correct.

"He feels the draw of the water," the shaman said to the gathered crowd. Stada clapped his hands. "I predict you will be bathing in your own spring very soon, Councilman." He took the rod away from Crixus with a flourish. Crixus put his hands to his belt, blushing with embarrassment.

Sighing, he knelt and scratched out an X with the haft of his hammer. "It is so marked. I look forward to meeting the spirits in person." He could not resist catching Stada's eye. "Meanwhile, I will have my team check the hill for other possible branches of this primary source, which may be more accessible. At no additional fee, and with the blessing of the revered one, of course."

"You were right, Artesi," the shaman said, finishing him off. "This has been a fruitful consultation."

*

Crixus' posture tipped his assistants off as he emerged from the trees. Gavri took a few steps forward.

Stamm merely lowered his flask. "What went wrong?" The journeyman spoke softly, fearing the worst.

Crixus shook his head. "He's a canny one. I opened my mouth and he put words in it."

Stamm spit. "Bastard. How many sites are going to be scarred by those charlatans and their bad guesses? I say we dig right here, priests be damned."

"We'll run our tests and choose the spot to drive the well, but we'll have to do the same at the shaman's chosen digging point."

Stamm and Gavri scowled. "Why?" she asked. "Did he find water?"

"I'm not sure." Crixus shook his head and held his hands as if he were holding the dowsing rod. "He has a glib tongue, talking about the water spirits gathering

below us. Stada is convinced. But then he handed me the rod. Damned if the thing didn't point down to where he said it would. It was eerie." He shrugged. "It moved in my hands."

"Huh." Stamm looked back towards the trees, beyond which the shaman had made his declaration. "So you think there's something to it?"

"No, but something moved that branch. I doubt it was his water spirits, but still..." He recalled the sensation of the branch moving by itself. "I'll work this out with the Guild officials. They will want to fine Stada when that site turns up dry, but it might be better to absorb the expense. Restia is a new market." He brushed the bastianae flowers with his foot. The thirsty little blossoms grew dense in a thirty yard span around them. Weeks before, he and his assistants had scattered the seeds across the hill. The flowers grew quickly when their roots found water, even deep in the ground. Along with some knowledge of geology, they were the Guild's own fragrant dowsing rod.

The Water Artesans Guild of Rond had little competition, but what did exist thrived in new markets like Restia: renegade Guild members, independents, even the shadowy contractors who courted favor with the dowsers. Anyone who thought they could save money by sidestepping the Guild usually came to regret their parsimony; they would pay far more to the Guild for repairs than the Guild would charge them for doing the job once the right way. Still, money thus spent was money lost to the Guild, and Crixus wanted to secure Restia for the Guild—and not merely out of loyalty or ambition.

"Pack up. We have six other estates to evaluate. Hopefully, we'll get to the clients before the shamans do." There was time left before dusk, enough to arrange meetings with planners and rich noblemen—or at least start the lengthy process.

The three Artesans bound the unused stakes with the remaining twine and stuffed them into canvas packs with sturdy shoulder straps. Crixus rolled the shovels and augers in a blanket. The tools weighed plenty, more than Stamm or Gavri could haul, but Crixus had no difficulty with the load. His father and his father's father had been giants; a lifetime of physical labor had made him strong. And luckily their cart was close, parked on the road at the base of the hill.

Emerging from the stand of trees, they spotted the shaman and his entourage

with Stada and his own servants, making preparations for a blessing ceremony.

Stada would get his personal aqueduct despite the shaman's interference. Restia's water supply flowed in from a mountain lake, through a rickety concrete aqueduct that had developed cracks from expansion due to temperature changes. As a result, sediment and minerals entered the water during its journey through the tunnel system. Once the arcades were reached, a third of the water spilled out of the cracks; animals used it for bathing as they would a natural waterfall. The water that did arrive in the little coastal city was potable but not clean, and certainly not to the standards expected by the landed nobility of Rond's large cities.

They could have all saved thousands of sestrices by contributing to the repair and upgrade of the main aqueduct, and thereby won the hearts of the local population. Instead, they brought their snobbishness with them, so Restia would become an outlying suburb of Greater Rond. Their money—and elitism—would put local laborers to work for years. At least the local economy would pick everyone up, to some small degree.

The cart and donkey stood untouched. Lawlessness had not yet found Restia, aside for the docks. That would change with the new road.

The thought caused Crixus a pang of regret as they loaded the cart and watered the donkey. He would never experience life in Restia as it had been—as Kharrina had experienced it.

He flipped his sestric to Stamm, who caught it and winked. It would be spent on ale before nightfall. Thinking of Kharrina's wry smile, Crixus led the donkey back into town.

2. The Future

The rest of the afternoon sped by in a blur of letter writing, sealing and dispatching. Crixus expected no response from his prospects tomorrow, or even the next day, but that did not trouble him. He would have more time to spend with Kharrina; his chest stirred at the thought. He wrote faster as the day drew to a close, in anticipation of dusk, when she was released from work.

Gavri smiled at his restlessness but made no comment about his boyish behavior. Still, as the sun fell beneath the clouds, she took the parchment out of his hands. “I can seal these, ser. You should go relax.”

“There’s still much to do.” Crixus fidgeted with the quill.

“You’ve already given me directions. Besides,” she said with a grin, “should you not test the plumbing of the bathhouse? A bath, and a shave, would be most instructive.”

Crixus’ brow furrowed as he tried to see how a bath would be considered work. Gavri’s smile gave her away. “Oh, aha.”

“A lady likes her suitor to be fresh,” Gavri said.

“I’m picking her up at her father’s print shop,” he said, setting down the quill at last and standing. “Is it fair to arrive as clean as a baby when she’s filthy from a day’s printing?”

Gavri wagged a finger at him. “A lady is never ‘filthy.’”

“My mistake.”

“Take her to the bathhouse, then. We’ll be refitting it soon enough.” Gavri plucked a *bastiana* blossom from the sample box for Stada’s estate and affixed it to his lapel. “A good day’s work, ser. We rise at dawn tomorrow?”

Crixus let the tiny girl shoo him out of the back room they’d rented as a temporary office. “Dawn, yes. I’ll see you here—”

She closed the door on him.

Laborers, dockworkers, and craftsmen peppered the tables of the inn's main room, drinking and tossing bets on the tables in games of chance: Pathii, Seaboard, and King's Dice, at a glance. Crixus ambled between the tables, studying the men and women as he passed them and the piles of coins massed before the winners. Many of them would be working for him on the construction of the small aqueducts for the incoming estates. If the sales closed as he hoped, he would be dealing with the contractors personally. They would paint a rosy picture of the sturdiness and reliability of their laborers, but a few nights' drinking in the inn would provide more insight than those interviews.

On his way out, Crixus passed a shrine to Kaolis, goddess of idyll and reflection. He thought it an ironic choice for a tavern but made the requisite two fingered tap to the forehead as a matter of habit.

The printing shop and home of the family Dramonicai was located on the next hill, nestled between a bakery and a jeweler. If there was one thing Restia needed no more of, it was hills. Sixteen hills of varying elevations surrounded the town. Aqueduct construction benefited from the slopes, but the additional labor to tunnel through their sides could run costs higher than budgeted. Fortunes would be made in Restia, all because of a road.

Crixus appreciated trudging about the town. He had to pass through neighborhoods which a sightseer would never visit, and as a hopeful future resident, he was awarded a glimpse of the true face of Restia. Growing up in Greater Rond, he was used to urban sprawl, service on every corner for every need, the reek of waste cast out of second story windows. The coziness of Restia reminded him of his outsider status. Taking a local wife would not necessarily change that.

The mother with her sons, lounging outside of the three story apartment building; the farmer wheeling the remains of his stock from the day's market; the message boys, faces tight with purpose and exertion; the gossiping merchants at the snack bar, sipping wine and nibbling on nuts; the dour sanitation workers, sweeping animal refuse into the sewer grates—they were all strangers to him and would remain so even after he built a house for himself and Kharrina.

He envisioned a modest house for them despite his extensive knowledge of building techniques. Yet there would still be an atrium, and of course it would have a fountain. And running water for the house as well, even if he had to

absorb the extra cost. As a water artesian, it was a point of pride, and a good selling tool. In fact, a modest house with running water impressed rich clients more than a grand mansion, because it was a luxury they did not expect to see. Kharrina loved plants, so their home would be lush, verdant, full of light and water.

The fading light of dusk spelled the end of the day for most of Restia's workers. They clogged the streets, buying loaves of bread for dinner, stopping for a drink with friends, or, most notably to Crixus, pausing to bet on dice games in booths adorned with roses. He resisted the urge to stop and investigate. Later, he promised himself, when I don't have a lovely woman to see. The bettors' faces bore the many stages of excitement, triumph, and disappointment that livened up a good game of chance, and he tore away his gaze with effort.

A unique combination of smells presaged his arrival at Kharrina's block: the musky scent of printer's ink combined with the lingering smell of baked bread. In the morning the bakery won out, a victory for all concerned. By the evening, a day's worth of ink elbowed the bread aside. Perhaps a houseful of flowers would restore some of Kharrina's poor abused sense of smell.

The Dramonicai Printing Company faced the street. The front rooms were open to view and to sunlight though protected from rain by an overreaching blue awning on the second story. Alman Dramonicai pulled oilskin tarps over a case of paper samples. The influx of new business concerns meant more work for the printer, and thus more initial expenditures on stock. Crixus knew from his discussions with Kharrina that her father had misgivings about the changes to his town.

He waited until he was within hailing distance. "Good evening, Master Dramonicai," he called. Alman glanced up, finished with his tarps, and wiped his hands on his apron. Whether it cleaned his hands or dirtied them more was, by the day's end, debatable. He shook Crixus' hand with a firm grip.

"Artesi Oraan," he said. "My daughter is storing ink. I trust you're here to see her." He turned to fetch the girl.

"I'll have printing for you soon, ser, but today you are correct," Crixus said to the man's retreating back. His prepared small talk would have to be used tomorrow.

Kharrina skipped out of the back room, all smiles. Her father watched as she threw her arms around Crixus' neck for a chaste embrace. Crixus grinned, risking a nuzzle against her cheek, but he kept one eye on Alman. The man's expression remained neutral, controlled.

"By Lestii, what a welcome," he said. Kharrina kissed his cheek. Her auburn hair trickled beneath an ink-stained rag tied around her head. Kharrina shared a slender frame and square jaw with her father, but her mother's fine features softened the effect to an exquisite balance. Even after a dirty day's work, her natural beauty shined through the ink and grease.

"That's not just for you, goose! It's closing time. Father," she said, turning, "the ink is packed up. Unless you want me to help with the sweeping..." She let her voice trail off, giving her father no leeway.

The old man allowed a smile to creep through. "After the mess you made, I should think I'd be better off sweeping alone." She stuck her tongue out. "Go, young lady. Your friend is only in town for a few more days."

"Thank you, ser," Crixus said. "I'll take your daughter to the baths and clean her up."

"A wise choice," The man said without expression. "Off you go."

"To the baths!" Kharrina exclaimed, taking Crixus by the arm and dragging him down the street. He managed to wave goodbye to Alman, who returned the wave coolly.

"I appear to have sprung a prisoner from jail," he said when the printing house was out of sight.

"You have," she groaned. "'Sunlight is the printer's light,' Father says. Up with the sun, close with the sun."

"'If it was fun, you wouldn't get paid for it,' is what my father would say, after turning his son into a bent-backed cripple with a day of hauling terracotta." Crixus aped a hunchback, making her titter. "The worst thing about my trade is that no matter how much arcane knowledge you master, you always have to carry something heavy."

Crixus bought apples at a nearby booth. They crunched the sweet fruit, savoring the tooth-cleansing quality with anticipation. It was a game for them, one with a delightful denouement: they tossed the apple cores into the gutter, nestled against the corner of a building, and kissed. He had been looking forward to that kiss all day, and judging from Kharrina's passion, so had she. She pressed against him on tip-toe and opened her apple-sweetened mouth to him. He felt her heartbeat against his chest, her small breasts through her smock, her strong arms gripping his neck.

This is Restia, he thought. My new home.

She broke the kiss and gasped for air. "What was that about the baths?"

"Well, I thought we could celebrate today with a trip to the baths, then a stout meal, then..." He grinned at her. She grinned back. Kharrina was not shy.

"What are we celebrating?" She started them down the cobblestone street again.

"Nothing, actually." He chuckled. "Stada brought in a water shaman to interfere with our scouting. The Water Guild has little power here, it appears. I lost that battle."

"Oh dear." She squeezed his hand. "But isn't a blessing from the spirits important?"

"I suppose, though I've never seen evidence one way or another that it makes a sprig of difference." Crixus frowned, remembering the quivering dowsing rod.

He guided her around a puddle of sewage. An overhaul of the wastewater management would be on his list of proposals for the city elders before Restia became the reeking sewer that Greater Rond was. "But I suspect the water spirits are happiest in actual water, not rock as dry as a grandmother's nether regions."

She punched him on the arm. "Crixus!"

Crixus snickered. "I'm teasing. But I stood over a perfectly good spring, on the other side of the hill, while the old fool poured sestrices into that swindler's purse. Next time I look for water, I'm bringing eunuchs and incense."

"I can be your dancing girl."

“Oh, no! I don’t intend to share you at all.” Crixus took her arm back, pulling her close. “Though you would be a sight for sore eyes after treating with these wrinkly old men all day.”

“Yet we’re going to the public baths? You’re a glutton for punishment.”

“I doubt I’ll spend much time staring at them.” He winked at her.

“You’re full of lies and contradictions.” Kharrina nestled against him as they approached the bathhouse.

“Like Anoxiae the trickster. I’ll steal your liver and replace it with a stone.”

The Restia bathhouse compared favorably to common bathhouses in Greater Rond. Crixus paid their entry fee of two coprices to an elderly woman who handed them linen robes and wooden sandals to protect against the heated floors. Crixus paused to thrust a hand under the lion-headed fountain in the façade, playing with the water pressure until Kharrina hustled him inside.

They separated to go to the dressing rooms. The men’s dressing room stank of sweat and dirt from the laborers thronging the tiny clothes lockers. Crixus found one on the end of the aisle, stripped, and draped his robe over his arm.

He stepped into the caldarium to wash himself. The attendant, a boy in a loincloth, handed him soap and a brush. A shallow pool of hot water lined with buckets steamed up the room. He felt his sinuses clear, his pores open to the hot mist. Crixus soaped up, scrubbed his skin with the brush, and rinsed off with a bucket of stinging hot water. Holes in the floor drained away the waste water. He watched the water swirl around the drain and guessed that they had not broken up the mineral deposits in years, if at all. He made a mental note to add that to the list when he approached the city about renovating this bathhouse.

Clean and tingly, he collected his robe and entered the frigidarium, a wide room sporting a raised octagonal pool. A quick dip in the chill waters set his heart racing. The water had an organic taste, as though plant roots were leaching residue into the tunnels of the aqueduct. But the locals in the pool splashed and laughed; they were accustomed to the taste.

The tepidarium housed the largest pool in the modest bathhouse. The grand bathhouses he frequented in Greater Rond took up several city blocks and

offered massive vaulted chambers, exercise fields, and libraries. Those who could afford the time lounged away every afternoon there. It was said that more business was done naked in the tepidariums of Greater Rond than in the palace, and it wasn't meant as a bawdy joke. This tepidarium, however, was strictly utilitarian, non-segregated, with a submerged bench for reclining in the lukewarm water that ran off the two caldarii. Men, women, and children swam in the four foot deep pool, but most sat and chattered away the evening. The echoes off the tiled floor and walls turned the room into a festive hall.

Kharrina had not yet finished in the women's caldarium. Intense scrubbing was required to remove the layer of ink and grease from the printing equipment. Crixus sprawled out in a corner away from the splashing children and watched the bathers at play. Restians carried themselves with a languid ease compared to the urban residents of Greater Rond. Less was at stake in the quiet town, a quality he feared would be lost with the influx of investment.

Crixus brought Gavri and Stamm to Restia to begin the process of estimating aqueduct and plumbing contracts for the new estates springing up like weeds. His Guild masters entrusted him with a new territory, a sign that they were grooming him for a leadership role. The responsibility had overwhelmed him at first, but he resolved to rise to the challenge. The task would surely prove to be a turning point for him. Success would lead to everything he wanted: a home, a wife, a family, wealth. Failure would similarly lead him down a path—one marked by frustration and resignation. It was not an option; nor was it what his father had taught him.

Fifteen minutes later, Kharrina strolled into the tepidarium, looking for Crixus. She wrapped the towel around herself but let her hair remain wet, pushed out of her face and falling in sheets to her shoulders. He waved her over to the corner where the children had not yet intruded.

"Forgive me, Crixus." She doffed the robe and lowered herself onto the sunken bench beside him. The sight of her slender frame gave him a salacious thrill, even in a socially neutral place like the bathhouse. "Every day it gets grimier and grimier in papa's shop."

He took her hand under the water. Public affection in a bathhouse was frowned upon, for the comfort of all, but it was unthinkable for him to sit by her unclothed splendor without touching her.

She squeezed his hand back. “Crixus,” she warned.

“I know, I know. We’re just holding hands.” He allowed his shoulder to brush hers. “You look lovely.”

“And clean.”

“I was instructed not to mention that.”

An eyebrow raised. “Really? By who?”

“Gavri thinks she is my older sister, obligated to lecture me.”

“She’s right, you know. But I give you permission to tell me when I’m dirty.”

“You won’t have to get dirty for much longer.”

“What do you mean?”

Crixus shrugged. Kharrina nudged him. “Crixus, stop it. What do you mean by that?”

“Just that I have some plans.” He felt he was blundering forward in a forest, bumping into trees, but the incredulous look on her face pleased him. “I should say no more.”

“You’re terrible, letting me wonder.” She kissed his cheek and whispered in his ear: “What do I have to do to wrest this secret out of you?”

It was too much. Crixus pulled on his robe before the effect she had on him was evident to the entire room. “You can have dinner with me, my plum.” He offered a hand and helped her out of the pool. “And you can interrogate me further.”

“I’ll ply you with drink,” she said, toweling off. “You’ll see spirits then, you skeptic.”

*

Caparelle’s Garden owned a fishing boat whose sole charge was to provide the bulk of the menu. Thus diners at Caparelle’s knew the fish on the end of their fork had been swimming in peace through the seas just hours ago. Farms beyond

the surrounding hills provided fresh onions, carrots, cabbage, tomatoes, and leeks, served with a broth over hard bread, topped with whitefish. After climbing those hills all day for the sake of rich old fools, Crixus wolfed down his food. Kharrina reached over to pat his stomach before he could get the waitress' attention to order a second helping of fish.

"You're turning into a bear," she said. "Will you settle for fruit?"

He winced. "Fruit? Bears prefer honey or meat."

Kharrina wrinkled her eyes at him. The way her eyelids bunched around her eyes won his heart every time, as if he had been waiting for the sun to rise.

"Blackberries. I'll eat them with you."

"We'll forage for berries, then." On her second pass, he caught the waitress and asked for a bowl of blackberries in cream sauce.

"No sauce," Kharrina called to the woman's retreating back. She turned to wink at Kharrina.

"I can't win," Crixus said, palms in the air.

"You will if you learn to listen to me."

Kharrina scooped up the mixed vegetables in a crust of bread and chomped down. The daughters of tradesmen lacked the social niceties of the elite, who bandied about as if the physical world was undignified. The lower classes, awash in squalor, made no attempt at manners. Tradespeople like Crixus straddled both worlds, although this particular meal did not lend itself to dainty eating. Caramelized onions fell from Kharrina's mouth back onto the plate.

The red wine they drank came from Greater Rond's vineyards, a special treat that Crixus insisted on. He wanted to show Kharrina the refinements the capital city offered. As much as Restia had charmed him, one day he would bring her back to Greater Rond. Yet watching her gnaw through crusty bread, sopping up sauce with the spongy portion, he wondered if she would become one of the pampered trophies that accompanied the Guild masters to their annual balls. In his eyes, Kharrina's beauty took strength from the joy she derived from her life in Restia, whether she was up to her elbows in ink or running barefoot on the beach. Robbed of that vitality, left to live with the memory of it, emptiness

would follow. Restia might be the best home for them after all, ambition be damned.

The blackberries arrived without cream sauce, but it wasn't needed. Their sweet tang screwed his face up and gave Kharrina giggling fits. She snaked a hand across the table to sneak a berry.

"One more day together," she mused.

"Two more nights," he said. She grinned back. "Tomorrow I have one remaining client to visit. A landowner, Ser Cadmis. All he appears to do is purchase buildings."

Kharrina nodded. "Father prints leasing papers for him. He owns a dozen apartment buildings scattered around town."

"Have you met him?"

She shook her head. "Only his secretary. I doubt Cadmis has even seen the leases. It must be nice to have other people earn your money for you."

"Well, you take business where you find it. Do fishermen buy many books?"

She sighed. "No, nor do they order forms or proclamations. But sometimes father prints holy books, land records, important council documents. Those I don't mind printing, since they contribute to the glory of Rond, somehow. Alas," she said and smiled ruefully, hefting her wine, "most of my day is spent on nonsense."

"It will get better. With the new road, the demand for books will increase. New libraries to be stocked, new book buyers coming through town."

"And even more paperwork to print up." The wine glass tilted back and forth, almost spilling. "Forms, forms, forms."

"We have an entire department of scholars at the Guild who sit in a windowless room all day, tracking accounts."

Her eyes crossed. "They must be blind."

“Or consumptive from inhaling nothing but lamp oil smoke.”

Crixus fed her a berry. Her lips curved in delight around his fingers. “Good?”

“Hmm hmmm,” she said around the blackberry. “Is that what it’s like to be rich? Fed by slaves?”

“I’m hardly your slave,” he said with mock outrage.

Kharrina leaned forward until her breath brushed his face. “You say that *now*

*

A sliver of moon slashed through the clouds, illuminating their faces enough to see each other’s satisfied smile. Kharrina pressed against Crixus as they walked through the streets to his inn. The route she chose was lined with apartments and houses, but most townsfolk were inside, asleep or gathered around the hearth. Street cleaners pushed sewage into drainage trenches with ragged brooms.

“It’s so peaceful,” he said, his voice hushed. “At this hour, my neighborhood would still be a madhouse with drunkards and bawds. And muggers.”

“Don’t bring that to our little Restia.” Kharrina watched the clouds pass over the moon. “The reason it’s quiet here is because we love our town. A brawl on Friday is the talk of the town on Saturday. Even the sailors know to behave.” She chuckled. “Sometimes.”

“Are you an authority?” He laughed at her as she slapped his stomach. Kharrina said nothing at the jibe, but her eyes and her sly smile answered his question.

Crixus bought a flagon of wine and two goblets from the innkeeper. The main room flickered in torch light and tobacco smoke. The tables had filled with revelers joking and shouting or gambling with tense faces. Waitresses weaved between the tables with jugs of ale in their muscular arms.

They mounted the back stairs to the second floor, divided into six rooms of which he, Stamm, and Gavri rented three. Stamm was either exploring the other pubs of Restia or drinking alone. Gavri retired early as a rule. Careful scouting had established that this inn had the softest, cleanest beds, free of insect life. Kharrina flopped on it and rolled around.

“I want one of these,” she said. “Father still thinks straw mattresses befit sturdy tradesmen.”

Crixus filled the goblets to the brim and handed one to her. “What should we toast?”

She lay on her stomach, legs bent, looking years younger. “Soft beds.”

They drank to soft beds. Kharrina gulped down half the glass.

“Darling!” Crixus said in mock alarm. “I have to take you back to your father tonight. Let’s not give him more reasons to hate me.”

“Other than the fact that you have ravished his daughter, and you’re going to steal her away from his dirty, smelly, sweaty shop forever?”

He knelt in front of her, face to face. “Ravishing, yes, I am guilty. But I haven’t stolen you yet.”

Kharrina kissed his forehead. “Promise you’ll try.”

Cupping her chin, he gave her a kiss. “But if you ask me to steal you, is it still a crime?”

“To father it is,” she said, giggling.

“Now, wait.” He stood and began to pace the room. “Let’s be serious for a moment. Your father resents me.”

“He doesn’t.” Kharrina removed her sandals.

“Alman hasn’t exactly warmed up to me.”

“He has in his own way. I’ve had suitors before, you know. Some he chased away with a rod. That you’ve gotten this far is a sign that his resistance is weakening.”

Crixus became quiet. Kharrina held out her hands until he relented and climbed onto the bed. She embraced him. “Don’t sulk. You know you’re not my first lover. Would you want a child bride, who you have to raise like a daughter

before you can make her a woman?”

He set the goblet on the flat bed post. “I suppose not. I prefer not to think of the men who came before me.”

“You were pleased enough to steal me away from that boy the first time we met.”

He remembered their meeting in the field at dawn, where he had been scouting for water sources. Her escort had been more than displeased when Kharrina stopped to talk to the brawny man lying on his stomach on the ground with a tablet and quill.

She spoke before he could respond. “I doubt you slept alone until you met me.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t matter what has gone before. We are here now, together.”

Kharrina kissed him, licking his lips with her tongue. He couldn’t resist a grin. “Father knows I love you the best of any suitor I’ve ever had. That’s significant to him.”

“It is?”

She nodded, sober despite the wine. “He forbade me to marry one young man I was besotted with because he was unkind. I couldn’t see past the pretty face at the time. Father was right.”

“It seems that I must please old men in order to get everything that matters to me right now.”

“Am I not worth it?”

Crixus kissed her cheeks, then her lips. “You are worth everything to me.” Their legs tangled together with sensuous friction. “I can’t remember life without you.”

“Keep going,” she said.

“Ha, what else do you want to hear?”

“Your noble intentions, good ser,” she said as she slid a hand under his tunic to tug at his chest hair.

“My immediate intentions are not so noble,” he said, eliciting her laugh. “But very soon, I intend to declare myself for you.”

Kharrina pulled back. “You do?”

“Are you surprised? I want to make you my wife.” The words came out fast and thrilled him to the core. They had danced around the subject for a year.

“Crixus.” She looked away.

Crixus’ throat constricted. “Forgive me, I spoke too soon.” His hands hesitated around her hips.

“It *is*

“Ah.” Crixus searched for words that wouldn’t sour the intimacy of the evening. “Then what would you have me think right now?”

“Think that I’m in love with you. Isn’t that enough?”

“Of course it is.” Crixus buried his disappointment.

Kharrina pushed him back and propped herself up to a sitting position. She lifted her dress over her head and dropped it on the floor. Underneath she wore nothing but a cloth wrap around her waist. Her eyes crinkled in a mischievous grin.

“I can be your wife for tonight.”

She guided his hand to where her wrap was secured. Crixus undid the strings; the wrap fell away, and she was nude before him. Her hands rested on her thighs, opening her body to him, all trust and sharing.

Crixus shed his clothes quickly and knelt before her. Kharrina breathed heavily, both eager and nervous. Her small breasts raised under his wide palms. He kissed her shoulder, her neck, her jaw line. She gasped at the delicate touch of his lips.

Falling back in the softest bed in Restia, Crixus and the woman he longed to take as his wife made love to each other.

3. Ser Cadmis

Crixus, Stamm, and Gavri stood in front of the house of the most powerful man in Restia. More accurately, they stood before his courtyard, a lavish garden that took full advantage of the lush seaside climate. Statuary, fountains, and exotic flowering trees had been arranged to create an archipelago of functional spaces, shaded by wide-leaved ferns or vine-shrouded trellises.

A guard in loose-fitting clothes emblazoned with the Cadmis family seal—a dolphin flanked by stars—approached them with an air of affable authority. A curved short sword hung at his side.

“Artesi Crixus Oraan?”

Crixus inclined his head. “I represent the Water Artesans of Rond. You’ll find I have an appointment for early midday.”

“So you do. Please follow me. Don’t stray from the path.”

The guard set off down the cobblestone path. The three artesans exchanged quizzical looks and followed. There appeared to be no direct way to reach the house through the garden; the path curved around like a serpent, leading them past small clusters of men and women being waited upon by servants in revealing garments.

“Now this is the life for me,” Stamm said. “Where did I go wrong?”

“About ten lifetimes ago,” Crixus said. “House Cadmis virtually owns the eastern seaboard. You’d have to arrange a rebirth in the loins of a Cadmis woman.”

Stamm craned his neck to watch a scantily-clad girl bearing crystal goblets of wine. “I’d settle for an evening in the loins of a Cadmis serving girl,” he said. Gavri kicked at his shin. “Pah, girl! What are you, a virgin priestess?”

“As far as you’re concerned, dirty old man. Behave yourself here.”

Stamm made a show of walking with excessive dignity. “Like a gentleman of the

city,” he said in a singsong voice.

“Enough clowning,” Crixus said. “We’re among cultured folk. Let’s stay professional.”

“Aye, ser,” Stamm grumbled.

The garden seemed to stretch out forever, but in fact they weaved through a mazelike series of paths that encircled the house. In the back, the gardens grew to more elaborate heights. A gazebo whose gold dome glinted in the sun above all the squat trees appeared to be their destination.

Gavri sped up to pace the guard. “Good ser,” Gavri said, “can you advise us on how to put Ser Cadmis at ease? We are coarser company than he may be used to.”

The guard chuckled. “In Greater Rond, maybe, but not out here. Believe it or not, he considers this informal.”

“Indeed,” Gavri said. “Would that someday I can enjoy this level of informality.”

The man smiled at her, basking in the female attention. “Wait for him to address you, and you’ll be fine. Ser Cadmis prefers to speak frankly with intelligent folk.”

She returned his smile then glanced back at an approving Crixus.

Ser Cadmis reclined on a couch by the side of a fish pond. The gazebo loomed behind them. A stout and handsome woman plucked grapes from a bowl to his right. Husband and wife had come to resemble each other over the years in the satisfied curl to their lips and their fleshy forms. These were two people who had never known discomfort.

Ser Cadmis perked up at their approach, spotting the scrolls they carried and the hammer at Crixus’ side. He twitched fingers at the servants and spoke a curt command. They scurried off.

The guard motioned for Crixus to come to the front. Crixus took the man’s earlier advice and remained silent.

“Artesi Crixus Oraan, ser,” the guard announced. He leaned over to Crixus. “State the nature of your business, Artesi.”

“To negotiate for purchase of a building for our Guild,” he said.

Ser Cadmis nodded at him, looking him over with a patronizing smile. At last he spoke: “Be welcome, Artesi.” His servants arrived with wicker chairs. Cadmis indicated for them to sit.

“Wine for our guests. They must be thirsty from the day’s tours.”

“Thank you, ser. Your buildings are handsome indeed, making our day a most pleasant one.”

“Water artesans are like their faucets. Turn the tap and warm water pours into your hand.” Sera Cadmis smiled at her own joke. She stretched on her couch. “We’re happy to have your Guild in our little town, Artesi. Did you see how our fountains sputter? The aqueduct here is hardly fit for more than a trickle.”

Ser Cadmis chuckled. “My wife loves her baths. Many times we’ve discussed constructing a magnificent bathhouse for Restia, one to rival the Suriae in Greater Rond.” They shared a leisurely smile, as if time stood still for their little private communications. Crixus fought down the urge to blurt out a sales pitch.

“I am sure we can be of service, ser.”

“I am counting on it,” Cadmis chortled. Crixus relaxed. “Restia is no longer our hidden secret. If we must share it, why not do it in grand style?”

“Many of Greater Rond’s nobility have planned estates here, with the coming of the road,” Crixus said. “Restia is on the verge of an era of prosperity.”

The wine arrived, sweetly scented. The three of them knew better than to drink before their hosts. Cadmis obliged with a prompt toast. “To that era, my friends!”

Stamm nearly drained the glass before Gavri stepped on his toe. Crixus relished the subtleties in the sweet wine, a hint of tartness that prevented it from leaving a cloying taste in the mouth.

“Ser, this wine is the finest I’ve had.”

“Then you’ll take a crate home with you, each of you.”

Stamm lit up with a grin: “Thank you, ser!”

“It is my pleasure. I admire the scientific trades. You aren’t nobility, but your company edifies the thinking man’s soul far more.”

“Toki is a reverse snob,” his wife snorted. “He’d rather play dice on the docks than stomach a party of our friends.”

“Please, dearest.” He favored them with a gracious smile. “Now, let me answer the question you are too polite to ask: ‘Why does he want to speak to us?’” He sipped his wine. “There is talk amongst your Guild of the expansion into Restia. Yes, I do know several of your Guild masters. There are bathhouses we visit, small but quite exclusive, you know.”

“Exclusive and most indulgent of dirty old men,” his wife said.

“But of course. Your masters, Artesi Crixus, speak well of your father and of his son. It’s no accident that you were selected to make the initial round of estimates in Restia.”

“He’s the best Artesan I’ve worked with,” Stamm piped up.

Cadmis nodded at Stamm. “So goes the chatter in the tepidarium. Gifted like his father before him. Humble and honest. Not an enemy in sight.”

Crixus blushed. Compliments were one thing; to hear that they are gossip amongst the masters of the Guild was entirely another.

“Thus, I decided to negotiate the final sale of the new Guild building myself, to meet this promising young man.”

“You’re too kind, ser.” Crixus bowed from his seat.

The old man waved it off. “Oh, I’m hardly kind. Curious, to be sure. Opportunistic, too. I would like to be considered a friend to the Guild that will be reshaping the baths of my hometown. More than a friend, if there is profit

involved.”

“We don’t have enough money yet, as you can see,” his wife said.

Cadmis tittered. “More than enough, but old habits are hard to break. Pull your seat closer, my friend, and show me which property suits you best.”

A servant appeared from nowhere to scoot the chair forward under Crixus. He settled back in, removed the scrolls from his bag, and checked the seals. Untying one, he spread it over his lap.

“This building struck me as ideal for the Guild. The warehousing portion allows us to save money on storage by keeping it on site.” He pointed to the floor plan’s open space, set to the side of the building. “We don’t need to be near the docks. Seawater is of little interest to us. Thus we can afford a larger space.”

“Precisely,” Cadmis said.

“There are plenty of offices for Guild officials. Even room for an office for visiting masters. On this yard space,” he circled an area outside the building itself, “we would build a set of kilns for firing terracotta piping, which provides better tasting water.”

“We use lead,” Cadmis said. “We were assured it was the finest metal for our piping.”

“For most uses, certainly. However, there is debate that the lead piping could, over time, affect the health. One need only meet a veteran lead smelter to know that the vapors are noxious.”

“Do you think this is so?”

Crixus measured his words carefully. “I am not yet convinced, but my mind is open to the argument. Small doses are harmless, some claim beneficial. The lead workers tell a different story. The question becomes, how much is too much?”

“This discussion we shall revisit. Now then, are you settled on this property?”

“Aye, ser. It meets the specifications I was given by my masters.”

Cadmis took the scroll and studied it stretched in front of him. He chewed his lip and squinted.

“I want to propose something,” he said at last. “It would not do for my estate to draw water from the same aqueduct as commoners, with the changes on the horizon. You are building Stada an aqueduct to his property?”

“A small one, yes. Enough for his buildings and vineyard.”

“A vineyard! That old dog. Well, what would you say if I contracted the Guild to upgrade my water supply at a discounted rate, if I offer the same on this property?”

Crixus hesitated. He had fallen in over his head. “Were it my decision, ser, I would say aye. As it is, I can bring back the proposal to my masters and give my opinion on it.”

“Oh?” The old man’s eyes crinkled with a wry smile. “And what is that opinion, Artesi?”

“Well, I favor the idea. But...” His mind raced to navigate the line between etiquette and business. “Before we survey your lands, I can make no guarantees about the overall cost of a project. Restia wants not for springs, but how close they are to your home, we don’t yet know.”

“What about a percentage of cost? This is a figure we can agree on.”

Again Crixus debated what to say. “It can only benefit the Guild to establish a relationship with you, ser. The percentage of discount would probably represent the masters’ valuation of that relationship.” He spread his hands. “For a lowly servant to estimate this would be presumptuous.”

Cadmis laughed. “You have the makings of a diplomat. I believe you both complimented me and refused to answer my question.”

“I mean no disrespect, Ser Cadmis, I assure you.” Crixus flushed. The afternoon sun beat on his face.

“No, no, young man. Your reticence is admirable. You’d rather give me an honest answer than court my favor. Which has the effect of courting my favor.”

He winked. “This is why I like scientists.”

Crixus let out a breath.

“Now I have the rare pleasure of courting your favor, my friend,” Cadmis said. “You’re their eyes and ears here in Restia. I can smooth the way for the Guild. That wouldn’t hurt your reputation at all, would it?”

This is how the rich and powerful work, Crixus thought. They exchange favors that improve the lot of both parties, then use their new influence to curry more favors. Soon the net has ensnared everyone of power, and the land is conquered without a single loss of life.

Could Cadmis be trusted? Why not? If he told the truth to his masters, that Cadmis hoped to curry their favor, what harm could it be? The judgment to respond to the overture would be theirs, not his.

“No, ser, it wouldn’t hurt at all. I’ll convey your offer to my masters.”

“But I want *yourf* scrolls, similar to those bearing floor plans of the buildings they had seen today. He sorted through the seals until he smiled in triumph and removed a scroll.

“Should all your stars align, young Crixus, you will be moving to our fair city?”

Crixus dipped his head. “That is my hope, ser.”

“Have you a family?”

He allowed himself a grin, which Cadmis returned. “Not yet.”

“That is the smile of a man in love.” Sera Cadmis laughed, tilting her wine glass. “Is she from Greater Rond?”

“She is of Restia,” Crixus said. He heard Gavri chuckle behind him. “I haven’t taken her to wife yet.”

Cadmis frowned, and discarded the scroll he had chosen. His spotty hand dipped into the basket again. The scroll he selected he handed to Crixus with a satisfied smile. “Please inspect this.”

The scroll displayed a floor plan of a residential home of substantial size. It boasted an atrium with a fountain and a pool, plumbing lines marked with red inked lines, and ringed by nooks for small trees, just as Kharrina loved. The house could fit Crixus, Kharrina, and an entire brood of children, plus rooms for his mother.

“Ser?”

“Should you continue on the path I predict,” Cadmis said, tapping his cheek, “the Restia branch of your Guild shall be yours to oversee. I would profit more from your friendship and counsel than your sestrices. This property I would be honored to sell you at no financial gain to myself.”

Gavri and Stamm craned their necks to see the scroll. Crixus felt a moment of embarrassment. “Your generosity takes me by surprise, ser,” he stammered. “I wish I had the funds to take advantage of such an offer.”

“At the rate you’re going, I doubt you’ll be counting your coptrices for much longer.” Cadmis waved a hand at the scroll. “Keep that for now. You shouldn’t make important decisions in the heat of the moment. The offer stands.”

Cadmis held out his goblet for a refill. Overhead, a songbird alighted on a nearby trellis and called a spread of notes into the air.

“Thank you, ser. I will give it serious consideration.”

The old man shifted his weight in such a way that Crixus knew the audience had ended. “Take the floor plan back to your masters. Let them know that the price is negotiable, by messenger for their convenience.”

Crixus stood, Stamm and Gavri following suit. “I will, ser.”

“And put in a good word for me, boy.” Cadmis winked at him. “I hope you will visit me again.”

“I will, ser,” he repeated, feeling foolish. “And sera. Your gardens are beautiful beyond the words of a simple artisan.”

“Why, he is

They all bowed, twice to be sure. Cadmis and his wife both turned their gaze to idle contemplation of the songbird.

The guard led the three artesans back along the winding path. Crixus could barely contain his excitement, but he didn't want to give the man anything to report to his master. Instead, his eyes danced when Gavri and Stamm glanced at them.

The road back to Restia's city center puffed dust under their feet. Crixus glanced back several times until the Cadmis estate gate dipped out of site. He grabbed Gavri by the waist and spun her around.

"Did you hear that?" he said. "I don't know which god to thank first!"

Gavri whooped in surprise. "Crixus! Put me down." He did so, and she adjusted her tunic. She pursed her lips at him then grinned broadly. "That went quite well."

Stamm clapped him on the back. "I'm already thinking of how to tell the young ones 'I knew him when.' Masters have been promoted for less."

"You'll be the Restia Guildmaster for sure," Gavri said.

As they walked back into town, Crixus thought of Kharrina's coyness the night before. The floor plan in his bag would be proof that she didn't need to settle for a salty fisherman as a husband.

4. Gold

Greater Rond had not changed since Crixus left, as though time had frozen in the sprawling capital city of Rond, while his life boiled to a head on the coast. In his luggage, he brought back his estimates of the eight projects he scouted, along with hand-drawn maps, land survey information, natural spring locations (including the contradictory predictions of the dowser), and floor plans for future offices. Everything was carefully annotated, his notes growing bolder as the idea of promotion settled in.

A separate bag bore the floor plan of the house Cadmis had offered to sell him at a discount and a note from Kharrina, meant to be read after he left Restia.

My darling,

You sleep beside me as I write this. As a girl, I never understood the secret joys of love that the mothers and grandmothers spoke of when they thought the children were gone. I can smell you on my skin, still feel you inside me, inside the chambers of my heart. There is much you will learn about me.

I dreamed of the house Ser Cadmis offered you. We were sitting at the fountain, a dog playing at our feet. I've never had a dog, but now I want one. Children's voices echoed in our atrium, but I never saw the children. I wonder if they were ours, if I was looking into our future.

Sleep hasn't found me yet. I am going to pray to Lestii, to Marach, even to Anoxiae the trickster, and keep them content until you return from Greater Rond. I will ask Anoxiae to visit sores on the bandits' feet so that you travel safely.

You snore after lovemaking, dear.

Your Kharrina

Which god oversees snoring? he wondered. He imagined Kharrina throwing sacred herbs into a bonfire, and bandits limping away from the road as he passed by. The image made him chuckle.

The trip home consumed most of the day. The sun gave up the last of its rays as

the spires of Greater Rond wove into view. Amber lights dotted the skyline where lamps burned in windows. The scent of smoke, sewage, and incense clotted the air.

Distances being what they were in the capital city, the carriage dropped off Gavri first then looped through the industrial quarter to Stamm's flat, a bare hole in the wall. His assistants parted with uncommon solemnity, as if they'd never see Crixus again. Nothing was certain; all the talk of promotions, favors, and wealth might be just talk to dazzle his naïve ears. And yet a distance developed in the quiet ride home and their camaraderie diminished. He hoped it was travel fatigue and nothing more.

His own apartment was modest, too, but featured one luxury: running water. Why build lavish plumbing systems all day long, only to come home to a bucket of cold well water? The jury-rigged system he built required him to stoke a small wood furnace for hot water, but he lacked the spirit for it after the trip. A quick, cold splash in his tub was enough to sluice the dust off his skin.

Cadmis' gift house loomed in his mind. The confines of his apartment, the bare walls and simple furniture, no longer contented him. He wanted the sunny atrium, Kharrina's dog, and cool rooms decorated with tile murals. The decades he had spent learning his craft poised to do more than provide a means of sustenance, a perpetual waiting for success. This small life will soon be a memory, he thought, dripping wet in the midst of his flat.

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Crixus stepped out of the Guild's council chambers and was ambushed by Stamm and Gavri, eager expressions on their faces. Stamm squeezed his shoulder.

"Well?"

Crixus controlled his expression. "It went *well*

"Damn you, man. Don't tease us."

"They are sending me to Restia..." He paused before a broad boyish grin split his face. "To head the Guild branch there, as an associate Guildmaster." Crixus showed them the small box with the Guild seal. "I am to report to the treasury to

procure a down payment for the headquarters.”

Gavri clapped in delight. “I knew it. I knew it!”

Stamm pumped Crixus’ hand. “I’m proud of you, old son. When do you leave?”

“In two days. They are sending me back with a bodyguard, a contract, and a cartful of gold.”

The council doors flew open to disgorge a crowd of officious functionaries and Guildmasters. Crixus led Stamm and Gavri down the hallway, out of the way. He clasped his hands together.

“I want to offer both of you positions in Restia. I can’t guarantee promotions yet, because I’m so freshly minted, but the list of candidates would be far shorter than here in Rond.”

“Yes,” Gavri said at once. “I’ll come.” Her eyes sparkled with tears of happiness. Crixus had never seen her so emotional. He looked to Stamm.

“Well,” the older artisan said, slowly, “it’s quite exciting. I couldn’t be happier for you. But Restia? Nice town, but I’m a city lad, born and raised. I have my pubs, my ladies.” He clapped Crixus on the shoulder. “I think this is an opportunity for the young.”

“Somehow, I knew you’d say that,” Crixus said with a sigh. “You could start a new life in Restia, you know.”

“I’m used to the old one,” Stamm said, shrugging. “Besides, it would take years before the pubs would stand me a tab like they do here.” His face lit up. “Aye, and there’s a good idea! A drink to celebrate.”

“I suppose I can’t turn that offer down.”

By the time the three arrived at Stamm’s favorite pub, word had spread about the newest Guildmaster. Handfuls of water artisans trickled in until the pub rollicked with drunken singing and handshakes. Faces of artisans whose names he barely knew beamed with pride at him. All offered congratulations, many asked about Restia. Stamm, his voice louder when drunk, let on that a Guild branch wasn’t all Crixus was starting. His hands described a womanly figure 8 in

the air. The crowd roared their approval. Crixus blushed and drank more mead, until the torches swam in his eyes.

*

Packed and anxious, Crixus navigated through the labyrinthine Guildhouse to the basement, where the Guild treasury vaults nestled behind stone walls. The Guild had hired a mercenary to accompany him; entrusted with the Guild's gold, Crixus wished they had paid for an entire battalion.

The bodyguard waited for Crixus by the vault door. He stood a hand's-breadth taller than Crixus, with a sleek, muscular build that would have made a mason proud. Madraig's leather armor bore the mercenary Guild badge, silver and brass, depicting a sword and an axe crossed at the hilt. The long hilt of a cavalry sword jutted out over his shoulder; Crixus had seen those used before from horseback and knew the blade was only a few hands longer than the hilt. The leverage a swordsman could generate with two hands would gut a man in heavy armor. Madraig lounged against the wall outside the treasury, a wolf among sheep, confident and bored. Sandy hair reached down to his eyebrows.

"I'm Crixus." He put out a hand. "We'll be traveling together."

Madraig straightened and grasped Crixus' hand, squeezing enough to challenge him. "Mdraig, Guild of warriors."

"I take it you've been briefed?"

His leather armor creaked with his shrug. "Escort a functionary with gold. Prevent theft. I do it every day."

Crixus was a functionary now. The term sounded odd coming from another man's mouth. "I suppose you do. This is a new road, though. No one knows where the dangerous stretches are."

Mdraig grinned at him. "All the more reason to look forward to this trip."

A massive iron door barred their way into the vault. Crixus knocked on the door with the steel knocker to save his knuckles. A peephole slid open, suspicious eyes beyond. "Yes?"

“I’m here for the Restia branch down payment.” Crixus suspected there was an etiquette to these transactions, but no one had briefed him.

“Name and rank.”

“Artesi—er, Associate Guildmaster Crixus Oraan.” He felt Madraig’s eyes on him as he produced the document. “The withdrawal amount is—”

“I have it here. Step back.”

With a groan straight from the pits of Hell, the door grated open, revealing a small, aged man pushing an ornate metal box on a cart. Three guards stood behind him, crossbows ready. Assuming the box contained gold, it weighed at least two hundred pounds.

“Let me help you, ser,” Crixus said, stepping forward.

The treasurer violently waved him off. “Not until you’ve signed for it! Don’t touch anything.”

For a full, agonizing minute, the old man struggled to push the cart free of the vault. Madraig shrugged and leaned against the wall again, inspecting his nails. Crixus fidgeted. At last the old man produced a scroll and an inkpot. He glared at Crixus.

“Get out your seal, Guildmaster,” he said with no deference in his voice. “Sign this so I can go back to work.”

Crixus produced his seal, inked it, and blotted the scroll in three places, at the direction of the treasurer, who returned the scroll to his apron with quaking hands. He waved Crixus off as he crept back into his vault.

The seal of the Guild had been fused into the metal of the box. Out of curiosity, Crixus tried to lift the lid. It resisted him. He wondered how he would present the payment to Ser Cadmis.

“There’s a key on the other side,” Madraig said, pointing.

“Oh.” The key unlocked a latch, allowing Crixus to open the lid. Slender gold bars laid in rows, wrapped in velvet. An open scroll proved to be a receipt for the

payment, fully annotated with ser Cadmis' name and business address.

"I see a lot of these," Madraig said. "Usually, they make me haul them to the carriage." The cautionary note in his voice told Crixus that wasn't an option today.

Pocketing the key, Crixus wheeled the cart out through the basement service exit. He and Madraig passed the kitchen, the furnace room, and storage rooms for lead, iron, and clay, each with their attendant odors. After standing in the lamp lit basement for so long, the morning sun dazzled them.

"If we leave now, we can make it to Restia by sunset," Madraig said. He shooed a stray cat out of Crixus' path. "You have your belongings, right?"

"Just a few bags." The cart seemed to triple in weight as he manhandled it up the slope from the service exit. Madraig waited for him at the carriage and opened the rear gate for him with a casual air. He was serious about not carrying the gold.

"So you're riding back to Rond with me, then?"

Crixus halted at the carriage, panting heavily. His arms burned from exertion. "Yes... yes, that's my plan."

"Good." He stepped to the other side of the money box.

"Nice to have company on the road," Crixus said.

"No. Doubles my pay for the trip." Madraig grinned, showing a few missing teeth. "Best kind of company, actually."

He gripped the handles opposite Crixus. "You ready?"

"Aye. One, two, three!" They both grunted as they lifted the gold. Swinging it in unison, they hefted it into the back of the cart, which protested with a wooden creak.

"Bloody hell," Madraig said. "Better to be poor than haul that around."

"I doubt the rich ever touch their own money." Crixus wiped his hands on his

pants. “They pay men like us to do it.”

“Huh.” Madraig looked at Crixus oddly. “Huh. Suppose so.”

The carriage had seats for four indoors, two up top. Crixus tossed his bags in the passenger compartment.

“You’re not going to sit in there?”

“If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather ride in the fresh air.”

The two horses stirred as Madraig leapt up to the coachman’s seat. He handed Crixus his own bag, a leather sack reinforced with a wooden frame and two straps.

“Let’s make room for you then, ser,” he said. Crixus stored the man’s pack in the compartment. He climbed up the side of the carriage, and nearly tripped on a loaded, but not cocked, crossbow.

“Mind that,” Madraig said. “Know how to shoot one?”

“Not I.”

“Then don’t block me from it.”

Crixus settled in to the wooden bench, a man’s height from the ground. “So you’d let me shoot it if I had any skill?”

“Gods, no. Just curious.” Madraig pulled a cloak over his armor. “Did you pull the curtains shut?” Crixus shook his head. “We don’t want to arouse suspicion, two men with an empty carriage.”

Crixus dismounted and closed the curtains. Now the carriage did appear to be for passengers, modest ones at that. Crixus saw some utility in the rickety carriage provided by the Guild. He climbed back up and took the reins. “Convincing enough?”

“Aye, I’m satisfied.”

Crixus snapped the reins, called “hup!” and the horses ambled forward, testing

the weight of their new load. He kept their gait at a slow trot as they moved through the streets of Greater Rond towards the outskirts. The morning sun began to tender some heat to the city, and the populace settled into work, or shopping, or hauling. The mix of smoke from forges, bakeries, and home hearths hung over the narrow streets. Crixus noticed it more acutely than usual.

Weaving through the foot traffic, it took them half an hour to leave the city proper; stacked apartments gave way to vineyards, farms, and barns. Madraig perked up as the fresh new road cut through the hills surrounding Greater Rond. It had been built along a different route than the most popular path to Restia, which was virtually a road thanks to decades of hooves, wheels, and feet. The paved road, years in the making, allowed wheeled vehicles to travel three times faster than before. Crixus encouraged the horses to trot at a mile-devouring rate. Two vehicles could pass each other on this road; the government had spared no expense. Crixus kept to the left side, watching the drovers pass by on the way to market.

Madraig whistled a melody as they moved through the civilized prefects, watching the orchards give way to farms and the farms give way to unplowed land. When the forest loomed in the distance, he lifted his hood and touched the crossbow.

“Trouble?”

“Not yet, but if it comes, that’s where we’ll find it.”

“I’ve traveled this road half a dozen times. I never had any feeling of danger.” Madraig didn’t respond. “The King’s Principles run this road thrice daily.”

“Do you see them now?” Madraig pulled the crossbow into his lap, nestling it in the flaps of his cloak.

“No.” They were alone on the road, farmers left far behind.

“Do you see other travelers now?”

“I don’t.” Crixus’ heart raced. “Are we in trouble?”

“No,” Madraig said with a snide laugh. “But now you’re paying attention, aren’t you, ser?” The last word carried a hint of insolence. Crixus bristled then decided

he preferred cockiness to the deference the artesans now gave him. It felt unnatural. Madraig was a man with whom he could share a drink and a card game.

Crixus shrugged. "I think I've had my first lesson at guardsmanship."

"That you have." Madraig nodded, gratified.

"What should I watch for?"

"Well." Madraig straightened in his seat. Crixus sensed he was about to get a lecture. "You remember playing at legionnaires as a boy? Small scale tactics aren't much different. Best to get the drop on your enemy, take him out before he knows you're there, or at least confuse him or scare him, so he has to think before he can fight." The hills sloped away from the road, and he pointed at the crest of one nearby. "Pretend that's in the forest and covered with bushes. Pretend your friend is wearing his dirty brown rags and lying on his stomach. You won't spot him, will you, until he hits you with his first mudball."

"I was big for my age. A perfect mudball target."

Madraig chuckled. "Aye, me, too. But they knew not to get close or you'd tackle them, right?"

Crixus raised a thick arm, careful not to yank the reins. "Papa put me to work digging trenches at an early age. I won my wrestling matches."

"The bandits near the coast are no different. Land's fairly flat, just some gentle hills, so hideouts are a rare thing. The Principles check the hamlets for illicit activity and hire the mercenaries if they want to roust someone out." He grinned at Crixus' surprised look. "That's right. Principles don't want to take any chances. Most of 'em are veterans who think they're already retired and paid just to ride a horse around and wench. They keep a budget for 'auxiliaries.'" He spat over the side of the carriage. "Most are good fighters if you can convince them to draw a sword. I suppose I'll feel the same way later. For now, I like a good fight to keep me sharp." He scratched his head. "Where was I?"

"Wrestling."

"Right. The point is, a bandit isn't a stout fighter, as a rule. Most are underfed,

over-drunk, cowardly louts. Mean, though dirty, fighters. They favor a clear bowshot to a swordfight. That bow makes them dangerous to even the quickest duelist. Question is, can you spot them before they take their shot?"

"Sounds forbidding."

"Can be, but like I say, once they rob someone, Principles don't leave 'em many places to go. That's why this road is probably safe enough for unladen travelers. My hope is to look unassuming enough that any bandits will consider it a waste of time to have a go."

The carriage entered the shade of the forest. Evergreens chattered in the light breeze. Crixus could not help but notice all the underbrush. "Why don't they trim it all back?"

"Probably will, once trade really heats up," Madraig said. "Now, pretend you're a boy again, and look for anywhere you'd lie in wait with a handful of mud. Don't point with your hand, use your chin. Small movements."

"Now I'm paranoid," Crixus said. He peered at the rising shoulder.

"Congratulations. You may have a future in the mercenary Guild."

They rode in tense silence, listening to the whickering horses, their hoof beats, the grating of the wooden wheels. The clatter seemed deafening now that Crixus had been awakened to the danger of traveling. He marveled at how he naïvely flounced along this road before.

Midday came and went. They snacked on dried fruit and meats, and a loaf of bread. In a flat section of forest, clear for as far as the eye could see, they stopped and watered the horses. Madraig maintained an easy air of caution. He urinated against a tree, humming to himself, then scanned their surroundings as Crixus did the same.

"I'm as tense as a virgin with a courtesan," Crixus said as they resumed their journey, making Madraig guffaw. "How do you do it?"

"I guess I'm just mean. I love the burn of a fight. Everything is so simple. You don't have to know anything but how to swing your sword and avoid your enemy's. If I had a head full of math and all that, like you, I'd go mad."

“Huh.” They watched the trees pass by. “In Restia, all the excitement that awaits me is negotiating with cheap old nobles and pleasing a young maiden.”

“The latter sounds worthy.”

“She is most worthy,” Crixus said. “Luckiest thing ever to happen to me.”

“Do you remember this stretch of road?” The mercenary asked suddenly. “Can’t see past that hillock, and I don’t like it.”

Crixus strained to remember. “It becomes hillier further along, for an hour or so.”

“Tell me about your girl in an hour.” Crixus took the hint and shut up. Madraig scrutinized the sides of the road with a frown.

The next hour was the longest in Crixus’ life. He imagined bandits with mudballs behind every bush, shrub, covert, or chaparral, dirty men with wet grimaces and hungry eyes. More agonizing were the three times Madraig signaled with a low hand for him to slow down as they passed a grade topped with significant tangle of foliage.

The lack of fellow travelers on the road made Crixus more nervous, as if he and Madraig, with their gold, were bloody bait in the water for dogfish.

“We’re clear,” Madraig announced. The topology of the land ahead seemed no different, but he exhaled in relief. “Stay alert, but I wager we’ve passed the worse of it.”

“How so?”

He pointed back at the forest behind. “All good ambush points, ones I’d have used. Ahead we’ve got sparse cover. No bandit worth their salt would bother with it.” He broke out the water bottle and took a swig, then offered it to Crixus. “Now, tell me about this fine young lady you’ve been swivving.”

“She’s the daughter of a printer.”

Madraig shook his head. “No, no, I don’t want to hear about that. Blonde, brunette? Big ass? Nice bosom?”

“Slender, still girlish,” Crixus said, feeling boastful. “Small breasts that fit in your hand. Nut brown hair that she can’t tie back well, so it falls over her face in curls.” He wiggled his fingers past his cheek. “Strong jaw, wide eyes. She’s got a face you know you could wake up to for the rest of your days.”

Madraig regarded him with abrupt solemnity. “You sound like a man in love.”

“Good and true,” Crixus agreed. “She’ll be the mother of my children.”

“Sorry I spoke of her ass, then.”

Crixus smiled at the mercenary. “It is

“Ha! Someday I hope to be so lucky, aside from the occasional—huh.” He grunted, scowling. Crixus thought he heard a thump, then saw an arrow jutting from the man’s back. His body went cold with fear.

Any pack of boys would have known the slight grade to their right, covered with forest ivy, was ill-suited for concealment, yet somehow he and Madraig both missed the men crouching behind a dwarf tree.

Madraig reeled for a moment then stood, casting off his cloak and roaring like a lion. His armor had caught the arrowhead before it could penetrate his skin. He brandished the crossbow and took aim at moving shadows.

Crixus had no idea what to do. The horses whinnied.

“Lash them, man!” Madraig cried.

“Yah, yah!” Crixus jerked the reins, leaning forward. The horses bolted, pushing him back in the seat. Madraig, standing, let the momentum take the carriage out from under him. He vaulted onto the road, rolling away from his arrow to snap it off without pushing it in further. The carriage sped away from him.

Crixus’ heartbeat pounded in his ears. The horses, not yet worn out, ran a hundred yards in a moment. Shouts resounded through the wood, some being challenges to fight from Madraig. Crixus craned his neck to see Madraig rushing four men, with two more on the slope notching arrows.

He wanted to flee from the violence, but he had no idea how Madraig could

prevail against so many foes, some of which were archers. Guilt overcame his fear, and he hauled back on the reins. The horses resisted and tossed their heads but came to a halt. They neighed angrily. Crixus' hand found the haft of his family hammer.

Turning to climb down, he saw why the horses were rearing in terror. Two bandits stood in his path, one with a spear, one with a bow, arrow notched and aimed at his heart.

Surprised, he finished climbing down. Why hadn't the Guild given him armor as well?

"Lay it down," the bowman said in a strident voice. Down the road, a man screamed shrilly; not Madraig.

Crixus hesitated. He had never been threatened with death before. Beatings, yes. A bar brawl or two, but always with an unspoken agreement to stop short at permanent damage.

The arrow did not waver. The spearman, a hunchback with a smooth face painted with soot, advanced on him.

The horses reared and lunged forward a step, panicked by the violence in the air. The bowman jumped back a pace, and the arrowhead pointed at the ground. Crixus moved without thinking, putting the spearman between himself and that arrow, then swung his hammer at the haft of the spear.

It snapped.

"Bloody hell—" the spearman said, eyes wide. Crixus got his feet between the spearman's legs and rammed him. Twice the man's size, he carried him forward toward the archer.

The bowstring thrummed: an arrow sailed past Crixus' head. He yelped, startled, and fear set his arms afire. He rammed the spearman into the archer and they all three fell into a pile.

Crixus disentangled himself from the pile, the privilege of the man on top, and immediately identified his target. He swung the blunt head of the hammer at the spearman's leg. A horrific snap, and blood spurted as something white tore

through the man's skin: his femur. He screamed in agony.

The archer pushed his comrade away and drew a wicked long dagger. The hatred in his eyes shocked Crixus. Rust and dirt tarnished the metal of the dagger, and Crixus' skin crawled at the thought of it cutting him.

In the bandit's hand, the dagger darted at him with unholy speed. His mason's hammer could never move fast enough to parry it.

Crixus could think of only one thing to do: he ran.

He spun on his heel and ran towards Madraig, hoping the bandit couldn't throw the dagger with any accuracy. His back itched, anticipating a fatal blow. Ahead of him, Madraig swung his cavalry blade with vicious speed; two bodies laid at his feet, and five arrows stuck out of the ground. He dodged and weaved as he parried the swords of his two remaining melee opponents. The archers took a step back, toward some ideal distance.

Crixus veered towards the archers, hammer in front like a shield. He sprinted with a desperate speed, knowing they could turn and fire and he'd die like an animal. Sound diminished in his ears as he concentrated on the ground between him and the archers.

The first man never saw him. He smashed into the man's side, knocking his bow to the ground, eliciting a yelp of surprise. The man fell to the ground and Crixus stepped on his arm. He stumbled, and, seeing the second archer turn and aim at him, let go of the hammer. It flew and became entangled with the bow. The weight of the hammer jolted the bow out of the man's hands.

Recalling Madraig's words, Crixus tackled the archer and rammed a fist into his stomach. The bandit's foul breath rushed out of his lungs; wherever the bandits camped, it wasn't near fresh water.

Grappling with the archer, Crixus felt a surge of adrenaline. This was combat he understood. He pummeled the smaller man with his meaty fists, feeling cheekbones crumple under his knuckles.

"Roll!" Madraig shouted.

Crixus threw himself to the side. An arrow pierced the belly of his opponent,

where his back would have intercepted the arrow had he still been on top of the man. The bandit gulped and spit blood.

Madraig had finished his two opponents in a most brutal fashion. A glimpse showed Crixus the bloody bodies and a separated arm. The archer whom he had trampled and his dagger wielding pursuer hesitated, seeing the wolfish leer on the mercenary's face. Madraig took a step towards the archer, then another, then dashed for him.

The archer stumbled back, drawing an arrow from his quiver and nocking it. Madraig's sword, held with one hand under the hilt and the other at the pommel, sheered off the archer's arm at the elbow, then swung wide to eviscerate the man. His stomach opened up and guts spilled out.

His companion screamed and ran, terror giving him speed like a deer. Crixus watched Madraig run him down over the course of a minute: their figures shrank in the dark forest until he saw the mercenary swipe his bloody sword through the bandit and heard a doleful cry of pain.

Crixus drew a breath but it came out as a sob. Another, and another, and he could not stop gasping. He dropped to one knee and concentrated on the dirt at his feet to regain his composure.

A hand on his shoulder caused him to spring to his feet, still hyperventilating.

"It's over," Madraig said. "You're all right. It's over." He grabbed Crixus' heaving shoulders and stilled them. "Look into my eyes, man." Crixus did and saw exultant calm in them. Madraig exhaled slowly through his mouth. Crixus fell into his rhythm and stopped gasping.

"S-sorry," he said, embarrassed. His eyes stung with tears, like a boy dragged off his friend in a schoolyard tussle.

A wide grin lit Madraig's dirty, blood-specked face. He looked Crixus over. "Are you hurt?"

"No." Crixus wondered if he had been hurt and failed to notice in the excitement. His body ached but tingled as well. "They never touched me."

"Remarkable," Madraig said. He let go of Crixus and surveyed the carnage.

“Eight on two. Bad odds, but we big boys whipped them.” He pointed to the ridge. “Can you believe we missed that, after all our talk and worry? It’s such a bad kill point, it’s brilliant.”

“I can’t believe... I mean... Gods, I’ve never had to fight for my life like that.”

Madraig peered at the woods around them. “I think we’re done. Any that’s left saw the brawl and got the hell out.” He pointed to the carriage. “Calm the horses before they bolt. I don’t want to chase them down.”

Crixus jogged down the road while Madraig dug through the still bodies on the road. He heard the jingle of metal coin and looked back to see Madraig holding up a handful of belt pouches.

“My tip,” Madraig called. “Courtesy of these bastards. Next round is on them.”

The horses bucked and neighed, but the fight was over and they sensed it. Crixus shushed them, patting their sides and offering them water. Madraig strode up to the carriage with Crixus’ hammer.

“This is one nasty weapon,” he said. “If you’d hit one of ‘em with the sharp end, there’d be limbs scattered like firewood.” He spun it in his hand. “Heavy and slow, though. Better balanced than I’d have thought for a tool.”

Crixus accepted the hammer back, sliding it back into its loop on his wide belt. It had indeed been an effective weapon, all things considered.

But not lethal. “I don’t think they’re all dead,” he said. He looked for the bandit whose leg he’d shattered. Madraig rounded the carriage and pointed.

“That one?”

The bandit groaned, discovered. Madraig walked over to him and flipped him with his foot. The man flopped over, weak and helpless. His leg bent at a sickening angle. Left alone, he’d bleed to death in an hour.

“Well, hello there,” Madraig said. “I take it you’ve met my friend, the plumber.” He nudged the bandit with his foot, producing a yelp of pain. He spoke to Crixus: “Should we finish him off?”

“I can’t,” Crixus said. “I don’t have the stomach for it.”

“I do,” Madraig said. “That’s why I didn’t follow my dream to be a puppeteer.”

Crixus squinted. “Really?”

“Gods, no. I’m a fucking killer!” he bellowed into the bandit’s face. “You want to die, you piece of shit?”

The bandit howled. “No, please!”

“I can fix that leg and take you to town, and you can sing like a bird to the constable and win me a reward, or I can let the ants have you.” He leaned closer to the quaking man’s face. “Choose now. I owe my friend a drink for whipping you like a dog.”

“Take me,” the man said. “Please, I’ll tell them everything.”

“Right. Good choice, that.” He glanced up at Crixus. “We have to bind his leg. Get me the spare reins, a shirt out of my bag, and the flask of rum.”

Madraig wrapped the leather reins around the bandit’s leg several inches above the break. “Nasty weapon, that hammer,” he said. “Blunt trauma always impresses me. A cut is a cut, but a contusion... ugly.” He solicited Crixus’ help in tightening the leather strap to cut off blood circulation in the man’s leg, using a stout branch to turn. The man whimpered as it constricted his leg.

“Drink as much as you can,” he said, giving the bandit his flask. The man gulped the rum down. “Empty it,” Madraig commanded. The bandit did, gasping for breath. “Feeling no pain?”

The bandit nodded, eyes glassy.

“Right. See the sun? Look into the sun for me.” The bandit turned his head, and as he did, Madraig drew his sword, gripped it tight, braced himself, and slammed it down on the broken leg, inches from the tourniquet. The sword amputated the leg with a dull, wet sound. The bandit screamed hideously.

“Tighten that some more,” Madraig said. His stomach turning, Crixus turned the branch, trying not to look at the fresh stump. Madraig stood, matter of fact, and

brought the oil lamp from inside the carriage. He lit the burner and took off the hood, letting the flame grow with the fresh air.

“Cauterizing the wound will prevent more bleeding,” he said. “Breathe through your mouth.” He burned the stump, filling the air with a sickening smell of cooked flesh. The horses bucked.

“By Lestii,” Crixus said, looking away.

“Believe it or not, this’ll save his worthless life.” Madraig shook his head. “I fought in enough ‘border skirmishes’”—the words seemed to curdle in his mouth—“to see this done on a daily basis.”

“I’d go mad.” Crixus eyed the semi-conscious bandit.

“Keep to your pretty woman, then,” Madraig said. “When the day is over and the bodies counted, she’s a better sheath for a man’s sword than anything else.”

5. Restia

Crixus and Madraig rolled into Restia as the moon rose over the bay, sharpening the crests of the dark waves into white knives. The one-legged bandit slept in the passenger compartment, his arms tied in front, his stump bound in Madraig's undershirts. After the ambush, the two men rode in silence. Crixus played the sequence of events over and over in his head until the entire battle became a series of paintings, each with its own emotional punch to his gut. Madraig spoke a few reassuring words, then let him meditate for the rest of the journey.

In Restia proper they requested directions to the constabulary from a group of dockworkers. The jail building itself had been painted black and bore a faded sign of the King's Principles crest. Without directions, they would have missed it entirely.

The jailer on duty helped them carry the bandit inside to a jail cell. He sent a patrolman to the home of a local doctor. Madraig explained the circumstances of the ambush as they waited for the doctor's arrival.

"Eight men, you say?" The jailer rubbed his salt and pepper beard. "Ever considered a career with the King's Principles?"

"Considered it," Madraig said with a cocky grin. "More money with the mercenaries. I'm not the sort to throw myself on a sword for the King's sake."

"Honor has a place on the battlefield," the old soldier said. "The King's Principles know what they stand for. We swing a sword for the good of Rond, not merely for coin."

Madraig shrugged. "Coin feeds and clothes me, not honor. I sleep well at night because I have the coin to pay for company. *That's*

"Aye." The jailer rooted through a desk to produce a scroll. "By edict, it's one austic per head." He scowled at Madraig. "Not to say you should bring me heads. The testimony of the Guildmaster will do."

"I'll witness," Crixus said.

“Hell, he fought as ferociously as I did,” Madraig said. “I’ll witness to him, and we’ll split the bounty.”

The jailer had them sign a piece of parchment with a truncated form of their report. Crixus used his new seal. “The town council meets in two days. I can present this then for approval. I’m not a bank.”

“Two days, eight austrices. I’d call that honorable compensation,” Madraig said. “You have two days worth of business, Guildmaster?”

Crixus thought of Kharrina. “I can find plenty to do.”

The door opened to an peevish old man sporting a red cloak. A teenaged boy followed him with a wooden box strapped to his back. The doctor dropped the cloak in the boy’s hands with an imperious air. “I’m here, Taval. Who’s dying?”

The jailer rolled up the scroll and report. “You gentlemen can leave, if you wish. We’re done here.” He called to the doctor, “third cell, ser.”

Outside at the carriage, Crixus took advantage of the torchlight to inspect the passenger compartment. Despite their efforts, the bandit had bled over the seats. The thickening blood stank; Crixus did not envy he who would have to scrub it out of the cushions.

Madraig peeked in. “Nasty.”

“We’ll hire someone to clean it. I don’t care to ride back to the city in a butcher’s cart.”

“Aye, this isn’t Nistru. The blood’s upsetting the horses.” He stroked the horse’s cheek and clicked his tongue.

“Nistru? Where have I heard that before?”

“I’d tell you if my mouth wasn’t so dry.” He took the bridle of the horses. “How about I stand you a drink, and we find our beds for the night?”

“My tavern lies near the bay,” Crixus said, pointing down the road. They walked the horses down the dark cobblestone street, their hooves echoing off the stucco walls. “I had hoped to see my lady tonight.”

“Can you call on her so late?”

Alman Dramonicai’s cool face came to mind. “No, probably not.”

“Then drink is called for, in truth. It’ll whet your appetite for her, and tomorrow she’ll sing your praises for all the neighbors to hear.”

Crixus cleared his throat. “So, Nistru. Is that an outlying province?”

“Hardly. Across the sea, on the continent of Minq. Nistru is tucked away in a mountain valley, ideal for defense. A mercenary army guards their diamond mines.”

They turned a corner to a livelier street, lit with oil lamps and crowded with revelers. Madraig smiled at the songs spilling out of dingy tavern shutters.

“Mercenary, eh? That figures.”

“Ha! Aye, I did have the occasion to meet a former member of the Red Legion, guarding a merchant ship from pirates. He was a strange one: swarthy, intense, and none too friendly. One night we convinced him to drink with us and he talked about being kicked out of Nistru, and how it was the best thing ever to happen to him.”

“What did he do? Steal diamonds?”

Madraig shook his head. “They’d have killed him for that. No, he took up with a peasant lass. The Lamiae forbid the Reds from fraternizing with the locals.”

The familiar tavern came into view. Crixus and Madraig led the horses around back where a stable boy accepted a coptric to water and feed them.

Madraig hefted his pack. “I’d rather not leave the box unattended.”

Crixus groaned. “I suppose we should bring it in.”

They carried their luggage in through the back door. Crixus called to a serving girl to fetch the innkeeper. A round-bodied, gray haired woman bore down on them, wiping her hands with a towel.

“Why, Artesi Oraan, back again.”

“Hello, Kimbry. I trust you have rooms for us? On the first floor this time,” he added.

“Aye, that I do.” The innkeeper looked Madraig over with open appraisal. “This one’s no plumber.”

“On the contrary, good mum. My ladies tell me I am quite the plumber.” He winked at her. Kimbry snorted.

They deposited their luggage on the floor and returned to the carriage for the box. Crixus felt increasingly exposed, surrounded as they were by people. Anyone there could be a potential thief. Only the weight of the box of gold prevented it from easy theft.

Grunting, they maneuvered the box into Crixus’ room. After a weighty moment of indecision in the dim light, they pushed it right up against the foot of the bed.

“Looks like a foot locker,” Madraig said, wiping his hands.

Crixus took a spare blanket off the bed and draped it over the box. “Now it does.”

“Good. I declare this leg of our journey over. The first round is on me.”

“Then I’m buying your dinner.”

They shook hands, grinning. “Agreed.”

The night’s specialty was hare, braised with wine in onions and carrots. Crixus ordered them two plates with bread and cheese. The serving girl set flagons of ale down before them. Madraig watched her sashay off, and hoisted his high.

“To a strong arm, good for fighting or for loving!”

“Hear, hear.” They drank the nut-flavored ale. The Restians favored a slightly bitter aftertaste, less sweet than the ale found in larger cities.

“You were telling me about your friend, the mercenary.”

“Right.” Madraig settled back on the bench and sniffed his underarm. “Gods, I stink. Is there a decent bathhouse in this town?”

“I’ll show you tomorrow.” Without Kharrina, he told himself. As much as he’d come to like this mercenary, he didn’t want the man’s eyes roaming over her body.

Madraig sipped at his ale and glanced around the tavern room. Gone was the lightning-fast, decisive warrior, replaced by a man of leisure. “His name was something like Stohko, Skehko... foreign name, can’t keep them all straight. His tribe hired themselves out to the Lamiae in Nistru as a standing army, patrol guards, what have you.”

Crixus held up a finger. “You mentioned that word before, Lamiae.”

“Aye. Lamiae, that’s what the lords in Nistru are. Blood drinkers, vampires. Rich as Pandros from the diamonds, they bought an army to guard them from invasion. Haven’t had more than a skirmish in centuries. Stehko—I’ll just call him that—called it the easiest post he’d ever had.”

“Strange that we haven’t heard much of them.”

“Oh, you wouldn’t say that if you grew up in Minq. Parents scare their kids with stories about ‘em. ‘Behave, or the Lamiae will come get you and bathe in your blood.’ Except, according to Stehko, they don’t leave their aerie.”

Crixus imagined cloaked figures in a dark cliff-side castle. “I have a hard time believing in vampires.”

Madraig nodded. “I’d expect an engineer to say that. Your kind hates anything that you can’t measure. But the gods built the world to suit their whims, not ours. I wish you were right.”

The dowsing rod came to mind, twitching towards water that Crixus was sure didn’t exist. “Natural philosophy uses the intellect to explain the world, not fear or wishful thinking. My basic rule is thus: if you want it to be true, for whatever deep, dark reason, it probably isn’t.”

“Forgive me, ser, but that is plain nonsense. Who wants vampires to walk amongst us?”

“Someone who wants to believe in fairies, too. A world of magic and wish fulfillment.”

Their food arrived on oval metal plates, with a board of bread and cheeses. On an empty stomach, the ale made Crixus woozy. He scooped up shreds of rabbit flesh and swallowed with relish. Vampires and science ceded to the demands of the stomach.

“One thing I’ll say for this little town,” Madraig said around a mouthful of bread. “The women don’t prance like show dogs. They’re real women, simple and lovely. Look at that tasty morsel by the door. She’s worth a tumble, wouldn’t you say?”

Crixus squinted to see the woman’s face. He stood. “I’ll bet you the next round I can talk her into my bed.”

Madraig snorted. “Talk her into *my*

Weaving between the tables of boisterous drinkers, he approached the girl from outside her field of vision. When he drew close enough to touch her, he slid an arm around her slender back.

“Care to comfort a man weary from the road?” He whispered in her ear.

Kharrina started then gasped in delight. “Crixus!” She kissed him with fervor. Over her shoulder, he saw Madraig pound the table and laugh. He led her back to where they sat.

“I win. You may buy us both a flagon. Kharrina, meet my escort, Madraig.”

Madraig stood and took her hand. “Honored, ma’am. Your man boasted of how lovely you were, and now I know to believe him.”

“My, my. And I’d have guessed from your armor that you were a rough soldier.” Kharrina favored him with a bright smile. Madraig bowed to her then motioned for service. She curled up against Crixus. “You can’t save him from me, though.” She slapped Crixus’ leg. “You silly man, what are you doing here? And why didn’t you tell me? Is this how you treat your girl?”

“We just arrived. It was so late that I didn’t want to wake you. I wasn’t sure how

long we'd be at the jail."

Her face became serious. "Jail?"

"It's not as bad as it sounds, miss." Madraig spread his hands. "Your fine man and I met with some mischief on the road, is all. We brought a man in."

"Crixus." Her look burned into his skull. "What happened?"

He sighed. "It's no cause for worry. A few bandits tried their hand at stealing the Guild's gold. Madraig here struck them down as if he was clearing brush. We handed the lone survivor over to the authorities." He took her hands when her eyes moistened. "Hush, it was just a tussle. I was in no danger."

"Was more than a tussle, ma'am. Your plumber fights like a bull. I'd say he saved my life, which is why he need never pay for ale when I'm in the room."

Crixus grimaced. "Thanks." Kharrina was now on the verge of tears.

"It's an honor." Madraig lifted his ale.

"Are... are you hurt, sweetheart?" She touched his chest.

"Nothing worse than a few bruises. Please, don't cry. I'm fine, Madraig is fine, and we have a little reward awaiting us."

"And your road is safer," Madraig pointed out.

Crixus embraced Kharrina and kissed her cheek. She calmed, eyes still sparkling. "You scared me. I don't like to hear about bandits."

"He broke the leg of one sorry lad with a single blow," Madraig said. Crixus waved him quiet.

"Let's talk about other things," Crixus said. "Anything else."

"Aye." Madraig winked at him. "Kharrina, my lass, do you have a sister as pretty as you?"

"I'm an only child," she said, giggling through her tears. "But I'm sure you'd have no trouble meeting a friendly girl."

“If you know one who’d show kindness to a working man for a few days, I’d be happy to spend some of that reward money to entertain her.”

Kharrina appraised the mercenary with a look that surprised Crixus and made him wonder if men were the only predators in the field. “I have a few friends who would enjoy meeting you,” she said. “They’ll make you feel welcome.”

“I’ll have to hunt bandits more often,” he said with a wink.

*

Kharrina threw herself on the soft mattress.

“I think you’re developing an obsession with comfy beds,” Crixus said. “I can’t keep you off them.”

“Is that a complaint?” Hugging a pillow against her chest, she stuck her tongue out. “Papa is so cheap when it comes to furniture. I’ve had the same down pad since I was a girl.”

He sat on the corner of the bed to take off his boots. Kharrina kicked at his back with bare feet. Crixus’ heart raced.

“Down is expensive,” he said, glancing at his luggage.

“But it’s not meant to last forever. It feels like stone. Stone feathers,” she giggled. “Those geese would never fly.” She wrapped her arms around his neck. “It’s like a special present, having you here again so soon. Do you have more meetings?”

“Just one with Ser Cadmis.”

“About the building? Did the Guildmasters take your recommendation?”

“More than that.” Crixus pushed her arms aside and knelt by his luggage, rooting for two small boxes. One, bearing the seal of a Guildmaster, he opened to show her. “They made me an associate Guildmaster.”

Her hands flew to her mouth. “Lestii,” she breathed. “You got it.”

“I did get it, indeed.” He grinned at her. “So? Are you not happy for me?”

She nodded, still covering her face.

“Would not a kiss be appropriate?”

Kharrina opened her arms wide and embraced him, kissing his lips repeatedly.

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes. Congratulations.” She rocked back and forth in his arms.

“You deserve this. Your father would be very proud, Crixus.”

“Aye, he would.”

Kharrina brushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes. He loved the way her unruly hair never agreed to stay in a bun but framed her face in dangling curls. Her mouth curled with a smile that he knew well. She put his hand over her breast.

“Now we have something to celebrate, again,” she said, husky and low. “I have a Guildmaster and bull, all in one.”

“Kharrina...”

She undid the buttons of his shirt, kissing the skin on the way down towards his nethers, giggling as she did.

“Kharrina, wait.” He gently pushed her away. She rolled over, consternation in her face.

“What’s wrong? I thought you’d want to play.”

“I...” He swallowed, mouth dry despite the rounds of ale Madraig bought them, which seemed to have done their work on his beloved. “I have something to give you.”

“Oh!” She beamed like a child. “What is it?”

He took her hands. “I have been thinking about this since... well, since the fight. What to say to you.”

The seriousness of his voice quelled her. She tilted her head. “What?”

“Every day, I think about what it means to love you as I do. We don’t know each other so well, really. We have fun together, we talk for hours. When I leave Restia, my heart breaks to think of the days or weeks that I won’t see you.”

“Me too,” she said in a small voice.

“Now that I’m here for the Guild, I don’t ever have to leave again.” He fished out the other small box. “This belonged to my grandmother. It has been in the family for, well... I’m not sure.” He opened the lid to reveal a gold ring stamped with the Oraan family crest. “I don’t know if it will fit you, but I want you to be the one to wear it at my side.”

Kharrina gasped. The tears began again, but she couldn’t prevent a smile from tickling the edges of her mouth.

“Be my wife, Kharrina. Please.” He fumbled for a moment to wrest the ring from the wooden clip. Her hand shook as he tried to fit the ring over her finger. It was too tight. They both winced at once.

“You have big fingers,” he said. She guffawed then gulped. Her eyes met Crixus’.

“I will,” she said, sniffing.

He sniffled himself; he was starting to cry like a child. He wiped his nose and eyes, embarrassed. Kharrina laughed at him and kissed his damp cheeks. The kisses moved to his mouth. Arms wrapped around bodies, and he kissed her with every ounce of love in his heart.

“Thank you,” he said as they broke for air. “I’m sorry I waited so long. I wanted to be able to build a life for us.”

“It was worth the wait,” she said, pulling him into the bed. He kissed her neck as he climbed on top of her.

“Does this mean we needn’t worry about your father?”

In response, she hitched up her dress and pushed against him, arousing him at once. “Oh, not tonight, my sweet, sweet man.”

6. Exploration

Ser Cadmis had business in Greater Rond, the servant told Crixus. He would return in two days. Would the Guildmaster care to make an appointment for then?

Crixus stalked off, appointment made and burning in his consciousness. The gold in his room made him increasingly anxious. He could not leave the Guild's payment with servants; Cadmis would think him unprofessional. The only option was to wait, be vigilant, and stay calm.

Meanwhile, there was the matter of the house. An associate Guildmaster made little more than a journeyman until the profits of his branch could be verified. Then he would receive a share of the profits, or, if he mismanaged the branch, a notable gap. Having seen the grand manors of the Guildmasters, it was incentive indeed.

His head swam with plans to market modest aqueducts for estates and residential blocks. Restia lacked the massive overbuilding for which Greater Rond was famous: buildings overlapping buildings, hanging out into the street, adhering to each other with random nails and smears of mortar. With the support of the local government and the landowners, he could make tiny Restia a marvel of modern water supply systems to spark envy throughout Rond.

Yet he could think of no way to create an immediate influx of capital, other than the groundwork he had laid on his last trip. His resources would be limited as the Guild members filtered by ones and twos into Restia. Most would feel the same as Stamm, that uprooting held little fascination. Natives of Greater Rond were loathe to leave the city they loved, the city that provided them any type of food, any brand of drink, any style of clothing, any manner of entertainment and distraction. It was small wonder that the city overflowed with job seekers. All Rond vied to make a living in the cobblestone streets of Greater Rond.

Consequently, he would live as a pauper for the foreseeable future, with the prospect of great riches taunting him from the horizon and a young wife disappointed by promises broken.

Crixus stopped for a cup of wine at a stall. The unleavened bread crackers they

served left crumbs scattered on the scroll bearing the floor plan of his dream house. The stall owner peered at it, upside down.

“Architect, are ye?”

“Water artesan,” he answered. “This isn’t my house.”

“Ah.” The man, browned by years in the sun, licked his lips. “Looks big.”

“So it is.” Crixus sighed. The man would not be discouraged. “I have been offered the chance to buy it, but for lack of funds this scroll is as close as I’ll come.”

“Ah, ah yes.” He refilled Crixus’ cup. “You have the look of city folk. You from Greater Rond?”

“I am,” Crixus said. “Does it show?”

“Not so much,” the man said, smiling, “but you folk have swamped little Restia in the last few months. I can spot them from a mile hither, the speculators.”

Crixus’ stomach tightened. “Snapping up properties?”

“Aye, like old men at a brothel.” He tittered at his own joke. “You won’t regret buying that one, there. You can resell it at twice the cost to some damned silk merchant from Greater with the notion he needs a coastal home.”

“I fear it will be Ser Cadmis doing the reselling.”

The wine seller nodded. “Ser Cadmis owns half the town. Wouldn’t be a road but for him.”

Crixus leaned forward. “Is he an honorable man?”

“Oh, sure, but a rich one. No worse than any of the others, and contributes to improving the local shrines, the docks.” He munched on a cracker. “Now he’s getting a return on his philanthropy.”

“You sound less than enthusiastic.”

“Oh, not me. Business has doubled in the last month. The more foot traffic, the

better.”

Crixus tipped the man a full sestric for the advice. The contrast between the predatory excitement of his clientèle and the cautious optimism of the working class left him with a sense of vertigo, standing on the edge of a precipice, playing a balancing act. He could see the appeal in the high class lifestyles of the Guildmasters. The luxury freed them of any connection to the working classes. Would Alman Dramonocai approve of a wealthy Crixus, or consider him as predacious as Ser Cadmis?

He prowled the streets of Restia for the remainder of the afternoon, ostensibly to evaluate public works opportunities, but observing the buildings with the eyes of a real estate speculator. Could he convince a bank to advance him a loan? He had no assets to offer as collateral. His rank as associate Guildmaster might get him through the door, but no further. He envied Madraig—who was even now drinking at the tavern with one of Kharrina’s more hedonistic friends—and the simple lifestyle he led. Need money? Go kill a bandit. Need sexual release? Hire a courtesan or find a friendly companion to help spend your coin. Madraig thought nothing of banks, real estate, collateral, credit— or marriage. His lack of a future freed him to wallow in the present.

As dusk settled in, Crixus found himself at the tavern again. He tapped his forehead at the shrine to Kaolis, thinking he would put a shrine in the atrium of the house if he found a way to buy it. I lack wealth, he thought, so a few gods on my side couldn’t hurt.

Madraig sat at a table with four men dressed well enough that they could not be laborers. The mercenary had dressed with care, wearing a stitched blue tunic and gold amulet in place of his armor. Dorinta, a plump girl with curly hair and amply freckled bosom, had fetched her chair against his so she could warm his side. Madraig held a hand of cards, which he scrutinized with the same seriousness he evaluated ambush points along the road.

Crixus raised a finger to the serving girl for a flagon of ale and ambled over to the mercenary.

“Fold,” Madraig said with palpable regret. “Where’s my luck, darling?” Dorinta cooed something in his ear. He tickled her chin. She noticed Crixus, and Madraig followed her gaze.

“Aha, the big bull arrives!” He stood to shake Crixus hand, grasping his wrist as soldiers do. Crixus gripped tightly, feeling flattered. The others at the table shielded their cards and glanced up at him. “Gentlemen, let me introduce the most dangerous plumber you’d fane to encounter, Guildmaster Crixus Oraan. When he tires of laying pipe, I’m going to take him hunting for bandits.”

The men murmured greetings, respect in their faces.

“I’d have thought you’d be with your lady love tonight,” Madraig said.

“Alas, I kept her overlong last night... or, rather, this morning.” The gamblers gave appreciative chuckles. “We’re appeasing her father... and my soon-to-be father-in-law.”

“Oh ho!” Madraig’s eyes lit up. “You dog!” Dorinta clapped. Madraig put her off his lap and stood, flagon held high. “A toast to Crixus, who’s gone to pasture.” They joined the toast. Crixus thanked them, still without ale.

“If you’re getting hitched, my friend, you should enjoy your dwindling freedom.” The man who spoke possessed an odd accent, all understated, without emphasizing any syllables. The words flowed from his tongue like a song. “Come join our little game.”

“I will, thank you.” The gamblers made room for his chair at the table. Crixus’ ale arrived, placed in front of him.

“I’ll make introductions. Captain Andros Chyorth,” he indicated the man who invited him. “This unlucky fellow here is Petrine.” Petrine’s pile of betting coin was the least of the table. “Gzeorge, who is a mason, incidentally.” Gzeorge blinked at him as he nodded in acknowledgment. “And finally, our reigning champion, this young buck, Oume.” The blond youth tipped an invisible hat to him.

“Mdraig told us about your adventure on the new road,” Chyorth said in his disturbing modulated voice. “Your Guild is wise to have chosen you to bring its gold to Restia.”

“Thank you,” Crixus said, wondering what Madraig told them about the gold. “Really, Madraig’s services saved the day. I saved my own skin.”

“And mine. I won’t forget that, Crix, old boy.” Madraig had drunk away any trace of the formality he used on the road. He shuffled the cards as Dorinta rearranged herself on his arm. “We’re playing Pathii, King’s rules.” He shuffled the cards by loosening them and throwing them together haphazardly but without dropping one. “Stake is one sestric. Blind players double the stake, One-eyed quadruple it. Blind men see after three rounds of betting. Raises have to be matched to stay in.”

“Aye, sounds familiar,” Crixus said, warming up to the proper mindset. Pathii was his best game. “I’ll treat you all gently.” He dug out the contents of his purse and dumped it before him on the table.

Madraig grinned. “The bull is loose.” He finished the shuffle and set the cards on the table, tapping them with a knuckle. “Ante, lads.” Silver sestrices flew into the center of the table. Madraig passed out cards one handed, three per player.

“Land Pathii,” Chyorth said with a chuckle. “At sea, we could see both your hands.”

Madraig stuffed his free hand into Dorinta’s blouse. She gasped and squirmed with feigned outrage. “Fair enough?” he said.

“Again, we’d not do that at sea. Too many eels onboard.” The table erupted in laughter.

Crixus decided to start with his usual strategy, testing the waters of luck, playing “Blind.” He could stay in the game longer, letting his fellows go “Seen” as they lost their nerve and wanted to know the contents of their hands before betting further. Oume and Gazeorge seemed to adhere to the same idea, remaining blind until the three round limit forced them to look at their cards. Crixus held a Prince of Hearts, King of Spades, and a Two of Swords. Garbage, King high. He folded.

“Apparently I’m here just to sweeten your pot,” he said.

“He’s marrying a beauty,” Madraig said. “He used up his luck on her. We can clean him out, lads.”

Oume won the hand, somber as he raked in the coins. He took the next two hands as well, until Crixus faced him down with a Three of a Kind in Sevens. Privately, he considered it a sign of impending luck, and he was right. The next

three hands were his.

Chyorth, the sea captain, grumbled good-naturedly at the new player's successes. "You play like a bull, 'tis true. I'm broken in the dirt."

"You haven't played with engineers much. They save their brutality for the Pathii table, and they have minds like bear traps."

The night wore on, and money moved around the table, staying mostly in Crixus' and Oume's orbits. Madraig had been drinking all day and could barely shuffle the cards. Petrine bowed out after sending his last silver to the middle of the table. Gzeorge took his place as the primary loser, dipping into his purse thrice before jumping to his feet in ill temper and declaring he would never play Pathii again. He left before they realized he had neglected to pay for his drinks.

Oume smiled at last. "A good night. Two purses lightened, good company, and a fine new player." He nodded at Crixus, who tipped back an invisible hat.

"I was hardly trying," Chyorth said with a burp. "These silver games are merely a warm up for the high stakes game. My evening's just begun."

"Mine too," Madraig said, putting an arm around the drunk and restless Dorinta. "This lovely wench is ready to give up on me and twiddle the twig of that fat old fart in the corner. I'd best attend to my duties." They both swayed as they left the table.

Oume tapped his cheek with a sestric. "High stakes game, eh? How high?"

"Minimum ante is an austric, no fussing when it raises. Same matching as before."

"Who's playing?" Oume asked innocently.

Chyorth gave him a sour look. "Do you want in or not? I can vouch for both of ye, if you keep stupid questions like that tucked in your underthings."

Oume blushed and mumbled an apology.

The pile of silver in front of Crixus was equivalent to twenty austrices, a handsome take. He carried another ten on his person, which he had planned to

use to purchase furniture for an apartment. He did a rapid calculation. At the rate he'd been winning, it would take ten hands of a high stakes game to increase his winnings to five thousand austrices. With the other two thousand saved up at home, he could take up Ser Cadmis on his offer.

Chyorth regarded him steadily, his face blank. "Guildmaster? These aren't masons and drunken mercenaries. They'll eat your engineers for breakfast and drop them in the latrine by afternoon."

The searching eyes of the bandit with the knife came to him, cold and fearful. If he could live through that encounter, he would not balk at a card game. This Crixus Oraan, husband of Kharrina Dramonocai, had learned to storm the future with his hammer raised high.

"I'm game," he said.

7. Stakes

Captain Chyorth led Crixus and Oume past the kitchen to the basement stairs. A stone-faced man wearing a sailor's tunic stood guard with a torch. He appraised Crixus and Oume without moving.

"They're all right," Chyorth said.

The man turned and started down the wooden stairs.

"Down here?" Crixus watched the torch retreat into the darkness with unease.

"Aye. Why else would I be here at a landsmen tavern? No one can interrupt us."

Oume opened his mouth to speak but thought better of it.

They passed storage rooms and the wine cellar. At the end of the crumbling, brick-lined passage was an oak door, dry and rot-free. The sailor knocked twice, paused, and pounded thrice more. The door opened to a room warm with lamplight.

It had once been a storage room; wooden shelves had been built into the walls. A round table commanded the center of the room. Six cushioned seats, far more luxurious than the stiff wood chairs in the main tavern room, ringed the table. Behind each of the three seated gamblers stood two men, standing casually at attention, swords at their belts. A slight man with a visor held a deck of cards. Another sailor awaited Captain Chyorth by one of the empty chairs. He stepped towards it, gesturing for Crixus to sit next to him.

"Gentlemen," he addressed the room. "My two new friends. Oume the Younger"—Oume winced—"and Crixus." No last names, Crixus noticed. "I have spent the evening with them and found them both pleasant and skillful. And lucky."

"And funded, I hope," the fat, piggish gambler said through folds in his face. "No credit."

"Flush with my own money, Ser Tookh," Chyorth said smoothly. Tookh

shrugged and picked at a plate of plums.

“Antonine,” Chyorth said, inclining his head at a man dressed entirely in black, with bushy eyebrows and beard. “And Quant.” The man named Quant had golden yellow skin like a trader from the far South. He kept his black hair tied back in a tight knot.

Crixus and Oume settled into their seats. They exchanged a glance. Oume appeared to be as intimidated as Crixus by the gruff gamblers and their bodyguards.

“We should begin with a small ante,” Quant said, “to make our guests feel welcome.”

“Wasting my time,” Antonine said in a menacing rumble.

Tookh said nothing but tossed a freshly minted austric into the center of the table.

The man in the visor took this as an indication to start. “Ante,” he said in a near whisper.

“Hells,” Antonine said. “Right then.” His coin followed Quant’s into the pot. Chyorth, Oume, and Crixus set their winnings from earlier in front of them and added an austric to the ante. One of the bodyguards stepped behind Oume, then Crixus, offering to exchange silver for gold. Silver, evidently, was not welcome on this table.

Play proceeded swiftly, and Oume took a modest pot in a silent game. The other gamblers glared at the newcomers under hooded eyes. Crixus knew from previous gambling jaunts that winners from low ante games could be dangerous threats or overconfident buffoons. He planned to be the former. Oume, young and experiencing a lucky streak, could fall into a trap of his own making.

Quant took the next hand, though Crixus folded after being forced to look at his cards in the third round. The whispering dealer shuffled the cards in a manner Crixus had not seen, steeping them then forcing them together in a flurry. The effect was a papery buzz, like an enormous trapped wasp.

For men determined to play high stakes, the gamblers struck Crixus as strangely

inattentive. He took hands merely by waiting out the Blind rounds then bluffing a Show. Oume and Tookh vied for the next hand, forcing a showdown that left Oume nearly spent. The young man sagged, regarding his few remaining austruces.

The old tigers have fangs, Crixus thought. Oume is outclassed here, and I'd better watch how I play.

He decided to change his strategy to a "One-Eyed" approach, paying twice as much as the current stake to see his cards in the first round of betting. Three hands in a row he received a high pair or better, trouncing everyone. Oume squirmed, reduced to a single game's worth of coins. In just fifteen minutes, he had lost everything he won upstairs.

No one chatted during play. All eyes regarded the table and their cards, backs or faces. Gone was Madraig's playful banter, the sly jokes, the noise of others enjoying their evening. This game was all business.

"I'm out," Oume said. "I can't bid for the next hand."

"Allow me," Quant said, tossing an austruic from his substantial pile into the center of the table. "You are improving steadily. Stay in for one more hand."

Oume tipped his non-existent hat to the golden man. "Thank you, ser."

Tookh blew air through his lips and put in his stake. The game proceeded in a lightning exchange of low bids, players folding until Oume and Quant remained. Quant smiled at the irony of it, when Oume took the pot. The lad suppressed a youthful giggle.

"Where did you find these two, Chyorth?" Antonine had been losing since they arrived.

"Upstairs, wasting their talents with silver," he said.

Antonine straightened up in his seat. "I've seen enough. The boy has enough loot there for the real game, if he's not a coward."

"Real game?" Crixus said. "What were we just playing?"

Quant's mouth twitched, as if that was all the smile they mustered down South. "A mere warm up. My friend wishes to begin betting in earnest." Quant pushed ten austrices into the pot. "If we don't keep him entertained, he'll tire and depart."

Chyorth snapped his fingers. A sailor dropped a large leather purse before him. "I'm satisfied. Crixus, Oume, you can leave if you don't want to swim with these sharks. The blood's in the water."

Crixus did a mental computation. He could last one game, maybe two if he bet carefully. His winnings and travel money would be eaten up in minutes—if he lost.

Thinking of Kharrina's dream of dogs and children, he nodded at Chyorth. "I'll stay in."

The fat man, Tookh, snorted. "Oh, we're scared, lad." He cast a ten-piece austric cluster into the pot as if it were a tip for a serving girl. "Let's have cards, then."

Biting his lip, Crixus watched the whispering dealer lean over the table to deal the cards. Oume scratched at his head, looking even younger than he was. The other gamblers relaxed, as if they had to wait for the stakes to become astronomical before they could enjoy the game.

Crixus started the betting as One-Eyed. He didn't want to spend any money without knowing what he held. It was a sound strategy, too: his hand was garbage. He folded, watching his ten austrices disappear in Oume's winnings. The boy shouted out loud with excitement, though he had only won enough gold to stay in the game for another few rounds.

"Beginner's luck," grumbled Antonine.

Crixus anted ten austrices for the next hand, feeling detached as he spent a month's wages in a single gesture. His cards arrived silently. Blind or One-Eyed?

The first round of betting reached him. He hesitated. To pick up his cards would mean the rest of his gold was committed. He pushed ten austrices into the pot, cards untouched. Please, Anoxiae, he prayed, let it be a good hand. For Kharrina's sake.

Two more rounds of betting followed. Crixus cursed himself for a fool. Playing Blind only lengthened his suffering. His last ten sailed into the pot like the end of a bad story.

Chyorth chuckled sympathetically at him. “Show,” he called.

With an unsteady hand, Crixus tipped over his three cards. He grunted with surprise: a pair of Kings and a Prince. No one could beat it. He won the pot, a healthy two hundred and eight austrices.

Leave now, common sense told him.

“Now he’s got a taste,” Tookh said into his cup of ale, spilling drops on the table. “Come on, artisan, how about double stakes this game?”

“Well...”

“You’re not leaving yet, after taking my money so handily. Double stake.” He tossed two ten austrices clusters into the table. The others followed with their gold. Crixus pushed his in.

Playing Blind again, Crixus fidgeted through the betting. Quant began to raise the stake, first to thirty, then forty, then sixty. Crixus paid double on sixty and checked his cards. A normal run, three cards in sequence, seven, eight, nine. Not in suit, which was the second best hand in the game. Still, worth betting on.

“Still in, artisan?”

He nodded, though he had exhausted his funds. “In.”

The hands came up: nothing but Quant’s lesser run, a three-four-five. Crixus had won again, a thousand austrices.

“Impressive,” Chyorth said. “I wonder how much luck you have left.”

Crixus regulated his breathing, staying calm. If he just bet moderately from now on, he could stay in the game and wait for a strong hand. He fought down the excitement building up in him: tonight he might earn the money for Ser Cadmis’ house. Kharrina’s house. He was blessed by her love, but he couldn’t let that delude him into reckless betting. Pathii was won or lost through betting

strategies.

“My ante,” Chyorth said. “One hundred.”

“A hundred?” Oume cried out. “That will drain me.”

“You’ll be fine, boy. Stop whining like a wench and ante.” Chyorth stared him down.

Miserable, Oume anted, leaving enough for but one round of betting. Crixus put his money in with trepidation.

The cards were dealt. I’ll forestall disaster, Crixus decided, and put in another hundred. He picked up his cards.

Three Kings.

Three Kings... only three Aces could beat it. The odds against that were incalculable. He recalled one of his engineer compatriots working out the odds as a joke one drunken night.

“Someone has lost his composure,” Quant said in his singsong voice. “Have we met our match?”

“Not bloody likely,” Antonine said. “I’m betting five hundred. Fold or fight.”

Crixus matched the bid.

“Oh, great,” Oume said. “I can’t match.”

“The boy plays this game on my sufferance,” Quant said, licking his lips in a distinctly sensual air. Oume grinned at him with all innocence.

“Then I match.”

Chyorth shook his head and folded. Tookh snorted and matched, then raised another five hundred. Crixus gulped.

“This is what I’ve been waiting for,” Tookh said. “Life or death.”

“I’m all in,” Crixus said.

“I’m not,” Antonine said. “I see that and raise another thousand.”

“A thousand?” Crixus couldn’t believe his ears. “That’s too much. We should show.”

The table laughed, Oume joining in with a nervous titter. Tookh threw a plum at Crixus. “Fold or fight, water boy.”

Three Kings virtually ensured a victory. The money on the table was enough to buy the house outright. If he continued the betting, he would leave the game a rich man.

Kharrina, Kharrina, Crixus thought. Without you I’d have left this table long ago, but I’d never have received this gift from the gods. Your love is what has brought me success.

“I can cover this bet,” he said, trying to control his voice, “if I can borrow one of these strong lads for a moment.”

*

Crixus made the man wait for him at his door while he crossed the dark, empty tavern. The candles in the shrine to Kaolis had been snuffed for the night. With a match, he relit them.

Kaolis, he prayed, you are not a gambling goddess, I know, but please forgive me. You’re the closest god right now, and I know you’ve had a hand in my fortunes. Please watch over me tonight. I’m making a future for my family.

He tapped his forehead twice for good measure and returned to his room. The sailor had tilted his head to listen to female moans of passion from Madraig’s room down the hall.

“At least someone knows how to have a good time,” the sailor said.

Crixus unlocked his door. The Guild money box sat unmolested at the foot of the bed, the covering blanket in the same position as it had been earlier.

“This is heavy,” Crixus warned.

“Used to it,” the man said with a grunt as they hefted the metal box. “Not... so... bad...”

Stepping softly, they carried the box to the basement stairs. The sailor went first, exhaling with each step. A bodyguard held the door open for them.

“Gods,” Chyorth said. “You really have come to play.” He turned to the table. “Gentlemen, a tiger is among us.”

“A bull,” Crixus said.

He opened the box quickly in the dark, using the blanket to cover the Water Guild seal. The slender gold bars were worth a hundred austrices apiece. He fished out ten and threw them into the pot with a clatter.

“I see your thousand...” Looking about at their faces, he plucked another ten bars. “And I raise a thousand.” He met Tookh’s sweaty gaze. “Fold or fight.”

Quant clapped his hands. “You have made my day, my friend. What a delightful surprise.” He fished in a purse, producing a smaller bag. The contents, spilled in front of him, sparkled in the lamplight. Diamonds.

“From Nistru, of all places,” Quant said, picking one up with delicate fingers and depositing it next to the messy pile of gold. “Worth one thousand, on my honor.”

That will be a true engagement ring, Crixus thought. I’ll melt an austric to mount it.

“Oh, and another for my friend, Oume.” He emphasized *friend* as if some agreement had been struck between him and the boy. Oume remained in the game.

Another round, and another, each with a thousand-gold raise. Greed lit the eyes of all the gamblers except Oume, who looked increasingly frightened even though Quant sponsored his betting. Crixus had placed a third of the Guild’s gold on the table.

“Show,” he said. Heads nodded in agreement. Crixus’ heart threatened to burst out of his chest.

Quant laid down a straight run of Prince-Queen-King. Tookh threw his cards down, a normal run, hardly worth the aggressive betting. Antonine put a trio of tens on the table, smirking at Quant.

Crixus flipped over his Three Kings and sat back, suddenly exhausted.

Murmurs of admiration ringed the table. Even the bodyguards leaned over.

“Well played,” Tookh said, with grudging admiration. “I like a courageous man.”

“Thank you,” Crixus said. He glanced over at Oume, who still held his cards to his chest. “Show, lad.”

Oume’s expression darkened as if a demon took his soul. His brow beetled with a leer so cruel it belonged on a torturer. “Well played,” he said, dropping his cards to the table.

Three Aces.

The room spun. Crixus couldn’t understand what had happened. Oume made no move for the money. The bodyguards tensed, waiting for violence. Crixus rose from his seat.

“Impossible.” The word fell from his lips like a stone.

Oume scooted his seat back. In a blur, the two closest bodyguards drew their swords and brandished them in Crixus’ face.

“Not a move, ser,” one said.

“He couldn’t... The odds...” Realization dawned on him, filling him with outrage. “I left the room.” He pointed at Oume. “I left the room. He switched hands.”

“I did nothing of the sort,” Oume said, his cocky grin back. “Everyone here can attest to that.”

Chyorth spread his hands, trying to placate him. “Crixus, it’s bad luck to be sure, but not cheating.” He encompassed the room in a sweep of his hand. “With these stakes, we can’t tolerate anything less than total honesty.”

“No cheating at my tables, ser,” whispered the dealer.

Quant flicked two fingers at the fortune of gold. “Take it, boy. We’ll sort out my share later.”

Oume glanced at Crixus, then engulfed the pot and dragged it before him. Crixus shook with rage. Either the boy was a cheat, or every man at the table had cooperated in this fraud.

“That gold wasn’t mine,” Crixus said. “It belongs to the Guild.”

“It belongs to Oume now,” Antonine said. “Sit down, man. You lost fairly.”

Quant sipped his wine. “We do not approve of illegal activity. I would fain to ask you to leave.”

The bodyguards advanced on him. He stepped back, hands up to fend off the deadly blades.

“Wait, wait, please.” Chyorth said. “There is a simple solution to this. Good Crixus made a reasonable gamble. Let him win his money back with the remaining gold in this chest.” He indicated the money box. “Given the way he was playing, he should be able to break even soon enough.”

The gamblers nodded, understanding the desperation of being in the hole. The bodyguards sheathed their swords. Chyorth nodded at Crixus’ chair.

Gritting his teeth, Crixus sat back down. His body shook with anxiety. Chyorth waved a wine bottle over. “Drink, lad. Calm down. You’ll see this through.”

The wine tasted bitter in his mouth. “Deal,” he said.

“Ante, ser,” the dealer said in his dry whisper.

Crixus leaned over to remove a handful of gold bars from the box. He winced to see the gap they left.

“Ante,” he said. “How much?”

“One hundred,” Oume said. His eyes searched Crixus’ face.

The game proceeded in tense silence. Crixus couldn't decide whether to play Blind or One-Eyed. He opted for One-Eyed, too afraid to squander the Guild's gold. His hand, a pair of sevens, was nothing he would bid on under normal circumstances.

"I'll match," he said, hating himself as he added more of the Guild's payment to the pot.

Oume smiled, his shoulders and arms loose like those of a lion wearing down the night's meal.

8. Lies

As Crixus reached the bottom layer of the Guild's gold bars, he knew for certain that his luck had deserted him and he would never win their money back. He had lost every game since the Three Kings. His hands were uniformly worthless. Oume's massive pile shrank somewhat as the other players took turns winning immense pots at his expense.

Chyorth put a fresh bottle of wine in front of him after his fourth glass. The alcohol did not calm him but instead made his focus waver and narrow at random intervals. A sense of doom settled over his shoulders like a hunchback's hump. The world had coalesced into a dark basement room with a round table that sucked his future down into a drain.

"Blind or One-eyed, Crixus?" Chyorth said gently.

"What?"

"Do you want to see your cards?" The sea captain's face held a look of paternal concern. He tapped the cards with a finger.

"Yes. I do." He reached for them, but Chyorth covered them with his hand.
"Double stake, lad."

Crixus dug another gold bar from the box. Fifteen remained. Fifteen! He could have carried the box one handed now.

His hand was not worth the gold. A pair of fours. He stared at them, face numb, trying to invent a scenario where so weak a hand could win.

The bidding moved fast with smiles all around. Everyone at the table had profited from his bad luck and poor judgment. The Guild's gold shined from piles of coins, as if under piles of rubble, waiting for rescue. He could reach out and pluck them out, return them to their home in box; yet the rules of society as dictated by Pathii, the bodyguards, and their swords, the social contract that enabled gambling to exist without dissolving into chaos, prevented him from moving an inch.

Chyorth leaned over to him. “I can tell you’re holding shite, lad. Stop now. No one will fault you for leaving with the last of your gold.”

“Not my gold,” Crixus mumbled.

“Aye, it wasn’t. That’s another problem to be solved.” He addressed the table. “My friends, I think I’ve had enough wagering for the night. I’m going to see Crixus back to his room.”

The gamblers grunted assent. Bodyguards came forward with sacks and cases to contain winnings. Quant offered Oume a sack for his own winnings, still substantial. The boy tipped his invisible hat back at Crixus. Chyorth glared at him.

“Hard luck, lad,” the captain said to Crixus. “Let me help you with that.”

The sailors gathered Chyorth’s own winnings while Chyorth took one end of the money box. “I can carry it myself,” he said. “Let’s go.” He nodded to the other gamblers and left. No one bid him or Crixus farewell.

Crixus climbed the stairs with difficulty, as if ascending from the netherworld. Chyorth and the sailors followed, grunting with the weight of the gold Chyorth had won from Crixus.

No noise emanated from the main tavern room or the corridor or the first floor rooms, including Madraig’s room. Crixus watched the mercenary’s door with anxious eyes. The man wasn’t charged to protect Crixus so much as the money entrusted to him. For the box to be anywhere but concealed in his room would be suspicious indeed. Rightly so, for Crixus was, by dint of circumstance, a thief.

“Which is—” Chyorth began. Crixus waved him to silence, then bade him follow with a finger. The two crept down the hall, past Madraig’s room, to Crixus’ door. He unlocked it with careful turns to keep the tumblers from clacking. They slipped inside.

Chyorth dumped the box on the soft bed, causing the same wooden groans a sleeper might. Before Crixus could sit, he stole up to his side and whispered in his ear with hot breath.

“You’re in a bad state, Crixus. The gold’s gone. Your Guild will throw you in

jail. I would have stopped you from betting your life away if I'd known it wasn't your'n to wager."

Crixus swooned from the man's proximity but Chyorth steadied him.

"It pains me to watch a man broken. Let me help." He pointed at the box. "We'll take that to my ship. Nothing else, not even your clothes. That bastard Rikarsen has his ship docked right now, but he's leaving in the morning. My man will spread word that he saw Rikarsen with your money box and you unconscious. No one will be surprised. Half his crew he dragged from the gutter."

"Abducted?"

"Aye, robbed and taken to sea. No way to search for you. We're bound for Izhmir in Minq, far enough away that no one will know you."

Panic seized Crixus. "I don't want to leave!" His mother, his job, Kharrina... Oh, gods, Kharrina.

"You'll come back after it's blown over, a year or two." Chyorth hissed as Crixus shook himself free. "Damn it, lad. What other choice do you have? Fess up and spend your life in chains? I'm giving you a chance to save yourself."

"What do you want?" Crixus couldn't hide the bitterness from his voice. "Why help me now?"

"I'll take one of them bars," the captain said. "It will be payment for berth and my services. You keep the rest."

Crixus fought back tears. He had to stay in control. Chyorth was right about one thing: prison awaited him. In Minq, he'd have a chance to recoup his losses. He knew little of Minq's technology, but Rond was renowned for its advances in water engineering. The rich of Minq would pay sweetly for the magic of running water, fountains, hot baths... Surely someone on that continent lacked the technology but not the gold.

"Quickly now, boy."

Crixus met his gaze. Wine and despair deadened his ability to judge the man: was Chyorth lying? Could he trust the captain with so dire a secret?

Did he have any other choice?

A nod and it was done. Chyorth smiled to reassure him.

“Aye, a good decision in a bad storm.” He drew a wicked curved dagger. Crixus stumbled back, hands out to ward off an attack.

“No, no, lad. We have to make it look like you were taken against your will. Give me your hand.”

Crixus grimaced. “You’ll cut me?”

“We need a lot of blood in a little amount of time.”

Chyorth slid the cuff down Crixus’ arm. “Suicides who don’t know better cut like this,” the man said with a devilish grin. He placed the blade on Crixus’ wrist, perpendicular to his arm. “Lots of blood, but nothing a tourniquet can’t stop. Look into my eyes,” he commanded. Crixus gasped as a sharp pain exploded on his arm. The dagger made a shallow cut across his veins. Blood poured from his wrist.

“Let it well up, then we need some here,” he pointed to the bed, “here,” the wall, “and here in a trail. Be quick, lad.”

Crixus smeared blood on the bed sheets, still rumpled from when he and Kharrina last made love. He splashed a bit on the wall, then dripped it towards the door, where Chyorth now waited with the lightened box.

“It hurts,” Crixus said plaintively.

“Take nothing. You were abducted.” Chyorth checked the hallway. “We’re clear.”

Crixus stood at the threshold, feeling dizzy from the blood loss and the enormity of what he had done. Something felt wrong... his hammer. It was propped against the bed. Crixus went back for it.

“Leave it.” Chyorth hissed.

Crixus hooked the hammer to his belt. Chyorth gave him a hard look then

noticed the hammer's intricate decorations.

"Aye, all right, Rikarsen would take that. Be sure to drip." Chyorth scuttled for the tavern's back door. Crixus cast a look back at the shrine to Kaolis by the front door. Had she abandoned him or cursed him?

Dripping blood from an aching wrist, he followed the captain out of the tavern and to the docks.

*

Oil lamps burned in the portholes of Rikarsen's ship, *The Champion*. The seedy captain had his men preparing for departure through the night. According to Chyorth, the man was a notorious smuggler who occasionally resorted to piracy. Rikarsen worked the same trade routes as Chyorth, so the men found themselves in competit

Crixus took care to drip at frequent enough intervals that even the elderly jailer could follow the clues. The night air chilled him, but no clouds threatened rain to wipe away their deception.

By the time they stood before Rikarsen's anchorage, Crixus felt woozy. Chyorth had committed the box of gold to one of his sailors. He steadied Crixus.

"That's enough bleeding, lad. We're staging an abduction, not a murder." Leading Crixus to a stack of wooden crates, the captain produced a length of twine and wrapped it around Crixus' arm. He placed his dagger's sheath on the arm, tied an elaborate knot, and turned the sheath to tighten the twine until it hurt more than the cut. Crixus exhaled and gritted his teeth. The bleeding stopped.

"Left a few pints in you for later," Chyorth said. "Come on, we're done here."

Chyorth's boat, *The Fancy*, floated but a few hundred yards away, tied fore and aft, gangplank down. Its proximity to *The Champion* to take turns loading. That would change with the influx of capital, a development Crixus would not see take place.

"We'll hide you in the hold for a day," Chyorth said as they approached *The Fancy*

“Luxury,” Crixus said. “Will there be rats?”

“Every ship has rats.” A sailor met them at the gangplank. “Take him to the hold,” Chyorth commanded. “Give him a mattress and blankets. And water.” He pushed Crixus up the gangplank.

“You’re not coming?”

“I have to maintain appearances,” Chyorth said. “They’ll want to know who saw you last, and that will be me. You gambled with us, lost a few austrices, and excused yourself from the table. My boys spotted Rikarsen’s scoundrels at work.” He shook his head in mock pity. “Poor Crixus. He seemed like a nice lad. Terrible fate.” He grinned, showing his teeth. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure all eyes turn to Rikarsen.”

Chyorth waved and disappeared into the darkness. The sailor waited at the top of the gangplank, stony faced, without sympathy.

The Fancy had taken on most of its cargo, but in the darkness it appeared to be nothing more than geometric shapes. The nameless sailor handed Crixus a scratchy wool blanket, a thin pallet, and a water bottle, as Chyorth had commanded, plus a rag for his wound. The concern that framed Chyorth’s interaction with Crixus was absent in the sailor, to whom Crixus was another passenger, of which *The Fancy* seemed to have few.

The hold stank of rotted food and rat shit. The rodents scurried as the sailor led him to a space behind a stack of crates. No one would find him there unless they followed the bulkhead all the way around the hold.

Crixus forced himself to lie on the pallet and think of nothing. Nothing of Kharrina, of the gold, of Gavri and his fellow engineers at the Guild, the masters with proud smiles creasing their old faces, Madraig and his easy camaraderie. He put them out of his mind.

His wrist ached. Releasing the tourniquet, he washed his wound with the fresh water and bound it with the rag he had been given. Chyorth had taken care not to cut too deeply; the blood had already coagulated. He would be left with an ugly scar, nothing more.

I’m going to sleep, he told himself. Tomorrow is another day, and I will solve

my problems then.

Under the wool blanket, listening to the barely audible click of rat claws on wood, Crixus fought to keep the enormity of his crime from driving him mad. He curled into a fetal position, hands clenched, legs entwined to find whatever warmth he could under the blanket. To seek warmth and nothing more that night.

9. Sea

Crixus dreamed fever dreams of flight, anxiety, confusion. His cramped position in the cold, damp hold of *The Fancy* imposed itself on his dreams, as if the struggle to stay warm, fighting the intrusions of cold air under his blanket, was interlocked with the need to correct the chain of events he had unleashed. His mind struggled to depict what could be happening outside the hold. On shore, the blood trail would be found, followed either back to his room, or to where *The Champion* had set sail at dawn, taking out to sea all speculation of his whereabouts. Half-conscious, Crixus pulled the blanket over his shoulders in order to encourage the sailors to bear outraged witness at the brutal abduction and robbery that befell the water he had been his charge. Had he been careless in trusting Crixus? Or had he failed Crixus as well as the Guild, his client? A man trained to sniff out danger would not simply throw up his hands in resignation. Madraig puffed cold air under the blanket, constr

A clank next to his head drove his fever dreams away. A sailor had dropped a metal plate with a crust of bread and cheese.

“Eat it before the rats do.” The man spoke in a thick accent with drawn out vowels. Crixus understood him only after a moment’s deciphering. He looked at the plate and up at the man’s face, shrouded in darkness. In his delirium, he felt like a child again.

“Eat,” the sailor insisted.

“What time is it?” His voice was a whisper.

“Daybreak.” The sailor retreated into the shadows of the hold. Crixus heard him climb the creaky wooden ladder.

Daybreak. The hull grunted as the waves struck it; the lack of give implied they hadn’t set sail. Distant voices found their way through the wood, muted and abstract. His resolve not to think of the last night’s troubles failed in his grogginess, and he recalled his blood trail in the tavern, left in the dark. The horror that Kharrina must be feeling... he had never seen her in any mood but cheerful or content. Fear for his well-being would contort her square, lovable face into a mask of pain.

Crixus dragged himself to his feet using the crates for balance. He ached from head to toe. A powerful thirst raged in him, compounded by the dehydration of a hangover. The water in his bottle ran out before it satisfied him, but it also awakened his bladder. Sunlight limned the hatch above the ladder. He climbed to the top and banged on the hatch.

Sounds leaked through: seagulls, boatman's calls, footsteps on the deck. No one answered his knock.

He relieved his bladder on the far side of the hold. A small furry shape bolted past his feet. He wondered how long it would be before the rats worked up the courage to approach him... or how long before they regarded him as food. In the dim light, he noticed an axe handle, half rotted but better for crushing rats. His hammer would damage the floor.

The bread and cheese quelled the pangs in his stomach. He ate slowly, chewing each bite to savor the bland flavor of the food. Sitting cross-legged on the pallet, blanket around his shoulders, he turned his mind as far away from Kharrina, Madraig, and the Guild as he could. He tried to recall what he knew of Minq: not much. Far to the east, ships sailed to several intervening islands, Ambiri, Cratos, and Chiran, before making the final jaunt to the continent. Rondans heard Minq most often in the context of artwork: tapestries, sculpture, and jewelry. Perishable goods would neither survive the trip nor be lucrative enough to import.

Minq lacked the cultural cohesion of Rond, which had extended its reach far to the west and incorporated a dozen lesser nations into its own structure. The region of Izhmiri, whose capital city Izhmir was the closest port to Chiran and the first Minquan stop for overseas traders, stretched hundreds of miles along the coast. Its borders butted against a vast mountain range whose name escaped him, but he remembered that it barricaded a score of warring city-states from reaching the sea. From what Madraig had described, Nistru would be buried deep in those mountains.

The languages of Minq derived from Thravian, leading some scholars to declare that the Thravs had come from Minq to Rond by the very trade routes used today. Crixus suspected it had more to do with trade itself than colonization. The Thravs resembled the Southerners like Quant: golden-skinned with narrow, folded eyes, and high cheekbones. What little contact Rond had with their

neighbors to the south supported the trade language theory. Either way, it was his first instance of luck. With a bit of practice, he could understand and speak the local dialects.

The blood-drinkers of Nistru were not the only exotic rumors he had heard of Minq. Some told of a city of brass where statues walked amongst men. Another city was said to be inhabited by dogs who hunted humans for sport. The Jewel-Men of Craiksh inserted so much jewelry into their skins that sword points could not penetrate them; he supposed one fought a Jewel-Man with a club.

And of course all the fanciful talk included lost cities, abandoned tombs, treasures under every rock, and dragonae in every cave. While he doubted these stories, legend was said to be rooted in truth, and the truth could be that Minq was not a safe place for a lone traveler.

Exhausted by worry he dozed again, only to awake to vivid thoughts of Kharrina. He mustn't leave her behind! In a frenzy, he banged on the hatch again, thinking that he could creep into town and bring her back to *The Fancylms* with gold. With her at his side, he would find the fortitude to rebuild his life.

Again, no response. Could they hear him at all? He continued pounding for five minutes until three heavy thumps on the hatch door quieted him. The sailors would not allow him to leave until *The Fancy* left the harbor.

He cast himself about the hold in a panic as all the anxieties about Kharrina flooded back to him. She would believe him dead, grieve, then find another man to marry. She was a lusty lass with an open heart, and surely she would take comfort in the company of another man before long. Crixus would return to Restia only to find her on the stoop of some tradesman's house with a babe suckling at her breast. She'd regard Crixus with both relief and regret, and perhaps she would not even love her new husband as much as she had loved Crixus, but their chance would have passed.

She filled his mind: laughing, joking about his skepticism, perpetually washing ink from her hands, looking sideways at him before requesting a kiss, stripping for him, in watching him take pleasure in her body, her legs, her abdomen, her back, her sex... Crixus' strength left him, and he wept bitterly for her. For the loss of her, for the minutes and hours and days he would spend away from her,

nothing more than a ghost.

*

He awoke to a lurch. *The Fancy* had set sail! By the light from the crack around the hatch, he guessed he had been ensconced in the hold for two days. The ruse had worked.

The hatch opened with ease, spilling morning light into the hold, dazzling him. Silhouetted in the glare, a sailor barked: "Come on up, then."

Crixus emerged into the morning as *The Fancy* navigated out of the Bay of Restia. His hands shook as he sought to steady himself. To the stern, Restia ringed the shore, white stucco houses with red clay roofs. He had never seen it from this vantage before; the town already looked unfamiliar to him. The sailor shoved him along the weather deck.

"Quit staring," he said. "You've had your holiday."

Crixus became aware of chanting from lower decks and the rhythmic splash of oars. *The Fancy* was a single-masted galley with a spritsail in the fore of the ship and a deck of oars, eight to a side. For a trading vessel, it was overpowered, but the lean, rough look of the sailors hinted at more than mere trade.

He had to hunch over to clamber down into the oar deck. Shirtless sailors rowed in unison, chanting in time with a drummer. The words became garbled in so many mouths; Crixus counted over thirty men at a glance.

"Have a seat, squire," the sailor said with a smirk.

"I'm a passenger," he said. "The captain promised me a cabin."

"You're a wit is what you are," the man said, hand to his knife hilt. "You get to rowing."

The oarsmen paid no attention to Crixus as he took a seat in the back, next to a wiry old man with fading tattoos. Now was not the time to argue about arrangements, he decided, though he would hold Chyorth to his promise to protect the remainder of the Guild's gold. Two days ago, Chyorth treated him with deference and sympathy, neither of which was evinced in the sailors. Had

Chyorth informed them that Crixus paid for his passage?

He gripped the oar handle with both hands. Years of use had worn the wood smooth. The first stroke he completed jolted his arms with the impact, a sensation he found satisfyingly simple. The drum beat, the counter rhythm of the oars hitting the water, and the murmured chant served to expunge his miserable thoughts of Kharrina. Rather than fuss over his station like a pampered aristocrat, he resigned himself to time at the oar. He would accomplish more by being helpful than being difficult.

They rowed *The Fancy* Many seamen distrusted the device, preferring to navigate by the stars. If the compass could carry Crixus to Minq that much faster, he needed no scientific explanation of how it worked.

“Ship your oars,” the drummer called. Crixus guessed he had been rowing for eight hours with only brief breaks for food and water. His arms ached in long strings of pain. His benchmate, the old sailor, wriggled his arms to loosen them up, and so Crixus followed his example. The rowers filed out of the deck to blink in the late afternoon sun. Crisp sea breezes ruffled their hair. The sailors chatted in clusters, filling pipes with tobacco. Listening to their argot, Crixus began to doubt his ability to communicate in Minq effectively.

Crixus squeezed past the sailors on deck, heading towards the bridge to the fore of the ship, and ignoring their stares. One man blocked his way briefly, looked down at his hammer, and stepped aside. He was being evaluated.

On the bridge, a massive man, over six feet tall and wide as a horse, teased the wheel, eyes straight ahead, lost in piloting the ship. Captain Chyorth and the bo’sun looked over a scroll together. Chyorth glanced up and spotted Crixus, then returned his attention to the scroll. Crixus waited for the two to finish; after five minutes he became anxious.

“I’ll be with ye,” Chyorth snapped. He jabbed at the paper with a stiff finger, muttering to the bo’sun in the sailor’s argot that Crixus couldn’t decipher. At last the captain dismissed his man.

“Been rowing, have you?” The captain’s manner had changed with their departure from the land. He spoke with absolute authority, even as he bantered. “Good work for a strong man. Keeps the muscles from going to hell.”

“I don’t begrudge a bit of work to pass the time,” Crixus said. “I know nothing about sailing. An oar suits me for now. But in Restia you took a gold bar as payment for my passage.”

“It was a busy night,” the captain said, looking out over the sea.

“I trust you don’t intend to berth me in the hold for the entire trip.”

“Aye.” The captain still did not look him in the eye. Crixus resisted the urge to spin the man around.

Chyorth remained silent. The endless chatter of the waves against *The Fancy*

“Would you care to elaborate?” Crixus said at last.

“No,” Chyorth said. “You’re on my ship now, and don’t forget your place. You aren’t a passenger.”

“But I—”

Chyorth turned to pierce him with a glare. “You paid me gold to save your life, boy, not to take you on vacation. Your money is safe in my cabin and *you’re*

He patted the pilot on the shoulder and left the bridge. Crixus watched his retreating back, feeling dizzy with anger at his helplessness. He’d never lost control of his life until now, nor had he experienced the crushing effect it had on a man’s spirit. In the confines of *The Fancy*

The Fancy held a fifty-odd man crew. Most lived in the forecabin, eight to a cabin. Crixus was awarded the bunk of a sailor who had taken ill in Restia. It was scarcely an improvement over the straw mattress in the hold, but the blankets and human bodies warmed the cabin to a bearable degree. Bone weary from the labor of rowing, he fell asleep at dusk.

*

Again, his dreams became an arena for every anxiety to torment him. He ran from wolves, he ran from soldiers and bandits, he looked in featureless buildings for Kharrina. Somehow worse, he lost his hammer and apologized to his father as he searched for it in hiding places of improbable sizes.

He awoke at midnight to laughter outside the forecastle. The sailors had lit a fire in a metal barrel where they shared liquor and stories. One man held a tool for the others to scrutinize. The haft reminded him of his own hammer.

It *was* his hammer.

Jaw tight, Crixus pushed past the outer fringes of sailors to the group clustered around the fire. Starlight and firelight painted their faces in abstract planes, yet the sudden consternation at his appearance was unmistakable. They tensed.

Without breaking stride, Crixus stepped through the crowd and smashed his fist into the face of the gangly sailor who held his father's hammer. The man crumpled into a heap. Two others started forward, words of protest on their lips. He seized the arm of the man on his right and dashed him to the deck.

A cry went up: "Fight!"

Crixus kicked the prone sailor aside and seized his hammer as the sailors converged on him. He held it aloft, ready to break bones with it again.

"I'll kill any man that touches this," he barked.

His two victims staggered to their feet, helped by their comrades. Faces twisted with resentment at the violent outsider.

"You hear me?"

A gnarled sailor with pale eyes cackled at him. "You shouldna' brought that onboard. It's worth a man's life."

"Don't fall overboard, plumber. It'll drag you down to the watery depths." The man who spoke had lines tattooed on his cheeks. "Mind yourself."

"I'll mind him," the sailor he had punched snarled. A short dagger had appeared in his hand. The crowd didn't back up, a sure sign that fights were common on this boat.

Crixus took his hammer in both hands, one under the head, one at the butt. A defensive position, it would let him block the man's arms, but probably not the dagger itself.

“Do ‘im, Tanney,” someone shouted. The small sailor lunged at Crixus, almost losing his balance. Crixus stepped back, out of harm’s way, and realized the man was besotted with drink.

The crowd opened enough to give them room to maneuver, but remained close to see the excitement in the dim light. Crixus avoided two more wild swings; sailors in the crowd had to do the same.

He lowered the hammer, giving the man a clean shot at his chest. As the sailor thrust the knife at his heart, Crixus rammed the hammer head into his forearm, then swung around with the butt to crack the man’s cheekbone. The dagger fell and the sailor followed it to the deck.

Crixus stood over the man. Adrenaline and rage filled his head. The hammer was all he had left of his life in Rond, and this man blithely stole it from him. He shifted his grip for a powerful downstroke. The sailors cheered the turn of events, as if watching a cock fight. They wanted blood, and anyone’s would do.

“Don’t,” a voice said near Crixus’ ear. “Captain’ll string you up.”

The man who spoke stood at Crixus’ height, with a big nose and ruddy skin. Still, something in the set of his mouth suggested that he told the truth, and just in time.

Crixus let his hammer drop. He could think of nothing to say. The crowd parted for him as he walked back to his bunk. Standing on the bridge, Captain Chyorth and his bo’sun gazed down on him impassively. They didn’t acknowledge him as he passed to return to his cabin.

This time he laid his hammer between himself and the wall, under the blanket. Perhaps he should not have brought it. Under the circumstances of his disappearance, his effects would be returned to his family, particularly the hammer. Madraig would see to it.

He missed the mercenary right now, more than anything, even more than Kharrina. Fear kept him awake until dawn.

10. Orazio

Chyorth and his navigator knew their winds and currents. The ship required no more rowing aside from an hour or two for course correction. Crixus knew nothing about the day to day routine of ship maintenance, and after the incident over the hammer, the sailors avoided him.

All but one man: the wiry sailor with the improbable nose that bulged between his eyes and hooked over his upper lip. The effect was that his eyes always seemed slightly crossed. The sun had darkened his skin so that he resembled all the other sailors in their coloration, regardless of origin. Orazio hailed from Minq and slept in the bunk across from Crixus.

Orazio must have borne Crixus' victim some ill will, for after the fight Orazio nodded a greeting to Crixus in their bunkroom every morning. He was the assistant to the ship's carpenter, so one day when he gathered his tools, Crixus took a chance.

"Doing repair work this morning?"

Orazio focused his buried eyes on Crixus. He hesitated before answering. "Aye, that I am."

"I've done my share of carpentry in the past. Should you need a strong arm, just ask. I'm going mad with boredom."

A non-committal smile curved Orazio's thin lips. "I'll tell Hahgris." He nodded at the hammer. "You use that for wood?"

"Stone. It's a mason's hammer." He hitched up the hammer so that Orazio could see it in the morning light. "Been in my family for generations."

Orazio appraised it coolly. "No wonder you fought to keep it."

"It won't leave my side now." He returned it to his belt.

The sailor nodded, considering. Then he stuck out a hand. "Orazio," he said.

"Artes—Crixus." He shook Orazio's bony hand. "You're the first person to

“speak to me on this boat.”

“It’s always hard for a new hand.”

“I’m a passenger,” Crixus said. “I disembark at Izhmir.”

Orazio’s brow furrowed. “Aye, well... It’s a long journey.” He inclined his head and stepped out the door.

The brief conversation buoyed Crixus’ spirits for the remainder of the day. The man’s reticence to draw it out further didn’t worry him; it would take time before his presence was accepted on the ship. Anything that distracted him from thoughts of Kharrina was welcome.

Crixus went out to the aft deck where a few sailors had cast fishing lines over the side. They ignored him as he found an unoccupied span of railing to lean against and watch the ship’s wake. In the uniformity of the sea’s surface, he was tempted to believe that the wake had more substance, more immediacy, and something solid would bob up out of it: a shark, a swimmer, a siren. The salty air, as fresh as air could be, had an invigorating quality. For the first time since his disastrous mistake, the urge to break down in tears diminished.

A sailor exclaimed in triumph and hauled a silver fish out of the water. His companions scrambled to get the fish over the side and subdue it with clubs. The writhing fish was the size of Crixus’ arm. The sailors grinned as they clubbed it dead and threw it in a bucket.

Orazio spared a few more casual words for Crixus that night. Crixus resisted the impulse to tell the man his story. He wondered whether Chyorth had spread word of Crixus’ presence on *The Fancy* word and return the gold in Izhmir was another question.

A week passed and one starry night Orazio joined Crixus at the railing he had adopted as his spot for reflection. The man had a flask of rum: foul, strong, and cheap. He offered Crixus a sip.

“Thanks.” Crixus drank, exhaling with satisfaction.

“Aye.” Orazio allowed himself several sips. “You’ve been mooning here for days now. Not spent time on sea before, I’m guessing.”

“It’s my first trip.” He surveyed the sky, searching for familiar constellations. The probably navigator had his sextant out, reading the same night sky like a book.

“Yeah, yeah. I watched the ship take me away from home my first time, too. Swore I’d get off the ship as soon as I could. Ten years later, I’m still here.”

Crixus studied the lanky man, his sloping shoulders and stringy muscles. He was stronger than he looked, Crixus suspected. “So you weren’t a lad when you put out to sea?”

“Oh, no.” Orazio chuckled. “And I didn’t put out to sea so much as escaped.”

“Ah,” Crixus said, regretting he asked.

Orazio had warmed to his subject, however. “I was a carpenter myself, working for the Guild in Chianze. Windows, my specialty.” He mimed setting a window frame into a house. “My boss was a right bastard, but he had good taste in women. Took mine right from me.”

The two watched the ship’s wake cut a white trail into the black sea, and Crixus waited for Orazio to continue. “Your woman?” he prompted.

“A finicky bitch, she was, and plump as a tomato, but I loved her true for a poor man of modest means. My boss wanted her too, and she wanted his money.”

Orazio took another hit of the rum, and handed the flask to Crixus. He relaxed against the rail.

“Isn’t it crazy? All my life, I’d had no problems with women. They knew what I wanted, and they’d give it to me if the urge struck them. I could fuck a serving girl and her mother... or go home for the night and sleep soundly. I didn’t care, and I didn’t need a woman to make me happy. I had my work and my house, my dogs...” His voice trailed off. “Two dogs, black mutts, mean as hell to everyone unless I gave ‘em the word.”

“Where is Chianze?”

“Western coast of Minq, north of Izhmir by a hundred leagues. Small town.”

Orazio's accent was different from other sailors. Crixus had little difficulty understanding his speech, which tended to compress syllables in odd places.

“But Termieza, that woman! Something in her eyes and her voice, I couldn't get enough. I bought her gifts. I told her I didn't think she was fat even though I could barely get my hands around her. I promised to marry her, kids or no kids, whatever she wanted.”

“To no avail?”

“‘Someday,’ she'd say. ‘Someday you'll say the right thing and I'll do anything you want.’ I wracked my brain trying to please her.”

“What did your boss tell her?”

Orazio spread his hands. “I never found out. When I learned he'd been fucking her when she wasn't at my place, and she'd agreed to marry him, I went over there on a moonless night”—he pointed at the dark night sky—“and I hammered a wedge through his skull. She started screaming.” Orazio paused, a distant look on his face. “I almost killed her, too. I was furious, until I saw the blood and brains leaking out of that bastard's head. Then I thought a strange thing: ‘We're so like food.’ You know? People are meat like any animal. Then I couldn't kill her. I just walked out of that house, walked out of town, walked for days until I found *The Fancy*

Another fugitive. The insular loneliness of the man gave Crixus little encouragement for his own future prospects.

“Do you regret it?”

“Aye, every day.” He drummed on the railing. “Not killing that bastard, so much, but what it cost me.”

Crixus nodded somberly.

“You have the look of a fugitive, too. Who'd you kill?” Orazio winked.

“No one I shouldn't have. I...” He bit his lip. “... I made a bad decision, let us say. Something I want to correct.”

“That would describe most of the men on *The Fancy*

“Are there any legitimate sailors on board?”

Orazio barked a laugh. “Now there’s a joke. Where do you think sailors come from? Any man who wants a ‘legitimate’ career at sea joins the damned navy. Better pay, cleaner boats, retirement, a plot of land. You’ll be bow-legged and bugged by the end of it, but you’ll be legitimate.”

“So where’s the benefit to a ship like *The Fancy*

“Mostly. Though sometimes a cargo comes that makes it worth your while. Some men get lucky, buy into a boat themselves, or quit and start a tavern somewhere.” The gaunt man tilted his head. “Ten years, and I’ve never seen that cargo. ‘Tweren’t my reason for boarding, but would be most welcome.”

*

The Fancy glided into the harbor of the first stop on their journey to Minq, an island known as Ambiri. Had the trading ships found another route, Ambiri would remain an uninhabited forest jutting up from the sea. The majority of the population served on a boat, or arrived by boat to serve the former sailors. The women had been prostitutes or scullery maids, or their children. Thus, Ambiri’s culture borrowed from every ship that passed by between Rond and Minq. Several major trading companies set up shop on Ambiri, guarding their warehouses with mercenaries. Most of the law on the island came at the point of a sword.

Orazio entered the cabin as Crixus belted on his hammer. He had watched the sailors offload cargo all morning, languid with the little they had to sell at Ambiri: spices, mostly, and some crates that he suspected were contraband. The work done, Chyorth gave the sailors a day’s leave, with a rotating watch on the ship. Crixus intended to take advantage of that time to learn more about Minq from those who would talk to him.

“You should stay onboard,” Orazio said.

“Why? I’ll go mad. I just want to stand on something solid for a change.”

Orazio sighed as if giving advice was a new experiment. “Chyorth’s been close-

mouthed about you but the other boys are talking. You have something in his cabin.”

“I do.” Crixus chose his words with care, even though Orazio was the closest thing to a friend right now. “The captain is guarding it for me. I told you before, I’m a passenger.”

“Guarding? Huh. Hoarding, more like. I’d not trust him with my own dried feces.”

“I didn’t have much choice.”

Orazio leaned closer. “Ambiri is a lawless town. Those that got something worth having learn how to keep it—and keep alive, too. You want a woman and a flagon of decent ale for a change, and I don’t begrudge you that. Going in myself for the same thing.” He lowered his voice. “If it’s worth guarding, it’s worth stealing, aye?”

“Aye,” Crixus agreed, reluctantly. “I can’t argue with that. Damn it, man, I can’t cringe in fear every waking hour. If Chyorth has something planned for me, better I seem oblivious.”

“True.” The sailor tapped his chin. “We’ve been seen together often enough that it wouldn’t be out of place for me to take you ashore. Two sets of eyes sees when one set blinks.”

Crixus felt a surge of gratitude towards the man, from whom he had concealed most of his story. He seized Orazio’s hand in a firm grip. “Thank you, my friend. I’ll not forget your kindness.”

Orazio grinned, thin-lipped as a lizard. “I hope that means more than a pat on the back for this poor old sailor.” He hoisted his leather satchel. “Let’s alight.”

*

The island of Ambiri gathered no clouds, and so the ocean sun burned color into the human settlement there, causing the most weathered wood to glow with an unnatural health, as if the laws of life and death stretched by day. The festivity of the dockside market was more ragged than that of Restia. No piece of cloth lacked tatters, no rope avoided frays. Ambiri made up for the dearth of urban

resources with flowers, mounted everywhere, growing from patches of dirt, scooped out pots in the posts of the aging stands themselves, or genuine gardens. The cheery display disputed Orazio's warnings about the port town.

The gaunt sailor led Crixus straight to a stall with pungent spiced meat on a grill. A species of boar had been let loose on the island hundreds of years ago to offset the predominance of seafood in an Ambiri diet. The leathery woman manning the stall used an exotic variety of spices on the meat: a pepper he recognized, an herb that seemed familiar, and a host of hot spices he had never encountered. She chuckled as he grimaced from the heat. Orazio tossed some coprices at an ale vendor to wash the burning spice out of their mouths.

"I've been unmanned by a piece of meat," Crixus said, gasping after a gulp of warm ale.

"Haven't we all?"

Orazio leaned against the ale stand and surveyed the crowd. Exploration could wait; Orazio had an agenda.

"What do you see?" Crixus asked.

"Some overfed hookers and a street full of horny sailors," he said. "More than that, I cannot say yet."

After weeks at sea, Crixus couldn't keep his eyes off the crowd, either. Unsure of what criteria Orazio had for suspicious behavior, he settled for relishing every unfamiliar face. Living in Greater Rond all his life inured him to the basic need to be amongst humanity. The isolation on *The Fancy*

Ambiri's location served to make it a hub for oceanic trade for dozens of nations, Rond included. The variety of faces in the crowd rivaled that of a Greater Rond solstice festival. Black skin, yellow skin, red skin, a few pale faces burned pink by the sun. Mostly male; the female faces belonged to sun-weathered women or painted harlots. Crixus saw only a handful of children, bolting through the market crowd without fear for life or limb.

Crixus had a few coins left in his purse, and these he used to pay for a shave and a new set of clothes, looser and lighter than he was accustomed to wearing, but appropriate for the searing ocean sun. He changed into them right behind the

booth, reveling in the sensation of clean linen on his skin. If only Ambiri had a bathhouse, he would feel reborn.

Orazio watched him with a canny look on his face, no doubt recalling his own flight from justice. He spat on the ground and put on a casual air, but Crixus noticed how often he scanned the ground, and the set of his thin lips.

“Very nice,” Orazio said. “Befits a sailing man. Now, we’d best hie ourselves to the brothel.”

“I thought we were trying to be alert.”

“Alert, but we can’t let on that we’re alert. If I didn’t visit a woman today, our stalkers would know we were suspicious.”

Crixus looked at the scattered strangers near the clothes hut. “You’ve spotted them?”

“No.” Ozario put an arm around Crixus’ shoulders and contorted his face into a mask of gaiety. “But they might be anywhere, and that’s what I’m counting on.”

Orazio walked him to the far end of the market, where the booths gave way to shops and taverns. One tavern in particular caught Crixus’ attention: topless women leaned out the windows, waving red handkerchiefs. Sailors milled about the entrance, counting their coins, drinking cheap wine, and laughing. Everyone on the street seemed to watch the brothel out of the corner of their eye.

“Wait,” Crixus said as Orazio steered him towards the brothel doors. “If we’re being followed, this is the worst place to be. There’s no greater distraction.”

“Aye, distraction is what I’m looking for. You ain’t paying me, lad, and I’ll be listening for Sirens if I don’t get some relief. We’ll take our chances.” He winked at Crixus. “You could use a little draining yourself.”

“No thanks.”

The brothel’s main room served as a rowdy tavern, stocked with drunken sailors, bellowing concertinas, gambling, and a surfeit of noise. Crixus had drunk with the laborers on his aqueduct projects and thought he knew the depths of working men’s reckless abandon. But masons and stonecutters were as a candle to a

bonfire next to these sailors who had come off month-long voyages. A fist fight, presumably over the girl who tried to separate the combatants, crossed their path as they wove through the crowd to the bar. Parrots screeched at the costumed monkeys who climbed over their cages. A dance floor bounced with sailors and harlots.

Yet for all the noise, the focal points of the room were the clusters of beautiful girls, attired like temple virgins in simple white linen wraps and jewelry. These women lorded over the chaos like Orazio's Sirens, serene and confident. The women moving about the floor were of all shapes, sizes, and colors, but the most lovely ladies made little effort to ingratiate themselves to the boisterous mass of sailors. They reclined on couches and settees, nibbling on fruit, waiting to be approached.

"Consider this," Orazio said, guiding Crixus towards an island of couches that wasn't besieged by lusty sailors. "This is a madhouse. Left alone here, someone could 'bump' into you, claim offense, and kill you in a duel, before I'd finished with my girl." He stopped ten feet from the women, close enough to attract their curious glances. Crixus refused to look at them.

Orazio leaned close. "Now, I'm willing to watch your back for the rest of the trip, but not because I'm a saint. You're worth something, otherwise you'd be chained to a rowing bench."

"This isn't the time," Crixus said, recoiling.

Orazio seized his arm. "It is, because if I throw in my lot with you, I'm risking my neck, too. And I won't do it for free." He smiled his thin-lipped smile. "Tell me what's in Chyorth's cabin."

"No. Bad enough he knows."

The sailor sighed like a father. "It will stay in his hands, then. You can't challenge him. I know how the ship works. I know how those boys' loyalties sway back and forth. All you need is an opportunity, which I can create. Make it worth my while."

Crixus wanted to trust Orazio so badly he could taste it. Alone on the ship he was powerless, and Orazio knew it. Was the man another manipulator like Chyorth, or was he willing to take a chance and help Crixus in hopes of getting

off *The Fancy*

“All right.” He whispered in Orazio’s ear. “It’s gold. Not a fortune, but a considerable sum. I’ll give you a hundred-austrice bar for your services for a year.”

Orazio’s eyes bugged out. “That’s no small fee! I’d have done it for less.” He seized Crixus’ hand. “You have a deal, lad. I’ll work on spec until we put the screws to that bastard.” He fished silver out of his purse. “Now, as your bodyguard, I’m getting you out of this room. Which of these girls do you fancy?”

Crixus looked at his feet. “No girls for me, Orazio. I still consider myself engaged.”

“Hell, man, I don’t care if you play dice with her. I just want to put you in a safe place while I have my time.”

The woman watched them debate with studied disinterest. They had little competition on the island. No doubt they expected to retire on their earnings on Ambiri. Apprehension overtook him as Crixus evaluated their recumbent forms. One of the girls had Kharrina’s hair, sending a stab of pain through his heart.

The woman to her right was a pale beauty with a heart shaped face and wide shoulders. Her dark eyes radiated intelligence. “What’s your name?” Crixus managed to hide his anxiety behind a smile.

“Sheirra,” the woman said, holding out a hand for him to kiss. “You’re no sailor.”

“‘Tis true, my lady. I’m...” He caught himself. “I’m a mason,” he said, thinking of his hammer.

“He’s my guest, ladies,” Orazio said with a gallant bow. “I would fain to sit with you a bit, while my mate and his new friend go upstairs to get acquainted.” Orazio gave Crixus a confidential nod. “Take your time, lad. We’ve got all night.”

Sheirra accepted his help up. He noticed she had generous hips and bosom, as though she were ripe as a grape. She moved with a sensuality that made

Kharrina seem like a tomboy. A few graceful hand gestures sent an innkeeper to collect the coins for the night's stay from Orazio.

“Offer me your arm, stranger,” she told Crixus. Arm in arm, they crossed the room to the staircase. Sheirra's fluid movement awakened desire in him—and shame. “Now tell me your name.”

“Crix—” It struck him that he had been using his own name amongst strangers even though he was in hiding. “Crix,” he finished lamely. No help for it. “I'm from Brastile,” he said, hoping this lie would throw off anyone canny enough to track him to this brothel.

“I'm from Greater Rond, myself,” Sheirra said. Crixus' stomach constricted. “Brastilians must be imitating the dialect of the big city.” She showed white teeth. “Is it very beautiful?”

“Like any other city,” he said quickly. “Gardens and gutters.”

An attendant met them at the door of their room with a pan of hot water and towels. The boy set them on a small table near the bed. The room itself was not spacious, but far cleaner than Crixus expected from a brothel on a small island. Candles illuminated a small shrine to Kaolis. His surprise showed on his face.

“Our madam also hails from Greater Rond. The Rose Petal is patterned after establishments back home.” The attendant closed the door. Crixus winced at the sound.

“Please, Crix, relax.” Sheirra ran her hands up his arms. “You're so tense you're making me nervous.”

“I'm sorry.” The hot water caught his attention. “You lack running water, I see.”

She gave him a puzzled look. “Of course. We're not in Rond.”

“Ah, no.” He splashed his face with the water, feeling salt dissolve off his skin.

“Let me, please.” Sheirra wet a towel and wiped his brow, his neck, and his face. “Take off your shirt, dear.”

“Sheirra, please take no offense, but I'm not—”

She shushed him. “You’re shy. It’s very endearing. You can at least let me wash you, for the coin your friend spent.”

“Aye, very well.” He allowed her to remove his shirt. Her soft fingers brushed his skin as she did so. Sheirra wiped his back and chest with patience, kneading his flesh as she rinsed him off.

“You have a pile of rocks under your skin. Lie down.”

Crixus shrugged her off. “I’m sorry. You’re very kind, but I’m promised to another woman. We’re to be wed when I return home.” He didn’t know whether he was lying or not. The fugitive life was trickier than he imagined.

“Yet you are here with me.” Her smile was both seductive and maternal. “You needn’t be ashamed in taking comfort on your trip.”

“Comfort’s one thing I’ve had little of.”

“Then you deserve it. Imagine how your lady would scold me if I didn’t lift your spirits when you were down.” Sheirra laid on her stomach, her breasts puffing out from under her shift. Her soft body was most inviting. “Surely it wouldn’t break an oath to massage *my*

He scratched the back of his neck and looked at the door. “No, I suppose not.”

“Then come here.”

Crixus sat next to her, feeling her warmth against his leg.

“Undo my belt.” Mechanically, he did so, trying not to brush against her smooth skin. She reached back and pulled her shift off. Nude, she relaxed into the cushions.

“My shoulders get very sore,” she said. “You may start there.”

Crixus could not help but admire the courtesan’s body. She squirmed against his touch, sighing with satisfaction as he squeezed her shoulder muscles. Nestling her head in her arms, her smile of pleasure was honest and open. He felt guilty that he might have hurt her feelings by spurning her.

“Masons are now my favorite people,” she murmured, giggling at her own joke. “Does anyone have stronger hands?”

“They’re hard won,” he said. Even as an artisan, overseeing the masons, he worked as hard on the project as they did. “I’m sure any mason would have no regrets if he could come home to a woman such as you.”

“That’s very sweet.” Sheirra adjusted her position, an awkward movement that was quite fetching. Despite his protestations, the woman aroused him. “I will put masons on my list of potential husbands.”

“You could do worse.”

“I have,” she said. “My first husband beat me every night when I couldn’t make his withered dick hard. I think my resentment over being sold to an old man spoiled his mood.” She looked over her shoulder. “Oh, sorry, dear. Don’t stop now. You’re a little too easy to talk to.”

He dug into her shoulder blades. She made small noises in the back of her throat. “That feels wonderful. You really should let me loosen you up.”

“Perhaps I will.”

“I promise to protect your chastity.”

He chuckled. “Strange words from a courtesan.”

“Not every client wants sex, Crix. Often they just want a sympathetic ear. Some want nothing more than to be held. A woman’s touch can heal, whether or not it brings about release.”

“That sounds appealing, actually.”

“Then finish rubbing me down,” she said, “and we’ll keep you honest for your fiancé.”

Crixus hands moved from her shoulders to the small of her back, then her buttocks. She cooed with delight, and he quickly switched to her legs.

“What’s her name?”

He hesitated, letting go of her calves. “Kharrina,” he said.

“A lovely name. Is she young?”

“Aye, fairly. Still slender, and still wild.” He forced himself to think of Kharrina in the abstract, even as visions of her nudity flickered over Sheirra’s body.

“What does she like to do?”

“Eh?”

“To please you.” Her matter-of-fact tone quieted him. She continued, softening her voice. “When you’re unhappy, how does she soothe you?”

“She’s not so domestic yet,” he admitted. “She’s from... another town, so our visits tend to be exuberant.” The question surprised him with its ramifications. “I don’t believe she’s seen me unhappy. Her company fills me with joy.”

His hands brushed her buttocks again, and she raised them slightly. It reminded him of Kharrina’s mischievous moods, and he draw breath inwards.

“Oh. You’re thinking of her?”

“Yes. She likes... she favors this position when we are together.”

Sheirra moved his hand back to her hips, her thighs, then resting it on her buttocks. They were impossibly soft. “You needn’t be ashamed, Crix, if you want me to be Kharrina this night.” Her hand stroked his forearm, but he didn’t jerk away. “I envy her, really. Her chosen husband has a kind heart, something more handsome than any pretty face.”

“I miss her,” he whispered.

Sheirra drew him down on the bed, embracing him. “Close your eyes and listen to my breathing. When I breathe, think of your love, breathing the same air. Let your heart love her as your body loves mine.”

“I—”

She stopped his protest with a kiss, light but with a play of tongues.

“Is she very skilled or awkward?”

“Girlishly enthusiastic,” he said. “Very passionate. She also likes my arms.”

Sheirra kissed each eyelid closed. “Sheirra kisses you good night, Crix,” she said, her voice warm. “She leaves you in Kharrina’s arms.”

Crixus’ hand gripped her buttocks, then found her womanhood. Sheirra gasped in pleasure, exhaling on his face. He thought of Kharrina’s body, pressing against his with the joy of possession.

Sheirra sucked in the air that had visited Kharrina’s lungs as Crixus made love to her.

11: Cove

Later that night, he awoke to find Sheirra tucked against him. He had climaxed with his eyes closed, imagining Kharrina under him, her back muscles flowing against his stomach. Somehow, he felt no guilt, as if Sheirra's evocation of Kharrina made the sexual act into a form of worship for the love Kharrina and he shared together. It confused his heart, because he felt an enormous gratitude and affection for this stranger named Sheirra, who understood the pain of separation from his beloved. He wished he had a younger brother to wed her.

She stirred in his arms, half asleep, humming as wakefulness came upon her. He kissed her neck.

"Is it morning?"

"Not yet," he said, taking her hands. "You can sleep if you want."

"Mmm, no," she said. "Let me pretend I have a mason husband like, what was her name? Kharrina. Just for a time."

"Sheirra," he said, heart aching. "If I'd known you before I met her..."

She rolled over to kiss his cheek. "That's very sweet, Crix, but I doubt you'd have wanted a whore for a wife. Let me enjoy my fantasy right now." She grinned at the irony of her joke.

"Do you want another rubdown?"

"We can skip that." Her hand found his groin. "This time, I want to look at you."

Her legs wrapped around his waist. They kissed with relish, hearts pounding with a new passion. She moaned as he pressed against her.

A metallic sound outside the door distracted him. He paused, his ardor fading as fear arose. Sheirra licked at his neck. "Don't stop, darling," she moaned.

He cast a hand about the floor for his hammer. His fingers brushed the haft as the door opened. Metal flashed and a knife struck the floor an inch from his hand.

“Who’s—” A dark figure moved forward and clasped a hand over her mouth. Two others slid into the room and closed the door. Each brandished a wicked, straight dagger, aimed at Crixus’ heart. Naked and unarmed, he felt utterly vulnerable.

The men concealed their identities with black scarves. The dark rags they wore provided camouflage in the darkness.

“Bring her, too,” one said.

His comrade handed Crixus his clothes. Puzzled, Crixus dressed at the man’s silent urging. The man hefted his hammer and held it at his side like a hand axe.

“What about her?”

“No one cares what a whore wears,” the leader said. The masked man pushed Sheirra from the bed.

The leader put a knife at Crixus’ throat, pressing hard enough to break the skin. “No noise or we kill you both where you stand.”

The shallow cut sent a shock through Crixus’ body. His limbs tingled with the urge to flee. “All right,” he breathed.

The man with his hammer checked the hallway. He motioned for them to follow. The hubbub from the main room resounded in the hallway; Crixus presumed it carried on all night. The kidnappers directed them away from the crowd, down the hallway, deeper into the building.

Crixus caught Sheirra’s eye, and her look of terror gave him no comfort. These must be Chyorth’s men, perhaps even sailors he had shared a ship with for weeks. Orazio had been right, but where was the man now? Sheirra’s life, as well as his own, depended on what Crixus did next—and he had no idea what to do.

A few turns, and they arrived at an outer hallway. A door had been cracked open; the men guided them into the tiny room. A rope ladder dangled from the room’s only window to the back alley below.

The stiff rope bit into his palms. One of the kidnappers waited below, watching

the street for onlookers. Ambiri's main streets never gave in to the night, but few bodies walked under the stars tonight. Once on the ground, the leader pressed against Crixus, dagger point in his back. Sheirra's guard resumed his position.

"We're going to walk calmly," the man said. "Tell your whore to mind her manners if she wants to survive the night."

Sheirra's wide eyes showed that she understood the man's warning.

"Don't hurt her," Crixus said. "She's innocent."

"Don't be stupid." He impelled Crixus forward with the dagger. "Move."

The subsequent ten minutes felt like ten hours. They kept to back alleys, moving away from the center of town to the fields of crops. A handful of times they passed drunken sailors who paid no attention to them nor to the naked beauty in their company. With each encounter Crixus' heart sank. No one would come to their aid. Orazio likely slept in the arms of his companion for the night, unaware that his charge had been spirited out from under him on the very first day of their agreement. He wiped at his neck, where the shallow cut stung from his sweat.

The sound of the ocean reached their ears. The kidnapers led them to a small cove with tidal pools that reflected the stars. Erosion had torn away the embankment, leaving sandy soil that crumbled under their feet. Stubby trees hid them from the village. A cool sea breeze teased their leaves.

It was a beautiful, serene spot, where he could have enjoyed an intimate moment with Sheirra.

"This hammer is pretty fancy." The man spoke at a normal volume, a sign that they were beyond human help. "It's probably worth something."

"Let me see." The leader inspected the axe over Crixus' shoulder. "Huh. Must be the family crest here."

Crixus spoke up. "It's yours if you let us go."

"It's ours regardless," the man said. "The only real question is, do we kill the whore?"

“She’s a witness,” said the man holding her. She struggled against his grip.

“Kill him, enjoy her, kill her,” the man with his hammer said as if giving digging directions. “We’re not being paid enough to risk a witness.”

“Madam Olor gets testy when you kill her girls,” the leader said, indicating at Sheirra with his chin. “Best to feed her to the fish, too.”

Sheirra cried out, a wordless sob. Her guard wrenched her arm.

Silence settled over them, as if each were contemplating the finality of the moment. Crixus tensed, trying to read the knife’s position with his body. His fears of a future without Kharrina paled under the threat of imminent death. Every second without an opening for escape was more precious than the gold in Chyorth’s cabin.

Made brave by fear, he reached his hand out to hers. She took it, without provoking retribution from her guard.

“I’m sorry,” he said. She swallowed, eyes bright with tears. She gripped his hand like a vice.

A thump sounded behind him. The leader of the men pulled away from him, clutching his head. For a floating, timeless moment, Crixus failed to understand what happened. A flagstone had landed in the sand at the man’s feet.

“Damn it,” the leader croaked. Blood leaked out from between his fingers.

Comprehension dawned on him. Emboldened by his sudden freedom, Crixus lunged toward Sheirra, throwing his weight against her. She toppled, away from the dagger at her back. The guard lashed out too late to cut her but managed to catch a fold of skin on Crixus’ back. He yelled at the unexpected, shocking pain.

The kidnapper dropped Crixus’ hammer and propped up his arm to throw his knife. A form flew through the air from the embankment to tackle the man, knocking the knife out of his hand. Crixus caught a glimpse of a long, stringy arm with a dagger: Orazio.

A desperate sense of purpose filled him. He snatched the flagstone at the leader’s feet and threw it at Sheirra’s guard’s head. Ducking, he failed to notice Crixus’

charge, which knocked him down. Crixus stepped on his arm, trapping the dagger, then dropped his knee to the man's stomach with his full weight. The air whooshed out of the man's lungs.

Sheirra scrambled on her knees to grab the loosened dagger. "Crix!" she called, tossing it to him. The dagger twisted point first, and Crixus spun to avoid being impaled. It buried itself in the sand nearby.

His opponent struggled to free himself from under Crixus. Afraid of what the man could do, he directed three blows to the man's head, putting all his strength into them as if he were trying to hammer through a stone wall. The man twitched with the impacts and was still.

Orazio wrestled with his opponent; each held a dagger to each other's face, locked in a lethal embrace. Crixus staggered to his feet to help his friend. His hammer laid by their heads, half covered in sand. He lunged for the haft.

"No!" Sheirra's scream froze his blood. A puff of air raised hackles on his neck, and Crixus stumbled. The leader's knife gashed his leg. Pain shot through his limbs like lightning.

He fell to his knees but managed to wrap his hands around the haft of the hammer. The kidnappers had cut him three times. His body wanted to shut down.

With an effort of will, he gripped the hammer and swung it at the leader's torso. The force of the swing dashed him to the ground. The hammer's wedge hooked under the man's ribcage, and Crixus' falling weight yanked the ribs loose in shards. Blood exploded from the man's side, soaking into the sand. He shrieked—a hopeless, strident sound—and collapsed in a bloody tumble.

Crixus heard rather than saw Orazio stabbing his dagger repeatedly into his opponent's chest and throat. The dull, wet thuds punctuated Sheirra's sobbing.

Orazio lurched back from his man, fist and knife wet with blood. Rage burned in his eyes, so primal that Crixus thought he might be the next victim. The gaunt man coughed twice, cracked his neck, and looked speculatively at Sheirra for a long moment. Crixus gripped his bloody hammer.

"Are you all right?" Orazio asked the weeping Sheirra. She nodded, fearful of him as well. "Then stop crying. I can't stand that sound."

Dull, throbbing pain burned in Crixus' back and right leg. He flopped onto his back. His leg seeped blood, and he bent it because straightening it caused the skin to feel as though it were ripping off his flesh. His back ached as though he had bruised it.

"Gods, they tore you up." Orazio knelt beside him, rolling him over to look at his wounds. Crixus yelped as Orazio poked at his injuries. "We'll need to bind that. Girl, strip those bodies. Keep their clothes intact if you can."

Sheirra tugged the pants off the leader and handed them over. Orazio worked quickly, cutting the fabric into strips and tying them around the bleeding gash. Sheirra held the leg steady while he secured the makeshift bandages. A shirt from the man Crixus had pummeled unconscious served for his back wound. Neither wound was deep enough to worry Orazio, though he complained of working in near darkness.

"That one's still breathing," Sheirra said when Orazio stopped. He grunted and knelt by the gasping man. The wet ripping sound was almost lost in the lap of the waves. Sheirra looked away, biting her lip.

Orazio removed his jacket and draped it over her shoulders. "We ain't done yet. Crixus can't walk, so you got to help me."

"Help you what?"

He jerked a thumb at the calm waters of the cove. "You think they chose this place because it's pretty?"

Sheirra shivered.

Crixus tried to stand. "I'll do it." His cut leg had already stiffened up.

"You're staying dry, my friend." Orazio began to drag the bodies to the edge of the water. Sheirra put her arms around Crixus for a hug, and to force him to sit. He protested without success.

"It's all right," she said. "I'm already undressed. A little swim won't hurt me." Impulsively, he kissed her cheek. She sniffled, a smile breaking through the tears.

Orazio and Sheirra waded into the water with the three bodies, letting them float free when the water lapped at their waists. Sheirra came back to shore first, splashing water on her body to rinse the blood off. She knelt by Crixus for another embrace as Orazio stayed in the water with the last body, working it with his knife. They saw him pluck something from the dead man's torso and throw it far out into the cove. He waded back hastily, washing his hands and knife in the saltwater.

Orazio threw himself down on the sand, next to them.

"You're unhurt?" Crixus said.

"Aye, but for some bruises." He grinned, a lizard-like grimace on his face. "I've been in a few more fights than you."

"How did you find us?"

"I never lost you. I took the room next to your'n, and listened for anything suspicious." He shrugged his bony shoulders. "Well, after I entertained Elisana a bit. I guessed they'd wait until you were asleep."

"So you followed us here?" Crixus said. Sheirra held him closer.

"Fifty paces behind you. I didn't think he'd send three boys after you, though. That had me plenty worried."

"But you attacked them anyway."

"Gave my word," Orazio said simply.

Crixus disengaged from Sheirra enough to put out his hand. "Thank you." The sailor shook it, grinning at him again.

"Yes, thank you," Sheirra said.

"Nice to help folks out," Orazio said. "Especially when they help me out in turn."

12: Farewell

The old woman crouched over Crixus with a bone needle and fishgut thread. She insisted he lie on his stomach on the floor. At first he assumed it was for some obscure medical reason, but as she untied Orazio's hasty bandage and blood welled up, he realized she was trying to save the sheets of the bed. The stench of blood and raw fish stung his nose.

"Stop squirming, boy," she said in a voice as raspy as a board.

Sheirra held his hand as he winced at the intrusion of the needle. Her bruises from the fight had become evident on her pale skin. Orazio sat behind them in a stool, sipping a glass of plum liquor; his chosen companion, Elisana, applied cold rags to his own bruises.

"I've spoken to Madam Olor," Sheirra said. "She's embarrassed by what happened. She wants to make amends."

"I think Orazio made amends of all three of our attackers," Crixus said.

"Your ship leaves in two days. You may stay here with me until then." Her smile contained more than a trace of hope. He wondered if he had led the girl's heart astray. "We'll patch you up, feed you, and put you at ease."

He offered her a smile in return. "I accept. Thank you."

"Not too much ease," the old woman barked. "It's a jagged cut on his leg. No pumping away for him."

"I'll find more tender ways, grandmother, I promise." Sheirra winked at him. "He deserves a reward for saving my life."

"Orazio did most of the work," Crixus said. "I'm just lucky to know him."

"I don't hear that often," Orazio said. "Sounds nice, eh, love?" Elisana giggled as he nuzzled her cheek. "Save that thought, my dove, until I return from the ship."

His attacker's knife had found mostly fat in the back, without damaging muscle

mass. More fish gut thread went into his skin to suture the cut. The skin around the wounds felt unnaturally taut.

“You’re going back?” Crixus said.

Orazio stood. “Aye. I want to see the look on Chyorth’s face when I board alone.”

“I understand.” Crixus thought for a moment, as Orazio set down the glass. “Were those men from *The Fancy*

“No.” Orazio checked his jacket for bloodstains. Frowning, he gave it to Elisana. “Burn that, please. No, I think those were local men. *The Fancy*

With a brief kiss on Elisana’s lips, Orazio stepped out.

This gold has been a curse, Crixus thought as the old woman sponged his sutured wounds clean. In one month’s time I’ve had two attempts on my life plus a moment of disastrous greed. I should let Chyorth keep it and start afresh. Without it, I could claim I was a victim. The only witnesses are sailors on this ship, whose word would not stand against a Guildmaster’s. Why am I still running?

Minq seemed far, far away, alien and forbidding. Ambiri was frightening enough, though Sheirra’s company could not be faulted. Still, to be realistic, she was a courtesan, and he had no plans to rescue her from the brothel and marry her. In his heart, he had not cheated on Kharrina. In Rond, men commonly took girls to bed when traveling abroad without fear of marital repudiation. His friends would have laughed at Crixus’ anxiety. Sheirra was a whore and meant nothing; Kharrina was his betrothed and meant everything. The line was clear.

Still, guilt stirred in him, precisely because he did like Sheirra. Coveting her body worried him not; coveting her heart worried him plenty.

Still, he had to acknowledge that he was in the most dire straits of his life. It was only natural that he should attach himself emotionally to those who treated him with kindness. Any lost dog would do the same.

He was not a lost dog, though. He was Associate Guildmaster Crixus Oraan, who may have made foolish mistakes, but he would return home to reclaim that

which was his: status, a wife, a trade—and his honor. To do anything less would be to surrender, which he would not consider, even as Sheirra helped him into a bed that he could not mount on his own, thanks to his injuries.

Crixus fought the temptation to take full advantage of Chyorth's ruse and return to Restia claiming to be a victim. The lie would shame him more than the stigma of admitting his crime—which in turn would bring shame on his family name. In neither case could he marry Kharrina and resume his normal life. His crime was against the Water Artesan's Guild, an internal matter. He hadn't exactly stolen it; rather, embezzled it. The word stung like his wounds.

Yet embezzlement wasn't outright theft, which meant he might have an opportunity to return their gold to them and repair the damage he had done without the involvement of the authorities.

The remaining gold was only a tenth of what had been entrusted to him, yet it was more important to him than anything else, except perhaps his family hammer. The gold was the lifeline to his former life, even as it separated him from that past.

He had suffered a moment of weakness. That moment must be surmountable, retrievable with an effort to bring back the Guild's gold in some form, even if not the actual gold bars. Those were scattered across the world by now, gone South with Quant, gone gods knew where with Antonine, Tookh, or Oume. He knew no way to win back the gold from Chyorth. Retrieving his remaining share from the man's cabin still existed as naught but a murky hope.

Crixus longed to return to the safety of his old life, where his greatest challenges were pleasing self-important noblemen and computing the gradient of an aqueduct. That he was now a fugitive, a criminal, was a redefinition of his sense of himself that the attack had finally made clear to him. To slough off his sin would require appeasing the Guild. Gold wouldn't be enough. He had to return to Rond in a position of power with something more valuable than gold bars as a bargaining chip, so that the Guild would have to overlook his mistake if they wanted to do business.

Minq could be that bargaining chip.

Schemes began to form in his head; he felt lucid for the first time since the disastrous Pathii game. As an engineer, he knew that every problem had a

solution. One simply had to weigh all the factors against the desired outcome.

*

As much as Kharrina signified a goal to him, Sheirra's proximity and affection glowed like a sunbeam, and he basked in it. They cuddled on the bed, left alone at last. His leg and his back hurt too much to engage in true lovemaking, but her body pressed against his seemed to provide more curative power than the herbal mixture the old woman spread on his puckering lacerations. He let his hands speak for him, to tell Sheirra that her sordid occupation mattered not to him, that she was a person of value, and beauty, and goodness. He pleased her with his fingers, and she responded in kind with her mouth, and thus they whiled away the night and the morning in languid reassurances that they were alive and had survived their brush with death.

In the morning they slept, backs pressed together, and awoke so content that they were loathe to leave the bed. An attendant brought food and hot water, and Sheirra bathed Crixus, careful not to dampen his stitches. They spoke little, knowing that he must leave in a day, never to return.

Orazio returned at lunchtime, knocking on their door and waiting to be invited in. Sheirra donned a silk robe and arranged Crixus' bedclothes so that he was decent. Orazio nodded to her with more respect than he had shown the other night, which pleased Crixus.

"Well?" Crixus could not read the man's expression.

Orazio dipped his head. "Chyorth braced me on deck when I arrived without you. He tried to play it off as though he was looking after your well-being, but..." He picked up an apple and crunched it. "But he did ask how many 'new friends' I saw you wander off with."

"What did you tell him?"

"Three, and his eyes lit up. I'm sure he's behind the attack now." Orazio worked the apple bits in his mouth. "My guess is that he'll pretend you decided to stay in Ambiri. The crew doesn't care enough to ask after you."

"Should we change our plan?" Crixus sat up in the bed. "There's nothing to stop Chyorth from trying to eliminate me again."

“Don’t misunderstand me, lad. The sailors don’t spare you a moment’s thought. You’re cargo to them, nothing more. But if Chyorth openly murders you, the boys no longer feel safe on their ship. The ship would be cursed even if your ghost didn’t come back. Arranging your disappearance maintains crew morale and keeps his hands clean. He’ll make no overt move against you on *The Fancy*”

Crixus laid back down as Orazio finished the apple and sampled the wine. He rolled back into Sheirra’s softness.

“Orazio,” he said from the bed, “I want to tell you something. Something of my plans.”

“I’m listening.”

“Minq is a land of opportunity for me. From what I understand, the water resource technology lags behind Rond’s to a large extent.”

Orazio considered this. “Yes and no. There are remnants of old Minq empire scattered around the city-states, but that’s in the hands of the rich.” He pointed with the apple core. “Folks say Arktos has a fountain for every citizen, and walking statues. I guess that’s what you’re aiming at.”

“Not precisely, but you bring up an interesting point. Are most city states aware of the possibilities of running water?”

Orazio nodded. “I’d reckon so. Minq’s big cities were legendary for miracles. A lot of that knowledge has been lost, and no one can get along well enough to share it again.”

“That’s where I come in.” Excitement roused him to lean forward in the bed. “Given time to study the terrain, I can locate water sources—underground springs, runoff lakes, rivers—and divert them to a city. With minimal construction, we can provide running water to public bathhouses or government buildings. Temples, markets—even the homes of the rich. Why,” his eyes sparkled with the possibilities, “if a city had enough in their coffers, every residence could have pipes installed. The work isn’t complex, but it does require a planner who understands water.”

“You’re making me homesick,” Sheirra said. “I miss the bathhouses. But masons work with stone, do they not?”

His clumsy lie had fallen apart from his own negligence. “I, ah, have many more skills than that.”

“So I have noticed,” she said, nudging his uninjured backside.

He stroked her hand. “I didn’t want to advertise myself to the entire island. I’m sorry to have deceived you.” Crixus blushed.

“And you’d be the first man to bed me with lies?” She patted him. “I’m accustomed to it. These rooms exist apart from the real world. Otherwise, how could I ply my trade?”

Despite Orazio’s cautioning look, he continued. “I’m not traveling by choice, either. You might have guessed that from the attack.”

“There were other clues,” she said quietly.

“Oh.” He felt foolish, as if he had been wearing his secrets on his sleeve and these new friends read him as easily as his newfound enemies.

“Your plan has merit, to be sure,” Orazio said. “You’ll need to travel quite a bit to find customers. I can’t say I know much past Chianze other than coastal towns, and that’s only from an anchor dropped here or there.”

“But you hail from Minq. It’s not a foreign land to you.”

“Minq is foreign to everyone, lad. No one looks past the horizon.” His eyes softened. “I know you want my help—and I’m willing to give it—but don’t expect me to give you the guided tour of Minq. It will be new to me as well.”

“Nevertheless, I’ll be lost without you. You saved my life for a handful of gold. What I have in mind should make both of us rich.”

“No objections to that from me,” Orazio said. “Now, Captain Chyorth may have other plans for your gold.”

Crixus sighed. Conflict was rare in his life. Victory required a confidence in one’s observation of the human factors circling the issue of contention, and he lacked such confidence. Orazio, for all his protests that he was a simple man, had no fear of decisive action based on his evaluation of a situation. Either he

was a savvy tactician who could protect Crixus, or just a man unafraid of the consequences of his actions. Why was it easier to find water fifty feet underground than it was to understand the minds of the people around him? He longed for the finite complexities of topology and mathematics.

“We set sail tomorrow morning,” Crixus said. “Let me consider that dilemma overnight. If there’s anything we need from Ambiri, we should buy it today.”

“For one,” Orazio said, holding up a finger, “you need a real weapon. That hammer of yours can break a man’s bones, but a dagger is faster in close quarters.”

Crixus spread his hands. “I don’t know how to fight with a dagger.”

“Sometimes showing the blade is half the battle.”

“I’m not sure how much we can bring aboard *The Fancy*

Orazio scratched at his stubble. “True, true. You might have gone spending money like a tourist, but bringing back a sword will alert the captain.” He set down his glass. “I’ll come back at dusk with your souvenirs. Meanwhile, rest up. No amount of preparation will help if you’re limping around the ship like a beggar.”

The command reminded Crixus of his aching leg. He envied Orazio’s limber gait as the sailor left for the market. He lay back down in the pillows, thoughtful.

“Thank you,” Sheirra said, putting an arm across his chest.

“For what?”

“Letting me listen. I expected to be sent away.”

He rubbed his face, regretting his indulgences. “Should I have sent you away?”

“Only if you distrust a whore.”

He scowled. “Don’t call yourself that.”

Sheirra laughed without bitterness. “Crixus, I think you’re becoming attached.

I'm not sure whether to be flattered or annoyed."

"Annoyed?" He propped himself up on an elbow. Sheirra had let her robe part, her nude body shadowed by the fabric. "You wound me."

"Please don't be angry. I like you very much. Had I known you back in Rond, I'd have welcomed your courtship. Any maiden would. But this"—she waved a hand at the room and the bed—"is my job. Some days it pains me, and the clients are enough to make me want to become a priestess. Sometimes I meet a man who charms me—you, dear—and I enjoy providing service to him. I can even pretend he is a true lover, but I know the difference. In the morning, you'll go to Minq and make your fortune, and I will take another man to bed and make my own."

"You think I'm naïve."

"Not any more. I think you've had your life destroyed, from what you tell me, and your heart seeks a warm place to hide. No one with so much uncertainty in their life would refuse comfort and solace." She moved his hand under the folds of her robe to rest on her hip. "I take comfort in you, too. Someday I'll meet a man like you who can take care of me, and I'll gather up my gold and join him. Not all men are small minded brutes."

"I'm surprised you can tell that just by sleeping with a man."

"You learn to read a man quickly. Even with a courtesan, men crave to open up. They don't pay us for this"—she enclosed his hand with her thighs—"as much as our sufferance. They stand before us, naked and erect, and we become moist for them, and they can believe in themselves for at least a short time."

"Is that what I needed?"

"Oh, aye, Crixus, it was heart-breaking to watch. I wished I could bring your Kharrina in to take my place in bed with you. You tried so hard to stay in control."

His face darkened. "I can't lose her, Sheirra. I must be a fool to think that bedding you brings me any closer to her. But who else can I tell of her?"

"It's love. I find it beautiful."

The sadness in her face pulled him closer to her. “You’ve never been in love?”

“I’ve wanted to for years,” she said. “It’s like an ocean to me, but I only live by a stream that flows into it.”

He could make no answer to that. Sheirra’s face aged, beyond her years, with her words.

“I’ll come back for you,” he blurted out. “You’ll say it’s stupid, but I’ll come back to Ambiri once I’ve gotten what I need in Minq. Restia is a growing town, and I know I can find you work there. Real work, work to be proud of. You could be a printer.” He grinned at the thought of Kharrina and Sheirra printing prayer sheets, complaining about ink stains together.

“What about your woman?” Suspicion colored her question. Crixus realized she heard offers like this everyday from lonely, lovestruck sailors.

“I’m not looking for a mistress,” he said. “Forgive me if I implied that.”

“A friend?”

“I consider you that already.”

She buried her head in his shoulder. “I accept.” He put his free arm around her. “Tomorrow morning we part as friends.” She undid his robe. “Today, you’re to be my lover.” She kissed his neck. “Rather than a client. This is a holiday for me.”

“A holiday?” He inhaled as her hand closed on him and stroked. “Not too different from work, though.”

“A holiday at the beach.” Her mouth found his. “I want to play in the ocean, just for a little while.”

He kissed her back. Guilt, passion, and affection mixed together in the sensation of kissing her, more so than before he confessed to her. Chyorth might kill him after all; today could be his last taste of a woman’s love. Prudery would gain him nothing.

“Very well,” he said. “Love for love is a fair trade.”

“But we shouldn’t irritate your leg,” she said, concern on her face. “We can just talk more. You can hold me.”

Crixus shook his head, smiling, and removed her robe. The differences between her body and Kharrina’s delighted him now. “It’s worth it.”

She guided him to her spread legs, but he pushed her hand away. “Lovers don’t rush,” he said.

Crixus levered himself above her. He stole a kiss then moved down to her neck and collarbone, taking minutes to caress her skin with his lips and nose. Sheirra arched her back, moving differently than she had when they dallied before. Her hands strayed to her sex, but he gently moved them to his own back. Few men, he supposed, had taken the time to love her as they made love to her, a patient luxury that he and Kharrina discovered only recently.

Her ample body pleased him even more as he acknowledged his affection for her. She was soft enough that her muscles showed only when she stretched. Given time and a rich diet, Sheirra would become plump, but now her body exhibited a voluptuous quality that awoke a primal desire in him. Taking her nipple in his mouth, he worked slowly to arouse the greatest pleasure in her, to let her be utterly selfish in her pursuit of sensation. This was what a genuine lover could give his partner.

Crixus caressed her this way for over an hour, resisting all her attempts to consummate the act. At last he pleased her with his tongue, and her climax followed at once. Only then did he place her on her stomach and mount her, breathing into her ear as he did, and whispering kind words. At first he had pitied her emotional limbo, but no longer. She, too, was on a journey like the one he had started; unwanted, cut off from home and without status. She drifted through life to find a place that accepted her without an agenda. Whoring came easily when she had never loved before. He hoped with all his heart that their short time together might place her on a path towards love, towards what she imagined others had. What he and Kharrina had, and he had thrown away.

This he could give Sheirra.

She sighed as he thrust into her and climaxed.

“I love you,” he whispered, and at that moment it was entirely true.

13: The Fancy

The stares Crixus drew as he boarded *The Fancy* confirmed his suspicions. Chyorth must have spread word that he decided to remain in Ambiri for some imaginary reason that was probably unflattering. The crew, already remote from him, was openly disturbed by his presence. He made no effort to engage them in conversation, heading for his bunk and remaining in the cabin for departure. The bittersweet farewell between he and Sheirra replayed itself in his head, until the swaying movement of the ship took him out to sea. For all the fondness they developed for each other, their time together could not be healthy for a woman who must give her affections to strangers every day. Perhaps she had such affairs before, discarding them when they were no longer convenient.

Despite the melancholy nature of his thoughts of Sheirra, whom he could have met in Greater Rond long before he had found Kharrina, he welcomed the emotional exercise. His predicament stranded him from normal human contact. He had a dangerous need to explain his dilemma to those he cared about; any distrust in their eyes burned at his soul, left him defensive and isolated. He produced rice paper and a quill he bought in Ambiri's market on the way to the boat. Inking the quill pen, he tried to write down the conversation he imagined he would have with Kharrina if he could be with her at the moment. After half a dozen attempts, he settled on a short note:

My love. Times are difficult for me now, due to my own ambition. I am not dead, nor a hostage, except to my conscience. I will not describe the crime I committed in detail, but be assured it was not one of violence, brutality, or blasphemy. Rather, I violated the trust that the Guild placed in me. Dazed by the enormity of what I'd done, I foolishly accepted the offer of an immoral man to escape punishment. I hoped, and I still hope, that I can mitigate the damage I've done by creating new opportunities for the Guild in Minq. May the gods send wind to these sails so that I can begin that process sooner. Every moment I wish I was with you again. I will not forget you. I will return for you soon, a man you can still be proud of.

Crixus listened to the battering of waves against the hull of *The Fancy*. Finished, the note struck him as pathetic, yet it was his only connection to his betrothed. He considered throwing it in the o his isolation from her and his home. Still, it said what his heart declared every moment, so perhaps having it in hand would

alleviate the pain.

He tucked it into the leather sack along with another set of clothes, a slender dagger, and a scarf from Sheirra.

According to Orazio, their course took them to another trade island, Chiran, then finally the coastal town of Izmir. The impoverished port city was a poor choice for their gateway to Minq, he said, but the sooner off *The Fancy* the better.

Chyorth had avoided him since he boarded, which was a great relief. The thought that the captain had arranged that terrible night brought back all the anxiety of violence; he doubted he could maintain his composure. Crixus spent the following week in his cabin, coming out only to relieve himself, mostly at night. The sailor's voices blended with the waves and the wind into a tapestry of sound. His resolve to rebuild his fortunes in Minq wavered under the weight of his ignorance. Fortunately, Orazio spent his breaks teaching him the Minq dialect, Minq customs on the east coast, and some small portion of Minq geography. Crixus would have killed for a decent reference text on the continent, but Ambiri had offered few books, and any on board were sequestered in Chyorth's cabin.

Along with his gold.

Perched in their bunks, he and Orazio spent hours concocting elaborate schemes to liberate the money box, from inciting mutiny to simply attacking Chyorth on the bridge, but nothing seemed promising. They lacked the support of the sailors, who, when in doubt, would throw in with their captain.

One night, three days out from Chiran, Crixus and Orazio shared a bottle of rum and mused on the captain once again.

"He's right bloody arrogant, he is," Orazio said. "His ship, his rules. If he decides not to give you the gold back, there's little to be done."

"So we've said. But the man swindled me without any drop of remorse. Can he truly command the respect of his crew?"

"Aye, because as a captain, he's good enough. Fair in most dealings, brings a profit, flogs nary at all." He poured out another glass of rum. "I'd not go so far as to say he inspires genuine loyalty, but no sailor will turn on a captain until

he's crossed the line."

"And what is the line?"

Orazio thought for a time. "Murder without just cause. Embezzling from the crew's wages. Knowingly cursing the ship."

"Cursing?"

"A ship is prey to the hungry sea. You don't give it any chance to visit ills upon you. So you mind yourself onboard."

Crixus looked into the bottom of his glass. "I haven't been told of any of this. Superstition?"

"You say it like it's a dirty word, lad, but a sailor knows there are rules to be obeyed." Orazio shrugged. "Some may be naught but folly, but why take chances?"

"Give me an example."

The gaunt man thought for a moment. "Remember when we spotted sharks swimming in our wake?"

"Oh yes. Big ones."

"A shark senses death before it happens. Had you befriended any of the crew, you'd have heard the whispers, or noticed them notching the mast with a fingernail."

"I just assumed the sharks were eating the refuse from the ship's galley."

"Nay. Spend enough time on the sea and you learn to notice when something carries another meaning on its back."

Crixus remembered the shark's fins cutting through the white-capped wake. The fish measured fifteen feet at least, and when one breached to bite at a fish carcass, the fanged mouth could have belonged to a demon. He shuddered. "That superstition makes sense. I'd sooner drown than become their lunch."

Orazio spit on the table and rapped it three times. “Damn it, Crixus, there’s too much you don’t know! *Never*

“Lunch?”

“No, no. A man ‘goes overboard,’ if you must make reference to it at all. You bring bad luck down on yourself with careless talk.”

“Oh.” Crixus marveled at the man’s impassioned reaction to an unlucky word, given the courage he had displayed against far more concrete dangers. It gave him an idea. “Is there a superstition about cargo? Some things that doom a crew?”

“Aye, sure there are.” Orazio’s face lit up. “I see what you’re thinking.”

Crixus grinned, getting excited. “You and I know it’s gold, but what if the crew thinks that’s a lie to cover up what we’re really hauling?”

Orazio stood, gesturing with the bottle. “It would spook them. Chyorth would have to calm ‘em down, convince ‘em he’s not carrying bad luck out of greed.”

“They’d mutiny without a moment’s thought.”

The sailor scowled at Crixus. “Careful, lad. Talk of mutiny’s bad luck.”

“Oh. Another superstition?”

“No. It just makes sailors very angry.”

Crixus shrugged. “But isn’t that our goal?”

“No. Don’t get mixed up, now. Sure, you hate Chyorth—and with good reason—but you’re not looking for revenge. Or at least, you shouldn’t be focused on that. You want your gold.” He spread his hands for confirmation.

“Yes,” Crixus agreed. “Gold first. Revenge later, if at all.”

“Then forget mutiny. You’d have to plant those seeds early, and then you’d end up with your gold at the bottom of the sea halfway to Minq.” He tapped his cheek. “Best we scare ‘em in the port itself.”

“What’s frightful enough to make a crew turn on a captain?”

Orazio smiled, a vicious slash across his face that Crixus suspected was the last thing his woman’s lover saw.

*

The port of Izmir bustled with sea traffic. Sea-faring galleys and coast-bound triremes competed for anchorage on the aging piers, while spry fishing boats dodged between them on the way to their hunting grounds. Grey clouds shed diffuse light over the forested hills speckled with red-tiled roofs and gray ribbons of road.

Crixus’ stomach clenched when the cry of “land ho!” came down from the crow’s nest. Minq rose from the flat, black ocean to which he had become accustomed. The shore terminated the ocean across the horizon. His hasty plan to bring enlightened plumbing technology to Minq paled under the vastness of the continent, seen from the sea. Traveling through Rond could take months, yet one always had a sense of civilization, even in the most primal forest. Rond had tamed the land it occupied. Orazio’s stories of Minq only served to reinforce the anxiety Crixus felt as the continent had grown incrementally as the ocean breezes blew them to shore.

Orazio worked with the crew to prepare the ship for docking, but he strayed from his post long enough to whisper a sharp eviction from the forecabin to the bedazzled Crixus. “Get bloody ready,” he said. “We’ve got one chance.” He scuttled off before Crixus could respond.

Crixus was more than ready. He packed and repacked his meager belongings five times as Minq drew close. The contents of the leather pack did little to reinforce his sense of identity. Only his family hammer, hanging loose and ready at his belt, and the clothes he wore the day he left Restia belonged to his old life. A second change of clothes and the scarf from Sheirra were reminders of his confusing visit to Ambiri. The letter to Kharrina had been rolled up and stuffed into the bottom of the pack. As much as his heart lived in those words, they were evidence of his crime. A confession, in fact. He knew he should burn the letter at the soonest opportunity, risking a flame onboard, but the potentially disastrous content of the letter kept him from feeling like a true criminal. It could be the seed for a true confession to his Guild that would obviate some of his guilt.

Lastly he strapped the leather sheath to his waist, adjusting the position over and over until it felt comfortable for a quick draw. The question of how to draw a blade for combat boggled him with possibilities and variations; the weight of his ignorance about knife fighting stifled him. Every movement counted in its smallest efficiency, much like intricate masonry, only with no time for consideration. Madraig's confidence impressed him even more as he found himself in the mercenary's world.

He considered the dagger at length, trying to imagine how Madraig would measure it as a tool. Tools he understood: their balance, their torque, their reach. It was possibly a clumsy approach to knife fighting, but at least he could grasp it. He sheathed and drew the dagger dozens of times until his hand learned the motion.

Shouts from the quarter deck warned him that *The Fancyto* starboard, for which Crixus was now very grateful.

He unfurled the scroll he and Orazio had crafted with the remainder of Crixus' writing parchment. A forged contract, with the forged signature of the captain, it attested to the existence of the box but fabricated its contents. The irony of the lie did not escape him.

Steeling himself for the charade, he envisioned his most pompous masters in the Guild: old Barcor, piggish Malleis. Men secure in their own authority and their place in the proper order of things, which they felt should have been internalized by every soul around them. Kaolis help those who dared to question propriety.

Three knocks, followed by two, sounded on his door. Orazio had signaled five minutes until their charade would commence. Crixus shouldered his pack, gave a last look to the cramped cabin, set his jaw with mock arrogance inflating his cheeks, and strode out of the cabin.

Izhmir earned its reputation as an entry point to the southeastern coast of Minq. Scores of ships laid at dock, swarmed over by colorfully dressed sailors, dribbling out lines of longshoremen with bits of cargo on their shoulders, ants at a picnic. The clouds hung low over the harbor, cooling the sea breeze further.

Crixus dared the sailors to meet his gaze, as imperious as he could be, fighting the butterflies in his stomach. He found a place at the rail that did not impede the to and fro of sailors, and also offered a view of the bridge. Chyorth barked orders

and directed the pilot in guiding *The Fancy*ands. A scoundrel he might be, but his competence as a sea captain was not in doubt. Immersed in the intricate maneuvers, he did not notice Crixus.

As swift and sure as Chyorth was in docking the ship, the process seemed to crawl to Crixus, who had been instructed to wait until the boat was tied to the dock and the gangplank had been lowered.

He spotted Orazio hard at work scuppering the square sails as the oarsmen edged the ship up to the pier. His face betrayed nothing of the confrontation that would follow.

The Fancy sidled up to the pier and halted. Crixus could imagine the pull on the oars as they braked the ship. Longshoremen caught the massive mooring lines cast by the sailors from starboard. *The Fancy* docked in Izhmir.

Crixus had arrived in Minq.

Straightening his posture, he climbed to the forecabin. He pushed past sailors and their curious stares. At last he stood in front of Chyorth's door. He swallowed, fighting a mouth gone dry.

"You there," he said to a passing sailor with a coil of rope. "Tell Chyorth to open his door."

"What?" The sailor looked surprised at Crixus' temerity. "'Tis private quarters."

"We've docked, and I require my cargo. Now. Chyorth has been paid handsomely, and I expect prompt compliance."

The man scowled. "Find him yourself."

Orazio appeared, his expression guarded. "I'll fetch him, lad," he said to the sailor. "Cap'n gave me a sestric to haul the man's cargo ashore."

Chyorth rounded the corner, his face set in stern lines, braced for an argument.

"There he is now," Orazio said. "Cap'n, your passenger's here to get his chest out of your cabin."

“He’s mistaken,” Chyorth said. “I have nothing of yours,” he said to Crixus. “You paid for passage, and now there’s the gangplank.”

Crixus unfurled his scroll. “Let me refresh your memory.” He read the words as loud as possible, to draw the attention of nearby sailors. ““For transport: one metal box, contents to be kept absolutely dry and secured from motion or vibration. Box is not to be opened, to prevent further decay of remains contained therein.”” He fixed Chyorth with a haughty look worthy of an elder Guildmaster.

“Remains?” Orazio exclaimed. “We’re hauling a coffin?”

“Merely a container for transportation of royal remains. Not that it’s any business of yours, ser. Trust me, your back will not be strained.”

Orazio turned on the captain. “Ser, what nonsense is this? We’ve been hauling a corpse all this time?” His raised voice carried across the deck, and Crixus thrilled to notice heads snap at the mention of the word “corpse.”

“No!” Chyorth had turned beet red. “This man is lying. Get him off my ship.”

“I’ll gladly leave. Our charade has made me bone-weary,” Crixus blustered, brandishing the contract. “Only I’m not setting foot off this damned boat without the body of my prince. My liege will have my head and the heads of my family if the body is damaged or lost.”

Sailors gathered on the forecastle now, muttering to each other. A few made elaborate signs to ward off evil.

Orazio raised his voice further. “We saw sharks swimming in our wake, and now we know why.” He pointed at Chyorth. “You cursed the boat by taking a corpse onboard. We should have thrown it over the side.”

“There’s no corpse in my damned cabin,” Chyorth bellowed. “There’s nothing!”

“I saw Turtch and Mostee carry a box into your cabin in Restia,” Orazio said. “Are they going to lie for you, too? How much gold did you pay them to sell out our safety?”

Crixus held his breath at the mention of the only other witnesses to the true contents of the money box.

Turtch stepped forward, a grim reminder of that fateful night. “‘Twas no body in that box. It’s gold, and hardly a fortune at that.”

“A likely story,” Orazio said. “I ought to kill you right now.”

Turtch balled his fists. The entire crew listened now, some moving forward as the threat of violence loomed.

Chyorth glared at the men. “There will be no fighting!”

“Hand over the body, captain.” Crixus said. “If you insist on keeping it on this ship, I will have you outlawed as a pirate and burned from sail to bilge.”

“We won’t keep a corpse on our ship,” Orazio said to the gathered sailors. “It’s a wonder we made it this far without losing a man. Let’s get it off right now.”

“Aye,” a handful of sailors chorused.

“Bad luck, that is. I’m not bloody risking myself again.” One grizzled sailor threw down his cap. “I quit, Cap’n. Give me my pay.”

Three more sailors cast down their hats and called for pay.

“Now wait,” Chyorth said to the crew, holding his hands up. “Some of you have sailed with me a decade now. Have you seen me ever flaunt the laws of the sea? Ever?”

The sailors watched him with hooded eyes. No one answered, but doubt had been sown in their minds.

“There ain’t no damn corpse on this boat, though I am tempted to cut this bastard’s throat for calling me a liar.”

“Show us the box, then,” a stout sailor shouted out, to murmured agreement.

“Stolen gold makes us a pirate ship,” Orazio said. “I ain’t no damned pirate. I’m an honest man,” he pointed to the sailors, “and so are my mates. If it ain’t a body, and it’s this man’s gold, give it to him and be done with it.”

Crixus resisted the urge to catch Orazio’s eye. Their scheme had to make the

money box a symbol of potential dishonesty, one way or another. Chyorth would have to choose between the box and his crew, if their plan worked.

Chyorth said nothing, rage in his face.

“Don’t bring bad luck down on us, Captain,” Orazio said. “Get that box off *The Fancy*”

The crew nodded.

“Take it,” Chyorth said, controlling his voice. “Take it and get off my damn ship.”

The bo’sun unlocked the cabin. Orazio and Crixus stepped into the dark cabin. Butted up against the captain’s own sea chest was the Guild money box.

“Has it been opened?” Orazio asked.

“We’ll find out,” Crixus said. The lock hadn’t been opened, which was one reason Chyorth wanted to keep the box away from Crixus until he could have it sprung. Still, the man had had an entire voyage to bypass it and empty the contents.

Crixus pulled the box out for easier access. The metal chilled his fingers as he fumbled with the lock. It showed no overt signs of tampering. The key fit in easily, and he popped the lock and opened the lid.

The gold bars were as he had seen them last, at the Pathii game. The memory of digging into that box as he lost hand after hand clawed at him.

“That’s it?” Orazio said.

“Aye, which is probably why Chyorth doesn’t think it’s worth it to fight us. The bastard probably has more gold in his share of the bars somewhere on *The Fancy*”

“Then let’s go, before he changes his mind.”

They closed the lid and locked it. The thought of leaving the other gold bars on the ship, even as questionable winnings, pained Crixus. In spite of the metal construction, the box barely weighed down the two strong men. Orazio took the

rear position to guide them.

They carried it out into the daylight, eliciting exclamations from the sailors.

Chyorth blocked their path. "Open the box," he ordered.

"We're leaving, captain," Crixus said. "Be grateful you're rid of us."

"There ain't no damn corpse in there and you know it." His hand brushed the hilt of his sword. "Now open the box."

Orazio gave an imperceptible head shake. Crixus' muscles sang with fear-induced adrenalin.

"Is there a superstition about cutting down a defenseless man onboard, Captain? I'm sure Izhmir has laws about it." Crixus began to back up again, itching between his shoulder blades where it was exposed to the captain's sword. He wondered if the leather pack filled with clothes could stop a thrust.

Chyorth cursed under his breath, and stepped aside as Crixus and Orazio carried the box to the gangplank. The sailors parted for them, some with a haste inspired by superstitious fear. The seeds of doubt they planted in the crew's mind had done their job.

"You damned traitor. Don't bother to come back," Chyorth snarled at Orazio.

"I quit anyway, Cap'n." Orazio's enormous nose gave his smirk a vulpine quality.

The gangplank sagged under their feet. Orazio cautioned him as they approached the end, and Crixus gingerly set foot onto the soil of Minq for the very first time.

14: Izhmir

In a lavish atrium stocked with statuary and hanging ferns, Crixus forced a smile to hide his aggravation. The scroll lying before the rich merchant had taken two days to draw. It depicted, in simplified shapes, a water and waste system that could be scaled for an entire city block. For all the interest the man showed, it could have been the scribbles of a child.

“Please forgive my crass ways.” Crixus struggled to keep from sounding condescending. “In Rond we are accustomed to these luxuries, but it is my Guild which provides them. You truly haven’t lived until you’ve relaxed in a heated bathhouse with your fellows.”

“Mmm hmm,” the merchant said. He tapped on his marble topped table. A servant refilled his wine glass. “These Rondan bathhouses are open to the public, you say?”

“They are the core of a community. Anyone can be found there, from the smallest child to the wealthiest landowner.”

“Why they’d associate with the unwashed lower classes, I can’t imagine. Although,” the man chortled, “in the bathhouse we can hardly call them unwashed.”

Crixus chuckled at the joke, hoping his contempt had not bubbled to the surface. “A good point, ser, which is why we can return to the idea of providing a private water supply and piping to your own mansion.”

“Water on demand, eh?”

Crixus nodded eagerly. “Hot water, cold water, tepid water, at the turn of a faucet handle.”

The merchant stretched his neck, animating his triple chin. “Am I so low-born that I have to prepare my own bath?”

The question hung in the air. Crixus cleared his throat. “No, I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Young man, my fisheries constitute a third of all fish consumed in this region. I need only snap my fingers to have a hot bath drawn for me by my servants, who will then wash me and dry me. I am not sure how your... system... offers me any advantage other than the pleasure of showing it off for my colleagues.”

Crixus produced the bathhouse scroll. “Then perhaps you’d consider the bathhouse as a lucrative investment—”

“So I can watch small children and old women flounce around in my water? Hardly.” The man’s fat face took on a kindly expression. “It’s very intriguing, this contraption of yours. We’re told the great old lords of Minq possessed such wonders. Still,” he said, stifling a yawn, “in our less miraculous age, we have little need for such marvels.”

He had articulated the barrier Crixus and Orazio had pounded their heads against for the last three weeks. Despair gnawed at Crixus’ stomach.

“So I see,” Crixus said. “Forgive me for wasting your time, but I wonder if there is an industry that would benefit from my services.”

The merchant kneaded his chin. “All of them, I’d imagine, but you fail to understand my point.” He pointed to the door. “Outside there are five servants waiting to fulfill my every wish. There are two more servants assigned to you, my guests. For every task there are a dozen willing workers to complete it. Why should anyone replace these hands with an expensive system that requires maintenance? And for a not-inconsiderable sum.”

“I see,” Crixus said.

“Minq is vast,” the merchant said, patronizing him now. “Many different cities with cultures as varied as a field of wildflowers. Your customers are out there, somewhere, with gold to squander. But, ser, they are not in Izhmir.”

He pushed the scroll back across the table, and took a sip of wine.

“Thank you for entertaining me.” With a flick of his fingers, the merchant summoned the servants forth. In Minq fashion, he shook Crixus’ hand, offering the right then closing his left hand around Crixus’. Orazio had made him practice the gesture. Such a handshake in Rond would have signified deep sentiment; the merchant’s non-committal grip made a mockery of Rondan ways.

The servants, faces bland with boredom, led Crixus and Orazio to the front gate of the estate. The iron gate clanked shut, leaving them in the dusty road. Crixus hardly noticed the tang of the salty sea breezes.

Orazio scratched his head and studied the clouds, saying nothing.

“How can a city so overwhelmed with people have so little desire for modern sanitation?” Crixus threw up his hands. “I’ve never seen noblemen so parsimonious in my life.”

“It’s as he said.” Orazio spoke without emphasis, trying to keep Crixus calm. “Cheaper to buy the daughter of your gardener to heat your water and fill your bath than to invest in a building project.”

Crixus pointed back at the town, peppering the hills. “No one would stand for that in Rond. Izhmir is a trade center, yet it’s a study in squalor.”

Orazio plucked at the collar of his embroidered tunic. He had cashed in his gold bar to replace the clothes and belongings he left on *The Fancy*

“So what did you expect?” he said.

Scowling, Crixus searched for a sensible response. He knew what Orazio was going to say, the same thing he said after their second and third failures to entice investment out of Izhmir nobles.

“I don’t think you’re going to change anyone’s mind,” Orazio continued. “You’re in a hurry so you’re going for the big sale. No one will nip at that bait unless they’re already hungry.”

They started back into town, to the inn where they had rented rooms. Crixus revisited the interview in his mind. Nothing he said differed from meetings with nobles in Greater Rond or Restia. In Izhmir he lacked the support of a Guild—and, more tellingly, a precedent.

“Hungry,” he said. “I’m hungry for a meal of gold. But I see your point. Nobles follow the lead of their fellows like geese. Izhmir is bereft of the least aqueduct. Why start now?”

“Aye, precisely.” Orazio looked relieved.

“He suggested that the old Minq empire had plumbing to rival Rond. That was, what, a thousand years ago?”

“It fractured over the centuries, but yes, you’re correct.”

“So Minq will never attain that level of achievement again, thanks to landowners who can’t be bothered to improve their own cities.”

Orazio shrugged. “What do you want? You saw how Chyorth abused his power. Folks that have it will always lord it over us folks who don’t. We’re better served by making our way in the world as best as we can.”

Crixus nodded, disliking the fatalism in the man’s tone, even as he fought against his own.

“You don’t want to hear this, but three weeks of begging at noblemen’s doors has gotten you nothing, not even a sense of perspective. Crixus,” Orazio spoke in a lower voice, “if men could get rich as fast as you think you need to, why haven’t they done so already?”

Crixus patted his bag of scrolls. “They lack the ideas.”

“No. The world itself lacks the ideas. Your Guild sounds like a rare example where a man can succeed on his own merits. Minq is not like that.” Orazio flung a hand east. “Out there, kings grind farmers into the ground for a few sestrices a year because they can. Not because the gods love them or the wisdom of the ages passes through their blood, but because we let them.

“Even a five year old understands this here, Crixus. That gold of your’n dazzled me for a time. Now that is a world I scarce understand but you’ve had a taste of it. I had hoped you’d bring all of that here, the gold, the deals, the prosperity. You have the seeds of it in your head, but you can’t plant them in Izhmir without turning the soil first.”

Orazio stopped Crixus with a hand on his shoulder. “There’s nary a thing wrong with what you’re doing, lad, and you will have a fortune from it. Maybe I will, too. But it’ll take time. Let it grow. Let it spread.”

“Time,” Crixus said. “Time like years?”

“Aye, a decade perhaps. Find a likely city where they have more gold than sense, lay your groundwork there. Patience sharpens every blade, even a ploughshare. We’re not just selling some pipes and tunnels. We’re farmers.”

Crixus pulled away. “I don’t have a decade. I thought you understood that.” He started to trudge down the road again.

“I understand what you think. I’m just waiting for you to learn something.”

Ears burning, Crixus kept his back to Orazio. Most infuriating was that the man was probably right. Crixus couldn’t invent a market for aqueducts and running water in Minq merely because one existed in Rond. In the last three weeks, he had been struck by how many technologies, commonplace in Rond, were accorded only to the rich. He had even seen steam power in a noble wife’s foyer propelling a figure of a mermaid around a bowl of water. He never found an excuse to ask her about the construct, but Orazio later speculated it was a child’s toy from Arktos, hundreds of miles away.

The stench of manure from pastures greeted them at the outskirts of Izhmir. Tame aurochs mingled with cattle, their shaggy shoulders towering above the black and brown cows. Herdsmen directed their charges with slender, flexible poles and yips in some code only cows understood. The antiquated scene underscored Crixus’ desperation.

Watching the wandering cattle, Orazio spoke again, his words blunt. “She won’t wait for you.”

“We won’t speak of that,” Crixus said.

“I ran, too. No one’s heart keeps love fresh for that long. They move on.”

“Kharrina won’t.”

“She will, Crixus. She has to. No woman gives up her happiness for the memory of a dead man.”

Crixus gritted his teeth. “I’m not dead.” The letter he’d never sent her still resided in his belongings at the tavern.

“You are to her. Remember the blood trail to *The Champion*? The captain made

you a ghost to protect you. How can you expect her to pretend that her betrothed is fixing to arrive in town

“That’s why I need to raise gold with haste. Before she gives up on me and finds another.”

Orazio shook his head sadly. “She’s lost to you, boy. A pretty lass will have gentlemen coming to comfort her in her time of mourning, hoping to part those legs before anyone else can.”

“Enough!”

“Get angry and yell, but you can’t change your fate. You’ll be happier if you accept it and move on. Start a new life in Minq.” He waved a hand in negation. “Not in Izhmir, of course. Elsewhere, some city with deeper pockets.”

Crixus glared at him.

“Scowl all you want, but it’s the truth, with Magaolis the Sea-Bearded as my witness. I wouldn’t bother to anger you if I didn’t feel for you.”

The sadness on the lanky man’s face stung Crixus: it was pity, directed at him. He sagged.

“I suppose.”

“It’s not all bad,” Orazio said. “That little courtesan, Sheirra, she was right taken with you. I think a trip back to Ambiri would net you a wife who’d forgive your past.”

“You’re reading too much into her, Orazio. She’s a courtesan. It’s her job to be comforting and affectionate. As soon as I walked out of her chamber, she bedded ten more men that day, I’m sure.”

“Aye, but no whore wants to spread her legs forever. They’re always looking for a way out. I saw her eyes, lad. She wanted more than your cock or your gold. She wanted your respect.”

“Well, she has it,” Crixus said brusquely. “She’s a brave woman.”

“Not that kind of respect.”

A passing cart forced them to step aside. A two horse team pulled a load of hay into the city. Orazio watched it fade into the distance with a speculative air.

*

That night, Crixus dreamt of Kharrina again, but her face blurred every time he tried to speak to her. Her father confronted him in a dark tunnel, grasping his arm in a Minq handshake but retaining his neutral expression. He did not respond to Crixus’ queries about Kharrina, but shadowy forms carried her away. Alman would not release him from the handshake.

Exhausted, he crawled out of the bed and threw water on his face. Fatigue dried his muscles until they were stiff. The Minq night stayed humid until morning, leaving him damp and cold. Too alert to sleep again, he pulled on a tunic and breeches and left his room. The common room still served their wares through dawn though most of the festivities had long since ended.

Scattered throughout the room, less than a dozen men slumped over goblets of ale. The lamplight flickered across their faces, their features as indistinct as Kharrina’s were in his dream. He ordered ale at the counter from the bleary-eyed, mustachioed barkeep and took the spilling mug to the darkest corner he could find.

On the way, he passed a game of dice between three burly, armored men. Crixus paused to scrutinize the dice: carved from bone, inscribed with clusters of alien symbols. The game was unfamiliar to him.

At a second cast, the men grunted at the result, one in triumph, the other two in disappointment. Looking up from the dice, their wide-browed faces and flat noses surprised him. The victor raked in his coins as the other two waited for Crixus to explain himself.

“What game do you play at?” he asked, feeling awkward.

One man gave him a toothy smile, either welcoming or sadistic. “‘Tis Lamia’s Balls,” he said. The other two chortled. “Hard to learn, impossible to master.”

“Speak for yourself,” the victor said. “Only cowards fear the balls of those

spiders.”

“Shut up,” the first speaker said in a snarl. The other two turned away from Crixus, ignoring him.

The word nagged at him: Lamia. He hesitated as the three gathered up their dice. “Lamia? I’ve heard that before.”

A few heads raised in the bar, and the burly men glared at him.

He noticed all three men wore red sashes. Madraig’s words came back to him: the Lamiae lived in Nistru, sending their Red Legion out to collect tribute. He lowered his voice. “You’re Red Legionnaires, are you not?”

“Aye,” the victor said, voice low. A few remaining patrons left their mugs half finished and cast copper coins down as a tip, leaving with uncomfortable glances at the Red Legionnaires. “Care to inform the town crier? Only half the town knows.”

“Sorry,” Crixus said, not sure if he was. Were these men unwelcome on the coast? “I’d heard talk…”

“From old women or children, no doubt.” The other two snickered.

Crixus set down his mug, and produced a handful of sestrices. “I want to buy in,” he said. “Teach me how to play.”

The men fell silent, glancing at Crixus and each other. Finally, the victor shrugged and waved at the bench next to him. “Waste your money, then.” He introduced himself as Torrek, but didn’t offer his companions’ names.

Torrek’s rundown of the rules of Lamia’s Balls (Crixus suspected the game had a more formal name) was brief, specific, and only marginally helpful, couched in his thick accent. Players read both the top faces of the dice, plus certain sides depending on the combinations reached. They worked up the hierarchy of combinations to qualify for additional casts, building up a score to match against opponents. They allowed Crixus a few trial casts, pointing out the combinations he failed to recognize and even complimenting him on one theoretically winning run, though he barely caught the rules they applied to judge it.

The Legionnaires had discharged their duty teaching a newcomer, and so commenced with betting again. Crixus received no counseling on his tosses now, and he abandoned a handful of sestercii, suspecting he had given up a viable run to their stony, serious faces. He ordered them ale and received for his trouble a barked negation when he gave up on the next toss.

“You have a Siren’s Thighs match on the nether east,” Torrek said. The other two nodded. Crixus inclined his head in gratitude and cast again, scoring nothing and losing the game.

The Legionnaires reminded him of surlier versions of Madraig. They respected courage, strength, and initiative. Crixus took his lumps in Lamia’s Balls until they relaxed around him.

“You’re far from home,” he ventured.

Torrek met his eyes then nodded. “Come to the coast for a shipment, though by morning word will spread that the Lamiae want to suck Izhmir dry as well.”

“They don’t?”

“Gods, no,” Torrek said, the toothy grin returning. “One thing the drinkers are is smart. They got enough magic to tell ‘em when the Legion’s overextended.”

“Got enough to watch us right now,” his companion, Borge, said.

“Why would they bother?” Torrek said. “They’d magick us dead if we even considered abandoning our post.” He closed an imaginary heart in his fist.

“They have that kind of power?”

The mercenaries nodded.

“That sounds unlikely.”

Torrek wagged a finger at him. “You aren’t from Minq, I can tell. I’ll give you advice, which you’ve paid enough silver for. Minq will eat you alive if you don’t take care. The Lamiae are real enough. I’ve seen their magic, seen them repeat entire conversations that happened leagues away from ‘em, just before they sucked the life out of the fool who dared to curse them.”

“Drained his entire family, his baby, grandmother, even the dog, and bathed in their blood, while he watched, helpless.” Borge’s eyes bulged out.

Crixus held up a hand. “Bathed, you said.”

“Oh, aye.” Borge grinned, cracking his whiskered face with wrinkles. “Like you or I would dip in for a bath.”

“They open an artery and fill the tub?”

The Legionnaires winced. “Hell, man. You’re a sadist?”

“I’m just curious about the mechanism. How do they bathe in blood?”

Torrek scratched his chin. “The blood pours from a fountain, like,” he said. “The Lamiae aren’t human. Their castles are living things. Blood runs through the walls like veins in an arm.”

Crixus thrilled to hear the description, as fanciful as it was. The mercenaries’ primitive minds didn’t understand the concept of plumbing and so wrapped it up inside a superstition. It was not impossible that they retained remnants of ancient Minq plumbing technologies. That the mercenaries couldn’t recognize it for what it was implied that few people knew how to build or repair it.

He had found his clients.

15. Departure

“You’re either mad or stupid,” Orazio said, making no attempt to disguise his contempt. “Minq isn’t a playground. The Lamiae are real, not a joke or old wives’ tale.”

“Exactly,” Crixus said. “They own diamond mines and a mercenary army.”

“They’re bloody *vampires*

“Not to me. It’s a land of opportunity.”

Orazio banged on the table, drawing the stares of the breakfasting diners in the tavern. “Gods! Are you that blind? I feel like I’m trying to raise a child.”

“Calm down. You sound as superstitious as the sailors we left behind on *The Fancy*

“I *am*

Crixus shrugged. “I’m just not saddled with the same silly notions you grew up with here.”

Orazio flushed. His nostrils flared; Crixus thought he was going to throw a punch. He backed his chair away, thinking he’d pushed the sailor too far.

“I’m trying to decide if it’s worth it to talk you out of this madness.” Orazio spoke with controlled fury. “You haven’t listened to me since we set foot on land.”

“You’ve given me fine advice,” Crixus said. “But you’re still thinking like a man who wants to plant roots in Izhmir.”

“As if that’s so dreadful.”

Orazio’s body language had changed, his shoulders squared as if readying for a wrestling match. He had questioned Crixus’ judgment for weeks now, and now this superstitious fear of Nistru was his excuse to cut himself loose without earning the rest of his payment.

“You’re not coming, are you?” Crixus spoke as though he knew the answer.

“Not there, no. I’m ready to start a new life, not give it up to bloodthirsty monsters.”

They locked eyes. Orazio didn’t blink, resolute in his opposition.

“You’re of a mind to ask for that gold back,” the sailor said.

“I am,” Crixus said. “But I owe you for coming to my help when no one else would. I won’t begrudge you what you earned.”

Orazio’s jaw twitched. “Aye, well said. Times come when a friend is worth more than a mountain of gold... or diamonds.” He sighed. “I’ll be a failure if I let you go to Nistru.”

“I’m not ignoring your advice.”

“Just not heeding it.”

“Orazio...” Crixus took a deep breath. “I won’t be talked out of this. Nistru is the first real opportunity I’ve come across to restore the Guild’s money. If I didn’t jump at this, I’d regret it for years.”

“You won’t have years if you go. Those devils will suck you dry. They’re not hired ruffians or bandits.” The chatter in the room ended as the diners eavesdropped. Some made signs to ward off evil. “One of them could clear out this town of souls in a single night. We’re lucky they keep to themselves. We’re also smart enough to leave them alone.”

“I think you’re exaggerating. Nothing but the gods can be so dangerous. If they aren’t divine, then I have nothing to fear.”

Orazio stood, face set in grim lines. He thrust out a hand. Crixus stood and shook it.

“I’m not a man to waste breath. Good luck to you, then. Keep your wits about you, and I’ll stand you a mug if you survive.”

Crixus swallowed. “Aye, thanks. For everything.”

“So the river flows,” Orazio said. “Here I go.”

Alone, Crixus finished his meal in silence. Conversation returned to the tavern room, but subdued, with furtive glances cast his way. He wondered whether he made a poor business decision and lost Orazio in the bargain. The casual cruelty of the Red Legionnaires, so common in soldiers who learned to wield their will as a weapon against the meek, did not inspire confidence for the trek to Nistru. Orazio could be gruff at times, but never anything less than trustworthy. He would probably settle down in Izhmir, find a wife to support, and take a job as a fisherman. Slow, steady, unsurprising, working through the years as time dried him up. It was Crixus’ plan for himself and Kharrina, as well.

Over a mug of tea, he allowed himself to revisit his plans for a life with Kharrina. Why had he been so determined to halt all movement in his life, buy the house of his dreams, and set their course for security and stability? Were those such desirable traits of a man’s life? Would he have ever found himself in a tavern room in Minq, watching tradesmen and merchants eat breakfast?

He had to admit to a certain excitement about his imminent trip to Nistru. The stories about the Lamiae were no doubt amplifications, the disadvantage of living on so splintered a continent. Fountains of blood struck him as both unlikely and unsanitary. More plausible was that the Lamiae lived in a red clay region with particulate tinted water. Mentally, he built them a new aqueduct and filtering system, using gravity and basins to settle out the clay sediment. They would have crystal clear drinking water spilling out of their taps, though he couldn’t do anything to dispel the rumors spread by ignorant peasants.

Spread also by men of common sense, like Orazio, Crixus reminded himself, though as a sailor Orazio held to a vast catalog of nautical superstitions and thus must be susceptible to land-based ones as well.

If only this excursion to the interior of Minq hadn’t been born out of a thoughtless crime, he could send back letters to his fiancé, filled with lurid tales of jungle temples, superstitious natives, and stern mercenaries. Their children would beg for the stories over and over, until the grains of truth in them were scattered for small hands to find.

Regardless, he could not continue mooning over his mistake. All of his energies must go to correcting it. Tears were for the weak; action, for the strong. Now

was the time for strength.

That afternoon, Crixus bought the supplies he would need for his journey. Layers of sturdy clothes, to be shed as the temperatures rose; dried beef and fruits, resistant to spoilage; a map of the interior, vague but clear enough on major roads; camping gear; and a horse, hitherto unnecessary in the close confines of Izhmir.

Her seller assured Crixus of her easy temper, but he insisted on a ride around town first. She took care in her footing, which Crixus guessed would be of use in rugged territory. He bought her tackle, saddle, and a woven saddle blanket to prevent his substantial weight from chafing her dapple gray flanks. On impulse, he named her Gavri, out of a sudden wave of nostalgia for his mousy, steadfast assistant.

Crixus took Gavri to trot around the outskirts of Izhmir. After he felt he had a sense of her gait, he struck out for the tradesmen's section of town, near the southern docks. Three citizens shook their heads in negation until he found one who knew of an architect's shop. There he asked for surveying tools, hoping that at least the architects had need of the same measure of precision that he did. Alas, the man would not part with his tools, nor was there any supplier in town; his own had been shipped from up north on the coast, from the metropolis of Aminis. Some prodding and gold convinced the man to sell his apprentice's tools: a level and a primitive dioptra.

Back in Greater Rond he had packs full of measuring implements, hammers, chisels, saws, shovels... everything he and his father used for their trade. There he also had Gavri, Stamm, and a team of masons with whom he was comfortable. In Nistru he would have nothing but what the Lamiae could offer him. Whether they possessed masonry tools to his standards could not be counted on, and he further hoped that these modest tools now in his pack would lend to his own credibility.

He stabled Gavri, who snorted with pleasure to be out in the world, and retired for dinner and ale on his last night in Izhmir. He wished Orazio hadn't left with such finality or censure, for drinking alone saddened him. The Legionnaires must have had business that took them away from their rooms. He sat and watched the tavern fill and empty until midnight with no sign of the mercenaries, then he went to sleep.

His dreams, forgotten upon waking, left a taste of anxiety that he tried to dispel with a quick bath, surely the last for weeks.

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The Red Legionnaires awaited him at the stables. They rose before dawn to pack up saddlebags stuffed with lined wrapped bundles. Their manner lacked the amiability of the dice game in the tavern. Crixus tried to move with surety as he packed his own bags. The mercenaries watched him with dour glances over their shoulders. Without ceremony, Crixus gave Torrek the handful of austrices that made up nearly half of a gold bar. The aged mercenary nodded and dropped the coins into his belt pouch.

Torrek inspected Gavri, patting her haunches and shoulders. “She’s no warhorse, but she’ll serve.”

“I’m no stranger to travel,” Crixus said. “The horse has strength enough for a long road.”

“One way to find out,” Borge said. “Or we’ll have roast horse for dinner.” The mercenaries chuckled. Crixus made no response.

The sun broke over a cloudy, uncertain sky, bathing them in wet gray light. Crixus already felt overdressed.

The mercenaries made one final inspection of their horses, muttering observations in a sibilant language Crixus had never heard. Without ceremony, they mounted up. Gavri shied at first; Crixus adjusted the saddle until both horse and rider were satisfied.

“We’re off,” Torrek said abruptly. They reined their horses and started out in a healthy trot, fast for so much luggage.

The pace consumed leagues without mercy, until they were passing through the fields east of the city. The mercenaries said nothing to while away the hours of riding, leaving Crixus to his own thoughts. Emboldened by his sense of purpose, he summoned up memories of Kharrina, of life in the Guild and his family. Under the featureless sky of Minq, their memories faded, no longer distinct. Without them, he felt almost a child of Minq, ignorant of its ways yet without history himself. Orazio had been his only friend here and the Red Legionnaires

did not appear to be interested in taking the sailor's place. The few words they exchanged were in their tribal tongue.

Hours stretched under the constant rhythm of hoof beats. Gavri, thankfully, possessed a mild temper and settled into the pace without complaint. She must have been confined to a pasture too long; she appeared to relish the aggressive pace set by the Red Legionnaires and their big boned, black thoroughbreds. The routine lulled Crixus into a state of semi-wakefulness, letting the mercenaries watch for bandits along the muddy track.

Morning passed into afternoon. Crixus mused on Orazio's suggestions to him, one fugitive to another. Start a new life, he said. Crixus had rejected the advice at the time, but on the road to the vampires' realm, it took on a new light. He realized he had spent little time in Kharrina's company, hardly more than a month if he totaled all his visits to Restia. The love he felt for her was strong, overwhelming, enough to occupy his thoughts and fight with work matters for his attention. But cut off from her, some aspects of their relationship dimmed in his mind, and he wondered whether that was significant. The finer details of her face and her body came to him with less clarity than a month ago. With effort he reminded himself of the mole on her arm, the blemish on her hip, the fine dark hairs on her upper lip that she lamented.

Easier to bring to mind were their sexual activities. After the first few days of their acquaintance, they leapt into bed with a joyful sense of adventure. In the throes of ecstasy, her head tilted back and her lips parted as though to cry out, though nothing escaped them but low moans and sharp exhalations. Her slender frame belied her muscular strength, which thrilled him when she pushed him down to mount him. Half the time they made love, she seemed to be showing off to him, rejoicing in her beautiful and strong body. The more often they bedded, the more she took to manipulating him inside of her, playing with sensation, more intrigued by the process of achieving orgasm than the culmination itself.

Her pert breasts, her lean haunches, her muscular back, these came easily to his mind's eye. What troubled him was that her expressive face, which offered tantalizing glimpses into her soul, had been reduced to an expressionless mask in his memory, both intimately familiar and static. Her father, too, took on a statue-like quality, and her mother, and even Stamm, though his statue winked drunkenly at him.

Those facial expressions had grown his love from a spark to a roaring bonfire he was loathe to lose. So much of his recent meditative time had been devoted to abstract contemplation of Minq and the opportunities for quick profit that he somehow blotted out memories of her. He tried to recall their conversations, which came to mind easily enough, though they now frustrated him with their superficiality. So much flirtation, casual exchanges of information, and too little confiding in each other. Those times happened in a hotel bed, sweat cooling their bodies or soaking into the sheets, when the darkness protected them from outside reproach. Yet those quiet moments of absolute openness had only graced them a handful of times, and the revelations were only of mundane importance. In fact, Crixus wasn't even sure what overpowering declaration he would make to her if he could have. He just wanted to assure her that he was alive, and so was his love for her. He would beg her to set aside the time he was away and not seek to reinvent her future just yet. The letter he had written needed more paragraphs, yet he had hours to ride before he could scratch any new words onto the parchment.

The mercenaries called a halt well after sunset, as the moon poked above the horizon. They made camp in a grove of trees adjacent to the road. The moonlight struggled to shine through the thick canopy, but the Legionnaires moved easily in the darkness. No chance to write and nothing to say: the words that seemed so urgent in the numbing boredom of the day's ride slipped away from him in darkness.

The smell of tea awakened his hunger. He unpacked strips of jerky and fruit, only to find Torrek preparing a collection of beef steaks, four of them, spicing them and impaling them with sticks. He gave one to Crixus with a grin.

"It's good luck to eat well on your first night," he said.

"Don't get used to it," Borge said. "Unless you're a dead shot with a bow."

"I don't even have a bow," Crixus said, squatting at the fire and finding his cooking spot, where the flame wouldn't scorch the meat until it had cooked inside. "Not much call for plumbers to hunt their own game."

The mercenaries leaned into the fire, drawn by the fragrance of cooking flesh.

"What good are you, then?" Borge said.

Crixus held up his cup of tea, still steaming from the metal pot. “I can run water this hot into your own house. You could have a steaming hot bath every day, just by turning a handle.”

“If we were lords,” Torrek said.

“Not so,” Crixus said. “It’s hardly cheap, but a prosperous city can arrange it for nearly all citizens. In Greater Rond, my apartment building has three bathrooms with running water.” He didn’t mention his own less-than-legal tap into that pipe.

The mercenaries considered this, sipping their tea with newfound appreciation.

“Would make a man weak,” concluded Ushe, the third mercenary, addressing Crixus for the first time in a voice surprisingly boyish. “Emasculate him.”

Crixus shrugged. “If you consider me weak, then yes. Women like a clean smelling man, though.”

The men erupted into snorting laughter. Borge gasped out: “Only if you don’t pay them enough!”

“Women like whatever you tell them to like,” Ushe said. He mimed slapping his woman.

“Greater Rond doesn’t sound too impressive,” Torrek said. “Perhaps we should inform the Lamiae that it’s ripe for conquest.”

“I’ll come discipline your mother,” Ushe said, eyes daring. “You can bathe us, weakling.”

Their eyes followed him as he stood. He rolled up his sleeve. “Come test me, then.”

Ushe bolted to his feet and drew his dagger. Crixus held up a hand.

“I’m not a soldier and I won’t fight you. I’m suggesting a contest of strength.” He smirked. “It’s how we weaklings resolve our differences in the pampered capital of Rond.”

Ushe returned the smirk and sheathed his dagger. “That’s fair sport. What game?”

“Arm wrestling.” He looked around at their campsite. “Without a table, we’ll have to lie down.”

Hitching up his sleeve, Ushe laid a few feet from the fire. They clasped hands. Uncovered, Crixus’ forearm and bicep outsized the mercenary’s by half again, and the revelation chased his grin away and widened Crixus’.

“On three,” he said. The other two men scooted around the fire to get a better view.

“Make us proud, boy,” Torrek said to his man, mockery in his voice.

Crixus counted to three. He and Ushe grunted with the sudden application of force. The mercenary was strong from years of swinging a blade, but Crixus had the strength of his family heritage and a lifetime of heavy lifting. He downed the mercenary in seconds.

“Again,” Ushe said, sweating and consternated.

Crixus beat him twice more. Ushe rolled onto his back, panting heavily. He waved Crixus off.

“I give you your mother back,” he said between gasps.

“She’s a widow, so I might let her keep you anyway for sporting,” Crixus shot back, to the jeers of Torrek and Borge. He offered Ushe a hand up.

“I’ll lie here and look at the stars,” Ushe said, but the challenge in his voice was gone.

“Anyone else?”

Torrek and Borge laughed. “Not a chance. I’ll need my arms for tomorrow’s ride,” Torrek said.

“We’ll wager on you when we reach Sandoss,” Borge said.

Even in the firelight, Crixus noticed their faces relax as they spoke to him. Soldiers wielded power and appreciated those with it. He had just earned a little respect from these rough mercenaries.

They didn't linger long at the fire. In travel, the mercenaries regulated their energy, focused strictly on riding for as long as possible. Crixus rubbed Gavri down, watered her once more, and slipped into his sleeping bag in his small lean-to. Two layers of rough canvas, stuffed with down. Despite the surprising cost, it only just kept out the night chill. He wondered what travelers used for warmth in winter.

Closing his eyes, the night sounds came to him as his mind settled. Bats and birds uttered cries of hunting and mating. The wind hummed in the folds of his lean-to. Gavri and the other horses whickered to each other as they rested their aching limbs. Aches arose in his own limbs, saddle sore for the first time in years. Lying on his side, he picked out constellations not hidden by the moon, all in unfamiliar places. In that moment, by a dying campfire, under foreign trees, he truly arrived in Minq.

16. Harvest

The next two weeks blurred together in endless riding punctuated by a few nights in threadbare villages. On the road, the mercenaries thought of nothing but covering the required day's distance, and Crixus gathered from clues in their evening conversation that they had a particular destination in mind before moving on to Nistru—a village named Basrat. They showed no interest in further games of Lamia's Balls, or trading stories, or even in sharing liquor he purchased from an innkeeper. As the end of the fortnight approached, their gruffness returned fully, and Crixus suspected they neared Basrat.

Riding through grasslands, Crixus spotted dark, blocky shapes off the road to the south. An overgrown dirt track branched off the road.

"Torrek!" he called. "Is that Basrat?"

Torrek reined his horse to allow Crixus to match his stride. "No, not Basrat. Look closely. Those are ruins." The burned village receded into the distance as they passed it. "I think it was Raqueem."

"Aye, Raqueem," Borge shouted over his shoulder. "And a bloody mess, too."

"Was it war?"

Torrek barked a laugh at that. "War? No, not for years. No one challenges the Lamiae. The fools refused to pay tribute because of a drought."

Craning his neck to study the ruined village of Raqueem, Crixus imagined Red Legionnaires on horseback, fierce and sadistic, burning thatched roofs and cutting down farmers. It wasn't hard to place Torrek and his fellows there.

"Did the Lamiae come out in person?"

The mercenary captain gave him an odd look. "It's a rare thing, but yes. A young nobleman and his mistress." His face clouded and Crixus stopped asking questions.

Cloud-capped mountains loomed in the distance, the tall peaks that concealed

Nistru. The frequency of villages increased, as did their size. Most perched on the road, which widened and hardened as the days passed; another sign of increased traffic.

That night they rented rooms in Sandoss, a town grown up around the banks of a narrow river, and a water mill for processing grain from the surrounding villages. As promised, Crixus was put to work arm wrestling the local farmers, who proved more of a challenge than Ushe, to the latter's disgust. Brawny, beef-fed lads who worked in the fields all day bailing hay gave Crixus a stout fight. A string of six victories and two losses confirmed what his arm was telling him with sharp bolts of pain: his ligaments couldn't take more abuse. He bowed out to clapping and slaps on the back, and the Legionnaires pocketed their winnings.

Crixus noticed that, as a companion of the Legionnaires, the locals treated him with deference to the point of obsequiousness. The straw-haired lad who beat him apologized and insisted on buying him ale. The cheers as he had beaten the boy's friends seemed strained, as if the town were putting on a show for his benefit—or the benefit of the mercenaries, who acted as though nothing was out of place.

In the morning, the mayor of the town met them at the stables with gifts of dried fish, cured beef, and a sack of blueberries. Torrek nodded thanks without returning the man's anxious smile.

On the road, Torrek passed the blueberries back to Crixus. The sweet juice coursed down his throat just as a break in the cloud cover revealed a blue sky and sunshine.

"Thanks," Crixus said. "That was the mayor, right?"

"Aye. Shitting his pants that we might leave town without talking to him."

"I hadn't guessed you were that important."

Torrek spat. "We're the right hand of the Lamiae. He'd better suck up if he knows what's good for his village." He paused, and Crixus was reminded of Raqueem, and again pondered whether Torrek had been present. "He probably mistook you for a diplomat."

"In a sense I am. Nistru doesn't exactly keep in touch with Rond."

Torrek studied Crixus for a long, uncomfortable minute. “Aye,” he said at last, and rode ahead.

*

Three days after they departed Sandoss, the wooden buildings of Basrat jutted out from the grasslands. Situated near a river and a forest, Basrat benefited from being a trade center, and thus could afford sturdier, more permanent housing. The grain fields had been shorn by farmhands working day and night. Harvest time had just ended.

The mid-afternoon sun cast beams through the breaks in the cloud cover. As they drew into town, children pointed and scattered. Adults bowed as they passed. The Legionnaires did not deign to acknowledge these homages. Crixus waved a few times, feeling awkward.

The Basrat town square bustled with preparations for a festival. Flowers arranged into bunches had been tucked into every available crevice. Lanterns of red fabric dangled from string strewn from roof to roof. Young men stacked logs for bonfires that would ring the public space.

The Legionnaires guided their horses to a two-story inn with a crow figurine over its door. The innkeeper and his stable boys swarmed out, effusive in their greetings. Torrek’s grin was nothing less than predatory as he handed the reins over and surveyed the gathering crowd.

“Your best rooms and ale,” he snapped. He pointed a thumb at Crixus. “This man is with us and should be treated the same.”

The innkeeper bowed to Crixus. “You honor me, ser. Welcome to the Raven’s Perch.” Crixus dismounted and put out a hand to the innkeeper. The man hesitated then shook it, smiling obsequiously.

“Send women to our rooms after dinner,” Torrek said. “Ushe here wants a plump one. Crixus? You have a preference?”

Crixus shook his head. “I’ll sleep better without.”

“Ha! I’ll take his, then. And young, this time. No mothers.”

Borge unpacked a saddlebag, careful not to disturb the delicate cargo. “No woman for you, Crixus? They’re free of charge, thanks to our station.”

“I left a woman back in Rond,” he said. “A fiancé. I’d rather not remind my nethers of that until I can have her again.”

“A romantic,” Borge said, grinning. “Suit yourself.”

The rooms were not spacious but clean, decorated with the same flowers as he saw in the square. Sleeping on the ground played havoc with his back and shoulders. Even this straw mattress would be an improvement. For a moment, looking at the fresh sheets, he regretted his decision to sleep alone. Just having a warm body beside him would help ease his anxiety. But after the emotional confusion he felt in Sheirra’s arms, he opted to avoid upsetting the equilibrium he established through numbing, monotonous travel.

By the time he settled in and washed with a bowl of hot water, the Legionnaires had taken over the tavern room, lording over a long table of the town’s foremost citizens. Torrek made room for Crixus near his chair, slamming a mug of the local beer in front of him.

“Have your first harvest beer, lad.”

Crixus toasted with him and sipped at the hoppy brew. It was more bitter than the sweet ales in Rond.

“Crixus hails from Rond, across the sea,” Torrek told the gathered celebrants. They feigned great interest, as if it was expected of them. “There’s not a man here who can arm wrestle him and walk away without pain.”

“What brings you to our land, ser?” The speaker was an elderly man with a sagging face, who wore an insignia that appeared to be a mayoral badge of honor.

“Money,” Crixus said, and the mercenaries cackled. “The Lamiae will be happy to pay for my services.”

“And what would those be?”

“I’m an artisan—a water engineer. Pipes and drains, fountains and baths.”

Conversation halted. The diners stared at him, and the mercenaries chortled at the discomfort then picked at their food in awkward silence.

“I see,” the mayor said.

“Crixus. Tell us more about the baths,” Torrek said.

“Well, the trick is to maintain pressure in the pipes,” he said, setting down his beer to describe a pipe with his hand. “This you can accomplish by sustaining a downward flow of the water . . .” He hesitated. The diners were not listening to him at all, but staring at their plates. “Gravity is the main force that we use to...”

He trailed off, unsure at where he made a social gaffe. The mercenaries grinned at him and swigged from their mugs.

“Mayor, a robust batch, as always,” Torrek said, wiping his mouth. “What time do the festivities begin?”

“Three hours past dawn,” the mayor mumbled.

Torrek inclined his head in mock joviality. “Then I have plenty of time to drink more of your fine beer and get acquainted with your fine women. Bring them forth. The rest of you can leave.”

The table emptied of sullen townsfolk. Crixus leaned over to Borge. “What did I do?”

“Pansies,” Borge said. He picked at food particles trapped in his crooked teeth. “The villages this far out only pay the tithe once a year, but they moan about it more than the peasants in Nistru proper. We should burn a few more hamlets to give ‘em a scare.”

“All right,” Crixus said. “But I don’t see how that relates to me.”

“Baths of blood,” Borge said. “Where do you think the blood comes from?”

His trail mates continued their meal, raucously chattering away in their own tongue and the Minq dialect. As Red Legionnaires and representatives of Nistru, they appeared to be the guests of honor at this festival. They relished the discomfort they created.

The maidens arrived at their table, dressed in simple gowns adorned with flowers. They wrapped their arms around the burly men in a grotesque show of familiarity which the mercenaries lapped up. Only Ushe bothered to ask the name of his companion, a blonde girl with an ample bosom and thighs.

A few more mugs of beer downed, and the three Legionnaires dragged the girls to their rooms for sport. Borge looked back at Crixus with filial concern. “Are you sure, no women tonight? Nistru is not a place for casual dating.”

“Looking forward only to a good night’s sleep,” he said. “Enjoy yourself.”

“No doubt of that.” Borge slapped his slender companion on her backside. He tugged the girl’s arm and they disappeared up the stairs.

Crixus drank in the tavern room alone but for the serving maids cleaning up after the diners. A harvest festival should be a time for high spirits and celebration, where inhibitions fall to the wayside, romances begin, friendships are renewed, and the community is uplifted. Instead, he thought, these villagers act like sheep who smell the spoor of a wolf.

*

From all appearances, the Harvest Festival of Basrat seemed to be joyous and carefree. The red lanterns, the flowers, even the blue morning sky were tailor-made for a holiday to celebrate the end of a successful harvest, which Basrat appeared to have had, judging from the carts piled with sacks of grain. Children with painted faces fidgeted next to their parents, who wore cloaks stitched with crow feathers. A parade formed at the far end of the town square: young men in elaborate hats with switches, teenage girls in gowns that showed their underdeveloped bosoms to best advantage. The girls clustered, leaning in to whisper and casting glances toward Crixus and the Legionnaires.

It was those small movements—remnants of Crixus’ own adolescent memories of learning about the opposite sex—that cast the already somber mood in a sinister light. The Legionnaires had dallied with tavern girls, but this was to be expected at any roadside rest, and those women were of marrying age. The girls so obviously on display could not have been more than sixteen. Some, openly fearful, he guessed at ten years old.

The mayor joined them, uncomfortable both in their presence and in his colorful

multi-layered jacket and cloak ensemble. Torrek grunted an acknowledgement of the politician's presence.

"Captain Torrek, good morning." He bowed. "And good morn to you, Ser Ushe, and you, Ser Borge." The mercenaries glanced at him. "And also you, Ser Crixus."

"Good morning," Crixus said, after a moment's pause where the mercenaries ignored the mayor. "I'm looking forward to the festival. Your people have put a lot of effort into the preparations, I can see."

"Oh, this year more than ever," the mayor exclaimed, his eyes wandering to Torrek and back again. "Despite our modest harvest, we've met the new tribute with great enthusiasm."

"I'm not taking excuses back to the Lamiae," Torrek said into the air.

The mayor nearly leapt in front of him. "Please, ser, I make no excuses. We relished the opportunity to optimize our lifestyle and consume less of the grain which rightfully belongs to our benevolent lords. I hope they will note our sacrifice"—his eyebrows shot up at Torrek's scowl—"or allow us the secret pleasure of an unacknowledged contribution to their glory."

Crixus squirmed. The mayor's sycophancy would have amused him were it not for the undertone of fear. To watch a man old enough to be his father snivel before these thuggish soldiers did not bode well for what he would find in Nistru. Or perhaps it was a sign of a deeply stratified society where lavish amounts of money would be spent at the whim of a single powerful individual, an ideal situation for making a fast fortune. Watching the old mayor's eyes dart back and forth, he hoped his time in Nistru would be short.

"How do you like our young ladies, Ser Crixus?" The mayor leaned towards him. "Are they not as pretty as a sunrise?"

"Ah, quite lovely," Crixus said. The girls hunched over, backs to them.

"Girls!" The mayor clapped his hands twice. The girls assembled into lines, stiff as mice in a cat's territory.

"Save it," Torrek said. "Their time will come."

“Ah, yes. Gentlemen, I must see to the final preparations for the parade. You’ll be comfortable, I trust? Wish you coffee, tea, ale? A loaf of bread and cheese? Anything...”

“Go,” Torrek said in a grunt. The mayor skittered off. “Insufferable,” Torrek said to Crixus. “Worthless little man. Dealing with the likes of him makes this job excruciating.”

“But villages can burn,” Borge said with a wink.

“Not this one. The old fart works their fingers to the bone to keep the Lamiae’s attention elsewhere. Every increase in tribute, he’s met. If he weren’t such an ass kisser, I could almost respect him.”

A horn sounded in the midst of the gathering townsfolk. The scattered marchers organized into groups of similar costumes, led by the young men in the wild hats, followed by the scared girls.

The mayor stood before the gathered mass, waving a staff painted red. Drummers began a lively, syncopated beat, accompanied by wooden flutes.

“*Harvest!*” he intoned. “Harvest! We thank Ceritis for the grain.”

The townsfolk responded with a unified clap, three short, two long.

“*Harvest!* We thank the crows, who keep us on our toes.”

The three and two clap again, then the adults in black cloaks ran out to the vanguard, arms outstretched as wings, cawing like crows. The young men with the switches batted them away from the girls, as the drums escalated their volume. The mock battle lasted nearly ten minutes.

The mercenaries snickered. “Crows,” Borge said, elbowing Ushe.

“*Harvest!*” The mayor called out, twirling his staff.

“Harvest!” The townsfolk answered back.

“We thank our Red Legionnaires, who protect us!”

The crowd repeated the line over and over, clapping a complex rhythm to it, and twirling in unison. It was quite a sight, a thousand people spinning to the same drum beat. Even the mercenaries nodded appreciatively.

“Harvest!” The major shouted until the chanting ceased. “Harvest! We thank our lords, who make us strong!”

The crowd parted to make way for the girls. The Legionnaires puffed out their chests and strode forward to the center of the square, under a tree aglow with white blossoms. Crixus hung back until Torrek gestured for him to follow. The mayor stood before them with an insipid smile as crowd-dressed women lined up the girls. Several sobbed unreservedly, and all slouched and looked miserable. All told, a hundred girls waited on Torrek’s words.

“Worse than a prison,” Torrek said to the mayor. “Is this a joke?”

The blood drained from the mayor’s face. “Oh, no, ser, no! They’re anxious. You know how young ladies are.” He clapped at the line of girls. “Stand straight, ladies. These Legionnaires honor you with their attention. Be proud and show them what Basrat offers.”

The mayor’s imprecations had little effect on the dispirited youths. A few met Crixus gaze, and in their eyes was nothing but resentment. Torrek left their group to walk up and down the line, inspecting the girls as if choosing a horse. He lifted a few chins, turned a few around to inspect their rears, and even made one girl open her mouth and show her teeth. But most frequently he pinched the flesh on their underarms.

“What is he doing?” Crixus whispered to Borge. “Some of those girls are too young to take to bed.”

“Oh, we’re not bedding these. That would be the end for us.” He drew a finger across his throat. “Three girls return with us as a gift to the Lamiae.”

“As slaves?” He hoped they weren’t sacrifices.

“Aye, and sacred the moment Torrek makes his choice, so don’t make any plans for unspoiled virgin flesh.” Borge winked at him. “These farmers will sell you a night with their daughters, though, if that’s your fancy.”

“Gods, no.” Crixus pitied the girls. No wonder they were terrified. “That’s horrible.”

“It’s not so bad. They’ll live in luxury, serve sweetbreads to a lord or lady, maybe be gifted to a Legionnaire as a wife. Better’n mucking about in the dirt out here.”

Torrek returned to the dark, curly-haired girl whose teeth he’d checked, and pulled her out of line. “Borge,” he called. Borge stepped forward and took the girl’s arm, not ungently. Her lips trembled but she didn’t make a sound. Somewhere in the crowd, a woman sobbed.

The next girl was younger than the first, blonde and fair. She would grow into a beauty for sure. She burst into tears when Torrek took her by the arm and led her to a leering Ushe. Crixus scanned the crowd, and saw a brief scuffle quelled by concerned townsfolk so that the Legionnaires would not notice.

The last girl ignored Torrek as he advanced down the line, instead studying Crixus openly. She showed no evidence of fear or intimidation. When Crixus glanced away and back again, she lowered her gaze to the ground in a movement that jolted his heart: she looked like a young Kharrina.

Although older than most of the girls in line, Torrek chose her with confidence. She stepped forward without being dragged and walked up to stand with her back to Crixus. Unsure, he held her arm. Torrek shrugged, expecting to take the girl himself.

“Very good,” Torrek told the mayor, over whose face passed a range of emotions like storm clouds in the wind: worry, relief, eagerness.

“Wonderful! The ladies are honored and thrilled to be chosen by our blessed lords. Their families praise you, and we of Basrat bow to your wisdom and suffrage.” The mayor knelt on one knee, and the entire town followed suit, the movement flowing through the assembled population like a wave in a pond.

Torrek surprised Crixus by bowing from the waist, suddenly regal. “People of Basrat,” he said, his voice echoing off the buildings in the square. “We have rode long and hard for your harvest celebration, which is renowned throughout the lands of Nistru for good reason. The Lamiae smile upon Basrat as a jewel in their crown.”

He unfurled a scroll from his belt. "I have a special message from Lord Staal himself. Permit me to share it with you." He cleared his throat, and as he did so a tremor ran through the townsfolk. Borge chuckled. "Basrat makes us all proud. There is no town more loyal, hard-working, or productive. When we are asked what the Lamiae expect from their vassals, we merely point to Basrat on our map. Do not falter in your quest to attain perfection. I salute you."

Tucking the scroll back into his belt, he continued.

"We leave with the fruits of your harvest, the fruits of your families, and the fruits of your goodwill to our lords. Pray they bite deep into these fruits, let the juice run down their chins, and continue to praise Basrat and her sturdy people.

"My companions and I leave on the morrow. Until then, let there be rejoicing!" A hand roughened by decades of swordsmanship swept wide in a convivial salute. The townsfolk stood and cheered, and Crixus sensed a tide of relief in the square. The girl he held remained impassive, her back straight, as Basrat thundered in gratitude for the reprieve they had been granted.

17. The Road to Nistru

The girls were locked in a room adjacent to the mercenaries' rooms. Borge stood guard outside the door with as intimidating a countenance as Crixus had seen on the man. He puzzled over this abrupt change in attitude until the first group of relatives showed up in the tavern. The parents of the blonde girl, Madella, offered sweets, wine, and at last money for one last chance to see her before the mercenaries whisked her away. Borge repelled them with gruff refusals. The most tearful pleas from the mother had no effect on him, nor did the resulting hysterics from inside the room. When the girl's father broke down in tears and had to be led away, Crixus had seen enough. He left the tavern to tour the festival.

The townsfolk frolicked with relentless enthusiasm, and Crixus now understood why the faces of the adults glowed with relief. With their children safe from royal edicts, they needed to burn off their anxiety. Wild dancing, drinking and gorging commenced. Crixus stayed at the fringes, sampling the local cuisine from vendors who sold marinated meats, fruits, and nuts from their carts. No one who recognized him as a companion to the Legionnaires charged him so much as a copper coin.

At last the festival repulsed him and he walked out towards the riverbank. Underlying the seasonal ritual was the desperation of political victims. Rond was no stranger to conquest; witness the size of the empire and the strength of the king's legions. Nevertheless, Rond's treatment of defeated territories could not be faulted. His Guild had built aqueducts throughout Rond at the king's expense. Over decades, a conquered land exceeded what it had been before annexation; thus civil strife was relegated to a few separatist ethnic militias. He had never given the policy much thought in the past. No conquests had taken place in his lifetime. The contrast in Nistru disturbed him to his core, witnessing human frailty on gratuitous display.

As the sun set, Crixus returned to Basrat and the tavern. Outside were parked three massive carts, each standing taller than a man. Two had been loaded high with pressed alfalfa. Windows and doors marked the third as a passenger cart for the girls. Well-wishers and family members had adorned it with flowers both artfully arranged and crammed into nooks. Inside the tavern he found an empty main room. Torrek had ordered the tavern cleared until their departure. The

innkeeper bustled out to shoo Crixus off until he recognized him.

“Ah, my apologies, ser. Would you like a beverage? Some dinner?”

“I’m satiated, no. Your festival wore me out.”

The innkeeper inclined his head. “Please let me know if you require anything. I will be here all night.” With a respectful bow, he slipped back into the kitchen.

Crixus envied the man his purposefulness, tied to the four walls of his establishment. It reminded him of his own purpose, which matters of local morality must not disrupt. Little Barida, the girl who resembled Kharrina in her youth, would get only sympathy from him.

The morning brought a new sense of urgency. Even weighed down by the carts, they were no more than a week from Nistru. He still knew little of what he would encounter there as a guest or as a contractor. It was time to learn.

He lingered in the hot bath, knowing it would be his last for days if not longer. Raised voices and a loud thump interrupted him. He wrapped a towel around his waist and stepped out into the hall.

Ushe, sword out, stood spread-legged over a young man bleeding from a broken nose. A club lay at his feet. Torrek, dressed in nothing more than breeches and trailing a naked bar girl, cursed from his room. The tableaux occurred in front of the chosen girls’ door.

“Bad mistake, boy,” Ushe hissed. Crixus saw a welt forming on his cheek. “The Red Legion is sacred to the Lamiae. Penalty for striking us is death without trial.”

The boy’s eyes went wide with fear.

“What happened?” Torrek said.

“I know him,” the girl said. “He’s the carpenter’s son. Alax.”

“His dead son,” Ushe said. “He tried to cold-cock me with that.”

Alax panted with anger. He tried to squirm but the point of Ushe’s sword dug

into his collarbone.

“Damn it.” Torrek frowned. He pushed the girl back into his room and closed the door on her. “Why’d you do it, boy?”

“For Barida,” Alax said. “She and I were promised to each other.”

Torrek grunted. “This isn’t a fairy tale, you idiot. You can’t take a bloodslave off into the forest and expect to escape the Lamiae. Attacking a Red Legionnaire is bad enough.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Do you understand the trouble you’re in?”

“No trouble,” Ushe said. “A little pressure applied with *this*

“Torrek,” Crixus said, but Torrek silenced him.

“Killing him will be disruptive,” Torrek said. “But there’s no help for it. The will of the Lamiae is law. Sorry, lad.”

Alax gasped. “Wait! Please, I won’t—”

“Right, you won’t,” Ushe said, grimacing. “Take a moment to pray, kid.”

“Stop, stop.” Crixus stepped into Ushe’s space, stopping short of touching his sword arm. “This isn’t necessary. The boy’s been scared enough. He’ll scarce hurt a fly, let alone attack a Legionnaire.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Torrek said. “He already *did*

“Torrek, you yourself said that Basrat has been meeting the increased tribute every year. This boy’s death could spoil that loyalty.”

“It’s not my decision.”

“But it is your responsibility to bring in the tribute. Who has to answer to the Lamiae if the tribute isn’t what it should be?”

Torrek’s face darkened. “They wouldn’t dare stint the Lamiae.”

“They might not understand how firm that edict is until you are sent back here with torches. And that reflects badly on you.”

“Letting the kid go makes us look weak.” Ushe hadn’t moved his blade.

“No one has seen this incident but us. If Alax understands that his life is forfeit should he tell anyone—”

“Oh, yes,” Alax said hurriedly. “I wouldn’t tell.”

Torrek glanced back at his room, where the girl cowered. His brow beetled. “Let him up.”

Ushe stepped back, sheathing his sword in a single businesslike motion.

“Come here, boy.”

Alax scrambled to his feet and approached the mercenary leader. When he came within arm’s reach, Torrek seized his hair and dispatched three swift blows to the boy’s face. The crunching impact shocked Crixus in the quiet of the hallway.

Alax collapsed to the ground. Torrek fetched him a kick to the ribs, hard enough to break one or two. Crixus leapt forward and stood over the boy.

“What are you doing?”

“Making this look proper,” Torrek said. “If folks think he mouthed off and got a sound thrashing, they’ll discredit any claims that he had the audacity to strike us. Then I don’t have to come back to Basrat and slit his throat.” He spat on the boy’s bloody face. “Get him out of here.”

Ushe dragged the youth down the stairs unceremoniously. The innkeeper’s exclamations could be heard all the way upstairs.

Torrek shook his head. “Damned way to wake up,” he said, and went back into his room. Crixus, dripping wet, considered the blood on the floor then returned to his bath.

*

The mercenaries hitched horses to the tribute carts, horses which came from the fields of Basrat and were considered part of the tribute. Their own mounts were tethered to the carts, relieved of the burden of their riders and cargo. Crixus tied

Gavri to the girl's passenger cart, but Borge stopped him when he attempted to open the door.

"Not for you," he said. "Those girls are sacred property now. Best not to draw the ire of the masters." He pointed to the carriage's perch for riders. "You can ride up there with me if you want."

"Aye," Crixus said, strangely relieved to not have to keep company with the sad girls. "Can we even speak to them?"

Borge shrugged. "I suppose, but I'd advise against it."

The bold, trusting look of Barida came to mind, but Crixus pushed it aside. The girls waited in their room to be released. Their families were nowhere in sight, having been warned away with royal force by the mercenaries and the mayor.

With luggage secured, it was time to depart. The mayor appeared as if by magic with sweetmeats and fruit for their trip. Torrek accepted the gifts with a silent incline of his head.

"Shall I help bring the girls out?" The mayor's eyebrows waggled. He followed Torrek into the tavern.

Ushe checked all the horses' tackle for strength. At last satisfied, he made a peculiar fist gesture that Crixus assumed signaled approval. "We're ready. Make your goodbyes to Basrat."

Indeed, Crixus was ready to leave the scene of so much angst. The post-festival litter, much of it red fabric fluttering through deserted streets, gave a gruesome cast to the town. He felt hidden eyes on him from behind curtains and shutters. There was no question he was an unwitting part of what had put the entire town on edge.

A small, sad parade of their own, the girls came out of the tavern with blindfolds. Torrek held the hands of two, and Barida, object of Alax's folly, held the mayor's hand. They took tentative steps that Crixus found poignant. It was their first day as chattel. With care, Torrek helped them into the carriage, his manner softer than throughout his stay in Basrat.

Without ceremony or farewell they mounted the carts, snapped the reins, and

rolled out of Basrat.

The stampings of pack-horses and tread of cart wheels had hardened the road over the decades, making for a bumpy but swift ride. Yet the carts moved at a fraction of the pace they set en route to Basrat, and the Mountains of Nistru failed to grow much in the first day of travel. Crixus grew impatient, but speeding forward on Gavri without the mercenaries defeated the whole purpose of joining their group.

Their odd pilgrimage had been augmented with the addition of the sacred servant girls. At midday Torrek called a halt to rest and water the horses. He allowed the girls to come out, blindfolds now gone, and stretch their legs. The modest courtesy brought nervous smiles to their faces, made more open when Torrek shared the mayor's gift of fruits. Barida bit into her apple with a solemnity that Crixus could not resist watching.

Gone too were the long days of riding. Torrek stopped the caravan by a stream to camp for the night. Mosquitoes tormented them, but the horses relished the cool water. He allowed the girls to bathe in the stream with Ushe taking watch as if he were a harem eunuch. In fact, all three mercenaries treated the girls as though they were priestesses to be protected. In their interactions they were cool and polite, with nothing of the lecherous soldier in their behavior. Crixus would almost mistake them for upright officers if this had been his only exposure to them.

It raised a question in his mind: was the rough behavior of Torrek and his men indicative of the society he was about to enter? The impression he received was that the Red Legionnaires served both as army and police force for the Lamiae. The mercenaries acted with utter entitlement in Basrat, as if these peasants lived only by their whim. They held themselves aloof from the townsfolk and from Crixus, despite the gradual warming. He doubted they would ever accept him as friend enough that he could count on them for aid in Nistru.

Nor could he expect any support from fellow engineers, though his scheme would create work for them. In their eyes, he would be an invader upsetting their system for profit—if in fact he was successful in convincing the Lamiae to build them aqueducts or improving what they had. There was no telling what the state of technology would be in Nistru. His few shreds of information hinted at ancient waterworks clogged with pollutants, a problem about which he was quite

knowledgeable.

According to Borge and Ushe, only an elite cadre of Red Legionnaires was trusted within the walls of the royal palace or noble houses. The vast majority of the Legion policed the population, collected tribute, or fought border skirmishes against bandit kingdoms to protect the diamond mines. Torrek had friends in the elite corps, to whom he might be willing to make introductions for a price. Crixus winced, thinking of his dwindling supply of gold bars.

The mountains in the distance amplified his doubt. From this distance, they appeared no more civilized than any other wild mountain range. He had traveled far into the interior of Minq with little more than a vague map to guide him back out unless he could find another willing escort. Yet in all their riding, along what was purported to be a major road, they passed few travelers coming from Nistru.

On the first night, the mercenaries set up a tent for the girls to sleep in. It was far more lavish than any of the other tents, with flaps and cushions and netting to fend off insects. Torrek lectured the girls about not straying from the tent, then proceeded to stake it to the ground on all sides and secure the main flap with a lock. Tiny hands dented the fabric of the tent. The girls had gone from a prison of wood to one of cloth.

“Ten days out,” Torrek said in answer to Crixus’ question as they took their evening meal, courtesy of Basrat. “I’ll be glad to be home again.”

“Aye,” Ushe said through a mouthful of pheasant. “My ass will be glad.”

“I’ll be glad to finally meet these fabled Lamiae,” Crixus said.

Torrek regarded him as if he were insane. “You’re still convinced they’ll hire you to fix their sinks?”

“More than that,” Crixus said. “I can bring their entire waterworks up to modern standards. No more red clay particles, or rusty pipes, or whatever is their current problem.”

“You’re an ambitious one, Crixus. I don’t think red clay worries them much.”

“They needn’t be worried about it for it to be a problem. The body can’t process so many minerals over time without adverse effects. Canovis proved that when

he tested the potability of..." Crixus paused as Torrek's eyes glazed over. "The point is, if the Lamiae are as rich as you say, they can afford to improve their filtering systems. They won't be known for 'fountains of blood' any more."

The mercenaries fell silent. Ushe cleared his throat, uncomfortable. At last Torrek spoke, his voice level. "Do you think me a superstitious man?"

"Ah, well, no," Crixus said.

"Good. Then listen carefully, for I don't want to hear outlandish talk like that when we reach Nistru. The lords lack a sense of humor or patience. They'd put you to the sword."

Crixus gulped and nodded.

"The Lamiae are not human. They subsist on blood. *Human blood.*"

"But that's absurd. The amount of blood that would require —"

Torrek nodded. "And thus we are well paid." He chewed on an apple while Crixus absorbed the idea.

"You Rond folk may have ways of doing things that outstrip primitive old Minq. I myself wouldn't mind one of your water faucets in my own house. But then, I'm human. The Lamiae are ancient creatures who can drive you mad with a glance. I won't bring you before even the lowliest Lamia while you cling to this notion that we're still primitives in caves. Both of our heads will decorate the walls of the keep if I am party to such an insult."

Borge and Ushe nodded in agreement. The seriousness on their faces caused Crixus to wonder if he was walking into the lion's maw.

Crixus chose his words with care. "I'm not suggesting that you're deluded or that you're lying to me. The idea that your masters are supernatural beings is hard for me to grasp. I accept that the gods take part in human events from time to time in ways the natural philosophers cannot explain."

"Any fool knows that."

The shrine to Kaolis came to mind. "But I doubt they trouble much with our

affairs, despite what the priests would have us believe. In everything... nearly everything I have encountered in my life, there has been a natural explanation for it. And when I don't understand something, I am willing to admit ignorance before I assign it a supernatural origin. It's a simple logic: the probability of the gods interfering with the natural world are less than the odds of my lack of understanding a natural phenomenon." He grinned. "If everyone followed that rule of thumb, we'd have a lot less superstitious beliefs."

Torrek shifted his shoulders, looking at the ground, before he spoke again. "Strange to make an argument for knowing nothing."

"Oh my friend, I know quite a bit. Enough to know how much around us is truly graspable through methodical study. Farmers replant crops that show greater durability until their field yields twice as much grain as it did years before. That's the work of man, not a harvest goddess. She'd smile upon smart farming like that, anyway."

"I don't see what this has to do with the Lamiae."

"Just that the likelihood of a race of vampires existing in Minq is just as far-fetched." He held up a hand to Torrek's scowl. "On the surface. You're right to say that I shouldn't make assumptions without meeting the Lamiae first."

"And keeping your damned mouth shut."

"And listening and watching, yes. A scientist collects information before he draws a conclusion."

The old mercenary grunted.

"Satisfied?" Crixus asked.

"I don't care what you think. I just care what you do." He pointed with a bone from his dinner. "Heed my warnings this time. You can conclude anything you please afterwards."

Crixus inclined his head in agreement. The dinner ended in uncomfortable silence, as the mercenaries contemplated the fire.

18. Barida

The fresh meat ran out after four days, so the group was reduced to eating dried jerky. The girls complained bitterly of the tough tack until Torrek called a halt near a wooded dale. He and Ushe took bows into the woods to hunt game. Crixus helped Borge feed, water, and rub down the horses. Gavri snorted in pleasure at the attention, making Crixus feel a bit guilty. He unhitched her from the girl's cart and mounted her to ride.

"Where are you going?" One of the girls called out from the interior of the carriage.

Crixus glanced over at Borge, two carts ahead, rubbing down the draft horses. "To exercise Gavri," he said.

"Gavri. That's a pretty name. I like that better than Hanha."

"Hanha?"

"That's what I named her. I had to call her something," the girl said, peevish. "I talk to her while we're on the road."

Gavri whickered in response to the girl's voice.

"I'm sure she appreciates it," Crixus said. "She's been bored, I think."

"Oh, she keeps me company."

"You can see her?"

"Oh yes. Through a crack in the window. I can see you right now."

Crixus didn't see any pale flesh in the seams of the covered rear window.

"What's your name?"

"Barida. Your name is Crixus, right?"

His heart stirred a bit when he remembered her face, so similar to Kharrina's.

"That's right."

“I wish the Red men would let us visit with you. I’m so bored in here.”

“What about the other girls? Don’t you all talk?”

“I don’t like them. We never spoke in the town. They’re either asleep or crying like babies.”

Crixus stepped Gavri behind the cart, so that Borge could not see them. “You’re very brave, then.”

“Can’t be any worse than Basrat.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Barida was silent for a time. “We’ll live in luxury, the mayor says. That’s good enough for me.”

“But what about the legends? They say Lamiae drink blood.”

“Yes, but who serves the blood to them? That’s what I’ll do.”

Crixus couldn’t resist a smile. “You’re also practical.”

“What are you going to do in Nistru?”

“I’m not quite sure. I think I will also serve the Lamiae by offering my knowledge about water to them.”

“Water? That’s silly.” He imagined her wrinkling her nose as Kharrina would.

“You like clean water, don’t you? Or hot water?”

“Of course.”

“I’m hoping your masters will, too.”

Crixus heard Borge’s foot tread at the front of the cart, and the stamp of the horses’ hooves. He reined away from the back of the carriage, but caught Barida’s tiny plea: “*Don’t forget me.*”

That’s hardly likely, little one, he thought. Borge squinted at him as he trotted

next to him.

“Are they making noise?”

Crixus decided against lying. “Aye, just lonely. I felt sorry for her and exchanged a few words.”

“Don’t,” Borge said. “Best not to risk Torrek’s wrath.”

“Good advice. I’m going to take Gavri out for a run.”

Borge nodded and returned his attention to the leg muscles of the lead horse in the girl’s carriage team. Crixus spurred Gavri to run up the road, leaning into the slight incline. The mountains of Nistru poked up over the lip of the hills, as if just beyond reach.

Crixus ran Gavri for a half an hour in the fading light. On his return trip he spotted Torrek and Ushe dragging a boar’s body along the road. They grinned in triumph at him as he skidded to a stop.

“My, my!” Crixus said. “That’s quite a haul.” He dismounted. The boar would have stood over his knee, young but worth several meals.

“We’re blessed today,” Torrek agreed. Crixus laid a blanket over Gavri’s saddle, and they hauled the carcass onto her back. She neighed and tossed her head. Crixus patted her cheek and whispered to her. Leading her by the reins, he accompanied the pleased mercenaries back to the camp. Torrek and Ushe traded details of felling the boar, laughing when one contradicted the other.

Yet when they saw Borge, all conviviality stopped. His face was ashen, and he met them hundreds of yards from the carts.

“They’re gone,” Borge said.

“What? Where?” Torrek’s face turned red.

“I let them out to piss and they ran off in all directions. The blonde one ran this way, up the road. One took off for Basrat. The quiet one, I don’t know.”

The curses that streamed out of Torrek’s mouth were impressive in any language.

“Then you follow the blonde girl, damn you, and I’ll catch our runaway.” He threw the boar, blanket and all, to the ground, and leapt on Gavri in a fluid motion that belied his age. Gavri bucked at the sudden weight but he reined her in savagely. “Move, you idiots, or we’re dead men!” Torrek spurred Gavri to a gallop, back down the road.

Ushe bolted for the woods, and Borge veered to the woods on the opposite side. Within a minute, all three mercenaries were out of sight. Crixus stood by the discarded boar carcass, a thrill going through his body. Would Borge blame his conversation with Barida for the escape attempt?

He hefted the boar onto his back, grunting under the weight, and carried it back to the wagons. The horses sensed the tension in the humans and snorted at his arrival. Dropping the boar into the dust, he leaned against a wagon to regain his breath.

“Crixus.”

The wind nearly swallowed the whisper. He couldn’t tell where it originated. A creak of wood from the girl’s carriage spun him around. Barida peeked out at him and waved him over.

She leaned forward from her seat in the carriage. Her nostrils flared and she grinned when he approached.

“Barida, what are you doing here?”

“Waiting for the Legionnaires. I’m not stupid like those two.” She took his hands and pulled him into the cabin with a small, insistent strength. He checked for the mercenaries before he ducked his head inside.

“You didn’t try to escape?”

“Not really. But I told them they’d never get another chance.”

“Why?”

“Because they’re stupid. I wanted to be alone for once.”

Crixus shook his head. “If the mercenaries can’t find those girls, all our lives are

forfeit.”

Moving like a woman years older, she pressed against him, putting her slender arms around his neck. “Not you. You’re important, everyone said. You’ll protect me in Nistru.”

“I don’t... I can’t...” He put his hands on her sides to push her away, but she took it as an invitation to kiss him. Her small mouth pressed against his, her tongue trying to push inside his lips.

“Hey!” He pulled away from her. “Don’t do that.”

“Why not?” She pouted at him, fetching in her own way, with dimples Kharrina did not possess. “When we get to Nistru, you can ask for me to be given to you, and I won’t have to give up my wrists to a creepy old Lamia.” Her breath brushed his cheek. “They do that to girls, you know. We’re just a cup of water to them. I’ll die.”

“You’re sacred,” Crixus said, recalling Torrek’s words. “They won’t touch you.”

“No, *you*h

Barida quivered in his arms. He shook himself, feeling pity, fear for his well-being, and pangs of arousal. He fought to suppress all three. How long before Torrek and his men returned with naïve girls lost in the woods?

“We can be lovers,” Barida said into his ear, far too much like Kharrina. “Then I’ll be safe with you.” Her hand strayed to his groin, and she felt his state of arousal. “See? You want me, too.”

He pushed her back against the seat. “No,” he said. “No, for many reasons.”

Barida’s face broke into tears in a heartbeat. “You’d rather see me dead!”

Hesitant, he touched her face. “Not at all. You remind me of someone very special, and it hurts to think of how I miss her. Alax loves you, and you must remember him when you are frightened.”

She sniffled and wiped her nose. “He’s just a boy. He can’t even protect himself.”

True, Crixus had to admit. He had saved the boy's life. "I'll... I'll see what I can do. I don't have any influence in Nistru, contrary to what your townsfolk think. But I'll make sure you have a kindly master who doesn't hurt you."

"Or rape me."

His chest constricted at the blunt words coming from so young a girl. "Or that either. You can be brave, right?"

Barida took his hand from her cheek and placed it on her chest to feel her small breast. Her expression was as somber as a mourner at a funeral. Crixus pulled his hand away after a moment's surprise. Still, the shape and pertness of her breast had blasted through him like lightning.

"If *your* eyes were hooded as he closed and secured the door.

Dusk had arrived, with no one in sight. He walked around the wagons, looking for tracks or indications where the girls fled. He had never hunted before so the scuffs in the dirt meant nothing to him. He glanced back at the carriage, thinking of little Barida, helpless and frightened, willing to offer her body in exchange for his aid. He would have given aid for far less if he understood the environment he was entering. For Kharrina's sake, if not for Barida's. She was only sixteen, he reminded himself, yet still old enough to take lovers. Unbidden, an image of a nude, recumbent Barida came to mind, all too easy to visualize because of her resemblance to Kharrina. The opportunity disturbed him.

He climbed to the top of one of the cargo wagons and watched the road and woods until a distant dust cloud told him that Torrek was returning. In the fading light, he could see a small form draped across Gavri's back like the boar. For a sickening moment he feared Torrek had slain the girl, but the ropes tying her down became evident as Torrek approached.

The old mercenary pulled up at the carriage. The dark haired girl, Geet, had been weeping and screaming hysterically. Torrek slapped her rump as he dismounted. "Enough! Save it for the Lamiae." He glared at Crixus. "Did they find the other two?"

Crixus pointed at the carriage. "Barida never left. She ran back to the carriage."

Untying Geet, Torrek barked a laugh. "My luck is improving. What about

Borge?”

“No sign of him or the blonde girl.”

Torrek unlocked the carriage door and shoved Geet in with force. “If you want to get fed, you won’t try that again.” He slammed the door behind her.

The boar lay where Crixus had dropped it, and Torrek nearly tripped over it. “Gods,” he said. “You carried it back.”

“Aye. It was all I could think of to do.”

The mercenary laughed. “You’re a strong one! I could use you in the Legion, even though you aren’t Proka.”

“How’s the pay?”

Torrek snorted.

Minutes later, Borge and Ushe appeared from the woods with a small, dejected figure ahead of them. Torrek and Crixus both let out sighs of relief. Madella came into view, and from appearances, her flight into the forest hadn’t been gentle: she was covered in mud and raw scrapes. Her eyes sparkled with tears. Torrek stood over her, hands on hips.

“There, look at you. Running did naught but bloody you up. Shall I tell the Lamiae how selfish you are?”

“No,” the girl sniffled.

“The Lamiae’s favorite servants live like royalty,” he said. “Their least favorite become lunch. Should I present you to them all muddy, with a warning that you like to run?”

“No, please.”

“Then we’ll have a deal. You dress that boar for us, and then Ushe will wash you off and fix you up. You’re already bloody, you can’t get much worse.” He leaned over at her, scowling. “You do know how to dress livestock, don’t you, farmer girl?”

“Aye, ser.” She quailed under the man’s gaze.

In a fluid motion, Torrek drew a curved dagger from his belt and brandished it before her face. She held her breath.

“You know how to use this?”

“Aye, ser.”

He reversed his hold on the dagger, presenting it to her hilt first. “Then get started. We’re hungry.”

In her small hand it looked like a scimitar. She knelt by the boar and grunted as she pushed the blade under the animal’s thick hide.

“She ain’t strong enough,” Ushe said. “The beast is bigger than she is.”

“She’ll do it. I’m more concerned with breaking that spirit of hers.” Torrek fished in his pouch for a piece of dry jerky. Crunching it, he shrugged. “Hard enough dealing with children, and when you can’t hit them, they turn into demons. Best eat something now.” Ushe made a face, and Torrek narrowed his eyes at him. “You want to present this girl to the masters? You can have my job, until they slit you ass to ear.”

Congealing blood dripped out of the carcass, onto Madella’s hands and arms. She tugged the skin away from a shoulder, and the shape of the muscle struck him as all too human, as if Nistru’s bloody logic already held sway.

19: The Mountains

The convoy trundled into the mountain pass. Mount Agath ruled over all the range, thousands of feet higher than its neighbors. Nistru was tucked into the valley beyond Agath, its aerie built into the sheer cliff walls. Clouds crowned Agath's peak, a coronation by nature herself of the lord of the range. The power and majesty of the massive mountain further intimidated Crixus, as if the rumors of the Lamiae's depredations weren't enough.

The mercenaries spoke little to him on the road, leaving him alone in his conjectures about the land they entered. An elaborate cairn declared the pass to be the property of Nistru, woe to those who trespassed.

"Are we in Nistru now?"

"Aye, we're home," Ushe said.

Crixus refrained from comment. His first impression of Ushe's "home" was that of lichen-covered boulders, tentative scrub and predatory birds. The dark forests of the last week lost some of their fearsomeness in retrospect; at least they were green.

"Three days out," Torrek called back.

That night, they camped in the pass itself. Crixus made his bed on a shelf of rock, which, though hard and unforgiving, felt like a bed against a wall and thus had a strange cozy appeal. He listened to the mercenaries chatter in their sibilant language and watched the bright stars until sleep overcame him. He dreamed of Barida again, a vague series of sensations of loss that fled his mind upon waking.

The next day, they passed the first of a dozen diamond mines. The stench arrived long before the view of the mine. According to Torrek, Lamiae scholars had perfected a magical oil that ate away unwanted soft rock to leave exposed veins of diamond. However, they expended no effort in ameliorating the searing, eye-watering vapors produced by the chemicals. The mine itself was no more than a hole in the canyon wall, lined by immense wooden beams cut from the forests surrounding the mountains. Haggard men in filthy pants wore cloth wraps around their faces, but Crixus doubted, as he covered his own nose with his

sleeve, that the wraps provided any protection. Miners lived a hard, brutal, and short life; these slaves in the diamond minds doubly so. A glimpse of a miner gasping for fresh air, facial protection unfastened, made Crixus recoil: the man had few teeth left, and the shadows under his red eyes seemed to bore into his skull. They use mines as punishment, Crixus surmised, for no one would subject themselves to such torture for money.

Torrek took care to make camp far beyond the aroma of a mining operation, choosing in fact an abandoned mine site nestled in a set of hills where hundreds of mines had once been dug into the mountain faces. Crixus marveled at the scale of the mining operation.

“How many active mines are there in Nistru?” he asked Torrek, over a dinner of boar meat.

“Hell. A few hundred, I would guess. They close and reopen mines as if they were fields of wheat. Thousands of years ago, you could kick over a stone and find a diamond.” He stomped the ground. “We’re probably sitting over a vein right now.”

“Incredible. And no one contests their land rights?”

“Not right now, but Nistru has always been at war with someone stupid enough to challenge them. Usually some prince, newly crowned, without a bit of sense in his head. Most of the surrounding cities are petrified of Nistru.”

Borge came back with empty plates, having fed the girls. “Crixus, your girlfriend’s asking for you.”

“What?” He shook his head at Torrek’s foul glare. “What do you mean?”

“Barida, the quiet one. Kept asking me when you’d come visit her again.”

“Those girls are off limits,” Torrek said. “What did you do?”

“Nothing.” Crixus held up his hands. “When I untied my horse from their carriage, Barida talked to me through the curtain. I thought nothing of it.”

“You aren’t to touch them or speak to them,” Torrek said. “No matter how desperate they sound.”

“I know, which is why I didn’t linger.” Crixus thought of Barida’s kiss and her too-adult sexual overtures. “Believe me, I have no interest in them.”

“See to it that you don’t.”

For two days, they rolled past mine after mine. At times Crixus saw dead bodies along the road, pushed into the ditch, some in advanced states of decay. The foremen of the mines dressed no better than the miners themselves, but from the look of them, they ate healthier fare. They lashed at their charges without mercy. The miners made no sound as they worked, not even crying out when whipped. The endless parade of misery terrified Crixus even as he became desensitized to it. He could only imagine what Barida’s reaction was, peeking through the crack in the window at scenes of hellish torture.

The Red Legionnaires trotted on, oblivious to the suffering, though a few times they called a halt to speak convivially with fellow Legionnaires stationed as guards. At every stop, they pointed Crixus out to the men. He could not read their faces or reactions.

Torrek purchased several bottles of wine from one of the guards, and on their last night they shared the wine and the last of the boar meat with a squad of Legionnaire guards. The tension of the journey was lifted from Crixus’ companions. They laughed and barked out incomprehensible names of fellow mercenaries, clapping each other on the back. The Red Legionnaires truly did consist of naught but Proka tribesmen, and the hissing Proka language flew back and forth across the roaring bonfire they built. No one made any attempt to translate for Crixus, though his companions would at times introduce him to a guard who would try his hand at the Minq dialect with Crixus. Evidently Torrek, Ushe and Borge were rare in their fluency of a language other than Proka. Crixus smiled, gave hearty handshakes, showed the size of his biceps, acquiesced to requests to inspect his hammer, and clanked mugs with the Legionnaires, who seemed genuinely curious about the man from across the sea.

Ushe sat down after a round of socializing with his fellow troops. “Torrek has convinced everyone that Rond is made up of burly giants,” he said, chuckling. “They’re all impressed.”

“Good.” The flurry of superficial introductions had tired Crixus out. “How long will we keep this up?”

“All night, until morning. Mine duty is painfully boring, Crixus. We all try to raise each other’s spirits. Once I was out in these rocks for two years. I nearly raped a goat.”

“I’m surprised you let her get away,” Crixus said, grinning.

“*Her?* Hell, that would have been luxury!” They both snorted with laughter.

Ushe toasted Crixus with a phrase in Proka. Crixus tried to respond in kind: “*Salla boasis katu ta Nistru.*”

“‘Heavy until death in Nistru.’” Ushe’s smile faded.

“I don’t understand.”

“Die with your blood in you, not as a husk.” Ushe hesitated, then leaned forward. “You’re going to need friends in Nistru. It’s a brutal place.”

“I have come to think of you three as my friends,” Crixus said with less confidence than he wished.

Ushe shook his head as if correcting a child. “We’re not friends. Proka do not make friends outside our tribe.” His eyebrows shot up at Crixus’ expression. “Make no mistake. We like you well enough. But you are *skassa’a*”

A contingent of mine guards pulled Ushe over to a dice game. Crixus, troubled by the man’s warning, didn’t follow. Would Torrek introduce him to the Lamiae only to abandon him?

He stood to stretch his legs, and in doing so noticed the girl’s carriage, tucked back with the horses, a sturdy lock preventing another escape. Barida, Madella, and Geet must be listening to the celebrating mercenaries with fear in their hearts, unsure whether the Lamiae edict of sacredness would protect them from drunken soldiers. From his vantage point, he saw no Legionnaires within thirty feet of the carriage. Loyalty to their masters had been ingrained over centuries.

Crixus crept over by the carriage, using his urge to urinate to lend verisimilitude to his comportment. He watered a scrub bush nearby then crouched near the cart.

“Barida,” he whispered. No reply. He couldn’t hear the girls’ sleep breath over

the shouts of the mercenaries. “Barida.”

“Are we escaping?” Barida whispered through the covered window.

“No, that’s impossible for now. Put that out of your mind.” He paused, unsure why he had woken her. The fact that no Legionnaires noticed him, combined with a mild intoxication, emboldened him. “Are the other girls awake?”

“They cried themselves to sleep.” Her whisper didn’t hide her scorn. “They’re worse than my sisters.”

“Barida, if you could escape... where would you go?”

“Oh, Crixus. Anywhere with you. Promise you’ll take me.”

“I won’t rule it out,” he said. “But you must not set your heart on escaping Nistru. Make the best of your time.”

“Arktos.”

“Arktos? Is that where you’d go?”

“Yes, oh yes. They have walking statues that the goddess blesses. Everybody is happy there.”

Arktos. Crixus had heard Orazio allude to it. “Will you do me a favor?”

“Uh huh!”

“Speak highly of me to your master. Tell him that I bring gifts of knowledge that will make their lives much easier, and that he would profit from being an early advocate.”

“Um... Okay. I’ll try.”

“I promise I won’t forget about you. I’ll find you as soon as they let me.”

He could hear her snuffle. “Crixus.” Her voice broke with tears. “I’m really scared.”

“These men won’t hurt you, sweetheart. They don’t dare touch you. In fact, if

they knew we talked, I'd be in danger.”

“I love you!” She blurted out. “Don't laugh at me. I think of you all day.”

His heart constricted at her girlish outburst. “You're my only friend here, Barida. That's the truth.”

Barida was silent for a moment. Crixus listened for sounds of movement.

“Barida?”

“I'm still here.” The noise from the camp swallowed up her words.

“I have to go back now. Don't worry about anything, all right?”

“All right, darling.”

Crixus squeezed his eyes shut, safe in the dark. The girl had latched onto him as a protector from the moment she was forced into line in Basrat. A part of him felt shame at exploiting that connection; another part wanted to keep her close and protect her from the encroaching danger. Although, from Ushe's cautionary advice, Crixus began to understand that Barida was in less danger than he. He stole back to the campfire, to watch the Legionnaires drink, stagger, fight, gamble, and caterwaul.

*

They rode into the morning sun as it peered over the mountain pass, blinding Crixus after a night of little sleep and too much wine. Weariness dragged his limbs down, and Gavri's reins filled his hands as if weighted with cast iron. No one spoke, letting the sound of the horses' hooves on the gravel and the wagon wheels' creaks echo off the stone walls. Throughout yesterday's ride they gained altitude; this morning the gradation of the road increased until Crixus worried for the strength of the horses.

Within hours Gavri wheezed and blew saliva from her mouth with every breath. Torrek called a halt just before Crixus asked for one. Following the mercenaries' example, he rubbed Gavri down with extra attention to her legs. Ushe braced the wagons with rocks found at the side of the road.

The view back down the road made Crixus a little dizzy. It would be a faster return trip, without doubt. Ahead the road climbed past a visible termination point.

Torrek brought water for the carriage horses and offered Gavri some as well. “How is she keeping up?”

“Well enough,” Crixus said. “Assuming the climb is half over.”

“More than half. You’ll be in the Lamiae’s foyer by dinner time.”

Crixus grimaced at Torrek’s poor choice of wording, but the mercenary didn’t acknowledge the joke.

By noon the overhead sun cut through the mountain chill to warm their bones. Crixus leaned forward in the saddle for balance. Gavri’s head bobbed with effort at the climb. The draft horses whinnied their protests. The progress of the convoy had slowed so much that Crixus dismounted and led Gavri by her reins. The mercenaries pressed on. Crixus regretted his decision to walk as the afternoon wore on, but Gavri still breathed with difficulty, so he trudged on. Sweat dripped from his forehead and chest, cooling rapidly in the cold air.

All at once the road leveled off, and he felt as if a great weight had been lifted from his body. The Legionnaires stopped the wagons to peer over the side. Crixus, slowed by his gait, eventually caught up to them. Borge grinned and swung a hand wide.

“Welcome to Nistru.”

The road curved sharply to the left, descending at a gentler grade than their climb, weaving down the side of the mountain towards Nistru’s walls. The valley stretched before them, a verdant green swath nestled in colorless cliff walls. Trees bracketed fields brushed with green and gold crops, and tiny forms moved through the rows like water striders on a pond. His artisan’s eye caught the white line of a ruined arcade of an aqueduct reaching across the fields. Miniscule wagons rolled along vein-like gray roads, lined with thatch-roofed hovels, leading to the heart of Nistru: the castle.

Crixus remembered to breathe only because of the discomfort of holding his breath as he tried to take in the entirety of Castle Nistru in one look. The builders

of the castle, presumably the Lamiae, hadn't assembled the castle brick by brick; rather they had reduced the mountainside until what remained was the castle itself. He counted at least two dozen spires soaring hundreds of feet into the air from the main keep. Had the castle risen from a plain, it would have been mistaken for a mountain itself.

The architecture relied on tapering points and smooth, rounded shapes that could not have been achieved with mere brickwork. The only color aside from the natural rock was a primal scarlet, hanging between towers as enormous draperies and pennants. The organic nature of the shapes of the towers caused the eye to seek out the features of a face, or rather a skull; yet Crixus could not assemble anything anthropomorphic about the profusion of edifices that constituted the chaotic whole. As the Lamiae lived apart from humanity, their architecture thusly distanced itself from lesser human attempts to mold their environment or bring culture into the clutter of nature.

Crixus' heart shrank back from the edifice—instead of relief at the sight of his destination, he felt the panic children felt when the enormity of the clouds in a blue sky finally impressed upon their sense of scale. Castle Nistru swallowed up all thought in the valley like no Rondan monument to power. Thousands of Lamiae could hide in the castle and never see daylight. And if the builders had excavated into the mountain, the tunnels and chambers could reach for miles. The intricate immortal lives protected by those smooth walls could achieve depths of experience unattainable to a normal man.

And yet he hoped to impress them with his meager waterworks! Crixus' desperate eye sought the reassurance of water sources: two mountain streams at the far side of the valley, feeding into a small lake abutting the farmland. At least he had identified the tools of his trade.

Torrek broke into a smile so broad that his face contorted. "*Braze poir mak sistlesa'ss.*"

"Indeed," he said. "I can't imagine that keep has changed much in the last millennium."

"And you'd be right." Torrek checked the position of the sun. "The ride down is longer than you think. Let's not tarry any more."

The mercenaries applied brakes to the wagons as they descended the

mountainside. At each switchback, immense boulders prevented runaway wagons from hurtling off the side of the cliff. Crixus had no inclination towards vertigo, but the sight of the treetops hundreds of feet below gave him pause. He kept towards the wall, knowing Gavri's footing was surer than his.

By dusk they reached the valley floor. The trees overarching the road concealed the monumental castle, yet Crixus still felt the oppressive presence. He hoped Barida hadn't seen the castle from her peephole. Better she enter without a sense of the finality of being swallowed by the edifice.

The miners and mercenaries notwithstanding, Crixus saw his first Nistruvans along the road to the castle. Pale and haggard, they seemed incrementally healthier than the miners. They dressed in dingy rags and crude wooden sandals. Though the air of the valley was considerably warmer than the mountain pass, the peasants seemed underdressed. Their carriage was indistinguishable from prisoners: slouched, limp, dispirited, without smiles or anger. Men, women, children—all emanated an air of resignation so pervasive that Crixus moved between pity and scorn without understanding why.

For half an hour, they rolled through the fields of laborers, and Crixus saw no children playing, no wives gossiping, no men boasting to each other. He did spot the denizens of the valley whisper furtively as the caravan passed, and their movements were so concealed with practiced skill that he must have missed hundreds more. On occasion they passed a contingent of Red Legionnaires and he learned the reason for the peasants' secrecy. The mercenaries had surrounded a man wiry from hard labor and poor nutrition, and they took turns kicking him in the ribs. More disturbing was the fetus-like acceptance of the victim, as though he expected to be beaten. Peasants walked past the scene as if it wasn't happening at all.

Openly staring, Crixus realized that he saw no gray-haired elders among the men and women. Faces aged and dried out appeared under a mop of brown or black hair, a strange dichotomy. Hard work could age a man, yet he'd never encountered a city where the elderly hid in their homes. Could they be broken by the labor?

The negligible hamlets gave way to carved terraces and stone buildings hewn from the same rock as the castle. Grotesque statues punctuated the squares and walls: gargoyles boasting exaggerated fangs, sylphs of filmy beauty, animals

with mythical proportions. No vendors hawked their wares, nor was there a town crier in sight. The laborers hunched over and hauled their loads through the majestic squares without taking their eyes from the cobblestone. The only festivity came from a Red Legionnaires squad rehearsing precision drills in formation.

Past the soldiers, at the top of a staircase hundreds of yards wide and thirty feet high, the forbidding iron gates of Castle Nistru stood closed.

20. Doors

Halting the caravan before the gates, Torrek and his men leapt down from the carts. Ushe hurried up the stairs while Borge worked the lock on the door of the carriage. He warned Crixus away from the proximity of the carriage with a wave of his hand. Crixus dismounted at the head of the caravan. Torrek gestured for him to approach.

“The man I’m going to send for you is named Heckur. Without him you’ll never get past those gates. Take this.” He pressed the rest of his dried beef ration into Crixus’ hand. “Don’t try to contact me on your own.” Quickly he shook Crixus’ hand, gripping him on the wrist and meeting his eyes with an unreadable expression. Then he hurried to the girl’s carriage and slipped inside without throwing the door open for the girls to see their new home. Crixus suspected they were being blindfolded.

He led Gavri away from the caravan, still within sight of the black lacquered carriage. After a few minutes of inactivity, the door opened and Torrek helped the girls to the ground. They had indeed been blindfolded and adorned with red fabric headdresses. Madella and Geet shook with fear, but Barida stood tall and defiant. Crixus fought down an urge to call out to her.

An immense, echoing crash sounded from the gates. Gavri snorted and fought against his grip. The girls cringed, including Barida. Gongs the size of houses resonated from behind the gates, describing the tones of an exotic musical scale at a stunning volume. The peasants paused with their burdens to watch the gates crack open. As human figures appeared in the dark opening, the scale of the gates became evident: they were at least a hundred feet tall. Gilt with gold and silver, the gates roared with the stress of their weight on the hinges as they exhaled the entourage. Red Legionnaires flanked scarlet robed figures in elaborate headdresses. The vanguard of exultants carried mounted pennants with bejeweled embroidery.

The peasants in the square fell to their knees and pressed their foreheads to the ground. The Legionnaire squad marching nearby flourished their weapons at the shouted order of their commander. Crixus glanced over at Torrek and his men. They stood at attention with the girls before them, and he couldn’t catch their eye. As the entourage descended the steps with regal patience, Crixus assumed

the position of respect in Rond: hands clasped behind his back, knees straight. He inclined his head toward the entourage.

Minutes passed as the entourage crept across the square towards the girls. As it neared, Torrek maneuvered them forward, his back stiff and formal. The Legionnaires on either side of the exultants parted to flank the girls, and Torrek, Ushe, and Borge fell into line with their compatriots. Three men separated from the line and took charge of the carts. A black velvet tarp rose above the girl's heads, suspended from poles. Shadowed, a figure draped in gold lined fabric enveloped the girls in its arms. The group expanded around the girls as they walked forward, as a snake would swallow its meal. The assembly reversed course, though it gave the impression that it had never stopped moving.

Crixus watched the girls escorted into Castle Nistru in unearthly silence. The gates boomed as they closed behind the procession, signaling the carts to roll away towards another wing of the castle and to the peasants to resume their duties. The Legionnaires marched off along the way Crixus had come.

He was alone in Nistru.

As fearsome and intimidating as Castle Nistru was, he badly wanted to be invited inside. Yet Torrek was gone, Barida was gone, and no one appeared to know or care that Crixus stood outside the gates. Torrek hadn't specified whether to wait there or find an inn. In lieu of making a decision, Crixus fed and watered Gavri. Peasants gave him a wide berth, and he saw no other foreigners or any Nistruvans who weren't victims of abject poverty.

Nothing happened. He gave Gavri a perfunctory rubdown, then a complete one, and still no one appeared. He began to wonder if he had been expected to follow the carts inside or even join the procession. His status with Castle Nistru was a mystery. He had paid Torrek real gold—more than he should have—and he deserved more guidance than he received. Torrek had taken advantage of him, just as Chyorth had. Crixus cursed himself for a fool yet again. He imagined banging on the gigantic gates until a fanged vampire butler came to let him in.

The sunset painted the castle façade an appropriate crimson. One by one peasants disappeared until he was the sole inhabitant of the square, feeling utterly ridiculous.

Stars appeared in the darkening sky, bringing him close to a boil. Inaction fueled

his uncertainty to the point where he would have gladly opened a vein to a supernatural horror if it meant someone would at least acknowledge his presence.

Yet nighttime in Nistru belied the city's reputation as a haven for bloodsucking nocturnal monsters. The entire city fell asleep at once. Even Basrat had been livelier. The city center lacked foliage to blow in the night breeze, so Gavri's whicker was the only natural sound in the square.

"We've been taken again, Gavri," he told her. "I must be sliding towards insanity, because I never played the fool like this before. Kharrina deserves better than me."

Gavri swung her head in response to his voice as if disagreeing with his assessment.

"It's true. I threw my life away in that basement and the last few months have just been a long, protracted death. Poor girl," he said, stroking her mane, "you don't deserve to be in this sad place. I'm sure you miss the sea breeze in Izhmir."

Gavri snorted. Her nervous stamping nearly drowned out the sound of the approaching horse and rider. As he neared, the red armor of a Legionnaire became visible in the half light. Crixus' head buzzed with excitement.

The man reined in when he reached them. "You're Crixus?" His accent was deeper than Torrek's.

"Yes, I am. Torrek sent you?"

"Mount up."

The man swung his mount away without waiting for a response. Crixus hopped on Gavri in a rush, eliciting a snort from her. They half-galloped across the square to catch up with the rider.

They trotted past the façade, past its many abutments, until the rider veered towards the wall and led Crixus under a shadowed portcullis. The profusion of wagons, crates, hay, and dung identified it as a service entrance. Legionnaires bickered and ordered servants around. The servants dressed as journeymen would: in sturdy, well-kept clothes and elaborate embroidery. Their faces

showed none of the resignation of the peasants but rather the purposeful animation of workmen with responsibility.

The man dismounted at a stable, handing his reins to a stable boy. Crixus lowered himself to the ground and another boy approached and took Gavri's reins. He began to lead her away until Crixus stopped him. "I have things that must remain with me," he said with sudden anxiety.

"Gather them—and hurry," the man said. "Leave the hammer."

Crixus took his scrolls, tucked into his pack, and the leather sack that contained his gold bars. The hammer he secured to his saddle and felt strange without its weight at his side. The boy led Gavri away, clicking his tongue at her.

"Ready."

The man turned to climb rickety wooden steps connected to an elevated receiving area. Crixus cleared his throat. "You're Heckur, right?"

"Aye." Heckur paused. "Torrek told me you were foreign. Keep your mouth shut in the castle walls. Mistakes are not tolerated here."

"Perhaps you can instruct me—"

"I just did," Heckur snapped. "The masters will decide what to do with you. Until then, you wait." Heckur strode into the castle without waiting for Crixus, who hitched his pack onto a shoulder and scrambled to keep up.

The wide, dark passage took them into the guts of the castle. The scent of food cooking in kitchens set his stomach to rumbling. Servants rushed past them bearing trays, laundry, bottles of wine, and metal contrivances. Heckur pushed the servants aside without ire or patience. A left turn brought them through a small door that opened into a magnificent vaulted room. The door itself had been concealed by the intersection of two tapestries. Each reached to the ceiling, forty feet above their heads. Oil lamps burned and suffused the room with warm, dim, ochre light. Water feebly spurted from the middle of a reflecting pool. Cushioned benches lined the walls.

"Wait here." Heckur said. "I'll give notice that you wish an audience." The tone of the man's voice gave Crixus no confidence. He turned to leave.

“Please,” Crixus tugged at his sleeve. Quickly dipping into his money pouch, he produced an austru. “They will not know me from a nameless peasant. Tell them an artesano has arrived from Roma to... to...” He searched for an enticing sales pitch that the man would remember. The listless fountain in the middle of the room gave him an idea. “... to make fountains like that one proudly splash the ceilings of Castle Nistru, instead of resembling a puddle of rainwater.”

Heckur looked at the fountain, then the ceiling, and grunted. He took the coin and left through the same concealed door.

Crixus seated himself on a bench. Fidgety at first, he calmed down and realized how sore his legs were from his long wait in the square and the grueling climb and descent into the valley. He exhaled and leaned his head back against the wall. At last he had reached his destination; the moment of truth was at hand. The salient details of his pitch, worked over and over in his mind during the last month, fled from his grasp. He breathed slowly to calm himself.

It was a reasonable guess that a concealed spring or mountain stream emptied into the castle, or that the battered aqueduct he spotted still carried water. A stream would be easier to work with, building up the pressure through gravity. Architectural aesthetics outside the castle did not appear to be a priority for the Lamiae—not that they needed to cut costs on an aqueduct project. All the evidence pointed to an iron grip on the resources of their region and a healthy tribute system with neighboring villages.

Crixus unfolded the blueprints he brought, congratulating himself on keeping the designs vague and general. He could draw their attention to the plumbing works depicted on the villa layout, explaining how it applied to their castle. The fountain in the room was an example that the existing plumbing channels could be adapted to higher pressure streams.

An echoing footstep startled him. He looked up to see a servant crossing the room in his direction. He gathered his scrolls, heart thumping, and stood with a smile on his face. Courteous, pleasant, confident, he reminded himself.

The servant passed him without a glance and exited through the hidden door.

Deflated, Crixus sat again, and after a few moments resumed studying his scrolls. Any moment now, he would be called upon to pitch his services, a presentation that would restore the course of his life to its previous promise.

Ten minutes passed. He strolled over to investigate the reflecting pool and fountain. Algae grew in black splotches along the joints. The water was a foot deep and tasted of minerals. Potable—barely—but not ideal. Particulate matter suspended in the water indicated filthy pipes or earthen channels. The sputtering fountain's jet broke the surface only by an inch. Testing its pressure would require him to wade into the pool, so he settled for a visual study.

The water itself exhibited no reddish coloration so his guess was wrong, at least as far as this fountain was concerned. There could be other fountains, public ones that gave the Lamiae their insidious reputation. Thus far he saw no blood at all.

Crixus sat on the bench for an hour, forcing himself to contemplate the water and the possibilities for improvements. His anxiety bubbled beneath the surface like the unhappy fountain. Arriving so late at night might have been a faux pas in Nistru, or it might be just what was expected of residents who enjoy a reputation for nocturnal affairs. Without any information from Heckur, he would just have to wait until he was given an audience.

Nervous energy overcame his fatigue, but his limbs felt hollow. He paced the room, swinging his arms. Without windows, he could not be sure of the time, but it had to be past midnight. When his eyes began to itch, he splashed water on his face and drank from the fountain. His stomach rumbled when the water hit it, so he ate some of the jerky Torrek had given him. Torrek must have known Crixus would be left alone in the foyer for a substantial wait, but what did the gift of food imply?

With the addition of Torrek's jerky, I have enough food for two days. Which should be more than enough, really. How can they ignore me for that long? I'm being foolish, he decided. Legends aside, no one is going to grant me an audience at midnight. Most likely, I'll be invited to a breakfast meeting, or tea before lunch. Nobility hate to be rushed.

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Crixus opened his eyes to a searing pain in his back. He had fallen asleep on the bench, twisting to fit on the narrow seat. Muscles already tender from the climb through the mountains howled in protest at his poor choice of sleeping arrangements. Rubbing the grime out of his eyes, he surveyed the room and his

belongings. Nothing had changed. Without a window, he didn't know if it was still night. The winding path that Heckur had taken to reach the grandiose foyer had thrown off his bearings, and he was loathe to leave his post. He ate the last of his dried fruit as breakfast, drank more fountain water, and changed into his other pair of clothes while watching over his shoulder.

One last issue clawed at him: the foyer had no toilet. He explored the walls behind the tapestries but found only the main entrance and the concealed door. His search became urgent.

“By the gods,” he said out loud, startling himself. “Am I to piss in their fountain?”

If he was being watched, it would be the ultimate insult to his hosts. Yet could he afford to leave the foyer?

He had no choice; he would soon reach the limits of his body. Casting a look back at his pack and scrolls, he pushed the concealed door open and stepped into the dark hallway. Servants veered around him with trays of food and crystal decanters filled with dark red liquid.

Blood.

In the dim light, it was an evil ruddy brown; the heavy odor of its wake clogged the air of the small corridor. The trays glided without tilting or spilling in the servants' able hands, though their furrowed brows attested to a high level of concentration. They disappeared into the shadows before he could utter a word.

Looking both ways, Crixus decided to investigate the direction the servants had originated. Privies were often located near a kitchen, in order to take advantage of mutual drainage and reduce the pipe work. The jagged passage led him to a kitchen where a dozen servants of both genders slaved over stoves and cutting boards. Meat slabs hung from the ceiling, the size of hogs. He almost swooned at the stench of rotting meat and vegetables.

Crixus pointed at the nearest scullery maid, a pale lump of a woman. “Where is your privy?”

She frowned and shook her head. The other kitchen staff chattered at each other about the intruder in an unfamiliar language.

“Privy,” he said, controlling his panic. “Bathroom. Toilet.”

The woman shrugged, her watery eyes watching him with caution.

Cursing, Crixus pantomimed a squat. “Toilet,” he said again. The staff cackled, nudging each other to see the comical foreigner making a fool of himself. The woman before him suppressed a laugh and pointed to the back corner of the kitchen. He hurried across the slimy stone floor to a narrow door. The privy was little more than a hole over a cesspool. The methane vapors stung his eyes to tears and he had to hold his breath as he relieved himself.

He staggered out of the privy and the kitchen, ignoring the giggles as he passed. He made a frantic dash back to the foyer. There his belongings sat undisturbed. The fountain burbled. The oil lamps flickered.

No change.

Crixus slumped on the bench again. Night and morning had passed, yet mocking laughter had been the only human acknowledgment of his presence.

“Damn it.” The echoes of the curse diffused on the tapestries.

He entertained the paranoid fantasy that they had come for him when he left the room. He entertained the dream of walking out of the foyer and bumping into Torrek, who would cheerfully introduce him to a vampire janitor with a list of complaints about the plumbing. He even tried to imagine what Barida was experiencing right now, if she were still alive. He suspected she was.

Geet and Madella, on the other hand, were skittish enough to become lunch. The decanters of blood were large and plentiful: at least four gallons total. Could they have been filled with animal blood? He had seen pigs as they rode through the valley and carcasses in the kitchen...

Time stretched and contracted like honey in the cavernous foyer. His thoughts raced, or they crawled like snails across a roadway, waiting for a servant to come by and trod on him. He reviewed his scrolls and floor plans over and over, packing them away in disgust every time. Each reading gave him new reasons to question their validity in Nistru. He wished fervently for his pen and parchment to sketch out ideas for improvements.

Folded up and crushed to the bottom of his hastily assembled pack was his note to Kharrina. He resisted reading it for hours, but at last succumbed to temptation. *I hoped, and I still hope, that I can mitigate the damage I've done by creating new opportunities for the Guild in Minq. May the gods send wind to these sails so that I can begin that process sooner.* So he wrote when his hope had wrapped itself around his ignorance of Minq like a silken scarf. In the start of his second day of waiting for the Lamiae to acknowledge him, he envied the naï

His travels had not only carried him away from Rond but also from ordinary interactions with his fellow man. As an artisan, he took pride in hard work and craftsmanship. At the conclusion of a project he would pack his tools with satisfaction; and when he fell in love with Kharrina, it was those quiet moments of joy he hoped most to share with her.

And he also took pride in helping Gavri advance through a Guild controlled by provincial old men, and in finding work for friends with strong backs, and even standing a stranger a mug of ale in his favorite tavern. Every act gave him the same sense of accomplishment that his job provided him. The Crixus of Rond had been a jovial man who treasured his collection of friends and associates.

For a fugitive, those ties were severed—possibly forever. If the Lamiae did not make him rich, he didn't know how he could ever return to his friends and family. Each friend he made since he lost the Guild's gold had been merely a passing acquaintance, a stepping stone to his next goal. Orazio, Sheirra, Torrek... if he saw them again, what could he say aside from reporting his progress on his quest?

Now he had only one friend whom he might have already lost. This one took the pathetic form of a frightened girl on the verge of womanhood, stolen from her home and clinging to the only person to show her a sliver of kindness. The Lamiae had sent their creeping exultants to drag Barida into the depths of Castle Nistru. The few chambers he'd seen seemed to be unimportant ones that few Lamiae ever bothered to set foot in, yet they already dwarfed the scale of the most regal buildings of Rond. How could he ever find her in their dens, assuming he could win such unfettered freedom of movement?

Yet he made her a promise— a qualified one, but a promise nevertheless, to find her as soon as they let him.

The pang of loneliness that speared his heart was so alien, so profound, that he could only perceive it from a distance. His isolation encompassed him as the skies did a bird above the ocean. Should he die in the next few days, no one would notice anything other than the stench. We humans truly are herd animals, he thought. We're entirely dependent on the sound of each other's bodies, our grunting and spitting. Few men can live on a mountaintop, alone with the snowy vistas and mountain lions.

I'd even welcome the company of a vampire.

21. Audience

Crixus marked the passage of time in sips from the fountain. He concluded that his thirst grew unbearable after three hours, so four sips spanned half a day. After six sips, he chanced a run to the kitchen and its horrendous privy. The day had disappeared in a featureless blur punctuated by catnaps and pacing. Nothing changed in the foyer, not even the oil lamps, which he speculated drew from a central reservoir.

He had consumed the rest of his dried foods throughout the long day, out of boredom as much as hunger. The debate with himself over whether to peel off another bite of jerky kept him occupied for hours. Passing the midway point on his rations gave him a bittersweet pleasure, as if he were casting himself into a deep pool with no thought of the rocks below. Hours later he cursed himself for indulging his weakness. He brought more of Greater Rond to the outback of Minq than he had planned, including a city dweller's notorious complacency.

Without the courage to leave his post and find a window, he could only guess at the time, but his body told him it was nearing nine o'clock. Vampires are nocturnal, he promised himself, and now is the time they'll come to speak to me. I should have slept during the day to match their sleep cycle.

He shook out his clothes and rinsed his face, then awarded himself another sip. Fatigue threatened to plant him on the bench again, but he slapped at his arms and paced to ward it away. Tonight is the night. Word must have reached the Lamiae that I await them.

Hours passed, his thirst grew, and no one appeared in the foyer. Giving in to his needs, he drank and reclined on the bench. I must stay awake, Crixus repeated. I must.

The stone cradled the back of his head, and he closed his eyes to think of Kharrina's smile.

A foul breath across his cheeks snapped him out of his catnap. A shadowy form blocked the lamplight. His dazed eyes focused on a nightmarish mask of pale, wrinkled flesh, laced with fine blue veins, a collapsed and porous nose, and mouth with a few rotted teeth. The creature's eyes had been blue but cataracts

rendered them an inhuman gray. It—or rather, he—studied Crixus from a distance of two inches, arms propped up on the bench.

“Yah!” Crixus yelled, scooting back from the apparition.

The old man—for it was an old man, in a silk tunic that did not hide his skeletal limbs—wheezed, looking back and forth as though blind. He emitted a sound from his throat that his tongue made no effort to shape, so that Crixus could hear the vibrations unseating phlegm. Hands rheumy and spotted groped for Crixus and found his scrolls. Crixus yanked them out of the way before the apparition could grip them.

“Who... who are you?” Crixus said.

The man tilted his head, re-situating folds of dry flesh that had been wrinkles since before Crixus was born. The effect was much like a turtle taking in its surroundings. He staggered back from the bench in angular steps that appeared to be the result of muscles spasms. Without speaking, he crept toward the main entrance of the foyer in a jerking, spider-like creep along the wall that inspired disgust and pity in Crixus. As if listening to an unheard rhythm, the old man wheezed and spat at odd intervals. The fountain bubbled on, swallowing his footfalls as he creaked out of the foyer.

Crixus finally exhaled a breath. He rubbed the sting of sleep out of his eyes. The old man had spooked him badly. He drank deep of the fountain water and washed his face and hair. His face, reflected in the rippling waters, seemed haggard. The night could be young or already over. He had no idea. Given the surprise visit of the unsettling man, he decided to try to stay awake for as long as possible.

Hours and hours passed while he fought against his heavy eyelids. Forgoing the bench, he nearly dozed off while standing. He traversed the foyer in laps like a prisoner in a cell. I am a prisoner of my own greed, he lamented. Why haven't I demanded lodging, or, better, left for an inn?

At last exhaustion overcame him and he dozed off in the corner, curled up like a child. He awoke an unknown time later, still alone in the foyer.

*

Anxiety had filled his stomach for his second day in the foyer, but by the third day (or was it the fourth?) hunger pains drove all other thoughts from his mind. He drummed up the courage to venture to the kitchen, where he was able to beg a carrot and a potato from the scullery maid despite the language barrier. She gave him the vegetables without compassion, more to drive him away. Never before had he met poor folk who were less hospitable.

Crixus kept a mental list of the times he dozed off or left the room and tormented himself with speculation about tragic coincidences of timing. He could not treat the foyer as his own campground to piss and shit in without concern. Any servant or Lamia coming to meet him would have no foreknowledge of how long he waited, nor would they accept any excuses for uncivilized behavior. It was a test of endurance to remain presentable for days on end without facilities or a private room.

His thoughts strayed to Sheirra, the last woman to whom he made love. It was strange to consider after so many passionate thoughts about his fiancé. Sheirra might have been a courtesan, but their ordeal together created a bond which he believed to be real. Her body had been more lush than Kharrina's; pale, soft, and inviting. The intensity with which he experienced orgasms in her bed could have stemmed from his emotional vulnerability as a fugitive or from her libidinous skills. Either way, he allowed himself the morbid speculation of taking Sheirra as a wife in lieu of a return to Rond. It would not be so bad, he had to admit. Sheirra possessed an intelligent practicality that appealed to him.

He believed his catnaps only lasted twenty minutes, but upon waking from one, his back had seized up so tautly that he doubted his reckoning as he stretched and massaged it back to flexibility. How can anyone judge the duration of sleep? And the quality, as well... he hadn't dreamed since arriving in Nistru. Some philosophers insisted the soul reconstituted itself during deep sleep. If so, what damage had Crixus done to his soul by sustaining a state of semi-wakefulness for days on end?

Crixus stood, resolute. He would walk through the main entrance and find someone, a butler or housemaid, who would end his wait. Or at the very least help him schedule an appointment, like civilized businessmen.

Ten feet into the wide corridor, he looked back at his belongings. Anxiety filled him. Was he making a mistake? The last denizen of the castle to know his name

left him in that foyer. While that had been three days ago, customs might differ in Minq. As Torrek had warned, he had to leave Rond behind. Besides, he could offend his hosts by attempting to subvert their process.

Defeated by uncertainty, he returned to the bench and slumped over.

*

As counted by parched sips from the fountain, two more days passed.

Patience and impatience had fused together in Crixus' mind. The scullery maid despised him, he concluded, but gave him food either out of pity or scorn. It was hardly enough to live on, and a month of such a diet would result in an inauspicious end by starvation, but he thanked the gods for the proximity of the kitchen and the strange patronage of the maid regardless.

Sleep deprivation, anxiety, and hunger had taken their toll, so on his next hasty visit to the kitchen, he tried to sip from a decanter of dark liquid. It was blood, but he never tasted it; the scullery maid took up her cleaver and swung at his hand. He snatched his fingers out of the knife's way before they were lost to him. The cleaver embedded itself in the wooden cutting board with an authority that would have cost him his hand had it connected. He ran with his single carrot and looked back to see black anger in the old woman's eyes. She would tolerate him no more. The blood was sacred.

Dazed and chewing slowly on his last meal for the foreseeable future, he thought nothing of Kharrina, Sheirra, the gold, Gavri the horse or Gavri the girl, Barida, or even his mother. Thanks to his skirmish with the maid, he gave up his claim to the forbearance of women. Next, all men. Another few days left alone and he would be dinner for the blind old spider.

A moment of delirious relief enveloped him and he wept tears of joy. Kharrina was lost to him forever, which meant he could leave the foyer. Finally, after so long, he was free. He would wander Minq, languageless and foolish, saluting each sunrise with an apology that he had been away so long, after thirty two years of a fruitful relationship.

“Ser.”

Crixus blinked. A servant in an improbable headdress stood before him,

speaking in a recognizable tongue. A red sleeveless tunic fell below his knees. Tights wrapped his arms and legs.

“Ser.”

“Ha,” Crixus said. “Yes?”

“Your request for an audience has been granted. If you would follow me, I will take you to be cleansed.”

Crixus sniffled, and blinked again. “Oh, yes, of course.” His head swam.

The man smiled, his puffy face and narrow eyes bunching up around his pale lips. He picked up Crixus’ sack and scrolls. Crixus fumbled trying to stand. He steadied himself on the man’s shoulder.

“Sorry,” he said. He almost mentioned the long wait, but his determination to put on a good front returned in a welcome burst of clarity. “Sorry, I was a little drowsy. Please lead on.”

The servant inclined his head and led Crixus down the main entrance. Ten feet past the point where Crixus had turned back, it dawned on him that he had been correct all along: patience paid off even in absurd circumstances. He made a silent promise to Kharrina that he would focus on his goal again, despite his brief vacillation.

The corridor had been decorated in a similarly austere manner as the foyer. He wondered what it indicated: that the Lamiae had no need to impress visitors with frescoes and sculptures? They wound through several intersections, passing more similarly clad servants striding purposefully on their duties, and he realized that the castle had been humming with activity while he rotted alone in the foyer. Such was the immensity of the Lamiae’s castle that entire sections could be left unused for months.

The servant took him through a series of iron bound oak doors and Crixus detected a familiar humidity in the air. A bathhouse? Nothing would please him more than a hot bath—or even a cold one.

The room wasn’t large, a third of the size of the foyer and without the soaring ceiling. A stone tub had been built in the center of the room, flanked by a bed of

coals with iron pots of water heating up for his bath. Primitive, he thought with delight, and ripe for improvement.

Still, hot water was hot water, and he shed his clothes without a thought and dipped a foot into the standing water of the tub. It was ice cold, but the addition of a few pots of hot water provided a suitable bath.

“I’ll dispose of your garments,” the servant said, wrinkling his nose.

“No, please. I’ll launder them later.” The clothes had become odiferous. The servant, however, quelled his worries by presenting a folded outfit, similar to his own but with looser pants, for Crixus to wear.

“They’re ceremonial,” the man said. “The Lamiae are strict in their adherence to propriety.”

“And justly so,” Crixus agreed. He splashed water over his grimy shoulders. A brush had been provided for scrubbing but no soap. He rinsed himself as well as he could.

The servant produced a vial of a lavender scented solution and added it to the bathwater. “Anoint yourself,” the man said, leaving no room for dissent.

For bloodsucking monsters, the Lamiae seemed to be sensitive to smells. Crixus felt foolish with so womanly a scent, though he wouldn’t have minded Kharrina smelling thus. As he finished, the servant added a red solution to the water.

“Again,” he commanded. Crixus complied, noting the saccharine taste of the water now. He swooned a bit.

“I haven’t eaten properly for days,” he said as reasonably as he could. “Perhaps I could cozen some food before my appointment so that I don’t offend your masters with a growling stomach.”

The servant tugged at a cord dangling from the wall. Within minutes, a young man in similar attire appeared in the doorway. The servant snapped a few curt words in the same language the kitchen staff used, and the boy bowed and sprinted away.

“Thank you,” Crixus said, inordinately happy. He forced himself to go over the

details of his presentation, although the prospect of a cooked meal distracted him.

The servant set three more vials on the edge of the tub and settled back on his haunches in an uncomfortable-looking, subservient kneeling position. Crixus cleared his throat.

“So, ah, my name is Crixus. How shall I address you?”

“You are not one of the masters, so you may not address me by name. You may call me ‘Procurer,’ if you wish.”

Strange and important, Crixus thought. “Very well. Procurer, whom shall I meet with?”

“You are expected in an hour at the pavilion of Lord Amadine Staal, Grand Vizier of the House Staal, Blood Scholar of the Sixth Degree, Knight of the Emperor’s Brace.”

“I see.” Crixus chewed his lip. “What is Lord Staal like, if I may ask?”

“You may not.” The servant’s expression did not change.

An uncomfortable silence stretched into minutes. The boy arrived with a tray of food: pork, a mix of vegetables, and wine, with a set of legs to balance it on. Crixus wolfed the meal down without regard for any sort of propriety, Nistruvan or Rondan. His gut expressed its delight at genuine sustenance with a volley of rank bubbles in the bathtub. The servants remained expressionless and the lavender and red fluid concealed the odor.

“Thank you,” Crixus said. “I feel much better.”

“Excellent,” the Procurer said. The boy gathered the dishes and departed. Leaning over from his kneeling position, the servant poured the remaining vials into the tub. For good measure, he fetched another blue vial and added it to the mix. The bathwater took on an overwhelming intensity of perfumes, making Crixus’ eyes water.

“What exactly are you scenting me with?”

“Do not concern yourself with trivial issues,” the man said mildly. “Prepare yourself to be obsequious in the presence of one of the divine Lamiae.”

“Oh, have no fear of that. I am honored to be welcomed into their halls.”

The Procurer chuckled. From the folds of his tunic, he brought forth a small crystal vial with a clear liquid. He handled it with more care than the other vials.

“What’s that?”

“Your soul is tainted with the unclean resonance of the outside world. Castle Nistru embodies the sanctity of life. This fluid will cleanse unholiness from your soul; it is thus that the Lamiae will permit your presence.” Before Crixus could respond, he poured the clear liquid into the bath. “Relax and let it do its work.”

“Hmm.” Crixus made a show of splashing the water on his chest. “Yes, I can feel it cleansing me. I feel at peace.”

“It requires ten minutes to enter your body.”

“Oh. Well, perhaps it is the soothing perfumes that put me at ease.” He sank lower in the tub.

“No doubt. Shall I warm the bath?” The Procurer tipped another pot of hot water into the bath. Crixus had to admit taking a certain satisfaction in having his bath attended to, rather than drawing it himself from a tap. He felt regal.

The vapors of the perfume, and presumably the distillate, relaxed his limbs. These folk knew already of the universal pleasures of a hot soak, so a bathhouse installation might be an easy sale. Their feudal system would provide a superfluity of manpower for the task.

After a few minutes, he noticed his fingers had grown numb as if they fell asleep from lack of circulation, yet they didn’t tingle. Instead, flexing them above the water, he had the sensation that his fingers had opted for a vacation. If it was a side effect of sleep deprivation, he rather liked it. The numbness enveloped his legs next, then his arms. He turned his head to ask the servant a question, and the languid motion of his neck muscles under his skin soothed him further. The Procurer had stepped back from the tub... or had the room become larger and Crixus too focused on the bath to notice?

The cloying scent of the bathwater—now more a solution than actual water—swirled in his nose, less oppressive than before. He detected veins of different fragrances, creating a visual impression of a multicolored tapestry. The clear liquid refracted light, light uniquely defined by his olfactory senses, pulsing from silver to black, through the spectrum of colors.

Two servants in red tunics entered the room, standing at attention. Crixus could not determine if they were male or female; his perception of them hovered between delicate masculinity and boyish femininity. Their blond hair had been bowl cut with a wavelike curve to it. Their arms and legs seemed disproportionate to their tiny torsos.

The room began to ascend as if attached to pulleys. The Procurer and his two androgynous servants took no notice of the movement. Crixus became concerned that his consciousness would not ascend as quickly as the room. It was, after all, earthbound.

“Ingenious,” he told the Procurer, but was unable to articulate further. The man smiled in a fatherly manner—could in fact be Crixus’ father—and gestured for the servants to come forward with the new clothes. He helped Crixus stand, in spite of the increasing upward movement of the room. It was an elevator, Crixus guessed, having heard of them from colleagues. He had ridden on similar constructions set up for building aqueducts across a river gorge. This one didn’t sway in the wind. Hauling so much stonework must require hundreds of strong backs!

The Procurer towed Crixus off, taking care not to become damp himself, and wearing cloth gloves to prevent skin contact. Quite considerate, Crixus thought, particularly for those who are sensitive to touch. The androgynes helped him into the ceremonial robe and draped a sash over his neck.

He cupped the shorter one’s chin and puckered up to kiss her—for he decided to make them female—but she pulled away, laughing at him. The Procurer led him away from the tub, brushed his hair flat against his skull, and pulled a hood over his head.

“You will wish to have your scrolls,” the Procurer told him. The serving girls—wait, one was certainly a boy—carried his belongings.

“Yes, yes I shall. They will be...” He lost his train of thought.

The Procurer tugged at a braided rope hanging from the ceiling. A tiny bell dinged over their heads. “Excellent. Just in time.”

“We’re in the sky?” Crixus wished there was a window.

The Procurer steered him towards the door. “Lord Staal will see you now.”

22. Lord Staal

He led Crixus into a dark corridor lined with red lamps inset into stone walls. Crixus' hands seemed to lose their skin in the red light. When he turned to show the Procurer his exposed muscles, writhing like worms, the servant had disappeared. At the end of the corridor, a red rectangle appeared. Crixus began to walk towards it, only to find the floor rising and the ceiling descending, so that he had to duck his head, then crouch, then fall to hands and knees. The rectangle grew larger in his field of vision, but too slowly, as if it were retreating or the corridor stretching. Dragging himself by his fingertips, face upturned as far as it would go, he gasped as the rectangle expanded all at once. It enveloped him in a warm embrace, growing into a vaulted room peppered with red leather chairs and elegant tables. Other shapes in the room failed to resolve themselves in his gaze. The heavy scent of blood thickened the air.

A slender man with silvery hair that flowed down his back reclined in a couch, facing away from Crixus, humming a disjointed melody. The man turned to watch Crixus crawl into the room. His face had been built in downward slanting angles, at turns furious and enigmatic. A wide, sensuous mouth curved in a smile, too slowly to be pleasant. His forehead shone smoothly up to a widow's peak of glistening pale hair.

He extended a slender hand, revealing long sharpened nails. Closing his hand around an invisible rope, he tugged, and Crixus found himself on his feet, lurching forward. He collapsed onto a loveseat in a fetal position. A mewling sound escaped his throat as the slender man stood over him and placed a cool hand on Crixus' forehead. He caressed his face, his neck, and inspected his palms. Crixus could not move a muscle as the man studied him.

Moving languorously out of Crixus' sight, he returned with a needle the length of a finger, fitted with a flat metal handle. His firm hand gripped Crixus' head, holding it still as he leaned forward and inserted the needle into Crixus' tear duct. Applying gentle pressure, he pushed the needle deep into the nasal cavity, tapped around the sensitive walls, and then released the needle to jut out from Crixus' eye. Crixus, already partly paralyzed, feared blindness if he twitched at all. The numbness prevented an involuntary pain reflex.

With another needle, the dignified man performed the same operation to his

other eye. The cool metal of the needles irritated his tissues; he wanted to sneeze. If he spoke, the vibrations would dislodge the needles and damage his eyes. Helpless, he waited for his captor to act.

The slender man brought forth a metal wire, so finely braided that it hung like a string, and attached it to each of the needles. He tied the ends of the wire to a metal box the size of a loaf of bread, gilded with diamonds and silver. A reservoir held a silvery liquid: quicksilver, lethal in small doses. Crixus didn't understand what the man was doing, nor could he prevent it. If the man injected quicksilver into his eyes, he would die.

The man manipulated a dial on the side of the box and the needles shook with some form of energy that made them hot. The pain was excruciating. Crixus' vision went black and his brain seemed to turn into mist. Images flashed through his consciousness of family and friends and the vistas he glimpsed on the way here.

"You may speak now. What is your name?" The man's accent resembled Torrek's but without the roughness. He drew out his vowels as if he had never been interrupted in his life.

"Crixus... Oraan..." The words vibrated the needles but caused no further pain.

"Very good, Crixus Oraan. I am Lord Staal. Do not move."

Crixus gulped.

"This device renders your soul corporeal in the form of an emulsion behind your forehead. The longer it runs, the more your soul evaporates. You see, it is accustomed to the lighter vapors of the aether. I shall draw a small sample of your soul for my own collection. If you cooperate with will and brevity, little more will be lost."

The Lamia made a small adjustment to the needles. Crixus felt a distinct drip in his nasal cavities. His heart swelled with terror.

"Let's begin." Staal cleared his throat and took a languid sip from a chalice of blood. "You journeyed here from Rond, across the sea." He paused then snapped, "Confirm or deny that statement, child."

“Yes.” The sibilant word hurt his eyes.

“Good. Are your motives personal, financial, or political?”

“F-financial.”

Staal nodded with satisfaction. “Much less tiresome than the latter. You may find it difficult to speak in long sentences, but I wish you to explain your purpose.”

Crixus struggled for breath to speak. “I want... t-to... fix... plumbing.”

The Lamia’s jaw dropped. His muscles twitched and his face lit up in a smile of solicitous delight. “Remarkable! You are either stupid, or insane... or there is more to your story. I am pleased.” He snapped his fingers and the Procurer wove into view with the scrolls cradled in his arms and a piece of parchment: Crixus’ letter to Kharrina. Staal picked up the letter.

“Please... don’t...” Crixus gasped.

Staal raised an eyebrow. “We are never denied our pleasures, Crixus. But you intrigue me, so I won’t have you slain yet.” He unfolded the note and read it with difficulty. The Procurer leaned forward and they struggled through the unfamiliar letters together. They finished and Staal barked a laugh. The Procurer tittered and bowed his head.

“Wonderful! You’re a fugitive, come to sell us... what?” He plucked at a scroll and unraveled it. His brow furrowed and he mumbled to himself. Dropping the scroll on the ground, he opened the next, and the next.

“I’m not sure exactly what these depict, but I assume they are plumbing constructions?”

“Y-yes, Lord.”

Staal leaned close. “You stole from your Guild of—plumbers?—and you came all the way to Nistru, despite the frightening legends of the Lamiae, to fix our pipes?”

“Advanced... systems... fountains...” Crixus lost sight for a moment. His thoughts raced and bled away. The device was killing him and destroying his

soul in the process. He fought for air through his mouth.

Staal licked his teeth thoughtfully. He put a finger to his cheek. “Hmm,” he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Hmm. Procurer, fetch my siphon.”

The Procurer bowed and returned with a tray with silver implements. Staal took a silver tube from it and the servant picked up a scalpel. He stepped forward to make a quick, precise cut along the side of Crixus’ wrist. Blood welled up from the wound; Staal leaned over, holding the siphon between his lips, and sucked up the blood. Crixus could feel the the blood being drawn out of his vein.

Staal paused, letting Crixus’ blood spurt from the tube as he licked his lips. “Unique,” he said. “Coarse in texture, yet sweet, with an aftertaste from flora I’ve never encountered. Lady Beryyal will turn green with envy.” He winked at the Procurer. “Get a sample of his distillate and close him up. I’ll keep him.”

Crixus’ gaze flicked wildly about the room as his eyes stung more and more. Staal and the Procurer’s bodies elongated to touch the ceiling. His legs withered, his arms sagged.

Kharrina stepped into view bearing an armful of white towels. She gave Crixus a concerned look but smiled as Lord Staal caressed her cheek and slender neck. Her eyes danced with reverence for the Lamia. She bowed to him and left the room.

Lord Staal licked the siphon clean of Crixus’ blood and strode out of the meeting hall behind Kharrina.

23. The Doctor

The pair of androgynous servants dragged Crixus through chambers and passages. Crixus perceived it through a haze. Terrifying emptiness occupied his head where the Lamia had casually rendered his immortal soul into fluid. In a near paralysis, he believed his organs could shut down at any moment, but the two servants acted as though he had merely consumed too much ale.

Two stairwells, one down, one up, took a brutal toll on Crixus' shins, but the numbness blocked the pain of the contusions. They dropped him in front of a wooden door, fumbled with keys, and unlocked it. Crixus curled up tighter into a ball. They conferred for a moment in their hushed servant's tongue then crouched and scooted him across the floor into the dark room. He came to rest against a bed.

With the lamp lit, the details of the room swam into view and out again. The two petite servants struggled to lift him up onto the bed, and once they succeeded fell back, gasping for breath. One departed, returning minutes later with his pack and scrolls. Meanwhile his (or her—Crixus still could not tell) colleague removed the ceremonial clothes and tucked a nude and shivering Crixus into the bed. The soft sheets gave him his first indication that his ordeal was, for the moment, on hold.

The servants doused the lights and left the room. Before Crixus fell asleep he heard the tumblers of the lock clattering together.

He slept for a full day, tossing and turning from fever dreams. Faces flew past of everyone he encountered in the last year. His fractured mind attempted to drop them into slots of a soil sample box to contain their memories, yet it dissipated into forgetfulness every time it filled.

At last he woke with a powerful thirst and a need to urinate. He found a candle in a candleholder and a bowl of matches. Crixus lit the wick and stared at the flame. Whatever Staal had done to him had been partly alleviated by the healing power of sleep, though his body still ached, his eyes itched, and his shins had turned blue with bruises. Dull pain pounded in his temples. The scent of the cleansing bath clung to his skin.

The rooms he inherited dwarfed his apartment in Greater Rond. The chambers—one could not call them merely rooms—featured a wide bed set off by a stone divider, a sunken living area with couches, a desk with a plush leather chair, a dining area contained within elegant screens, a closet, and, to his relief, another small room with an enclosed privy and tub. Tapestries on the walls displayed the same heraldic symbol as that in Staal's sitting room: a crescent moon with a single feather cradled in its arms.

Candle in hand, he relieved himself. Even in the water closet, elegant frescoes leapt out from the shadows cast by the candlelight. Lighting an oil lamp, he inspected the tub. A channel running alongside the tub had gone dry and dusty long ago, but he surmised it had once been used to fill the tub with water. Residue blocked a drain at the head of the tub. At one point in time, the Lamiae or their predecessors had enjoyed a greater degree of luxury. He lit all the lamps in the room and surveyed it. The desk contained sheets of parchment, an inkwell, and quills. Fruit and bread had been left on the table; he consumed them on the spot and drank down a decanter of water without pouring it into a glass. He found his clothes hanging in the closet, free of dirt and fresh-smelling, along with an entire wardrobe of fancy attire for court wear. He brushed a hand across the expensive fabrics, but he decided to wear his familiar garments for the time being.

He rooted through the contents of his pack. The androgynous servants had carefully repacked his belongings, but Crixus' note to Kharrina was nowhere to be found. In the corner, the remaining contents of his saddlebags, including his family hammer, had been arranged against the wall. Nothing had been taken: all the gold bars were present. The only item unaccounted for was the note.

A silken rope dangled from the ceiling. A tug sounded a distant bell, as had the rope in the preparation room. Was he entitled to service as well? The room they assigned him was generously appointed. On impulse, he moved to the door. He had been too delirious to note his surroundings after the audience, and now he was curious which direction the servants would approach from. But the door didn't budge when he tried to open it. A few shakes confirmed that a deadbolt of considerable size had been locked from the outside.

Was he a guest or a prisoner? The indistinct images from the audience—the interrogation—gave him few clues to his status.

His head throbbed, so he sat down in the couch and massaged his temples. As he did, the lock rattled and a middle-aged man stepped through the door. He closed the door with care, pocketing a ring of keys. He favored Crixus with a smile both paternal and obsequious.

“I answer your summons, good ser.” He set his black leather satchel on the table by Crixus. “You’re awake at last. I began to worry about my new patient.”

“You’re a doctor?”

The man nodded, disturbing wispy silver strands of his thinning hair. “And you are my patient. The cleansing delivers a terrible shock to the body. Are you in pain right now?”

“Oh gods, all over.”

“Good, good. That’s normal. Anywhere in particular?”

Crixus reviewed his infirmities. “My eyes.”

“That is to be expected. You appear to be a strong man, which helps to resist the effects of your first cleansing. It becomes easier over time.”

Crixus’ eyebrows shot up. “I have to go through that again?”

“To a lesser degree, yes. No foreigner can walk amongst the Lamiae while in your natural state of spiritual disease. After a decade, you need only undergo cleansing once a year.”

Crixus moaned. The doctor removed his hands from his forehead and tilted his face up to him. “Did you find your perceptions measurably altered by the cleansing?”

“Very much so,” Crixus said. He recalled the waves of hysteria and, worse, the vision of Kharrina.

“That’s common. Eventually you’ll find it no more wearing than a night of drinking.” He breathed a little song through his teeth as he peeled back the eyelids to study Crixus’ eyeballs. Nodding to himself, he reached into his bag and brought forth a vial. “Three times a day, one drop per eye.” The doctor put

left the vial on the table. “Headaches?”

“Yes. Around my temples.”

Out of the bag came a canister of white powder. The doctor tapped out a heap onto a square of paper. “A pinch on the tongue whenever you feel pain, no more than four times a day. Wash it down with water.”

“Not blood?”

The doctor leveled a serious look at him. “Don’t joke about that, young man. The Lamiae have a sense of humor—largely at your expense. Give them no excuses.”

“A Red Legionnaire told me to speak only when spoken to.”

“Not a bad policy for a soldier. From what I understand, you are a guest of Lord Staal. You should strive to be entertaining and reverent all at once.”

The doctor handed him a glass. The water washed most of the chalky, astringent taste of the powder out of his mouth. He made a face.

“Tastes like hell but does the job,” the doctor said with a smile.

Crixus leaned his head back as the powder cleared it. “Powerful stuff,” he said, blinking.

The doctor asked him to remove his shirt and lie on his back. First clucking at the dark bruises on his shins, he prodded Crixus with strong fingers, asking him to describe the nature of the pain in each spot. Crixus doubled over when the man poked at his side. Grim, the doctor set out a box of tea, explaining that Crixus’ innards had been strained by the treatment so soon after a period of exhaustion and malnutrition, which in turn preceded injuries.

“No wrestling for you,” he said. “Keep to bed, light exercise consisting only of walking, as much water as you can stand to drink, and piss it out, too. We’re going to cleanse you of your cleansing.”

“The water here could be improved,” Crixus said. “It contains particulates and
—”

“And it’s all we have. Stay away from wine and ale. For the gods’ sake, don’t accept any blood a Lamia offers you.”

“Won’t that be perceived as un-deferential?”

The doctor scowled. “Tell them Doctor Sempri gave you strict orders. They can be like children at times.” He returned to his bag. “Oftentimes,” he muttered.

Crixus drank another glass of water in the spirit of Sempri’s advice. “Staal seems to regard me as a plaything.”

“Pray he grows tired of you quickly.” The doctor put a paper envelope of pills on the table. “Do you expect him to call upon you often?”

“I hope so. I mean to sell him the means to modernize the plumbing of this castle. Our first interview didn’t exactly touch upon the finer points.” His eyes stung at the thought of it.

Doctor Sempri showed him the small brown pills. “If they ask, these are vitamins to restore the balance to your internal system.” The kindly veil fell, and Sempri pierced him with his gaze. “They are not intended to counter the essences used in the cleansing process, nor am I aware of any such effect. Do I make myself clear?”

Crixus fingered the pills. “How often should I take them?”

“Once a day. If you anticipate... stress, take an additional pill before such an event.”

“Thank you, doctor.” He gulped a pill down at once. The doctor’s kindly smile returned. “But are you not Staal’s servant?”

“I’m the physician of his house, yes.” The doctor rolled his shoulders. “But I’m not Nistruvan. You and I have much in common.”

Crixus grinned at him. As Ushe had advised, he had found a friend on the inside. “Where do you hail from?”

“Estra-Cavoy, north of Nistru by a hundred leagues. A poor land, I’m afraid, after Nistru ransacked it.” His face darkened. “I followed my daughter here.”

“You followed... ah, I see.” Crixus looked at his feet. “Is she...?”

“She’s alive and quite well. In fact, I daresay she lives better than I do. She was only fifteen when they took her to be a Sacred Companion.”

“What’s that? A courtesan?”

“More than a courtesan. The Lamiae tire of each other at times. They live too long and enjoy too much luxury, and so they seek out stimulation from new sources. Yet they are not rapacious beasts. They hold themselves high above humanity, thus they cannot simply rape war captives like the rest of us.” He smiled ironically. “No, they have to create consorts who are worthy to stand in their presence. The Sacred Companions are chosen for their intelligence and beauty, be they male or female. They spend a year in seclusion, learning to please the Lamiae and to maintain purity.”

“Like the cleansing.”

“Rather like it, yes, but for months on end. And the Sacred Companions are the only humans permitted to drink blood with the Lamiae. Without this sanctification, it would be a terrible sin.”

“You don’t sound convinced of that.”

Sempri shrugged. “My daughter hardly acknowledges my presence or recalls my name. My idea of sin differs from that of our hosts.”

“But you remain.”

“I do, and I’m well paid. The Lamiae rarely trouble to learn the sciences, unless it’s some obscure occult practice that takes their fancy, like Staal and his devices. Anything that requires rigorous study they shuffle off to a servant or hire an outsider.”

“Like myself.”

“Indeed. Or me, though I intend to leave their service some day.”

“Really? Once you’ve made enough money?”

Sempri became quiet. “The Sacred Companions are not encouraged to age,” he said, not meeting Crixus’ eyes.

Crixus closed his mouth. The casual cruelty demonstrated by Staal was not an aberration. Clearing his throat, he said, “Well, doctor, I’m grateful for your help. Please don’t hesitate to visit me any time you wish to talk of matters outside the Lamiae’s stomach regrets and gassiness.”

Sempri laughed and ran a hand through his silver hair. “They’ve already complained about that to you?”

“About stomachs? No, I was merely joking.”

Sempri stood. “They refuse to believe me when I tell them that even immortals can suffer from bad digestion. It’s too mundane and boring, the worst crime possible in their ideal world. Every time one of them squats and sprays liquid shit, it’s another curse, prophecy, evil spell, or visitation from the infernal realm.” He winked and gathered his bag. “So I can’t tarry today, but I will happily take you up on your offer. In the meantime, bed rest and medicines for you.”

“You won’t find a more cooperative patient.”

The doctor bowed in the Nistruvan manner, arms extended, but bore a sad grin on his face as he backed out the door. The lock sounded again, shutting Crixus in with his infirmities.

24. Charts

Lord Staal unfurled Crixus' scrolls on a stone table carved out of the same material as the floor. The androgynous servants who had brutalized his shins with their negligence remained expressionless as they held his scroll open on the table for the Lamia. Staal ignored their efforts, wandering around the room with a goblet of blood and a rapier, with which he pointed to details on the scrolls or toyed with their clothes and hair. One servant's cowlick gave him considerable pleasure as he nudged it back and forth with the razor sharp blade, while the servant maintained a neutral expression.

"How are your eyes?" Staal asked in an innocent tone. "Still sore?"

"Aye, Lord Staal," Crixus said. "But better every day."

The answer pleased him. "Such candor. Is this a trait of Rond?"

"It's a trait of my family. I suppose many artesans are of similar plainness in speech."

Crixus sat before Staal on a divan in a position meant to appear relaxed but calculated to force him to look up at the Lamiae as he pattered around his study. The room resembled the chamber where Crixus had been tortured but was adorned with portraits of Lamiae of centuries past. The resemblance between Staal and others of his House was incontestable. Crixus wondered which of the portraits depicted Staal himself and which traced back his lineage.

Staal reached out and slapped Crixus' shoulder with his sword. "Relax, my friend. You are clean and worthy to walk in my presence. Do not fear that your foreignness offends me."

"Yes, Lord."

"Good. I am glad we are friends. It takes a man of great personal fortitude to befriend a Lamia in good faith. I sensed that in you right away and later quantified it in your soul's distillate." He sighed and took a sip of blood. "I grow so bored in this damned castle, Crixus. Please try to forgive my apparent strangeness to your sensibilities."

The pathos of his torturer attempting to explain himself was enough to take Crixus aback. He had feared for his life at Staal's hands—was it merely a matter of cultural difference? More important, was there financial gain in allowing himself to believe so?

For now he would play Staal's game. "There is nothing to forgive, my lord. I'm a visitor to your land here, thus subject to your laws."

Staal shrugged. "Well said. Our law dictates that you be clean before you set foot in our sacred chambers. But the soul distillate is a new whim of mine alone. Was the process overly painful?"

Crixus searched for words. "Discomforting. But science is not always able to accommodate personal preference."

Staal's face brightened as a child's would. "My point precisely! Oh, what a *relief* brought out a sheet. He laid it over the scrolls, still stretched by the servants as though they were living paperweights, and

The Lamia's enthusiasm was infectious, and Crixus could not deny that a graph of his own personality was fascinating. "It's hard to argue with these figures. A man strives to know himself, so one could argue that the pain of the procedure is no worse than a lifetime of uncertainty."

Staal grinned. "Agreed. Not many of my fellows are willing to undergo the distillation, in spite of the benefits. They are wedded to their own creature comforts. Thus far I have tested it on servants and peasants. They show mostly the same readings." He retreated to the cabinet and brought back a pile of pages an inch thick. Staal had been busy.

"Without studying the analytical techniques I have mastered, these won't mean much to you." Crixus paged through them, noting similarity in the graphs. "But in essence it confirms empirically what I have always suspected: humans in Nistru are shiftless, unintelligent, subservient, and resentful."

Staal handled the papers with such care that Crixus decided to take a risk. "You think that environmental factors play a part?"

"They certainly do," Staal said, nodding at the observation. "Which is why I've been anxious to establish a mean by testing outsiders. Your little friend Barida,

for instance... though her youthfulness sends the graph flying hither and thither.”

“Ah, Barida,” Crixus said, trying to control his voice as he imagined her with needles in her eyes. “How is she?”

“A delight, I must say. A smart girl for peasant stock. It was through her insistence that I scheduled an audience for you, you know. She deserves a reward for persistence.”

Crixus blinked. He had languished in the foyer for nearly a week. Would they have let him die there but for the pestering of a teenage girl?

“She’s a clever girl,” he said. “She and I became friends on the journey to Nistru.”

“So she told me, and you know that is quite forbidden.” Staal frowned then grinned at him. “Which pleases me even more! Are you thirsty? Wish you some wine?”

Crixus gulped and recovered his composure. “Doctor Sempri ordered me to keep to water for now.”

“Very good.” He turned to one of the androgynous servants. “Fetch the new girl. Bring water for my friend.” The servant nodded and, with the timing of a dancer, released the corners of Crixus’ scroll, only to have the other servant adjust its hold on it as it curled up.

Staal set aside the charts. “Enough. Let us discuss your drawings here.” He pushed the remaining androgyne aside. “Explain this one.”

“Well,” Crixus said, “this is a simple plan for a villa, not as applicable to the magnificent edifice that is Castle Nistru. However, it does demonstrate basic concepts of moving water from where it is to where you wish it.” Crixus traced the path of the water through the system on the scroll. “We use the natural mechanisms of gravity and vacuum to redirect the water.”

“These villas are common in Rond?”

“Common among the landed, yes.”

Staal flicked the sword back and forth, making Crixus fear for his eyes. “By ‘landed’ you mean aristocracy.”

“Or members of the mercantile class. Essentially, those who can afford private plumbing. The rest of us patronize a public bathhouse.”

“Fascinating. Bathing in public with the commoners. You’ve done this?”

Crixus fished the bathhouse proposal from the scrolls. “Aye, Lord. Rond is not so, ah, exclusive as Nistru in this regard. The bathhouses do charge an admission fee, however, so the impoverished frequent the cheaper baths.” In the modest bathhouse in Restia where he had soaked with Kharrina, rich and poor mingled from sheer practicality; Restia had been unable to support more than a handful of baths. “It’s not so shocking.”

“To humans, perhaps. The Lamiae obey a higher calling.” The seriousness in his voice, as sharp and cold as a blade, dissipated in an instant. “Imagine, lords and ladies splashing about like babes. Ridiculous and amusing!” He tapped his lips with the flat of the blade.

Crixus gave him the most agreeable smile he could muster. “In some ways the public baths are easier to construct than a series of individual baths, especially in an edifice as labyrinthine as Castle Nistru.”

“Oh, I am just letting my imagination run away with me. There’s no chance Lamiae would bathe together. No”—he pointed at the villa—“this is more appropriate for us.”

A throat cleared behind them. “Water, my lord.”

Barida placed a goblet of water on the corner of their table. Staal scowled at it. “Put it on the serving table, foolish girl!” he snapped. Barida flinched and moved the goblet. Drops of water spilled on the floor, but Staal didn’t comment. Crixus, however, noticed the Lamia’s knuckles whiten on the hilt of his sword.

Barida flushed red and assumed a curtsy position, head bowed but trying to peek at Crixus. Staal broke into another smile, his rage gone. “Crixus, it’s your other patron. Say hello to your friend, Barida.”

Barida straightened and beamed at Crixus. They had applied makeup to her so

that she appeared years older, like an adult woman. “Greetings, ser,” she said. “I’m so glad you and Lord Staal have become friends.”

Staal swatted her on the rump with the flat of his sword, still smiling. “The Lamiae don’t befriend the lower races, silly thing. But for the sake of argument, I will concede that Crixus and I are getting along fabulously. You were quite right to bring my attention to him.” He winked at her and she giggled. “I’m quite fond of her, too,” he said to Crixus. “She’s alert and bold, unlike the little mooncalves they usually send me. Fair, too, though a few years of a proper diet will fill out her womanly assets.” His gaze wandered over Barida’s body. The serving uniform showed her still-developing bosom and freckled shoulders, while flowing loose around her waist. Gay red and blue tights wrapped her legs.

“She is quite charming,” Crixus agreed carefully. “And lucky to have a kindly master.”

“Oh, yes, very much so,” Barida said.

Staal raised his sword point to hover in front of her face. “But she still blurts out her mind like a farm girl,” he said. “I’m sure they told you that won’t do, right, Barida my dear?”

“Yes, Lord.” She gulped and tried not to stare at the sword.

Staal deposited the sword on the table. “Splendid. Take care to remember that, and you’ll soon be my favorite. Now stand still and await orders.”

She curtsied again and clasped her hands in front of her dress, head slightly bowed, an unnatural position she had certainly been taught by the servant staff. Staal had already turned away, and Barida began to relax into an informal slouch, but Crixus raised an eyebrow at her to resume her proper posture.

“Crixus, let me enlighten you about rank. Even within your species, class doesn’t mix with class. It is natural for the strongest and most intelligent to rise to the top of the social pyramid. You yourself have experienced mobility, as befits your skills and entrepreneurial spirit... that is, before your apparent fall, which you simply *must* tell me about.

“An artisan as yourself doesn’t ascribe emotional significance to the pipe you lay. It is a means to an end, a material to be shaped. This mirrors the relationship

between the Lamiae and humanity. However”—he picked up the sword again and etched in the air—“one lacks respect for an artisan who mistreats his tools and supplies, am I correct?”

“Aye, lord.” Crixus didn’t fancy being equated to a terracotta pipe fitting, but it paled beside the torments Staal had inflicted on him.

Staal wandered about the room swishing his sword. “Our plight is unique, however. Our tools speak and have feelings, crude and unrealized as they might be. You know that you can only whip a horse so often before it resents the rider and throws him.”

The Lamia stood over Barida and leaned on the sword as if it were a cane. “If you never whip the horse, though, it believes that its own whims take precedence—making it an unsuitable steed.” Barida blushed as Staal leaned close. “The ideal relationship, then, is for the superior to practice moderation in discipline, and the inferior to lack the rebellious impulse to disrupt this ancient system.” He breathed on Barida’s neck. “This little one could be a perfect servant if she learned to stifle her desire for free, unfettered will, which only adds entropy to a way of life that has existed for my people for thousands of years and will continue to exist centuries after her bones are dust.”

“I’m sure she’s learning that,” Crixus said.

“You misunderstand me,” Staal said. “One does not display patience with a cracked pipe, correct?” The sword came up under her throat. Her eyes widened with fear. “You are *both* servants to me, Crixus. Today you have displayed some valuable assets that will help me in my various pursuits. This little oneh

“My lord?” Barida croaked.

“You see? I did not address her. You are invisible!” His voice rose to a shout. Barida flinched. “So pretty, too. I abhor waste, Crixus.”

Crixus stepped forward, hands out in supplication. At Staal’s serpentine glare, he backed away. “Young people adapt at their own speeds, lord. Often the slowest to learn are the wisest in the long run.” Staal made a sour face and Crixus hurried on. “For an immortal like you, grooming an outstanding servant has its own rewards.”

The sword point hesitated then dropped. “You’re quite right, and I don’t mind admitting that,” Staal said, his tone suddenly effervescent. “Haste spoils the adventure, and the gods know how badly we need adventure here.” He petted Barida on the head, for which she trotted out a nervous smile. “I can be impulsive at times. My friends say I have the temperament of an artist.”

“Then perhaps I may be of service,” Crixus said. “Assign her to me as a handmaiden. I’ll put up with her blunders until she is more suitable for sacred company.”

Staal nodded as Crixus made his suggestion, but the last words seemed to inspire a different notion in him. He looked Barida over as a man evaluates cattle, with a thoughtful expression.

“A fine idea,” Staal said. “And I am renowned for giving the perfect gift.” He propped Barida’s chin up with a slender hand. “Child, you will serve Crixus for the time being. Do not allow tales of my friend’s displeasure to reach my ears.”

Barida nodded anxiously.

Staal clapped Crixus on the shoulder, displaying remarkable strength for so graceful a frame. “I must be off to an appointment. We shall meet again tomorrow to speak more of Rond and pipes.”

Without waiting for acknowledgement, he turned his back to them and exited the room. Crixus and Barida shared a glance, and both let out an exhalation.

25. Prisoners

The Procurer returned them to Crixus' quarters. He and Barida paused to watch the door as the lock clacked shut: trapped again.

"How will I fetch your dinner?" Barida said, laying a palm on the door. "That's dumb."

"I suspect they have a reason for it that isn't dumb at all," Crixus said. "Staal is hiding me from his fellows."

Barida grunted. She began to explore his room, opening drawers, peeking in the closet. Crixus wondered what he should say. He felt as though he owed her something.

"Your room is much bigger," Barida said. "There are three other girls in mine. Our room could fit in your bathroom."

"Are they nice?"

Barida screwed up her face. "No. Well, one is, sometimes, when the other girls aren't around. But the oldest one cuffed me the very first day I arrived."

He recalled Ushe's advice. "You should try to make friends," he said. "Sometimes people are cruel at first to establish dominance, but later come to respect you."

"It doesn't matter," she said with a sunny smile, "because we're together now."

With a few quick strides, she crossed the room and hugged him, nestling her head against his chest. He stiffened but patted her back.

"We are, we are." Crixus took her by the shoulders and moved her back. "Barida, come sit with me."

He led her to the couch. She pressed her leg against his and closed her eyes like a housecat.

"Do you know why Lord Staal said you were my 'perfect gift'?"

She shrugged. "He likes to give presents?"

"No, that's not it. 'I am renowned for giving the perfect gift.' That's a strange way to assign a servant to me."

Barida squirmed with a child's delight at keeping a secret. "I don't know."

"You do. What did you tell Staal about me?"

"Nothing. I mean, I told him you were an important man from Rond and you knew things about wells and fountains."

"That's it?"

Her hand crept onto his leg. "Well, I guess I told him a few more things about us."

"Us?"

Barida upturned her head to give him the most adult look she could manage. Her resemblance to Kharrina was striking in this pose.

"I told him you wished to take me to wife."

Crixus bolted upright. "Barida!"

She leapt up and took his hands. "Don't get angry. It worked! We're together now."

"We're not together." Crixus walked away from her, clasping his hands in frustration.

"But you asked for me to be given to you." She bit her lip. "I fibbed a little to Staal, but I thought you liked me."

"I do." He sighed. "And I asked for you because you wouldn't have lasted a week with Staal."

"You think he'd hurt me?"

"I think he would have killed you on the spot just to emphasize a point to me."

Barida sat back down on the couch. She hunched forward, licking her lips, eyes lost.

“Nistru is a dangerous place for young women,” Crixus said. “And foreigners, too, for that matter. Do you realize they left me to rot in that waiting room for a week?”

She nodded.

Crixus returned to the couch and put an arm around her. She was shaking. “You rescued me from my own stubbornness.”

“Why? Why couldn’t you just... go somewhere?”

“I’m here for a reason. I won’t leave without achieving my goal.” He wasn’t sure if he should trust this girl with his ulterior motive.

“Selling them water? Why is that important?”

“The money is important.” Crixus took her hand. “And staying alive is important. The Lamiae are predators, like wolves among sheep. This castle is their hunting grounds. Don’t you think Staal behaves differently than other men you’ve met?”

Barida nodded, a somber look on her face, as if she were digesting the mysteries of the adult world. “He can do as he likes, without getting in trouble.”

“And his whims go hither and thither. He’s probably killed serving girls for spilling a drink.”

“Oh.” Her breath became shallow. Realization was setting in. Crixus held her quaking in his arms. “So he wasn’t playing?”

“He was doing exactly that. It’s all play to him.”

“Then you saved me,” she said, gripping him tightly. “You saved me.”

“For now. As long as he wants my friendship.”

Barida sniffled, fighting back tears. “He should. You’re a good friend.”

“I try to be.”

Crixus stroked her hair as she sniffled and exhaled through her mouth, on the verge of a crying fit.

“I didn’t want any of this,” she said.

“I know.” Neither do I, he thought.

“Basrat is so *boring*

“The best stories are the hardest to live through,” Crixus said. “Mine isn’t much easier, but I brought it upon myself and my fiancé.”

She wiped her nose and looked up at him. “Is that what did you to her?”

“Her?”

“The girl I remind you of.” Barida seemed to have memorized their fleeting conversations.

“Gods, no. I would never be cruel to her. Aside from propose marriage, which has probably caused her enough grief.”

“Is she pretty?”

He nodded and impulsively chucked her under her chin. “As pretty as you are.” Barida blushed and he regretted the gesture, but her tears dried up. “I’ll tell you the story sometime, I promise.” He gazed around the expansive chambers, which now seemed small thanks to the locked door. “I’m not very proud of it.”

““You have to make the best of your time in Nistru,”” Barida intoned. He realized she was quoting him.

“Huh. Thanks.”

Barida searched his face. “I’ll get you water.” She took one of the crystal goblets into the eating area, where a servant had refilled the decanter.

Crixus found his medicines and lined them up. The aches came and went, but the fuzziness in his head had never entirely departed. Barida placed his water on the

table.

“What are these for?”

He described the doctor’s orders, indicating each medicine. The brown pills to offset the cleansing caught her attention.

“Oh, can I have some of those? I threw up for days after the cleansing.” She popped two pills into her mouth. He held the goblet out to her but rather than take it from him, she clasped his hands and pulled the goblet to her lips. Tilting it, she drank.

“Thank you,” she said in a small voice.

Crixus exhaled the breath he had been holding. The moment had more erotic overtones than he wished. His chambers seemed even smaller, lacking a second bedroom for a servant. The events that conspired to bring him to this point oppressed him. Not for the first time, he wondered what a life without Kharrina might be like. Barida found his closet and browsed through the hanging clothes, cooing when she found a handsome item. The bones moved under her bare shoulders in a fetching manner. Crixus knew he could have her as a lover in a moment, if he wanted to. Yet the possibility only served to render abstract the incremental forward motion of time as it stacked against his list of desires. He could also sit on the couch and breathe the air, let the day end, let the next begin, become nothing at all.

Barida discovered a handful of dresses in the closet, minimally brocaded with the gold thread that the Lamiae loved so well. The jewels in the fabric must have been diamonds. Barida held it to her chest for Crixus’ approval. Struggling to keep his eyes open, he smiled and nodded. She asked him if she should try it on and took his grunt as an affirmation. He closed his eyes for just a moment, opening them just long enough to see her bare back as she changed out of her servant’s frock. Sleep found him as her hands stroked his forehead and face.

*

His eyes snapped awake; clarity had returned. Barida’s head rested on his lap, her body curled up on the couch, breathing through her mouth. She slept deeply and her jaw had relaxed and distended. The buttons on the back of her dress were unfastened. A flap revealed her back and the tops of her breeches. Crixus

looked away, scanning the room for changes. No one had crept in while they dozed. Without a window, he could not gauge the time they slept, but his body hadn't relaxed fully in his sitting position. He supposed it was no more than an hour. It didn't matter in Castle Nistru, where the residents adhered to their own schedules.

Crixus disentangled himself from the sleeping girl, lowering her head so as not to disturb her. She licked her lips and mumbled, closing up further into a fetal position. A woman, a child; as both she wormed her way into his life. For a moment he contemplated ignoring his conscience—letting her fend for herself in the castle. Staal's casual threats in the study stilled that thought. The cruelty of slaying a child for sport enraged him.

As a test of his motivations, he pictured what it would be like to give in to her advances entirely, take her as a young bride and make a life for them somewhere less morbid than Nistru. Absurd as well, he thought, but he couldn't dispel the warm loving smiles she gave him or the notion of earning that smile with returned love. He had followed every flicker of emotion across Kharrina's face like the clouds in the sky, with fascination and speculation. Watching Barida squirm in sleep, he realized that Kharrina was still the greatest love of his life.

Yet did love flow and merge, like two streams emptying into a river? Or could lovers only synchronize the direction of their flow, two rivers side by side? If the latter, was it then worth the struggle, the risk to his very life, to try to reunite with Kharrina? Barida wanted to be in love with Crixus, and she was young enough to be molded however he chose.

Barida craved reassurance in this alien environment; so did he, though he was able to recognize it. The girl bounced between girlish neediness and mature sophistication. He was her port in a storm, and she sensed he was drawn to her on a primal level. At what age did a girl develop a woman's intuition? He recalled poor Alax, broken on the floor from Torrek's brutal mercy. Had she slept with him and made promises to be his wife? Alax believed the Legionnaires were stealing his future away.

I'll rescue her from Nistru, he decided. The abrupt resolution bolstered his courage. I'll make my money first, then for her sake—and Kharrina's—I'll find her a safe home. As a man of honor, I can do no less. And she need not sell her body to guarantee a protector, particularly one as powerless as me.

He missed Madraig more than ever.

Crixus crossed the room to heft his hammer, propped incongruously against a chair. It had acquired some dirt, and probably manure, from the stables. He made a face and took it to the bathroom. The water taps were of an unfamiliar design and dry as bone. All the water came in on two legs. Locked in as he was, he could only ring for the servants. Yet he didn't want to wake Barida, so he wiped the hammer off with a towel.

He had used it to fight before with mixed results. It was built for striking power against stationary objects, not speed or mobility. The engraved head contained most of the weight of the tool. Placing one hand under the head and one at the end, he could overcome some of the imbalance and move it like a weapon. He took a few swipes, experimenting with stance, envisioning a bladed foe before him. Parries would be critical; one successful strike with either side of the head should cripple or kill a foe. The haft was braced with iron, and therefore could handle a strike from another weapon, though notching a family heirloom shamed him. The slender blade of Lord Staal would leave no mark, and the man lacked the size to withstand a direct blow...

Staal. Fighting the man over Barida would bring about their deaths, for the entire castle of inhuman vampires would descend upon the cruel lord's assailants to protect their own. He and Barida would be dead before the Legionnaires could arrive to fulfill their duty.

26. Promenade

Visibly exasperated, the Procurer took pains to explain Lamiae etiquette to Crixus, using Barida as a standin lady of the Lamiae. Barida could not resist clowning around, striking a faux imperious pose and causing the Procurer to pause and scowl. Crixus waggled his eyebrows at her until she stopped.

After an hour, Crixus felt as though he knew less about the sacred etiquette than when he started. Much of the intricacy stemmed from the interrelationships of the many noble houses amongst the Lamiae. A few careless words could incite a feud. The Procurer expressed the hope that Crixus' status as a commoner and foreigner would protect him from mild gaffes, yet he spoke with no more encouragement than a farmer would for a dinner hen. Crixus wished he could bring a manual with him.

Barida would accompany Crixus, both to remind him of his newfound manners and to give the appearance of propriety to the foreigner. The androgynes arrived with elegant dress clothes for her. Crixus turned away while they stripped Barida and fitted her with a gown brocaded with purple velvet and interlocking clasps.

Crixus' own outfit had been chosen by Staal himself: breeches and arm wraps of white silk, fastened with an elaborate network of golden threads that the androgynes wove with ready dexterity; a coat of cotton cut to resemble a scientist's; slippers and a cravat. Barida clapped her hands with delight at the fully appointed Crixus.

"You look like a Lamiae yourself," she said. Her smile contained more than a hint of flirtation. "Handsome and commanding."

"I will do my best." He tugged at the cravat to loosen it; an androgyne tightened it again with pursed lips.

"If you remember nothing else," the Procurer said, "do not speak unless spoken to, and then with only the greatest deference." He shook his head. "I counseled the lord against bringing you to the reception, but he can be obstinate when he has a new toy." The androgynes glanced at the old man and looked away, brows furrowed.

“Crixus will not embarrass Lord Staal,” Barida said in a stern voice.

The Procurer took the lead, arms loose at his sides. Crixus followed, keeping his eyes focused at the ground ahead of him, as the Procurer had instructed; it would not do to meet the eyes of a Lamia without invitation. Barida walked two paces behind, her hands clasped in the fashion of servants. The two androgynes brought up the rear with an air of gravity. Crixus had the sense he was being escorted to an execution.

The entourage walked through the winding halls of Castle Nistru for twenty minutes, deeper and deeper into the mountain. He worried that Barida had had nothing to drink, for he imagined they would be beheaded should she ask for water during the reception. Upon passing a working fountain, Crixus called a halt.

“I’m thirsty,” he told the Procurer.

“There will be refreshments served all guests.” The Procurer took a few steps alone, stopping with irritation playing over his face when Crixus bent to scoop water with cupped hands. “We mustn’t be late.”

“We won’t be.” Crixus motioned for Barida to join him at the fountain. His large hands, pressed together as a vessel, held a substantial gulp of water. “Drink, servant,” he said, injecting gruffness into his voice to deflect the Procurer’s scorn.

Barida’s eyes sparkled as she put her lips to his fingers and sipped. When the water drained away, he refilled his hands for her. Her shoulder brushed his arm as she finished off the second handful.

“Thank you, ser,” she said. He winked at her and she giggled.

“Very considerate,” the Procurer said with a sneer. “I’m sure Lord Staal will be touched by the reason for this delay.”

“No doubt,” Crixus said. “Lead on, Procurer.”

Music and laughter reverberated down the causeway leading to the grand meeting hall. A passing servant bearing an empty tray whispered in the Procurer’s ear. The old man’s eyes widened. He glared at Crixus.

“What?”

“The Emperor is in attendance,” the Procurer said, his composure shaken. “An unexpected appearance. You are *notnot at all*

“I’ve met politicians before,” Crixus said.

The Procurer swept himself up into Crixus face, nearly standing on tiptoes to do it. “Still your tongue! The Emperor is a holy being, Most Just of the Judges, Most Honored of the Sacred Race. He isn’t a petty official to be fawned over by dull-witted commoners.” The old man looked away, calculating some form of social math. “Very well. You must do as I tell you: do not leave Lord Staal’s side. If he chooses to risk his status by introducing you to the Emperor, you act cowed and you answer only direct questions without exposition. Hopefully that will reduce the chance of grievous faux pas.”

Crixus set his jaw. “No one will find fault with my behavior.”

“I already have, but they might be too distracted to notice.” He turned to Barida. “You are to be utterly silent. An invisible flower. I’ll flay you alive if you reduce the master’s reputation by even a sliver.”

Barida nodded and curtsied.

The Procurer opened his mouth to speak then shook his head. “Recklessness! But my orders are clear. Follow on my heels.”

Two Red Legionnaires in elegant crimson armor stood at attention by the doors to the hall. They parted their halberds to allow Crixus and his companions through. Crixus reached back to give Barida’s hand a squeeze but an androgyne swatted his away.

The hall’s vaulted ceiling cast the music and voices about the room like rainfall. Columns wrapped with oil channels burned like hundred foot torches, giving off little heat but a wealth of yellow light that glinted off the diamonds, gold, platinum, and silver adorning the celebrants. Hundreds of Lamiae milled about the room, their wiry forms in postures of utter indolence. Each Lamia sparkled in their elegant finery in contrast to the plainer apparel of their servants who shadowed them. There could be no mistaking the servants for the Lamiae, even those who had been dressed up by their masters: their shoulders sagged forward,

heads bowed, and gazes were directed at their master's hands. Entirely subservient, all personal wants subsumed into the whims of their bloody masters.

“Stay close. Meet no one's eye,” the Procurer whispered. Crixus watched the man's bony shoulders, but couldn't resist a surreptitious glance hither and thither as they wound through the crowd.

The Lamiae, without exception, were beautiful, more like angels than devils. No blemishes spoiled their faces, not even visible pores; each possessed porcelain skin crafted around faultless features. Every hair had been trimmed, every fold of their couture intentional, every facial expression a stage play of remarkable depth to lay out a drama of ancient and subtle themes.

And yet they were not delicate dolls. The Lamiae radiated unholy, supernal health, of an intensity that he had never seen in human beings. Kharrina, whom he regarded with the generous eyes of a devout lover, seemed coarse in comparison; the delicate little minx Barida seemed was a mouse from under the baseboards. Crixus felt like the bull he had been compared to.

The Lamiae were inhumanly perfect.

A Lamia lady as fair as a cloud caught his furtive glance and smiled at him. He cowed, feeling each of her lips as a slice from an icy knife, the dimple that formed on her cheek as a stab from its tip. She licked her lips and a stirring ran through him from groin to forehead. To touch so perfect a woman for even a fleeting moment...

Barida scraped his heel with her foot. He returned his gaze to the Procurer's back. The old servant's dignified bearing in this room of his masters humbled Crixus.

Towards the rear of the room, Lord Staal lounged in the lap of a golden haired beauty with a long, precise face. He kissed the inside of her wrist, eliciting a giggle. At their side, a young female servant stood with a glistening arm outstretched, palm up. The woman leaned over Staal and thrust a silver straw into the servant's wrist. She sucked at the girl's wrist as the girl winced. Her lips bloody, she kissed Staal with an open mouth, sharing the blood with him. Staal's body jerked in sensuous, obscene pleasure. A chill ran through Crixus; he wished he could take Barida and flee Nistru at once.

“Crixus! Welcome, welcome.” Staal waved from the woman’s lap. She offered Crixus a warm smile. “Beryyal, please meet my new friend: Crixus Oraan, hailing from the far off empire of Rond.”

Lady Beryyal held out a hand, speckled with dried blood. “A delight, ser,” she said with the voice of an angel.

Crixus gulped and took her hand, giving it the slight squeeze, accompanied by the appropriate inclination of the head and straightening of the heels. He wished he could politely look over at the Procurer for affirmation. “My lady, I cannot express the honor you favor me with.” He decided to take the chance he’d been considering ever since the Procurer’s briefing. “May Kaolis guide your feet, Astris your heart, and the wind your hand.”

Beryyal’s eyebrows arched. “Oh? What does that mean?”

Crixus could feel the Procurer’s cold glare on the back of his neck. “It is a Rondan saying, reserved for persons of lofty status—or great beauty.”

Beryyal’s pale skin reddened. “How dear,” she said, smiling wider to reveal bloodstained teeth. “Rond must be a place of manners and charming men.”

“Would that it was a tenth of what Nistru is.” Hoping he hadn’t held her hand too long, he let go. She returned it to Staal’s grasp.

Staal grinned at Crixus and said to Beryyal, “Isn’t he wonderful? Exotic, but so clever. It’s enough to make one want to travel across the sea.”

“I like him,” Beryyal said, narrowing her eyes at Crixus with an easy allure that a courtesan would covet. “He’s a big one, too. Is this common in Rond?”

“It is not, my lady. My family is blessed with healthy bodies, and our chosen trade strengthens us further.”

“He’s a water engineer,” Staal said. “A man of applied sciences.”

“Water,” Beryyal said.

Crixus inclined his head again.

“Baths?”

“Baths, my lady, and sinks, and aqueducts, and fountains... even privies, though I prefer to leave those to my colleagues whenever possible.”

Staal and Beryyal tittered.

“Forgive me,” Crixus said. “I am not accustomed to such sophisticated company. The Procurer has done what he can with my crass foreign manners, but I fear I will nevertheless offend a noble personage tonight.”

“That’s the fun,” Staal said, sitting up straight. “These parties are so stuffy.”

“But will my life not be forfeit if I cross a line of propriety, regardless of intent?”

“Well, there is that,” Staal said. Beryyal giggled.

“Come here, Crixus,” she said. Plucking a brooch that would have cost Crixus a decade’s wages from her gown, she leaned in close enough to breathe on Crixus’ neck. She secured it on his jacket. “You’re branded. Anyone who takes exception with you must answer to me.”

“Why, my dear, you make me jealous!” Staal said, clapping his hands. “Must I fight for both of your attentions? What a dilemma I have created for myself.”

“Give him your pin, Amadine, and then we can own him together. Will that satisfy you?”

“I had no intention to share him,” Staal said, his face darkening, “but for you...” He grinned again, and pinned Crixus’ jacket with a small blue diamond pin.

Lady Beryyal patted the cushion next to her. “Sit, Crixus. I wish to hear about your home.”

Crixus sat on the couch. It had been crafted with cushioning so extravagant that his haunches could have been floating. Barida knelt near his feet.

“Look at this cute little pixie,” Beryyal said. “She serves him?”

“Aye, quite well, I hope,” Staal said with a leer. “I gifted her to Crixus. You

know how impetuous I am.”

Beryyal recovered her silver straw. “Cut,” she said simply. One of her servants stepped forward with a slender scalpel and a cloth. He took Barida’s wrist, made a swift, expert cut, and held it up to Lady Beryyal. She leaned in to sip with the straw but hesitated.

“I’m sorry, Crixus, I forget that you are foreign born. You do not mind if I sample from your maid?”

He cleared his throat, trying not to look at Barida’s anguished face. “Of course not, my lady. It is your custom.”

Lady Beryyal’s toothy smile would have broken the hearts of an entire navy had it not been stained with children’s blood. “You are too kind.” She nestled the straw in Barida’s seeping wound and drank deep. Her delicate neck muscles moved under her skin. Staal idly glanced around the room.

“Robust, isn’t she?” Staal asked her.

“Too rich,” Beryyal said. “All that beef and grain. Better drinking for lords than for ladies.” She tittered and Staal joined her. Crixus managed a weak grin.

The servant offered the girl’s wrist to Staal as if it was finger food, but he shook his head to decline. The servant wrapped Barida’s wrist in a linen, tying it tightly.

“Don’t close it,” Staal said. “I may be thirsty later.”

Crixus ached to reach out to Barida and comfort her, but he could not offend his hosts. He caught her eye and tried to convey his sympathy without being overt. She dropped her gaze at once. She knew her place amongst the Lamiae.

“Now, then.” Beryyal laid an elegant hand on Crixus’ own. “Tell me about your home.”

“Do, please,” Staal said.

“Well, Rond is a big place with many faces. I’m not sure where to begin.”

“Your own home,” Beryyal urged.

“I live in Greater Rond,” Crixus said, glossing over his fugitive status, “the capital of the Rondan Empire for the last five centuries. While it lacks the social graces of Nistru, Greater Rond is home to the richest citizens of the empire—of whose rank I cannot claim membership, alas. Our architecture is modest compared to Castle Nistru but it has an elegance and functionality which I find appealing. Rond favors geometric forms and straight lines.” He liked to make that point to his fellow artesans. “I grew up near the trade district, a short walk from my Guild. My father taught me the family trade. When he passed away, I supported my mother. In my time, I’ve built a few important aqueducts and memorial fountains and ran plumbing into dozens of homes of privilege.”

Beryyal regarded him with hooded eyes. “It sounds enchanting, but you speak of it as though you are in mourning.”

Crixus hesitated. “I suppose I am homesick.”

“I can imagine you are. I’ve never left Nistru,” she said. “Oh! Except for that one delightful trip to Raqueem. But the travel was so tiresome, I could not bring myself to repeat it.” She gestured her own serving girl forward for another sip. The girl swooned. “Close her up, she’s done for the night.”

“Thirsty, aren’t we?” Staal teased.

“I have appetites,” Beryyal said, eyes focused on Crixus. “They can be difficult to satisfy.”

“Once, Crixus, every chamber in Castle Nistru provided a cheerful fountain of blood. Now, less than one in ten work.”

“This meeting hall is so gauche,” Lady Beryyal said, “but it is one of the few with a working fountain. We’re forced to hover around it like crows.”

“Crixus has a plan for that,” Staal said, as helpful as a salesman. “That is why I wanted you to meet him tonight. I know you’ve had trouble with your bath.”

Beryyal clasped her hands. “You can fix that?”

“It is my job,” Crixus said with care, “but I have not yet had the opportunity to

study the plumbing problems of Castle Nistru.”

“Oh, Amadine! Send him to my chambers, please.”

“Why, my lady, I quite thought you favored me. I’m stung.” Staal pouted. “Have I offended you in some way?”

“Silly,” she said, patting his cheek. “You are one of my favorites. You know that. I am referring to Crixus’ skills with piping. I want to draw my own bath again, not have to wait for the tub to be filled only to freeze by the time it’s ready.”

Crixus cleared his throat. Staal, as mad as he was, had given him his first opportunity to pitch his services. “I can provide you with hot water at the turn of a handle, my lady.”

“Water? I mean blood. Water sounds lovely as well.”

“Blood, of course. It would be an honor to repair your bath.”

“Splendid, splendid.” Lady Beryyal took his chin in her hand and kissed him with a swift movement. Her small mouth moved against his, her tongue forcing between his lips. She tightened her grip on his chin as she did, telling him in no uncertain terms that he had no choice in the matter. His body stiffened in shock. The taste of blood was overpowering: both the servant girl’s and Barida’s. Lady Beryyal’s tongue was coated in it.

“Naughty,” Staal said, tscking at her.

“I’m just pleased.” She licked saliva from her lips. “This is a party, after all.”

Crixus smiled, uncertain at the appropriate response. His stomach roiled. “You flatter me, my lady.”

“You can take that back to Rond with you.” She took up a fan from an adjacent table and fanned herself, stretching her neck in a fetching manner. “Why travel so far for no gain?”

“Indeed.” Sweat broke out on his forehead. “My lord and lady, I crave a drink of water and moment of refreshment. Might I leave your esteemed company for a moment?”

“Of course, my friend,” Staal said, putting an arm around Beryyal. “Feel no urgency here. We are all at leisure.”

Crixus rose unsteadily to his feet. He put a hand on Barida’s shoulder. “Privy,” he whispered to her. With a creaky bow, he left the two Lamiae. The Procurer was nowhere in sight.

Barida guided him to the outer wall where waiters stood with their trays at their sides. She poked one. “My master is feeling ill. Where are the privies?” The waiter pointed to the corner, making a point to ignore them both.

A doorway led to a dusty unused bathroom once meant for Lamiae. Crixus stumbled forward, found the privy, and vomited. The taste of Lady Beryyal’s bloody mouth could not be flushed out as his stomach roiled and ejected its contents. Barida held his hand as he fell to his knees, succumbing to the dry heaves.

“I’m all right,” he gasped between gagging. “I’m fine.”

“You need water, darling,” Barida said. “Do these faucets work?” She turned the handle of each without success. The sinks remained dry. A fountain with a faucet concealed in the mouth of a statue of a boy also proved dry. “I’ll find you something.” Barida hustled out of the bathroom.

Crixus sucked in air, trying to ignore the hideous taste in his mouth. Between Lady Beryyal’s bloody remnant and the contents of his stomach, he would have welcomed a surgeon to cut his tongue out altogether. Several trays of spent silver straws had been stacked against the wall, reminding him of the blood drinking he had witnessed. He thought he might vomit again just from the residue in his mouth. A minute passed but Barida didn’t return.

The fountain with the boy’s head sculpture possessed a wide aperture. Crixus took a few of the less compromised straws and used them to probe the faucet. The pipe was over an inch wide, running deep into the wall. On an impulse, Crixus undid one of the thick golden threads from his outfit, passed it through five of the straws and shoved the makeshift snake down the sculpture’s throat. He encountered no resistance. He had enough thread for ten straws; any more, and he would not be able to stiffen them all with a tug on the thread. He slotted all ten silver straws, retied the knot at the end to be sure it could take the pressure, then tried to push it down the sculpture’s throat again.

With two straws remaining outside the faucet, he encountered a clog. He tugged on the thread to align all the straws, giving him enough torque to dig at the clog. For a minute, he wriggled, twisted, and pushed, digging away at the obstruction in the pipes. His thirst raged. Where was Barida? A simple glass of water was worth more than gold to him.

All at once, the obstruction gave way; the snake had broken through. Liquid choking sounds emanated from the pipe. He thrust the snake deeper into the pipe and with a violent movement, felt the obstruction break away.

Foul, black blood burst out of the child sculpture's mouth, soaking his arms and splashing in his face. The sour-smelling chunks of coagulated blood had been backed up in the pipe for ages. The stench was horrendous. Crixus vomited again, staggering away from the stream of blood. Unfettered, it filled the bowl and spilled out onto the floor.

Crixus backed into the corner, horrified. He had made a stinking, bloody, gruesome mess of the bathroom—and in the proximity of the Emperor! Surely they would execute him. The irony didn't escape him: he would die for a feat of plumbing rather than the genuine crime he committed at home. He would have laughed if Barida's fate hadn't jumped to the forefront of his thoughts. Would they execute her as well? If not, would they just suck her dry? No amount of money was worth this nightmare.

Nausea overcame him. He fell to his knees just outside the spreading pool of blood. Barida entered the bathroom with a crystal goblet of water. She dropped it when she saw the pool of blood and the spewing fountain. It shattered with a resounding crash, echoing on the stone walls. She rushed to Crixus' side.

“What happened?”

Crixus fought through his nausea. “I thought it was a water fountain,” he said. “I'm a fool. Barida, get out of here. They'll kill you.”

“I won't leave you. Wait! I'll be right back.” She skittered out of the bathroom before he could protest.

She returned in moments with Lord Staal. Crixus boggled at the gaffe.

“Crixus is sick,” Barida said. “We need to help him, master.”

Staal stared aghast at the overflowing fountain. “What have you done?”

“I’m—I’m sorry.” He gasped for air and clarity. “It’s not her fault.”

Staal waved the plea aside. “That fountain has been broken since I was a boy.” He strode through the foul blood and picked up Crixus’ improvised snake. “What’s this?”

“Plumbing... tool,” Crixus said, wiping his mouth. “I wasn’t thinking—”

“And thank goodness for that,” Staal said, grinning from ear to ear. “Prop him up, girl.” Staal dashed out of the room.

Barida helped Crixus to his feet. His head spun, but with her aid he stood in some semblance of propriety in spite of the blood splattered over his jacket and hands.

Staal returned with a handsome young man, dressed more plainly than the other Lamiae yet projecting an air of authority. He surveyed the pool of blood and the dazed artisan. Anxious servants piled in behind him.

“Kneel, Crixus,” Staal urged.

Barida pulled Crixus down to the floor. Their knees soaked up the stale, stinking blood.

“Your Majesty,” Staal said, “the greatest gifts are a surprise, are they not? This foreigner—who is in service to me—appears to have accidentally repaired one of our long abandoned fountains.”

“Indeed,” the Emperor said. He stepped around the pool to lift Crixus’ head by his chin. “Strange features. Where are you from, outsider?”

“Rond, Your Majesty,” Crixus said in a croak.

“This is your servant girl?”

“Aye, Your Majesty. Her name is Barida.”

The Emperor scowled and Staal broke in quickly. “He’s a rough diamond, my

liege. I could have trained him better before presenting him, but he's just too... too fascinating." Staal's enthusiasm was contagious and the two Lamiae shared a grin. "Imagine what he can do with proper tools." He showed the Emperor Crixus' improvised snake. "Is it not ingenious?"

"Quite," the Emperor said. He propped up Barida's chin. "She's new?"

"She is from Basrat. I gave her to him as a gift, but if you wish her, merely give the word and I will be honored beyond all expression."

The Emperor smiled, a moment of terrible beauty that emphasized his high, regal cheekbones. "Speak, girl. What is your name?"

"Barida, my lord—Your Majesty," she said, trembling.

"So pretty. A gift worthy of Amadine Staal," the Emperor said. Staal hid his grin with a grateful bow. "Would you like to offer your blood to the Emperor, little one?"

"Y-yes, Your Majesty. I would be honored."

"Of course." An alert servant handed him a golden straw. Barida reopened her bandage and clenched her fist to encourage a blood flow. The Emperor, as casual as a robin, sipped from her wrist. He inhaled a moment and favored her with a smile. "As fresh as a verdant field," he said, and the servants murmured in appreciation. "Blood is always sweeter from a pretty face. You may go."

Barida curtsied, hesitated, curtsied again, and retreated. Crixus gazed at the Emperor's slippers, on the edge of the blood.

"Crixus, eh?" The Emperor paused. "Your little mess here has been the highlight of this tiresome gathering."

"Uh, thank you, Your Majesty," Crixus said. "My clumsiness is exceeded only by my gratitude for your goodwill."

The Emperor snorted. "Are you sure you aren't a Lamia? You have a velvet tongue." He snickered, most un-regal. "Your trade is to repair fountains?"

"Aye, Your Majesty." Crixus met the man's eyes. "Fountains, baths, anything

with water or liquid. In Rond, such plumbing is commonplace.”

“Really?” The Emperor pursed his lips. “And is Rond a grand, mystical place, to possess such magic?”

“It is but a fraction as grand as Nistru. We merely have the good fortune to have the geography conducive to such engineering. I could do the same for you with time and strong backs.” He remembered to add: “Your Majesty.”

The Emperor laughed, looking around at the gathered servants and Lamiae with outstretched hands. “My friends! I did not expect to conduct business tonight. The men of Rond are bold indeed.”

“He’s unschooled in our ways,” Staal said, nervous. “Perhaps we can overlook his crass nature in light of the benefits he offers.”

“Amadine, Amadine.” The Emperor shook his head. “You have ever had a disdain for manners. Were you not so entertaining, I’d have put you to death long ago.”

Staal grinned, his eyes squinting against the expression.

“Crixus, what do you charge for your services?”

“Your Majesty, no figures had been discussed. I have plans—

The Emperor reached into the pocket of his jacket. He withdrew a handful of diamonds, each the size of a cherry, and cast them into the pool of blood.

Their total worth was fifty times that of the money box Crixus had squandered.

“There is your retainer fee. Staal will handle the accounts.” He smirked at Crixus. “Let us see what Rond has to offer Nistru.”

27. Promises

“Hold still.” Crixus tightened the bandage on Barida’s wrist. They sat on his couch, still dazed from the whiplash turn of events but alert enough to notice that the androgynes hadn’t locked them into the room. The bowl of fruit had been refreshed with pears; Crixus insisted she eat one and drink a glass of water.

She acquiesced without complaint at first. “I’m not a little girl,” she finally said after he had fussed over her wrist.

“And I’m not a doctor. Maybe we should summon him.”

“He won’t treat me. The girls in my room said we have to look after ourselves unless we’re really sick.”

“They drained you like a glass of wine,” Crixus said. “I couldn’t prevent it.”

Barida took his hand. “Don’t even think that you can. It’s their right as our masters.” She raised his hand to her cheek, closing her eyes as she rubbed against it. “But thank you.”

Impulsively, he put his arm around her shoulders to hold her tight. His stomach still rumbled from the vomiting. Barida’s affection glowed like a lighthouse on a choppy sea. She purred into his chest.

“How do you feel?” he asked.

“Safe.” She nestled against him.

“You’re not.” He thought of the Emperor drinking her blood as if he were plucking an apple from a tree. “How many Lamiae drank from you tonight?”

“Five. Six, maybe.”

“You were woozy from loss of blood. Nothing will stop them from indulging their appetites—certainly not a respect for human life. They could kill you without even noticing.”

“What choice do I have?” Tears rolled down her cheeks. “I haven’t seen the sun

for a week. Every waking moment I'm supposed to be crawling around at their feet. I'd rather live in the gutter in Basrat than wear pretty dresses for Lord Staal. I *hate*

Crixus fished the diamonds out of his pocket. "Look." He spread them out on the table where they caught the lamplight. "My payment for the work I will do. This is more than enough money to return home and repay my debts."

"Oh, they're beautiful." She pointed shyly at the gems.

"Go on, you can touch them."

Barida held a diamond up to her eye, squinting to look at a lamp through the facets then at Crixus. "I can see you," she said with a giggle. "I think you could buy Basrat with these."

"I'd rather buy passage far away from these creatures," Crixus said. His voice grew quiet. "And yours as well."

"Crixus!" She threw her arms around him. Her face was an inch from his. "Do you mean it?"

"Of course. I would never leave you here to die." How could he explain that his feelings for her were rooted in his love for Kharrina? "Friends watch out for friends."

Barida squirmed onto his lap. "You're more than my friend," she said. "You're my knight." A sweet, girlish smile lit up her face and Crixus couldn't help but respond in kind. "I trust you."

"Well, I do my best," he said lamely. She giggled and kissed him on the lips. Her small mouth was cool and moist.

"Barida, wait," he said. She kissed him again, pushing her chest against his. In trying to move her aside, his hands found the back of her dress where she had loosened the clasps. She gasped with excitement. Her mouth found his, her tongue seeking his. He tried to speak again but only succeeded in allowing her tongue inside to tap at his teeth.

"We shouldn't do this," he said when she paused for a breath.

“I don’t want to die,” she said, tears still welling in her eyes. Her vulnerable beauty in the moment stunned him; had Kharrina ever been so lovely in his presence? Had the young Kharrina been as angelic?

He stroked her hair. “We’ll be safe now. Don’t worry.”

The words had the affect of an aphrodisiac on the girl. She twisted out of the top of her dress, the fabric bunching at her waist without the clasps in back. Her small breasts jutted out at Crixus as she arched her back to complete the maneuver. Before he could reply, she had her arms around his neck again, kissing his cheek and ear.

Crixus knew he should push her away, but her passion had become contagious. They were alone together in a castle of uncaring predators. Very possibly they would die before his project could be completed. Could he still value the future—and the past—over the present?

“Barida.” He tried to make a last ditch effort to talk her out of seduction. He reached for her shoulder and found her breast instead, the same one she had placed in his hand in the carriage. Uncovered, its rounded shape gave the impression of absolute delicacy. She moaned.

Without a thought, Crixus lifted her in his arms and carried her to the canopied bed. Barida breathed heavily through her nostrils. When he laid her on the sheets, she tilted her head back, eyes closed, accepting of any caress he cared to venture. The muscles of her stomach led his eyes down to the fabric around her waist, concealing her pelvis and legs. He longed to remove that last obstacle.

“We shouldn’t make love,” he said. “Do you understand why?”

“No,” Barida said, rolling over on her side. “I’m yours. I want to be yours.”

He sighed and sat down next to her. “Another woman has already spoken those words to me. We made a commitment to each other. Should I to flout that just because she’s far away?” He tried to ignore the hypocrisy of the argument. Sheirra had been a courtesan with a wall around her heart built by her profession. Barida loved him; to take advantage of her feelings would be cruel.

And yet he loved her in a way that didn’t fit within the stricture of courtship and marriage. He was her protector. Why should he not accept her gratitude?

The day had exhausted him; he could not manage a voice of authority, let alone decisiveness. He slumped.

“I don’t know what to do,” he admitted. He allowed her to take his hand again. “I want too many things for my own happiness.”

“What about my happiness?”

“The Lamiae own you, body and soul. Until you escape them, you’ll never be at peace.”

She paled.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He put a hand out to rub her back. She buried her face in the sheets, quaking. Crixus recoiled, thinking he had driven her mad with lust, until he heard her sob. “No, no, please.” Now he embraced her fully, trying to massage out the anguish. “I didn’t mean that.”

“It’s true,” she said into the soft bed. “I wish I was dead.”

“Never say that,” he said, reaching under her to pull her hands away from her face. She rolled over to face him. The makeup they applied to her had smeared. “Wait there.” He procured a towel, dampened it and returned to the bed to wipe the shadow from her eyes, the paint from her lips. Without the makeup, her youthfulness glowed again despite her misery. “I like you better that way.”

“Okay,” she said, hands in her lap, half-nude before him without shame.

“Can we agree to be partners for now?” He tossed the towel aside. “Comrades in arms?”

“Okay,” she said, with a brief snuffle, “if I can be in your arms.”

“That’s not what... all right,” Crixus said. “You must accept whatever I give you without complaint.”

Barida nodded. “What does that mean?”

“Let me honor my vows,” he said. “To my betrothed, and to you.”

“I can’t go back to Basrat.” She had already thought ahead to the possibility of retribution. “When we leave, can I go to Rond with you?”

“By Kaolis,” he swore. “Yes, yes you may.”

“Will she hate me?”

“I don’t think so, but she may hate me. In that case, it will be nice to have a friend for support.”

“Oh, Crixus...”

“A friend, Barida.”

She nodded somberly. “Agreed.”

Exhaustion hit him at once. He flopped onto his back. “Good. Let’s rest then.” Crixus closed his eyes while Barida struggled first with something on the bed, then his jacket which still carried the reek of blood. He shifted so that she could pull it off his torso.

“Thank you.”

“You stink, Crixus. Take off your breeches, too.”

He opened his eyes to find her working at the belt of his trousers. She already removed the dress, and her bare buttocks poked up beyond her mane of hair.

“Hey!”

“I’m your servant. It’s my job to dress you.” With a determined tug, she removed his pants. “Your shirt, too. The sleeves are stained.”

Crixus found himself a loincloth away from nudity, with Barida bare naked and throwing his bloody clothes in the bathroom. She paused at the foot of his bed, resplendent.

“Shall I sleep on the couch again, ser?”

He was beaten. “Only if you wish.”

She slid under the covers and up to his side, putting her arm across his chest. After a moment's hesitation, he raised his arm so she could cuddle close. As determined as he was to remain faithful to Kharrina, the feeling of Barida against him, her breathing slowing in contentment, was the finest thing he felt all day, surpassing even the achievement of the fortune he had sought.

I'm rich, he thought as he dozed off and dreamt of kissing Barida.

28. Lady Beryyal

Crixus had become accustomed to the smell of blood by the time he arrived at Lady Beryyal's subterranean estate, tools in tow.

He had spent a week adapting the tools of other crafts to his needs. His favorite tool was a proper artisan's snake, composed of a chain of one-inch metal cylinders threaded with a steel cable that he could tighten with a twist of a handle to transform the chain into a stiff rod. Metal ears jutted out of every fifth cylinder, allowing him to dig at clogged pipes by spinning it. The crafted snake worked far more effectively than his improvised snake of Lamiae drinking straws.

Using Staal's authority and the Procurer's command of the castle support staff, he assembled a team of workmen. Staal himself had provided two of the men, servants he'd come into contact with during his "excursions" into the vassal lands of Nistru. Staal's curiosity about matters scientific was an adventurousness that the other Lamiae lacked. The remaining workers were minor servants usually tasked with the most laborious chores in the castle. The peasantry, by and large, seemed to specialize only in menial labor and farming—or if they violated one of Nistru's many draconian laws, mining in the caustic diamond mines.

Pahhim had a drawn out face, with extra chin and forehead useful for maintaining his perpetual frown. He had Crixus' wide frame without the muscle. Pahhim was three years younger than Crixus, though he appeared to be his senior by a decade. Pahhim let his face do the complaining for him; the most hideous task would be completed in mournful silence.

The other servant, Kerik, could not keep his eyes focused for long. His hands and feet moved of their own accord. He had lost his pinky finger and the top of his ring finger on his right hand in a farming accident. Crixus had his doubts about the man until he saw him chisel through a wall in less than the time a typical mason would have finished the job. Kerik's face screwed up in concentration on the job until the hole was made and he retreated, sweating and tearing up from salt in his eyes.

Explaining the theories behind the tools and techniques of interior plumbing to the two men tried Crixus' patience. Both had an air of resignation, which they

strove to overcome as they realized Crixus spoke to them as peers rather than servants. Nevertheless, their submissiveness had been ingrained from birth in Nistru, resulting in long silences as they waited to be ordered to perform every step of the work.

Pahhim and Kerik may have been deficient in initiative, yet the other dozen workmen, faceless and new every day, were cattle in comparison. The fact that each had to endure a cleansing before joining his workforce didn't help matters. Crixus would have given one of his diamonds for Gavri—the artisan, not the horse (who had been moved to Staal's own stables and fed like a queen). After a few days of repeating instructions to the rotating workforce, he spent a day training Pahhim and Kerik in the essential foundations of plumbing, then supervised them as they drilled the next day's recruits in the skills. A week of this and the two appeared to have some grasp of the ideas they were repeating and demonstrating.

He first used his own bathroom as a testing ground for the tools and the workmen. Pahhim, Kerik, and a contingent of men peered in, perplexed, as he tapped the walls around the faucets with a hammer, his ear pressed against a glass cup.

“Ser,” Kerik ventured, “what are you doing?”

“Finding the pipes. Listen.” Kerik took his place at the cup as Crixus tapped on two spots. The second set of taps resonated more fully. “Hear that?”

“Aye! They ring.”

“They do, and I will bet you a glass of blood they're copper as well.”

The two men flinched at his turn of phrase. “It's not mete to joke of that, ser,” Pahhim said in his airy voice.

“Sorry.” Crixus flushed and cleared his throat. “We don't want to tear the walls apart, but sometimes we need to replace piping itself.”

“The masters won't allow it,” Pahhim said. “It's sacrilege to damage the castle.”

“Is it sacrilege to dig into the walls of my own quarters?” The men's silence answered his question. “Hmm. Well, I'll have Lord Staal authorize it in here.

Once we know more of the innards of the castle, we can work around the limitations.”

Crixus broke through the wall with his own family hammer using swift, powerful strokes. The workers stared at him, unused to such a display of physical strength. To a man they were underfed and prone to exhaustion. Even when he had to take a break for his prescribed medicines and water, they had not equaled his progress. Crixus showed them the proper stance for swinging the heavy mason’s hammers.

Barida looked in on them as the piles of stone grew. She had secured food and ale from the kitchens. Crixus called a rest for the men, and they descended on the rich palace food like vultures. The grunts of astonished appreciation for the fare concerned him; what did they eat at home?

Crixus ate only an apple, which Barida insisted on slicing for him and popping into his mouth when the men were distracted by the food.

“Barida,” he protested. “Don’t do that.”

“I like to feed you,” she said. She pouted as he patted her hand.

“Not in front of these men. I’m trying to impress upon them my authority, not show off my charming maid.”

Barida giggled and ate an apple slice. “Oh, very well. Ser.” She wrapped her lips around the apple slice in a suggestive manner. “I hope you’re not embarrassed by me.”

“Not at all.” He squeezed her knee. “But remember, we’re playing a dangerous game with Staal. Pretend you’re at home avoiding a spanking.”

She rolled her eyes. He broke the last apple slice in half and fed it to her. She held his gaze the whole time.

“Do you love me?” she whispered.

“Hush,” he said, “I have to get back to work. Go tell Doctor Sempri we’re low on pills.”

With an eager grin, she ran out the door.

*

Crixus and his crew waited in Lady Beryyal's foyer, smaller than the main foyer of the castle but far more lavish. Lady Beryyal favored lime green and gold decorations, in fabric and metalwork. There was enough gold in the room to replace the Guild's lost gold twice over, all molded into fixtures, wall hangings and sculptures. His crew, Pahhim and Kerik included, had never been so deep inside the castle, let alone a Lamia noblewoman's estate; they held their breaths and huddled together.

The Lamiae's sense of time bore little relation to that of human beings so Crixus resigned himself to a wait. After only an hour, a servant in forest green robes arrived. Her head had been shaved and tattooed with delicate, interwoven patterns, in white ink that resembled scar tissue. Contrary to the Procurer's surliness, she gave Crixus and his crew a warm smile.

"Welcome to House Beryyal," she said, bowing to them.

Crixus stepped forward to bow in response. "We're honored to be here."

"Lady Beryyal wishes to speak with you alone, Artesan. Your men may wait here. Bring your tools."

Crixus selected a bagful of tools and followed the servant. Well-fed, this one, he noted; plump by Nistru standards. The Lamiae were slender and strong, the peasantry emaciated. Only in the servants had he seen any body fat.

The chambers known as House Beryyal equaled his Guildhouse in size. From what he could tell, it was inhabited only by servants of greater or lesser status. His guide stopped to bow to several who Crixus first assumed to be Lamiae.

"Who lives here, ma'am?"

"The Lady Beryyal, her sons, her uncle, and a cousin."

"She is the head of the household?"

"Of course."

Could the Lady Beryyal be a widow? Did the Lamiae even have widows? Crixus wondered how far he could press his line of questioning.

Before he could inquire further they entered her antechamber, passing through to her own bedroom, so luxurious and immense as to make Crixus' own quarters look like a jail cell. The heavy, sweet scent of blood permeated the air. Servants bearing large, empty jugs hustled past them, out of the room.

"She's bathing," Crixus said. "Should I wait outside?"

"No. The Lady Beryyal specifically asked for you." The woman continued into the bathroom as if there were no consequences. Helpless, Crixus kept close to her, eyes at her heels.

The bathroom's tile depicted a scene of floral extravagance. Crixus had become accustomed to the stench of blood from the fountains he repaired after honing his skills on his own fixtures, but it still awakened a primal fear response in him.

"*Crixus, Crixus, here to fix us,*" Lady Beryyal sang from her bath. "Come in!" The sound of splashing attested to her immersion in liquid, but with the sickening basso of a more viscous fluid.

"Ha ha, yes, very clever, my lady," he said, keeping his eyes down.

"Don't be shy. Come, come, you aren't some lowly floor sweeper. Raise his chin, Peshmi."

Before he could react, the servant woman had lifted his gaze from the floor. The Lady Beryyal lounged in a marble bath of human blood. The dark red plasma covered her breasts. Handmaidens, nude but for a linen wrap around their hips, warmed the blood over coals and poured it into the bath, while one scooped out the cooling to maintain a proper level and temperature. Adjacent to the bloodbath was a conventional tub of water, manned by two more handmaidens, who kept the water hot for the lady's convenience. Had he stumbled upon the scene with no previous knowledge of the Lamiae, he would have assumed a ritual sacrifice had taken place. Blood was splattered on the handmaidens, in Lady Beryyal's pale hair, on the floor.

She took a languid sip from a crystal chalice of blood and handed it to her servant. "I believe I have frightened you, my big friend. What could be so

horrific about a young woman taking her bath?”

“Forgive me, my lady. I was only recently cleansed. It is an overwhelming honor to be taken into your presence in such... circumstances.”

Lady Beryyal brushed away his comment, splashing blood near his feet. “Oh, it is no such thing. Remember your status, Crixus, my dear. You are no more than a servant. Were you a Lamia, you would never be allowed in my quarters unless you were my lover.”

“I meant no offense, my lady.”

“Please relax. I need your mind clear and focused on fixing my bathroom, not gaping at my bosom or acting like a child.” She straightened, giving him a view of perfectly round, blood-soaked breasts. Lady Beryyal had the figure of a goddess, though in her gruesome bath she would be a death goddess like Chalii. Framed by bare shoulders, her fine-boned face could not have been more desirable. Lady Beryyal moved languidly, evoking in the least shifting of her body the vision of endless nights of caresses and lovemaking. Crixus used the fear of offending his hosts to chase away such erotic thoughts. Still, part of him longed for Lady Beryyal to stand and display the rest of her unclothed form. The blood in the air only served to add to his discomfort.

Lady Beryyal regarded him as if waiting for a response. “Yes, my lady,” he blurted out.

“Delightful. Now Crixus, as you can see, my bath is quite an undertaking. Every since I was a girl, I have had to rely on a team of girls to draw my bath.” She splashed blood onto her chest, rubbing it in as if it were soap. “Have you wondered why we bathe in blood, Crixus?”

Spellbound by her movements, Crixus could only nod.

“The gods created the Lamiae to bring beauty into the world they created. Every living thing preys upon another living thing; this is the rule of the gods. Spiders consume flies, mountain lions consume sheep, humans consume swine, and Lamiae consume humans. In Nistru we teach the humans to respect that which they consume, for it gives up life to sustain them. Even a pig has sensation, you know. It can recognize the human who feeds it. When it gives you its life for your table, it gives a gift, the greatest one being can offer another. Our humans

are possessed of the noblest souls of all the peoples of Minq, for they surrender their life's blood, and sometimes their lives, so that their superiors can live. Without blood, the Lamiae would die, just as you'd starve without meat and vegetables."

Lady Beryyal sank back into the tub as a maid poured warmed blood into the tub. She caressed the girl's hip as she did so.

"No doubt in Rond you are the dominant species on the continent. I am guessing, from your knowledge of all this, this plumbing"—she waved her hand—"that you have developed your culture to improve the lot of the inferior people you have conquered." She waited for him to speak.

"You're correct, my lady. The Rondan Empire is renowned for building infrastructure in conquered lands. In time, the people embrace our culture, and they bring the best parts of their own for the benefit of all."

"Exactly. Predation benefits predator and prey. Ask the lowliest serf in Nistru and they will praise the Lamiae to the heavens. To be superior is to accept the mantle of responsibility. This extends to societal acts and personal acts as well. Chalmy, do I not coddle you as if you were my own child?"

The servant pouring warmed blood into her bath nodded somberly. "And I love you as I do my own mother."

Lady Beryyal rose to kiss the girl on the cheek. "Chalmy is one of my favorites," she said, settling her lovely body back into the tub. "I'm biased. But it would be wrong to think we don't love humans. Our very laws are designed to celebrate the bond we share with the humans of Nistru." Her smile dimpled her cheeks with genuine happiness. "I think it is rare that a civilization achieves this level of enlightenment, don't you?"

"Surely," Crixus said.

"We're lucky. So lucky. I'm glad you're here," she said, holding out a bloody hand for Crixus to take. He did so, restraining his revulsion at the warm, slimy sensation. "Our castle is as old as time itself. Our ancestors possessed technology superior to anything that has graced the world. Little of it remains. Warring humans destroyed the glorious civilization that had united Minq. Still, stone is stone, eternal. What functioned once can function again, correct?"

“That’s why I came to Nistru.” Crixus squeezed her hand. “To help restore the castle to former glories.”

“Well, thank goodness, because the Lamiae are so caught up with their social calendar that no one has the time to resurrect the old sciences. Except for Amadine.”

Crixus inclined his head. “He’s been kind to me.”

“Oh, Crixus,” she said, grinning, “he’s mad about you! Even when we make love, he can only talk about how excited he is to have a new friend who grasps... physics, I think he said, and something about dynamics. He can be maddening, the dear.”

Crixus blushed. “I had no idea.”

“Don’t tell him I said so. I find his enthusiasm adorable. The Lamiae live too long, I fear, and become so

“Every day I am reminded of that,” Crixus said.

“I haven’t seen him this happy since the campaign in Raqueem. Now, tell me how you are going to fix my bath.”

Crixus hesitated, digesting the information he just received. “First I have to learn what kind of, ah, blood pressure reaches your pipes. The central blood reservoir hasn’t seen as much use in the last century, I’m guessing. No one has cleared out the tunnels or pipes. Right now I’m hoping to determine who has pressure and who doesn’t, and map that until I can find the blockages.”

“You can’t just do whatever you did at the ball?”

“Alas, no. I was fortunate to be near a blockage then. The estates of the houses are further removed from the central station. The pipes branch off from arteries”—the symbolism wasn’t lost on him—“and I believe this is where the blockages have grown. Blood is thicker than water, you know.”

“All too well. Speaking of which,” Lady Beryyal said. She stepped out of the tub, onto a grate. Chalmy poured lukewarm water over her to rinse off most of the blood. Crixus’ mouth went dry as he tried to maintain his composure. Lady

Beryyal gave him a mischievous smile and stepped into the water bath that had been kept warm for her.

“Do you think I’m beautiful, Crixus?”

“Indeed, my lady,” he said with care. “No doubt the suitors line up at your door.”

“They do, but a lady needs only a handful to cater to her needs. But I’ve never had a lover from Rond before.” She giggled at his distress. “You’re much bigger than a Lamia. I wonder what you could show me in bed.”

“Surely nothing remarkable,” he stammered. “I would hesitate to disappoint you.”

“Repair my baths,” she said, “and you’ll have done more to pleasure me than the Lamiae could with their most vigorous pumping.” With a casual wave, she dismissed him.

Peshmi took his sleeve, guided him through a proper bow, and led him back to his crew.

29. Nistru

On returning from a day's labor tearing open a Lamia's bathroom walls to seal up leaky pipes, Crixus found his quarters empty. He tugged the cord to summon a servant; the bored androgyne that arrived shifted with impatience.

"She's serving Lord Staal and the Emperor," the androgyne said.

"When will she be back?"

"She's serving the Emperor," the androgyne repeated. "I doubt the Emperor follows your schedule." The servant left without asking for further instructions.

Crixus wondered if "serving the Emperor" meant that Barida had been reassigned at the whim of the Lamia ruler. He paced his quarters for hours, stopping only to take his medicine with a glass of water from the newly repaired sink. By midnight, his eyelids grew heavy. He dozed off on the couch with his growing map of Castle Nistru's schematic in his lap.

Barida woke him with a kiss to the forehead. "Were you waiting up for me?"

"I—no, just napping." Despite the dim lamplight, Barida's skin looked pale. He recalled how the sun over Basrat had tanned her a healthy nut-brown. "Are you all right?"

"Tired," she said and plopped on the bed. He saw a flash of white at her wrist. He knelt at the bed to lift her bandaged hand up to the light.

"They drank from you again."

"Not just me," she said, exasperated. "There were a dozen other girls in attendance. The masters don't do *anything*

"Do you want to eat?"

"They fed us."

"Really? That's odd." He pulled her slippers off. Barida pulled the blankets over her dress.

“Do you want to bathe before you sleep?”

Barida declined with a grunt into the pillow. Shrugging, he put out the lamps and crawled into bed. She nestled her back against him.

“Poor thing,” he said. “They work you to death.”

“Crixus,” Barida said, “do you think I’m pretty?”

“We’ve discussed this before. Of course I do, but I am committed to Kharrina.”

“That’s not what I mean,” she said. “Boys have always liked me.”

“You’re easy to like.”

“Is it just so they can bed me?”

Crixus considered how to respond. “Not necessarily. Every man likes a pretty face, but it’s your heart that wins friends and true love.” Apprehension seized him. “Why do you ask?”

“The Emperor told me I was beautiful.”

He closed his eyes. “What else?”

“That’s all. Well, he drank from me, too, while I sat on his lap. Lord Staal did, too. Drink from me, I mean, not sit on the Emperor’s lap.” She snickered.

“This is serious, Barida.”

“They weren’t mean at all, Crixus. The Emperor stroked my hair like you do, while they talked about things. He was very kind.”

How could he tell her to avoid the Emperor of Nistru? Or, for that matter, Lord Staal? He held her closer to him, until she rolled over to face him. In the half light, her expression was thoughtful.

“I don’t trust them. Neither should you.”

“What does it matter?”

Crixus thought of Doctor Sempri's daughter, taken at fifteen for the Lamiae's pleasures. Even if he were to marry Barida tomorrow, how could that human institution protect her from these creatures? Like an over-muscled fool, he had dug himself in too deep with the Lamiae. Could he even evade the Red Legionnaires if he and Barida fled with the diamonds?

"I know it's difficult, but try to be less beautiful."

"Huh. How do I do that? Avoid baths? Get fat?"

"Fat would be good, if your body will manage it. I rather doubt it, though. I think your best hope is to discard your charm around the Lamiae. Don't smile or wink. Be sullen."

"They'd punish me." She tightened her grip on him.

"Only a little. The less esteem they hold you in, the easier it will be for me to take you out of here."

Crixus kissed her cheeks and her hair. He rubbed her back and her aching legs. She accepted his ministrations without comment.

When he was done, he too was ready for the forgetfulness of sleep. He put a protective arm around Barida. Without any real power in the castle, the only support he could provide was affection.

*

Crixus stood in the partially covered channel of the arcade, sighed, and kicked at the dust. Like aqueducts in Rond, the primary Nistruvan aqueduct, whose name no one remembered, did most of its work underground. He hoped that he would identify a crack or broken section of the elevated channel leaking the water away. Such outdoor breakages were far easier to repair than exploring miles of tunnel. Instead, he found a channel exposed to the air by dozens of collapsed roofing slabs.

"I didn't even know this channel was here," Kerik said. He balanced on an intact stone slab to look out over the entirety of the Nistru valley.

"It's been unused for centuries, by my guess," Crixus said. "You can't let the

size of the edifice fool you. Without regular maintenance the elements will eat away at the hardest stone.” At least three inches of sediment had hardened in the aqueduct channel.

“It’s hard to repair, then?” Kerik said.

“Aye. I’ll need months and dozens of strong men. Assuming the water hasn’t run dry.”

“How can water disappear?”

Crixus pointed towards the mountains with his hammer. “If the runoffs have diverted elsewhere, the mouth of this aqueduct could be a mile or more from the original source. A rockslide would make this aqueduct useless—unless I spend the next decade digging new tunnels through the peaks.”

“The Lamiae have nothing but time.” Kerik spit over the side, watching his spittle disappear a hundred feet below. He shrugged. Crixus noticed that both Kerik and Pahhim, a few hundred yards away, relaxed when away from the castle. Kerik’s sarcasm would have been scandalous inside the walls of Castle Nistru.

“What do the Lamiae need an aqueduct for? The moment one of their mouths goes dry, a dozen servants appear with water.”

“It’s not the water I want,” Crixus said. He watched Pahhim unfold himself and walk back towards them, liquid level in hand. Crixus dug his scroll out of his pocket. “It’s the gravity. To achieve the pressure in the blood pipes that I want, I’d have to bleed the entire valley dry otherwise.”

“The masters already bleed us dry.” Kerik threw a rock over the end. “Why should they stop?”

“Well... I’m not here to judge your people’s customs. A thousand years of tradition hold more sway than my opinion. But a good aqueduct would reduce the volume of blood needed to move it through those pipes.”

“The blood fountains would flow freely again?”

“Fountains, baths, everything your masters want blood running from. But it will

use a fraction of what the old system requires.”

Kerik looked away and said nothing. Pahhim arrived with the dioptra.

“Four point six,” he said. “That’s less, is it not?”

Crixus checked his chart. “It is indeed. Not the kind of gradient I’d build in Rond, but then we haven’t walked the entire channel yet.”

He had the idea while standing in the central pumping station for blood. Servants worked a bellows, forcing the blood into the system, resulting in weak pressure to only a handful of fountains. As he removed blockages, the pressure of the blood further diminished until the Lamiae complained even as their bloodbaths filled once again, albeit slowly. His exploration of the pumping station revealed water channels that had been dry for ages. Moving water contained more power than a thousand pumps. He could harness that power to create a vacuum that would suck the blood into the system as needed. It would require building a number of basins and unstopping drains around the castle, but with enough manpower it could be accomplished rapidly.

Yet no one had the kind of plumbing wherewithal that even the lowliest Rondan artisan apprentice learned in their first year. Crixus would have to inspect every inch of work done, day in and day out. The job could take months, if not years, in the best of conditions. Meanwhile, Barida gave her lifeblood to the Lamiae and Kharrina slowly forgot about her lost fiancée. And Staal had more and more questions about the plans for the plumbing, forcing Crixus to give answers before he had a chance to weigh the time commitment they required. The lord had been making promises to his fellow Lamiae, assuring them that new luxuries awaited them through Crixus’ efforts; blood would flow again from every gaping gargoyle’s mouth into their baths and drinking fountains. Were he still a Guild member—were Kharrina here by his side, as his wife—he would have welcomed the nobleman’s promotional efforts. Instead, the prospects for a quick project diminished with every faucet unclogged. Once the tap was opened, as it were, the possibilities flowed forth in endless succession.

Kerik’s derision was excusable. The blood station had sickened Crixus. A queue of peasantry, resigned to their fate, waited to be drained into a large basin. The bloodletters cut carefully to get the clean arterial blood from their wrists. Servants poured the blood into a reservoir from which the fountains fed, where

the suction drew the blood down in a dark vortex with increasing speed thanks to Crixus' efforts. In the station, he discovered the reason for the shipment of alfalfa from Basrat: it was a source of coumarin, an anti-coagulant that extended freshness. The stench of blood in the station hung like curtains over the heads of the peasants. Children wept from the pain of the cuts. Woozy donors clasped bandages to their wrists and limped out.

The abstraction of the blood pouring from the fountains took on a heartless realism that gave Crixus shaking, sweaty nightmares. He awoke from sleep several times with a concerned Barida bending over him. The third nightmare featured the horrific image of Barida drowning in the reservoir of blood; awake, he brushed his tears of anxiety away as she slept by his side.

By his calculations, half of the blood served only to increase the pressure to push it through the pipes. As he opened old pipes to the flow, the peasantry bore the brunt of the new demand for blood by the nobles. He hoped the vacuum suction system would lessen their burden. If it didn't, his diamonds came at too rich a moral price. Yet he made a commitment to the Lamiae, as vile as they were. He was not here to judge; he was here to fix pipes. So he reminded himself as he turned away from the assembled blood donors and their wretchedness.

"Look over there, Crixus," Kerik said. "That field. My wife labors there, one of those white dots bent over the crop." Crixus squinted to see the tiny forms amongst the green. "The last time she gave blood to the masters, I had to carry her home."

"It must be a burden."

"She had the flu," he said. "Why don't they get sick, too?"

Crixus recalled the doctor's comments. "I think they do. I'm not a doctor, mind you, but drinking a sick woman's blood can't be healthy."

"If you're inhuman, what does it matter?"

"Kerik," Pahhim said, frowning. "Your tongue flaps like a broken shutter."

"It's all right," Crixus assured him. "I work for your masters as an artisan only."

"Don't put him in an awkward position," Pahhim said to Kerik. "No one wants

to hear you grouse.” His wide shoulders bunched up around his neck.

Kerik spit over the side again. “Aye, you’re right, as usual.”

Pahhim gave Crixus a rare smile. “Forgive us. We tire faster than the sturdy men of Rond. Are we done for today?”

Crixus gazed down the length of the aqueduct, towards the mountains. He needed to explore the ancient tunnels cut for water tomorrow before he would know if his plan was feasible, or if he had to build an entirely new aqueduct, which would keep him from Kharrina for years. She would be plump with another man’s child by then.

“We’re done. Tomorrow we’ll fetch lanterns and do a little spelunking.”

Kerik glared at him but said nothing. The man’s eyes weighed him as his bandit opponent had on the road to Restia, as Alman Dramonicai had measured him as a suitor for his daughter. It was a reversal of authority; Kerik’s scorn put Crixus on the defensive.

“You have a question?” Crixus met his hard gaze.

“No, ser. Give the orders and I’ll follow.”

“The tunnels, tomorrow. We’ll find the water here. In a year you’ll forget what it was like to carry a bucket.”

Kerik grunted and inclined his head.

30. Underground

The morning sun dazzled Crixus as he rode to the aqueduct's first tunnel. Pahhim and Kerik estimated that the quickest path would take them through the fields and outlying village where Kerik made his home. The peasants had been out since dawn, turning the soil and harvesting the ripe bean pods. Their movements lacked the vigor of farm workers in Rond; they did not sing or raise their heads to the sun. No one looked up to watch their procession pass.

A foreman rode through the fields on horseback, whip at the ready. His tunic bore the standard of House Staal, whose lands they crossed. Kerik and Pahhim glared at him under hooded eyes.

Crixus said nothing until they passed through the village where the farm workers lived—Kerik's village. Wind blew through gaps in the walls of the thatched huts. Men and women bent by age and hardship applied foul-smelling mud to the holes, adding straw to hold the mud in place. Waste water pooling in the narrow streets attracted rats and flies. Naked children played in the filth. Families packed into huts like dogs in a den. Despite the workday, the village swarmed with sad-faced Nistruvans who weren't in the fields.

"This is your home?"

"Aye. A far cry from the castle, eh?" Kerik grunted an ironic laugh, stiff and unnatural on his horse. "Don't worry, you won't have to look at it for long. The masters give us little land to make our homes on."

"What do your representatives do about it?"

"Who?"

Crixus steered Gavri around a muddy furrow. "Mayor, headman, chief... does no one speak for you?"

"Lord Staal is our master. We serve him alone. What use would we have for a mayor? Our master's generosity is all we need."

"Enough, Kerik," Pahhim said.

“Aye, enough. Let Crixus draw his own conclusions.”

Then Kerik’s village was gone, open fields in its place. The lush valley of Nistru existed only to raise crops for the Lamiae; what scraps remained found their way to the tables of those who tilled the fields. Rond’s nobles made no small amount of profit from their land holdings, but nowhere in Rond had he seen such abject poverty. Rondan livestock had finer shelter than the peasantry of Nistru. Wood in the valley was at a premium and only seemed to be used in the small mercantile zone near the castle.

They reached the arcade’s terminus by mid-morning, tying the horses in a patch of tall grass and watering them. Gavri nickered with pleasure; the ride had been her first since he arrived in Nistru. Crixus rubbed her legs down even though she didn’t need it, just to revel in the concrete reality of the horse’s muscles, the dust in his nose, and the feel of the sun on his skin. Castle Nistru’s social intricacies and indulgences faded into memory in the hot white light of the morning.

Kerik surveyed the slope ahead of them. “There’s a path somewhere around here. Let’s circle around a bit.” He paused and looked at Crixus. “Ser.”

“Lead on,” Crixus said, ignoring the man’s surliness. “If we’re lucky, we can be back here by dusk.”

The path had not been created by man; more likely it was a deer trail. Crixus placed one foot ahead of the other, keeping his breathing regular and his eyes focused on the next place he was to step rather than the drop-off to his right. Switchbacks had no marking at all, other than an overturned stone. Kerik called a halt to reach down to the ground.

“What is it?”

“Mountain lion tracks.”

“How old?” Crixus looked back down the slope to the horses.

Kerik crouched down. “Recent, from the last rain. We could try to bring the horses into the tunnel.”

“They’d break their legs trying to get up the mountain.” Crixus wished he brought a servant. “Do we need to leave a guard with the horses?”

“Aye,” Kerik said quickly. “Pahhim can take first watch, and I’ll relieve him for lunch.” He grinned at the tall man, whose mournful features screwed up in a smile.

“I’ll settle for the fresh air, thanks,” Pahhim said. He stepped carefully around Crixus.

Crixus and Kerik continued up the path, watching for more tracks. Crixus saw none, though the preponderance of flat rocks could account for the dearth of tracks. He was grateful for the sharp eyes of Kerik.

The arcade met the mountainside in a dark tunnel mouth, seven feet tall and six wide. Dust swirled on the floor of the channel. The sun lit the first twenty feet of the tunnel; beyond, cool darkness. Crixus and Kerik lit their lanterns.

“It’s like a tomb,” Kerik said.

“But it’s in good shape.” Crixus tapped the wall with his hammer. “The lining hasn’t cracked. I haven’t seen this mix of concrete before, though. Must be local ingredients.” He ran his hand down the wall to the floor, where the ancient engineers had fused the two together. Following it deep into the tunnel, using the lantern light to focus on the seam, he chuckled with pleasure. “If the whole tunnel is as sturdy as this mouth, our work may be easier than I thought.” He rapped the wall with two fingers for luck.

Even more remarkable was the size of the tunnel, twice as large as any in Rond. Did they use that much water in ancient Nistru? Why had the Lamiae—who were ancient themselves—allowed such a major resource to deteriorate?

“Watch the ceilings,” Crixus said, echoing down the tunnel. “There have to be manholes for maintenance. We’ll need those for the future when the aqueduct regains its flow. For that matter, watch the floor as well, so that we don’t fall into a basin.”

“What do those do?”

“Catch particulates, which is a problem with your water right now.” He held up a hand, palm flat in the lamplight. “Here’s where the water enters from your source.” He lowered his hand. “Here’s the top of the first basin.” A little lower. “The second, and so on. The channel resumes a bit lower so that the water keeps

flowing. Meanwhile the solid matter precipitates into the basin to be cleaned out regularly. By the time the water's passed over a dozen basins, it's as pure as it will get."

"The aqueduct flows right into the castle," Kerik said.

"Aye, true, though we can divert water to irrigate fields and provide clean drinking water to the peasantry. With the masters' permission, of course."

Kerik grunted.

Crixus rose to his feet. He wanted to find the source of this aqueduct more than ever, knowing now that it must be massive. Kerik lingered behind, holding his lantern close. Crixus didn't blame him; the tunnel did instill a sense of unknown menace. Had he not built such tunnels in Rond, he would have felt the same way.

"Onward and upward." Crixus resumed walking down the tunnel, hoping to give Kerik confidence with his stride.

"Upward?"

"Aqueducts are graded at a half a degree for their entire length. These tunnels are built with exacting care, using the dioptra I showed you to measure the gradient. So even though it appears to be a hole in the ground, we're slowly climbing up to the source."

They walked for fifteen minutes, pausing every three minutes to check the condition of the lining. Invariably, it had held firm. Crixus could only guess that the source of water contained few of the pollutants that would eat away at the concrete. Nearly a mile in and he had seen no vertical maintenance shafts. The ancient builders had confidence in their workmanship.

The tunnel curved to the right by thirty degrees. Crixus looked back to the lagging Kerik, whose lantern guttered, sending wild shadows across the stone walls. "I knew it," Crixus said of the bend. "We should see a maintenance shaft any time now."

"There?" Kerik pointed at the ceiling a hundred yards ahead, just barely around the bend. Crixus let out a laugh.

“Good eyes,” he said, holding up his own lantern. “I wonder if it’s blocked.”

Crixus craned his neck to spot the hole Kerik had seen. Behind him, Kerik cursed as his lantern went out. “Go on, I’ll catch up,” he called out.

The maintenance shaft hewed to the right wall of the tunnel, hard to spot even with the lantern. The stone handholds set into the walls wouldn’t cast a shadow—how had Kerik seen it? Crixus held the lantern up to illuminate the shaft. A shadow moved in the flickering light. The sound of rock grating against rock startled him.

Before he could react, something large and heavy, a paving stone, smashed into his lantern. The glass shattered; burning oil spilled on the tunnel wall and his boot. He jumped away from the flame with a shout, stamping his foot until the flames went out.

More rocks crashed into the floor where he had been standing. Voices shouted above, two men, cursing that they missed him. The loss of the lantern plunged him into near-darkness. If the men above had allowed their eyes to grow accustomed to the dark, the fading light of the oil burning on the wall would give them an advantage over him.

His blood ran cold: I’m under attack.

Crixus backed away from the fire. Two figures dropped down into the tunnel, silhouetted by the flames. Bladed weapons in their hands reflected the fading firelight. He fumbled at his belt to draw his hammer but his shaking hands dropped it to the ground with a metallic thud. The two men charged.

He fell to his knees, casting about for the hammer. Fortunately, the gold appointments of the shaft reflected light even better than the steel blades; he recovered the hammer and rolled out of the way as swords dashed into the ground.

“Kerik!” he shouted in desperation. His opponents blocked the tunnel in the direction of the entrance, where Kerik presumably struggled to relight his lantern. Crixus turned and sprinted up the corridor, deeper into the tunnel.

He plowed into the wall. The aqueduct tunnel continued to curve, preventing him from a flat out dash in the impenetrable darkness. He dragged his left hand

on the wall to guide him as he ran.

A thrown torch exploded into flame ahead of him, filling the corridor with yellow light. Four men in rags waited for him, brandishing clubs and a wicked scythe. The torchlight at their feet turned their faces cadaverous.

“Time to die, butcher,” the man with the scythe said. He raised the implement over his head and charged.

Crixus parried the overhand slash with the hilt of his mason’s hammer; the point of the scythe looped over to pass through a lock of his hair. Stay focused, he told himself.

He kned the man in the groin. The curved scythe blade caught on his hammer and skittered down the haft towards his unprotected hand. With a yelp, he let go with his right hand, retaining the hammer with his left hand just under the head. The man stumbled for a moment from the follow-through of his swing. Crixus jabbed him in the face with the hammer head, crushing his nose. In astonishment, he brought his hand up to his bloody face.

Seizing the opportunity, Crixus grabbed the man’s arm and surged forward towards the press of attackers. They scattered and left him a path to trample the scythe-wielder and dash onward into the darkness.

This time he made no effort to hug the wall. Crixus pumped his legs in an act of faith that he would encounter no more sudden turns. The full course of an aqueduct rarely maintained a straight line; it was more expedient to follow natural contours. He had worked on a few that doubled back to skirt a valley. The grand arcades that elevated the water made up only a fraction of the entirety of an aqueduct. Thus he ran with arms extended but with the strength of fear powering his legs.

Darkness enveloped him as he left the circle of light from the torch. Their voices rang through the tunnel as his first two attackers united with the four. Six opponents—and he was alone. Kerik was either dead or gone. He didn’t blame the man if he had fled.

A torch bounced off the wall captured him in its glow. Its crackle and threat of imminent danger distracted him at first from the hissing sound of water further down the passage. He registered both, noticed the tang of condensation in the air,

when a shape bolted at him from the darkness, wielding a bright sword. Crixus dodged out of the way of the seventh man and hurried towards the sound of the water, away from the deadly firelight and the blades it glinted on.

He expected a sword in the back, but the lone man seemed to be waiting for his comrades to arrive. Their footfalls clattered in the tunnel, growing louder in a storm of angry shouts. The sound of rushing water grew inordinately loud like a waterfall.

Crixus' next footfall encountered not the solidity of stone but deep water. His momentum plunged him face first into a deep pool.

He had stumbled right into the reason for the dried up aqueduct.

A wide gap had opened in the floor of the channel. Pressure sucked him down into its murky depths. He nearly lost grip on his hammer from the initial jumble of limbs as he tried to right himself. The water dashed him against the wall.

His hammer slipped from his fingers and stars flashed before his eyes. Up and down became one. The swirling, bubbling current cast him down into a freefall, where air and water met in opposition; he splashed into a shallow pool, bouncing hard off smoothed rock. His skull sang with the impact. Water rushed into his lungs; his body reacted with a panicked jerk to the surface. The steep gradient of the pool's bottom guided him away from the waterfall until he lay on his side in cold mud.

His body throbbed with pain, but he was alive and conscious. He listened to the susurrus of the waterfall. The reverberation of the splashing water could only be produced by a substantial chamber; the aqueduct channel must have been dug too close to underground caverns, probably carved out by the same water source. The darkness was absolute. He had no way to provide light.

On the other hand, he had found the ideal way to evade his attackers. Even if they guessed he fell down into the caves, they had no way to keep a torch burning for a search. More likely, they would assume he drowned in the pool.

It was just as well, because he had no desire to move. The water he swallowed and the beating he received on his way down the waterfall had consumed his adrenalin, leaving him shaking with tension. The mud oozed under his weight like an over-accommodating bed. He closed his eyes to let his body relax. Part of

his mind wanted to consider why he came under attack, but the line of inquiry seemed as forbidding as the pool that had pulled him under. He longed only to fix the plumbing systems of the castle and leave with his money and Barida. If he could ignore the increasing madness around him—the blood, the decadence, the exploitation, the unexplained attack—he could avoid being drawn into it.

A loud splash interrupted his rest. He rolled over into a crouch, hands out to ward off another attack. This time the attacker would be as blind as he. A minute passed with no further sound. Cautiously, Crixus edged forward, feeling along the floor as well as the air in front of him. Water lapped at him as he entered the pool.

His toe collided with something sharp and hooked: his hammer. Smarting from the stubbing, he nevertheless rejoiced that the hammer had found him in this lightless place. He hefted it as if it were a beloved nephew. Moving forward, the hammer now served to test the space in front of him.

A familiar stench met his nostrils: blood in the water. The hammer thudded into something soft and heavy.

A corpse.

Was it one of his attackers? Kerik? He had to know. If it were Kerik, the right hand would be short a finger. He hitched his hammer to his belt and turned the body around in the water. The skin felt clammy and stiff, nothing like a living being; more like a large piece of furniture. By touch he located the arms. One ended too soon in a wet mess of flaps of skin that licked at his fingers. He yelped. Gritting his teeth, he ascertained that the corpse floated face down in the water, thus the left arm had been the one to be shorn off. Good luck for me, he thought grimly. The right hand possessed five fingers.

So it wasn't Kerik. Instead, it was a bandit, or whoever these men were that they would draw steel against an innocent man.

And yet was he entirely innocent? The man with the scythe called him a butcher. No one could be fully innocent in the service of the Lamiae—cultural differences were a poor excuse. When Orazio had walked away from him, he was rejecting this sort of amorality. Crixus' love for Kharrina had blinded him to the consequences of his actions, just as the damp stone walls of his cave blinded him from the sight of the gored corpse in his arms.

Yet had he never come here, Barida would be friendless in a castle of predators. Crixus might not have much influence among the Lamiae, but he had resolved to protect her, which was more than she would have had on her own. He had constructed immense arcades and deep tunnels with his own hands; could he not direct his intellect and strength to shaping human—or inhuman—behavior as well? Did he have a choice, if he and Barida wanted to survive?

The dead man had no tales to tell save for a short one of his violent death at someone else's hand. Above, however, the remaining combatants either searched for him or fought another battle. He needed answers.

Crixus waded under the waterfall. The pressure of the water pushed him down under the surface of the pool. He surfaced against the wall, past the arc of the water. Water smashed down on him, but enough air existed between the sheets that he could sputter for breath. The jutting rocks that had battered him on his tumultuous descent now served as hand-and footholds for his ascent. Algae and mud coated the rocks with a slippery slime. He made a few false starts, pushed off the rocks by the water, and found the best approach was to duck his head against the wall, letting the water press him into the footholds.

He had fallen down the waterfall in less than five seconds; the climb up took half an hour. The last portion was the worst and the hastiest: without air pockets, he had to climb through a vortex of swirling water. His lungs nearly burst with effort. By the time he pulled himself out of the water, every muscle in his body screamed with aching, dull pain. Crixus rolled onto the tunnel, exhausted, ready to die if his attackers happened to be waiting for him. A kitten could have slain him at that moment for all the strength he had left. He lamented that he deserved no less for what he was going to do to the peasants of Nistru.

A torch flickered on the ground, discarded but still burning its tarry substance. So be it, he thought. I'll die here as soon as they notice me. How could I have known? I should have tried to learn patience in my short life.

Yet no one stood in what seemed to his dark-adjusted eyes to be a bright circle of light. Shapes lay on the ground, still and gruesomely familiar.

With enormous effort he sat up. He counted five bodies. Including the body that had fallen into the pool, they added up to six, leaving one man unaccounted for. No effort had been made to arrange the bodies or loot them. Their faces had been

frozen in expressions of rage or anguish. In the dim light, the blood on their bodies sparkled black like a night sky. Moving sluggishly, he recovered the torch and stoked its fire. With the benefit of greater light—the better to spot the last man, if he lived—he could see the men’s fatal wounds now. Precise cuts, each in a vital spot: a throat, a chest, a stomach, a head. Each bore a single, fatal wound, aside from the scythe-man whose broken nose seemed ironic in the display of overt carnage, and the corpse in the cave below whom he could not inspect.

Who killed these men?

Kerik had displayed nothing of the physical prowess this sort of fighting required, unless the man was hiding something. Moreover, the work had been done with a sword sharp enough to cut through bone.

A memory flashed: the crouching figure that confronted him before he fell into the pool. It hadn’t been crouching in fear or hiding; rather it had assumed a defensive position as a fighting man would. Trained to kill and faced with an unknown opponent in near darkness, combat reflexes took over.

The enormity of what Crixus didn’t know or understand frustrated him. Stay the course, he thought, and focus on saving yourself and Barida. Hammer and torch in hand, he marched back towards the outside world. He watched the ceiling for maintenance shafts where the seventh man could hide.

Nothing happened.

Twenty minutes later, ambient sunlight swallowed his torch. He emerged into blindness of another sort, brightness that dazzled his eyes. He dropped the torch into the dust and shielded his eyes with a muddy hand. At the foot of the aqueduct, the horses and Pahhim were gone.

31. Swordplay

After the attack, Crixus faced a long walk back to the castle. He was intercepted by a contingent of Red Legionnaires with torches and lanterns; Kerik and Pahhim rode at their vanguard. Kerik said he panicked and ran after hearing the sounds of battle. Crixus hadn't emerged from the tunnel, so he and Pahhim galloped back to the castle to call for help. The Legionnaires bore Crixus back for medical attention, while a contingent explored the tunnel. They recovered the five bodies, though the sixth, deep in the caves, was left to rot. There was no sign of a seventh man.

The rumors amongst the serving staff whispered of Staal's fury at the news. The servant who had the misfortune to inform Staal escaped with bruises from the furniture Staal hurled at him. Later Staal visited Crixus' chambers in person to fuss over him like an aunt. Crixus gave him the first detailed account of the encounter, then of his conclusions about the viability of aqueduct repair.

Staal rejected Crixus' estimate of a year-long project. "I am hardly that patient. How many men do you want?"

"It's not merely a matter of strong backs. I'll need men like Pahhim and Kerik, bright enough to train to supervise the men."

"You needn't worry about expense with the Lamiae. I can provide you with a thousand men and a hundred with an ounce of brains for you to fill with knowledge. Now give me a new estimate."

Two months, they agreed, assuming all went well. Staal seemed satisfied. He instructed Crixus to send word when he felt ready for some exercise; Staal would teach him how to defend himself properly.

Two days later, they stood face to face, swords in hand.

"Congratulations, Crixus." Staal offered the snide grin to which Crixus had become accustomed. "You've earned enemies. Welcome to Castle Nistru. Now check your straps."

Crixus tightened the straps on his protective jacket. It reminded him more of

window blinds than fencing armor, but the copper woven between the springy wooden slats promised some measure of protection. A thick leather helmet with a mesh face would save his face from thrusts. Nevertheless, as Staal's quick sword arm already twitched with anticipation, Crixus felt no enthusiasm for this lesson in swordsmanship.

"I'm secure, my lord."

Staal paced around the indoor palestra. A smattering of Lamiae reclined in the bleachers, served blood and wine by the servants who outnumbered them five to one. Barida knelt on the floor with water and a towel.

"Watch my eyes," Staal said.

"Aye, my lord. But should you not wear your helmet? I'd hate to injure you."

Staal blew air through his lips. "You're polite, but far too slow to touch me. Now watch my eyes, not my hand."

Crixus met the man's eyes. They glinted with mischief.

"Most opponents will look at their target before attacking." Staal demonstrated by a quick glance at Crixus' midsection before tapping him there. "The sword may be weaving back and forth or flying all about. It's slender and hard to track. Watch the eyes for the cue to defend." Staal repeated the maneuver until Crixus was able to catch the timing and knock his blade away. "Excellent. Speed can come from strength—with training. Now you just have to learn how to see an attack coming."

"Or four," Crixus said, thinking of the tunnel.

"Or more. A true swordsman fights with his eyes and his ears and his skin, not his weapon. The sword thrust is an afterthought."

Staal showed Crixus a series of parries and made him practice them alone before pushing his blade into range. However, Staal grew bored with instruction and used his skill to dodge around Crixus' clumsy practice parries and poke at his chest.

"I fear I'm a slow student, my lord," Crixus said. "While you were learning the

art of the blade, I was hewing rock with my father.”

Staal laughed. “Rather, I mastered the art of the blade while your father was a babe swallowing rocks in the yard. But had I a decade to teach you, I’d make a juggernaut out of that big frame of yours. Well, we can practice this again. The rebels won’t give up so easily.”

Crixus removed the stifling helmet. “Rebels?”

“Your would-be assassins.” Staal leaned in close to speak softly. “I’ve been monitoring them for years. Nistruvans are slow to act but care little for their own safety when they do. In attacking you, they’ve tipped their hand.”

Lamiae began to enter the bleachers with their retinues. Crixus wondered what was so fascinating about watching Staal teach him to parry a sword.

“Why attack me? I pose no threat to them.”

“On the contrary,” Staal said, removing his jacket. A retainer hurried to catch it. “One pressing issue with them is our tithing of blood. They fail to understand the system of patronage we have created, whereby they are coddled and protected in exchange for providing our sustenance. The sheep wish to live in the herder’s own house, as it were.” He handed off the practice sword. A servant brought out a bundle wrapped in silk. Staal withdrew an elegant and sharp saber from it. He tested the blade. “Ah, perfect.”

“Are you finished with me, my lord?” Crixus tried to hide the nervousness in his voice.

“Not quite. Stand aside, there by your girl.”

Crixus managed a formal bow and backed up, trying to force his eyes away from the tip of the sword. Staal ignored him, glancing around at the gathering crowd. He made a few practice swipes with the blade.

“What’s he doing?” Barida whispered.

“I don’t know. He seems to be done with me, though.” He handed the helmet to Barida.

A door opened at the far end of the palestra. Seven men, wearing leather facemasks and blindfolds, were led out into the center by Red Legionnaires tugging on a rope wound around their necks. Their hands were bound in front and they stumbled in helpless fear.

Crixus cursed when he saw the Legionnaire bearing seven swords follow the procession.

“Is he going to make you fight them?” Barida asked.

“I don’t think so.” He watched a grin of anticipation widen on Lord Staal’s face.

“Watch carefully, Crixus,” Staal called to him. “Pay special attention to my feet and my head.”

The Lamiae in the audience clapped politely as Staal took an exaggerated bow. The Legionnaires cut the bonds of the prisoners and handed each a sword. Finally, they untied their blindfolds. The masks concealed the alarm and confusion that their bodies gave away.

The Legionnaires arranged themselves on the walls, standing guard with swords drawn. One soldier consulted with another and then took up a position near Crixus. The helmet hid his mouth but he gave Crixus a wink.

“Ushe?” Crixus leaned over to whisper.

“Moving up in the world, I see,” Ushe said in a quiet voice without changing his facing.

“Aye. You too, if you are pulling palace duty.”

“And I have you to thank. Ah... the exhibition is beginning.” He squared himself with his sword. As a unit, the Legionnaires hailed Staal with a shout.

“My friends,” Staal said, addressing the audience with arms extended like a minstrel. “The mercy of the Lamiae is legendary. And yet there are those among our charges who are too violent to continue in society... too violent even for the mines. We can provide them one last chance to honor their masters by bleeding for our distraction.” The crowd applauded. Barida nudged Crixus, who clapped along.

“Thanks to our new friend Crixus, I am suitably warmed up.” Another smattering of applause. “You men,” he said to the gladiators, “you may feel you fight for no purpose. To have the eyes of the Lamiae upon you in death is an honor afforded few of your fellows, but I can understand if that is too much of an abstraction right now. Take this to heart as motivation: the last man standing will live. If you flee, the Legionnaires will slay you. If you fight with vigor, you could walk out of this arena a free man.”

“You are a tease, Amadine,” a familiar female voice cried out from the audience. Lady Beryyal. She sat with her adolescent sons, the first Lamia children Crixus had seen. The boys’ faces were as cold as statues.

“Begin!” Staal raised his blade.

The gladiators circled him like hunters facing a cornered tiger. No one wanted to take the first blow, yet these men were no cowards. The largest snorted in contempt and lumbered forward. The arrogance in his stride spoke volumes about the contempt held for the Lamiae. He outweighed Staal by fifty pounds.

With an ease that could have been choreographed for stage, Staal maneuvered the man’s blade out of his hand. The end of his disarming parry was a riposte that tore the man’s throat open. He collapsed in shock.

Pay attention to my feet and head. As he watched the first man die, Crixus noticed Staal’s feet move of their own volition, independent of his line of sight. Assessing his foes, he had planned his movements as one determined chess strategies. He struck out at the arm of the man nearest the dying bruiser. Blood shot out from a long, gaping wound. Applause from the Lamiae drowned out the man’s cry of woe.

The remaining five men hesitated no longer. They crowded in to land a strike at Staal. Again his feet moved like predatory cats, pulling him away from desperate attacks. At play, he danced the point of his sword up the body of a prisoner, giving a yip as he jabbed it into the man’s eye. Crixus’ blood ran cold at the howl of agony that followed. Barida pressed close against him. Behind them the Lamiae tittered at his joke.

“Try harder, lads,” Staal said. He whirled around the wall of sword points with supernatural ease. Tsking in contempt, he cut the leg out from one man, impaling him as he fell. The man’s flesh refused to give up its deadly grip on his sword,

and the press of bodies forced him to leap back, unarmed.

Gasps of alarm arose from the Lamiae. Three men chased him around the palestra. Staal ran with a catlike grace, never once admitting to his danger. Legionnaires attempted to give him their own blades but he whisked past them. One prisoner gained on Staal, who dodged his horizontal sweep. He caught the man's arm and directed his sword up into his back to jut out his chest. Confused, the man died as he collapsed to the ground.

Dashing to the man whose arm he had slashed, Staal elbowed him in the face, took his sword, and eviscerated him in a single, fluid movement. He weighed the blade as the final two lunged at him, comically ignoring their advance. At the last moment, he slapped their blades out of the way.

“Which one shall I spare?” He shouted to the audience. The roar in response was indecipherable. He danced the rightmost man's blade aside in a movement that he had demonstrated to Crixus five minutes ago... followed by a riposte direct to the man's heart.

The last man stepped back, relief in the sag of his shoulders. Staal growled something too quiet to hear, stepped forward, and beheaded him. The crowd howled with ironic delight.

Staal grinned at his fellow Lamiae. He gave a theatrical embarrassed shrug. Laughter and applause filled the palestra.

Crixus stared at the beheaded man's right hand. It was missing the smallest finger and the top segment of the ring finger.

32. Maps

To please Staal, Crixus wore a blade on his belt and never left the castle without two Legionnaires. The Lamia lord made good on his promise. Eleven hundred workmen assembled in the square, lined up like soldiers. Crixus meandered through an impromptu speech, mostly emphasizing the importance of setting a deliberate pace and checking their work. He made no threats for disobedience or incompetence, though the men seemed to expect it—especially with his two bodyguards glowering behind him.

Crixus divided the hundred men with masonry experience into two groups: one for the aqueduct and one for the internal systems of the castle. He advised Pahhim to watch for men of particular skill and leadership potential to take the place of Kerik. Pahhim did not ask about Kerik's fate, nor did Crixus offer details.

For a week he split his time between surveying the aqueduct, and guiding the workforce to the needed repairs downstream before filling in the pool in the tunnel. When he was satisfied that he laid out a solid day's work for them, he returned to the castle, more often than not spurring Gavri into a gallop, to finish his schematic map of the castle piping. The ancient builders had built well, providing enough drainage for the blood and water in separate stations deep below the castle. He chose a handful of assistants to map far flung sections of the castle then brought their maps together at the end of the day to add them by candlelight to his master map.

While Crixus was out of the castle, Staal appropriated Barida to serve as his own handmaiden. She would return exhausted even later at night than Crixus with tales of giving up blood to Staal and the Emperor as they drank their liquors, called for minstrels, and chattered about palace gossip. The Emperor had taken a liking to Staal after Crixus' arrival, which a sleepy Barida murmured was a change in his previous attitude. Though tired, Barida didn't seem as distressed about her servitude as when Crixus had first arrived at Castle Nistru. She offered few clues, murmured only "they treat me well," then fading into deep sleep. Despite sharing a bed, Crixus and Barida had little time to talk. Crixus found himself missing her clingy dependence on him.

"One more month," he promised her one night. "Every time I encounter a delay,

Staal pulls more men out of the fields to put at my disposal. I suspect there have never been so many peasants in the castle at one time in centuries.”

“I know,” she said, chewing on an apple. “He told me and the Emperor.”

“Oh?”

“Well, he told the Emperor.”

“Be careful, Barida. These are dangerous men.” He touched her shoulder. “A servant is supposed to be deaf to such conversations.”

“Perzigan likes it when I offer opinions,” she said, looking away.

“Who?”

“The Emperor. He says I’m ‘refreshing.’” In the lamplight, Crixus thought he saw her flush.

“You address the Emperor by his given name?” Crixus gritted his teeth.

“He bade me to do so. I’m his favorite, he says. He says Lord Staal has ‘excellent taste’ in women.” She grinned at him. “Isn’t that wonderful? Lord Staal doesn’t torment me anymore. I’ve done what you told me: found the most powerful friend in the castle.”

Crixus recalled the confident swagger of the Emperor. This was a man who was never refused. “Has he touched you? Made amorous advances?”

“Crixus!” Barida scolded. “You sound jealous. It’s very unbecoming.” Pleased with herself, she rose to pace the room. “I would think you’d be relieved that I’ve helped to smooth things out for you.”

“Not if we’re going to leave this castle together.”

Barida’s silence spoke volumes. Crixus stood and crossed the room to her.

“You need to listen to me. Despite what the Emperor says, this castle is a deathtrap for you. I’ll never forgive myself if I leave you here.”

She put her arms around Crixus. “Thank you, Crixus. I wasn’t sure if you still

loved me.”

He patted her back, as distressed as he’d been in the tunnel. Helplessness washed over him. “I do love you,” he said at last. “Please stay with me.”

Barida rose up on her tiptoes for a kiss. Crixus kissed her with the fervor he knew she wanted. “Oh, darling,” she said. “I promise I won’t let them separate us.”

“Remember, a lot of things can change once we leave here,” he said, knowing it was true. “I may not be able to return home. I’ll need a friend.”

“Or a wife.”

“Or a wife. Don’t let them lure you away from me.” He felt hollow as he hugged her close.

Barida frowned. “I don’t want to offend the Emperor.”

Not *Perzigan*

She kissed him again. “I trust you,” she whispered. “Can we not be lovers too?”

“It’s—” He wished he understood women better. “It’s not time yet,” he finished lamely. “Not here, anyhow. Let’s wait until we’re free, and rich, and happy.”

This appeared to satisfy her. She reached up for another kiss, giggling as though she won a game. She had; Crixus understood his desires less and less.

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While the aqueduct repairs were underway, Crixus began his second phase of attack on the challenge of moving a heavy liquid through pipes. The castle’s earlier system, a manual pumping station, required too much plasma and generated waste. The bloodbaths drained into an underground complex of caves where they ultimately mixed with waste water and were flushed into the outgoing streams at the far end of the valley. The stewards of the pump station advised Crixus not to venture into the caverns, warning of toxic vapors and ghosts.

Crixus' plan to save blood was simple. The current system drained the blood as if it were water, with the same sort of piping used for water; namely, lead. The styles of piping for the water (wholly broken for ages) and the blood (mostly broken) were identical, leading him to speculate that the castle hadn't originally been constructed for the Lamiae and their unique needs. He planned to complete the adaptation of the plumbing for the two types of liquid by separating their waste removal systems. The fountains, meant for drinking, had little impact on the cleanliness of the blood, and therefore the fluid could recycle through the system, passing through a series of special basins with screens to catch incidental particulates at least twice before moving to the waste drains. He staggered the basins so that the blood moved through five fountains before drainage. Since every Lamiae felt they should have running blood fountains in their chambers, in addition to meeting halls and dining halls, Crixus put these systems at the top of his list. They would both gratify the Lamiae at once—for near-immortals, they were most impatient about luxuries—and prevent an overuse of the finite blood supply. By his calculations, this simple step would account for half of the Lamiae's anticipated blood usage.

The rebel's insult, "butcher," had resonated with Crixus' own guilty feelings about the amount of blood he designed to move through the system at any one time. The Lamiae drank it, cooked with it, and bathed in it. Moreover, the Lamiae's ability to sense differences in taste and smell of blood prohibited him from using anything but the freshest blood. It would not keep long, even at the cooler subterranean levels. The coumarin additives derived from alfalfa delayed coagulation for over a week, but freshness was another issue.

The complex portion of his plan involved using vacuum technologies, which he had studied but never implemented. A vacuum created by water drawn from the aqueduct would suck the blood into the system, rather than relying on volume to push it through. Crixus missed Stamm more than ever; the old man had installed virtually every kind of pipe known to man.

Consequently, Crixus spent days in meetings with Nistru's metalworkers, drawing and redrawing diagrams for his modular vacuum pump system. The pumps themselves were not complex, once the pieces were cast. Shipments of copper and brass arrived in convoys of wagons guarded by Red Legionnaires at Staal's insistence.

Staal harangued him every few days with increasing impatience. At first he was

satisfied with a matter-of-fact progress report, but soon he wanted Crixus to project finish times and reiterate the working details of each mechanism, as if knowing the guts of the operation somehow sped it along. When the first vacuum pump was assembled, Staal insisted on visiting the pump station, interrupting work as the Legionnaires guarded against rebel attacks.

The visits also gave Staal a chance to vent about the peasant rebellion to Crixus. The other Lamiae paid little heed to his warnings. Even his new confidante the Emperor troubled little about it. The general sense among the nobles was that the Legionnaires could root out and destroy dissenters without any need for Lamia involvement.

“They take their security for granted.” Staal paced the reception hall with a sword as was his wont. “Do you know who first contracted with the Red Legionnaires six centuries ago?”

“You, my lord?”

Staal gave him a curious look. “I’m not that old, Crixus. My ancestor, Thoador Staal, evolved the defense plan that took the burden of military duty off the backs of our peasantry. Mercenaries are more reliable because they fight for money, which fulfills the human impulse of resource hoarding.”

“Resource hoarding?”

“Greed, Crixus.” Staal smiled like a snake. “The lower races suffer terribly from it. Lamiae do not succumb to its tendrils. We have all we need, we ask for no more.”

“Agreed, my lord Staal,” Crixus said. “Nevertheless, I have some reservations about the possibility of an increased demand on the supply of blood if we repair the system. According to Doctor Sempri, a peasant can safely contribute one liter per month—”

“Doctor Sempri fusses over nothing. Do we need more? We can increase the frequency or the amount.” Staal snickered. “Wouldn’t it be an ironic joke to fix every fountain and let them run dry?”

“No joke, my lord,” Crixus insisted. “My improvements to the pump system will increase the efficiency by a substantial margin, but you mustn’t consume that

savings with a soaring demand.” He spread his hands. “What if we rationed the baths?”

The sword point flew through the air to hover in front of Crixus’ face. “Ration?” Staal’s face screwed up in distaste. “My friend, *I* can joke about such things, but *you*

“The math bears me out, my lord. Forgive me,” he added as the sword point stole forward, menacing his eye. “I merely wish to forestall your public embarrassment.”

The Lamia lord grunted and dropped the sword point to the floor. “So you’re telling me that your improvements are so effective that we’ll overindulge in blood and run out?”

“Correct,” Crixus said. “As a man of science, I knew you would appreciate the conundrum in the abstract earlier than your fellows.” He grinned weakly.

“Yes, yes.” Staal put a finger to his cheek in thought. “Could we not vary the pressures according to rank?”

“We could,” Crixus said, imagining a system of stops built along the piping. “We certainly could without added effort. Good idea.” In fact, it was a good idea, he had to admit. “But who dictates the pressure settings?”

“Me,” Staal said. “That way we avoid accusations of favoritism.” He studied the length of his blade. “I’m known for my careful navigation of our complex social structure.”

Crixus refrained from comment. “I’ll build that into the plan, my lord.”

“And be sure to map it clearly, Crixus. We must have a clear record of whose switch is whose.” Staal smirked. “Doubtless there shall be many adjustments.”

“My lord, your solution is ingenious but it may not compensate for the increased demand. Are you not adding fuel to the fire of the rebellion?”

“They will be dead soon so their concerns hardly matter.” Staal shrugged. “Now, you’ve had enough of a break. Come back tomorrow with your maps and the controls clearly marked.”

33. Dice

Pahhim gawked at Crixus as he took a third round of casts at Lamia's Balls. The copper coins on the table were a meager pot of winnings, yet Crixus appreciated them more than austrices on a gambling table in Rond. The simple, finite joy of gambling at dice, its consequences limited to the tavern table they cast upon, felt like fresh air after a month and a half of life or death gambling in the castle.

"You've played this game before," Pahhim said. He slapped more coins on the table. "No foreigner should be able to beat us this handily at our own game."

"Several times with the Legionnaires who escorted me to Nistru," he said. "Back in Rond, I did have a reputation as a ready hand at the gambling table." Catastrophic Pathii games aside, he corrected himself. "Believe me, I'd be happy to lose. It's a relief just to play the game."

"Feel free to start losing any time," one of his companions said.

"Aye," Pahhim said. "Put some of the Lamiae's money back in our pockets."

"It would violate the spirit of the game," Crixus said. "But I can buy the next round of drinks." He signaled the barkeep to bring another flask of the weak ale the Nistruvans favored. The tavern, a dimly lit, low-ceilinged room wedged between food stalls in the stunted mercantile zone near the castle, was a disappointment in comparison to taverns in Rond and even Izhmir. Nevertheless, he found he could forget for a moment the interrogations by Staal, the strained exchanges with Barida, and the ever-present scent of blood in his nostrils.

Pahhim's friends had the same surly expressions as he did, as though smiles were a thing of the ancient past. They spoke with the determined earnestness of philosophy students in Rond—each utterance would be used to judge their integrity. The peasants of Nistru could not be called handsome; even those with favorable features had them drawn over their skulls by malnutrition and systematic bleeding. Yet their company was relief after spending so much time in the self-centered and preening confines of the castle.

"When this grand project is done, Crixus will be living high and mighty like the masters," Pahhim said. Crixus shot him a surprised look at the disclosure. "You

might become our first human bloodsucker.”

“I don’t think that’s appropriate talk, my friend.” Crixus pushed out an ante into the center of the table. “I’m no Lamia. I’ll be returning home after my work is done.”

“Make the cut and leave the patient to bleed,” said Pahhim’s friend, a sandy haired man named Atul. “You’re more of a mercenary, then.”

“I suppose.”

“The Legionnaires are forbidden to socialize with the dirty peasants,” Atul said. “Why do you bother?”

“I work with you,” Crixus said. “I’m not a part of the hierarchy your masters have created, so please spare me your bitterness.” He filled Atul’s mug. “Rondans put our slaveholding past behind us a century ago.”

“We’re not slaves,” Atul said, his eyes dark and hot. “Take that back.”

“Shut up, Atul,” Pahhim said. “Crixus is as fair a man as I’ve met. You’d do well to listen to him.”

“Oh?” Atul crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair, ignoring the fresh ale. “I’m listening now. What have you to say?”

Crixus cleared his throat. “Your friend has taken offence,” he said to Pahhim. “Best that I hold my tongue.”

“I’ll ask the question, then.” Pahhim sipped his draught. “How does a man born in a free society justify giving tools to our masters to help them brutalize us worse than before?”

The table became silent. Crixus’ ears burned. “I thought you were on my side,” he said, trying to make the comment a light joke.

“What side is that?” Pahhim raised an eyebrow.

“I gather you have lost interest in our gaming,” Crixus said. “But I’m not comfortable with this topic.”

“That’s because you’re ignoring the moral consequences of your actions, and it ill-suits you. I’ve worked under you for nearly two months. You treat men with respect, not entitlement. If the masters saw you spread such egalitarianism they’d turn you into a cocktail.”

“The Lamiae take no interest in the dirty details of a project like this,” Crixus said. “Half the day we’re up to our knees in filth.”

Atul smiled, a sun peeking out from an eclipse. “He sounds like a peasant.”

“He is a peasant. He’s a commoner in his homeland. A tradesman, where they reward skill for its own sake.” Pahhim leaned forward. “Rond is what Nistru should have been.”

“I try not to judge,” Crixus said. “I’m here to do a job.”

“You’re here to get rich from the lazy ignorance of the Lamiae,” Pahhim said in an eager voice. “You recognized their weakness and you exploited it.”

Crixus shifted in his seat. “I’d like to think that I identified an unfulfilled need and offered a solution.”

“The masters want more blood. You gave them a way to get it. When our children die from a simple cold because their bodies lack the blood to fight off infection, shall we blame the Lamiae, or Crixus? Or thank the gods that the child was able to give blood to the sacred masters while she lived?”

An image of a drained Barida came to mind. “I knew nothing of these things when I came here,” Crixus said in a quiet voice.

“But you didn’t relent. Why?”

The accusing eyes of his tablemates burrowed into him. Crixus’ thoughts raced. They had expressed all the doubts he had swallowed for months.

“I had a higher purpose,” he said. The words sounded as absurd in his ears as theirs. “I mean to say, my goals are not strictly profit.”

“Profit would have at least been a defense we could grasp,” Atul said. “What else could it be? You make no sense, man.”

“My fiancée,” Crixus blurted. The glares didn’t subside. “I was separated from her by—by circumstances. I hoped that the money I earned here would allow me to be reunited with her.”

Pahhim took a deep breath. “So you aren’t a mercenary,” he said. “You’re a romantic.”

“I’m a fool,” Crixus said. “But I’m trying to undo past mistakes.”

“By making more,” Pahhim said. “And on a grander scale. Is this woman worth the lives of my countrymen, who’ll die as the masters demand more and more blood for their shiny new fountains?”

“You don’t think I’ve thought of that?” Crixus’ voice raised in pitch. “What do you think the vacuum pumps are for? They reduce the need for deep reservoirs of your people’s blood. I’ve introduced efficiency into the system, Pahhim. You’ve seen the figures yourself.”

“Aye, I have. And I know how many fountains and baths we repaired so they can now draw from those reservoirs. If the Lamiae maintain their previous habits, you save blood, true. But what possible reason would they have for restraint when the blood runs at the twist of a wrist? They’ll outstrip your estimates in a month.” He made a fist. “You’ve unleashed a dragon amongst us.”

“It’s not my fault,” he protested. “I’m not Nistruvan. I didn’t know about any of this before I arrived.”

“And you never stopped to question it, even when you saw them sucking that servant girl of yours dry.”

Crixus pounded the table. “Damn it! What was I supposed to do? I can’t change your entire nation with a wave of my hand.”

Pahhim put a hand on Crixus’ shoulder. His eyes smoldered with sincerity. “What if you could?”

“I can’t.”

“You’re a godsend to us, Crixus. You’re the only man of principle in that castle, and the masters have entrusted you with their very life essence. You can save

her.” Pahhim emphasized the words. “And all of us.”

A chill ran down Crixus’ spine. “You,” he breathed, “you’re the rebellion.”

“We are,” Pahhim said. “We argued for weeks over whether to tell you. I convinced them,” he nodded his head at Atul and the others, “that you were a man of ethics worthy of trust. I know you aren’t of a political nature, but neither were we until we tired of our wives’ and children’s veins being opened for those arrogant monsters. They’re not human, my friend, but they’re not untouchable, either.” He squeezed Crixus’ shoulder. “You’re a dagger in their midst, waiting to be unsheathed.”

“How?” Crixus croaked.

“They drink our blood with impunity,” Pahhim said. “But with your new system for plumbing, we can poison their well.” He grinned in triumph. “Their first drink from our hearts will give them a taste of our hatred.”

“I’ve been paid to fix their pipes,” Crixus said. “I’m an artisan. I take pride in my work. What I am *not*

“Keep it,” Pahhim said. “What flows through those pipes when you’re done isn’t your responsibility. Just show us the way.”

“You’ve seen the map.”

Pahhim laughed. “I have, and my respect for your skill grows every day. If I had a copy, I could save lives.”

Crixus’ mind raced. “If I help you—and I am not giving assent yet—their deaths are on my hands as well as yours. I’m no revolutionary or killer or soldier. I lay pipe, Pahhim. I provide water.”

“Wars have been fought over less,” Pahhim said.

“Staal has the map now. I’ll have to request it from him.”

“You’re going to help us, then?” Years of worry slid off Pahhim’s hangdog face.

He had seen Kerik beheaded for the Lamiae’s entertainment; Barida, an innocent

girl, treated like a toy; widespread squalor and poverty to put the worst slums in Rond to shame; pools of blood thick with the stench of suffering; Staal's casual cruelty born of unearned privilege; a society built only to serve a callous, cruel, and cynical aristocracy of supposed non-humans. His life had been spent working for himself, hoping to increase his meager standing in life so that he could wed a beautiful, vital woman like Kharrina and live happily. If he left Nistru intact with his fortune, was it not on the backs of these pathetic peasants? What would the sacredness of his marriage to Kharrina be if he bought it with the money won through the suffering of an entire people? Every time he impregnated her, he would think of the child in Nistru that bled for the sake of his own future offspring.

“Crixus?”

What good was love for Kharrina if it prospered in the wake of human suffering?

“It's not that easy,” he said.

“Why not?”

All beings coursed with liquid in their veins; liquid was the water artisan's stock in trade. The Lamiae had welcomed him into their own bodies, yet now he could be the plague that wiped them out. When his father had bequeathed him the family hammer, he imagined he would be hewing stone and guiding water to homes and public baths, not calculating the mathematics of life and death.

If he used his skills to take lives—even those of cruel monsters—what kind of man was he?

But if he didn't act, how many deaths would he be complicit in?

“Because,” he said, taking a breath. “Because...” Barida trusted him to save her. Barida deserved to live a full life. “Because the flow is controlled by Lord Staal alone, right now. Only I know how the stops are built to restrict the flow to various estates. If you wish to... pass... foreign substances through the system, all the stops must be opened.”

“The map describes all this?”

“If you know how to read it. Yes.” A whirlwind seized him, of blood and fire and

screams. His life was now forfeit. “Yes. I can teach Pahhim, who’s spent enough time in the bowels of the castle to understand what he’s reading.”

Pahhim’s face split into a toothy smile, as did Atul’s and the others at the table. In that moment, the centuries of oppression lifted with a gust of wind tinged with the scent of hope. This was the future of Nistru, Crixus thought.

“You’re making the right choice,” Pahhim said.

“Good.” Crixus emptied his mug in a single gulp. “Because I’m scared like I’ve never been before.”

34. Poison

Alone in bed, Crixus tossed and turned as the taps opened and the blood flowed freely for the first time in centuries. The map, now in Staal's hands, refused to leave his mind's eye; the central points of confluence glowed as though candles burned under them. A parcel of poison there, and there, and there, and ten Lamia households would be bathing in their own graves. Lady Beryyal, smiling like a goddess until the poison seeped into her perfect skin... she would die in convulsions, splashing the tainted blood on the exposed bosoms of her handmaidens. Would they survive the exposure?

Men had died by Crixus' hand before: the assassins in Ambiri, the bandits near Restia. Yet those men had directly attacked him, an act of violence that seemed almost innocent in its simplicity. He had no guilt about slaying his attackers; he hadn't even thought of it since arriving in Nistru.

Yet his hand would strike the first blow against the Lamiae for the sake of principles which they would surely dispute. He would be the bandit in the woods, rationalizing a forthcoming act of violence with a list of grievances against society.

His father had never taken another life.

Nistruvans would have continued to live short, brutalized lives had he never laid eyes on their valley. Lamiae would have persisted in their cruel ways. Legionnaires would still strike down dissenters for their masters' gold. He came to profit from the inequality in the valley, only to contribute to its downfall. His payment would be a handful of diamonds from his victims. Was it ethical? The map of the pipes of Castle Nistru was simpler to read than the maze of moral paradoxes into which he had wandered.

The victims of the situation were as concrete as the principles were abstract. Barida, whom he loved—and he did love her, in some way he could not yet define—suffered before his eyes; the resignation with which she viewed her exploitation stung worse. She didn't even grasp the crime the Lamiae perpetuated on her.

Or did she? Had she made peace with it, as Nistru and the outlying villages had?

Was he helping a revolution that would claim more lives than the unfair system it uprooted?

Water flowed downhill. It obeyed the law of gravity: always downhill, even when forced through pipes in the walls. Ultimately it wanted to descend. Would his present dilemma resolve itself so absolutely?

The door opened, cutting the darkness of his room with a sliver of yellow lamplight. Barida's slender form broke the clean line of light. She closed the door softly and crept into the bathroom. Crixus rose and followed her.

She rinsed her head under the tap he had torn out and replaced half a dozen times as he tested ways to channel the water. Her young face bore a look of jaded thoughtfulness.

"Barida," Crixus said. She caught his eye and turned away from him, silent as the water coursed over her hair and neck. "I'm glad you're home."

She didn't reply. Her hands cast about for a cup to fill. He retrieved it from out of her reach. She filled it with water and gulped it. In the light of a single oil lamp mounted on the bathroom wall, the water she spat out appeared discolored.

Crixus heart sunk.

"Kiss me," he said, despairing.

She took another drink of water, dodging his gaze.

"Barida. Do as I say."

She shrugged off his arm.

"What's wrong?" He said.

"Nothing," she said. "I'm just tired."

Like a blacksmith testing the sharpness of a blade, he seized her shoulders and kissed her, forcing her mouth open with his tongue. The salty, metallic taste confirmed his fears.

Blood.

“Stop!” She pushed him away. “What are you doing?”

“He’s giving you blood,” Crixus said. “The Emperor.”

She wiped her mouth, eyes wild with anger. “So what? I told you, he fancies me. You picked a strange time to become a jealous lover.”

“I’m not jealous,” he said, though she wasn’t entirely wrong. “I’m concerned. We’re nearly done with the project. Don’t you want to leave this place?”

Barida clenched her jaw. When Crixus reached out to her, she pushed her hand away.

“Of course I do,” she said. “What’s the hurry?”

She’s still a child, he reminded himself. These secrets are too much for her to conceal in the presence of such powerful men. “Trust me, we’re nearly done here. You mustn’t encourage the Emperor to become attached to you.”

“Crixus, can you even hear yourself?” Barida laughed the contemptuous bark of a schoolyard bully. “Do you think I have any control over the Emperor’s affections?” She pushed past him into the dark chamber. Crixus followed her.

“I told you to be less appealing to him.”

“How do I do that? Refuse him when he shares blood with me?” Barida turned away from Crixus, looking into the darkness. “Few are honored so,” she said as if quoting him.

“The Sacred Companions,” Crixus murmured. “They’re the only ones allowed to drink blood with the Lamiae.”

“Crixus,” Barida said. Shadows concealed her expression. “They live like the Lamiae, with servants, with chambers... with beautiful clothes and jewels... I’ll be a princess.”

“You’ll be a courtesan. You act like you’re going to accept his offer.”

“You’re so stubborn!” Barida shouted. “What choice do I have? What can you do to stop it?”

I can poison the man, Emperor or not, he thought. I can kill him and Staal and every monster in this castle.

“You have to trust me. You mustn’t leave our quarters from now on.” He reached out to embrace her. “I swore I’d protect you, Barida, no matter what.”

“I don’t need your protection any more,” she said, springing away from his arms. “I’ll wield more power than you could ever imagine. I’ll be beautiful forever. I’ll have the most powerful man in the whole of Nistru as my lover. That’s what upsets you, isn’t it? I’m not waiting for your love any more.”

“Love has nothing to do with this.” Crixus felt he was trying to catch a leaf in a whirlpool.

“You’re right,” Barida said. She retreated into darkness; the door opened, silhouetting her slender form in the light. And then she was gone.

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A knock on the door roused him. His eyes stung from troubled sleep.

The androgynes opened the door and stepped back. A formally dressed Pahhim entered the room.

“We’ve been summoned,” he said, his voice taut with concern. “Dress quickly. They expect us in five minutes.”

The androgynes had already selected an outfit for him to wear and all but dragged him off the canopied bed. “It’s the middle of the night,” Crixus said.

“What better time for the masters to unveil the imperial fountain?” Pahhim said. “Staal asked for you to appear with your top men.”

“In other words, you.” Crixus slipped into the jacket. An androgyne combed his hair with rough strokes.

“Me, Ridwa, Seath, Bengt... and none of have been cleansed recently.”

“If Lord Staal requires your attendance, you must obey,” an androgyne intoned.
“Cease your speculation.”

Crixus crossed the room to hitch on his tool belt and his hammer.

“That is not required,” an androgyne said.

“If this is a ceremony, I need the symbol of my Guild and my family,” Crixus said. “To appear without would dishonor my hosts.”

The gold appointments of the hammer caught the lamplight and the androgynes nodded. “Very well. Come, you tarry too long.”

Outside, Crixus’ head supervisors stood at nervous attention. He nodded to them, trying to convey an air of confidence. Were these men rebels as well? If so, they were walking into the lair of their enemies, and nothing Crixus could say would reassure them. Nevertheless, he would try.

“Stand proud but respectful,” he said, repeating the warnings he had always been given. “Don’t meet anyone’s eyes. They wish to honor our work, nothing more.”

“Aye,” Pahhim said.

“Silence,” the androgynes commanded. “We approach the imperial hall.”

The group walked for ten minutes through winding corridors and vaulted chambers of lush decoration. The men grew uneasy; most of their work had been in the bowels of the castle, in filth and thickening blood. These handsome chambers were meant for their masters’ eyes alone.

The androgynes walked them to a door hidden in the wall behind a tapestry. “We enter through here. Remain silent unless addressed.”

The door opened to a Red Legionnaire guard in ceremonial armor. He waved them through with a curved sword.

The imperial reception hall dwarfed every other chamber in which Crixus had worked. The ceiling rose a hundred feet or more. Lamps behind stained glass dioramas gave an impression of the imperial hall floated in the sea of Lamiae history. A thousand Lamiae could relax here without rubbing elbows. In the

center, a grand fountain that had been fallow for decades glowed with loving restoration. Banners hanging over the nobles near the fountain bore the Emperor's standard.

Barida's tiny form, if she were present, was lost amongst the tall, beautiful bodies of the Lamiae in their most elaborate finery.

"Forward," an androgyne said. "Lord Staal wants you in attendance when the Emperor drinks of the imperial fountain."

Crixus shot a glance at Pahhim. The look of fear on the man's face told him everything he could have asked aloud—except how he had placed the poison in the water supply without the use of the system map.

An androgyne licked its hand and smoothed out a stray lock of hair on Crixus' head, as his mother used to do. "Go."

A dozen Red Legionnaires fell into step behind Crixus and his men. Their movements were precise and rehearsed, giving Crixus the impression that he was being served as a main course.

The crowd parted to reveal the Emperor's entourage. Emperor Perzigan and Lord Staal stood with easy grace in their midst, nodding their heads in a casual chat as those around them bowed in the presence of royalty. Crixus goggled at their insouciance until the androgyne elbowed him in the side. "Kneel, all of you," the androgyne hissed.

He gestured for his men to kneel before the Emperor, inclining his head far enough to expose the nape of his neck. The Emperor continued to chat with Staal as if Crixus didn't exist. Minutes passed, until the Emperor announced: "We might as well start, eh, Amadine? Would you care to present your servant to our guests?"

"My friends," Staal boomed. "Please welcome our foreign engineer whose ingeniousness has gifted us with luxuries to make our forefathers envious. Artesi Crixus Oraan of the Empire of Rond, rise and greet the noble houses of Nistru."

Crixus stood, back twitching with anxiety. The beautiful faces around him smiled with a mixture of welcome and condescension. His skill was respected even as his status was scorned.

“I’m honored,” Crixus said.

“Crixus and his crew have endured appalling filth and back-breaking labor to rejuvenate our historic fountains, not to mention our baths. He has assured me that not only will the blood flow freely, but that the new system utilizes it so efficiently that the burden of tithing is ameliorated for our beloved people.” The crowd murmured and applauded with delicate clapping. Staal grinned and clapped along. “I will take a *smidgen*

The Emperor laughed at the obsequiousness, and Staal joined him, enjoying the dance of etiquette like two mischievous boys.

“I just wanted a good bath,” the Emperor said. The room exploded in laughter. Crixus forced himself to smile.

“And a fresh cup of blood,” Staal said. A servant produced a tray with an exquisite crystal goblet. “Crixus, if you’ll do us the honor of activating the imperial fountain, the Emperor can take the first drink.”

Crixus bowed and crossed to the side of the fountain with the hidden handle. He knew the priority assigned to the imperial fountain. When Pahhim’s men poisoned the blood supply, it would receive an undiluted, lethal dosage. He twisted the knob with a shaking hand. The fountain made a gurgling sound, and then a hundred spigots shot red blood forth in perfect, tidy arcs.

Crixus held his breath as the assembled nobles clapped and cooed in delight. The fountain was impressive, despite its sickening stream of Nistruvan pain and suffering. He looked up to see the Emperor holding up his empty goblet to the masses. Beyond him, his entourage clapped obediently. Forming the left flank was a line of women in black and red lace with gauzy veils over their faces. The smallest, with a less elaborate décolletage, clapped but kept her eyes on Crixus.

He met Barida’s gaze with nothing but sorrow.

“Let me propose a toast to Nistru, the holy land, where mercy and love never set with the sun.” The Emperor positioned his goblet under a stream of blood, filling it to the brim. The crowd hushed.

The Emperor smiled with satisfaction as he brought the goblet to his lips.

“My lord! *Stop!*”

Supported by her bald servant, Lady Beryyal staggered into the circle formed around the Emperor. She lunged forward, her legs failing her, and slapped the goblet out of the Emperor’s hand. It shattered on the tile floor.

“Beryyal? What are you doing?” The Emperor recoiled as froth spilled from Beryyal’s mouth.

Staal caught her before she fell. “Fetch Sempri,” he commanded the androgynes. They sprinted away. “My lord, she’s been poisoned.” He cradled Lady Beryyal’s head with affection. “Darling, what have they done to you?”

“The blood,” she gasped. Her body shook.

Staal looked up. “The blood is poisoned.” All eyes fell on Crixus. “Seize them!”

The Legionnaires moved with lightning speed. In a second, Crixus and his men found themselves in the center of a forest of blades. Staal laid the shaking Lady Beryyal on the floor and strode forward to Crixus, drawing his sword.

“Traitor. I should kill you right here.”

Crixus’ heart raced. Barida’s eyes were bright with tears, her hands at her mouth. The Legionnaires prepared to strike Crixus down with wicked swords.

“But you’re still of use to us. Tell me, where is the map to the pipes?”

“You have it, my lord,” Crixus said in a low voice.

“Lies! I returned it to you yesterday. That gave you enough time to pass it off to your fellow rebels.” The crowd repeated the word with shock. “That’s right,” Staal said to the room. “A rebellion, one that I never guessed would move so boldly. I’ve been watching them for months. I wonder what they offered Crixus that was worth more than my friendship.”

Crixus shook his head.

The room exploded in outrage. The beautiful faces of the Lamiae contorted in fury. Delicate fists balled up, eyes narrowed with hatred, voices screamed hoarse

the violation the Lamiae now felt from the revolutionaries' poison: all directed at Crixus. Golden flagons sailed through the air to strike his head and shoulders.

Staal dodged the projectiles and waved his hands for order. He knelt by his ear to be heard over the clamor. "You'll satisfy my curiosity in time." He turned to the Legionnaire captain. "Send your men to every fountain and bath. Don't let anyone touch a drop of blood until we've cleared out the system." The captain bowed and ran out of the hall with a contingent of men at his heels.

"My liege." Staal bowed to the Emperor. "I have failed you. In my naiveté, I never would have guessed the rebels would act so soon. Please, I beg you, let me redeem myself."

"What do you propose?" The Emperor said with a bemused smirk.

"Let me lead the Legionnaires against the rebels. I will not sleep until every Lamiae is safe within their homes again."

The Emperor squared his shoulders and silenced the crowd with a gesture. "So I decree. Lord Amadine Staal shall head the suppression force. No one will be spared." He took a stride and kicked Crixus in the face with his booted foot. Stars exploded in Crixus' eyes; he sprawled on the floor. "Dig whatever information you need from this one then execute him."

Crixus looked up from the floor at the Emperor, the same vantage point he had when the man had cast a fortune in diamonds at his feet—a fortune that was secure in his quarters, where he most assuredly would never return.

"His map may be in rebel hands," Staal said, "but the knowledge is still in his head. He'll show us where to look." Staal turned to the Legionnaires. "Kill all but his lieutenant. We only need the two of them."

Crixus' supervisors gasped in surprise. The swords closed in and struck; in a moment, the three men died on the floor. The crowd of Lamiae applauded and jeered.

Staal reached down and took Crixus' hammer from his belt. "A souvenir to remind me to be less trusting of foreigners," he said with a sneer.

Legionnaires seized his arms. As they dragged him to his feet, he saw the raw

hatred on the faces of the Lamiae, their outrage that anyone could attack their very lifestyle. The Legionnaires dragged him and Pahhim out of the hall. He struggled against the iron grip of the mercenaries for a last glimpse of Barida. The Lamiae blocked his view.

35. Rebellion

Staal and the Legionnaires marched Crixus and Pahhim down to the pumping station. The walls were lined with workmen held at bay by Legionnaires who had interrupted their finalization work on the station. Some of the men were rebels, he knew; the question was, did Staal suspect?

He did. “Kill them,” Staal ordered the mercenaries. The workmen cried out in horror as the mercenaries cut them down while Staal cooed in delight. He grinned at Crixus as if he had scored a touch at fencing.

“So much for your rebellion, *rebel leader*

“You know that’s not true,” Crixus said, wincing as the Legionnaires jerked his arms tighter behind his back.

Staal shrugged. “I’m a lord of the Lamiae. I make the truth.”

They halted by the waste channel of the pump station. The stale blood and sewage mixed together in a vile, tear-inducing miasma as deep as a tall man. It oozed into the wall, where an iron grate blocked further access.

Staal sent away all but a handful of Legionnaires. He unsheathed his blade.

“There’s no poison here,” Crixus said. “That’s a waste channel.”

“How appropriate then,” Staal said. “Since I have to discard you both.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And I lack time to explain, though I am sure you’d appreciate the logic behind it all. Men of science are men of action. There’s a peasant revolt to suppress upstairs.” He nodded to the Legionnaires, who forced Crixus and Pahhim to their knees. “I enjoyed our time together, Crixus. You helped to relieve my boredom. I’ll kill you quickly, without too much pain, not like these clumsy mercenaries and their hewing.”

Crixus knelt in filth that oozed around his knees. Staal’s eyes glinted with the satisfaction he took in controlling a situation and causing pain.

I'm going to die, Crixus realized, and the realization soothed him. The doubt and fear, the uncertainty of seeing Kharrina again, were all resolved in an answer at the tip of Staal's sword: he had reached his end. He had veered off the path of moral actions, fled from responsibility, and now the gods presented him with his comeuppance. In truth, he had died the night he gambled the Guild's money away. Since then, every day was just giving a final breath into the air while awaiting this closing moment.

Barida would serve the Emperor as a concubine, living in luxury until her life could sustain his pleasures no longer. Kharrina would give up on him, if she hadn't already, and marry a wiser man. Crixus' mother would outlive her son.

The fetid odor of human feces and rotting blood emanated from the disturbed muck in which he knelt. I've worked my life in the dirt, dealing with water and waste. Dying in a sewer is a proper death for an artisan. I'm used to the stench. My eyes don't even water...

"Goodbye, Crixus." Staal took a position to thrust into Crixus' chest.

"Wait!" Screwing his face up in anguish, he yanked his arms free, falling forward into the muck and catching himself with his hands. He brought them together in supplication. "Grant me one last request."

"Oh, pish. What is it?"

"Please look after Barida. I loved her, and... and..." His voice broke. "I would have given her the life she wanted."

Staal sighed, rolling his eyes in exasperation. "How utterly pathetic. Is that—"

Crixus flung the foul muck he had scooped up in his hands into Staal's face.

The Lamia howled in outrage as the polluted mud burned his eyes. The sword fell from his hand as he tried to scrape his eyes clear. Crixus wasted no time trying to regain his feet. He rolled into Pahhim and his captors, using his bulk to dislodge their hands and tumble the both of them into the reeking channel of filth.

Pahhim shrieked as he caught a mouthful of refuse but Crixus dragged him under into the caustic dark of the filth. A splash of a thrown sword spurred him

forward, towards the grate. He kicked his feet to angle them down to the bottom of the channel, where he knew from experience the grate didn't reach. There was just enough room for them to crawl under, if he could convey that to Pahhim without being able to speak or see.

He groped for Pahhim's hands, found one, and guided it to the grate's opening. He felt Pahhim's body slip past him, under the grate, and then he followed, gripping the iron bars to propel himself into the tunnel. He swam ten feet in the bloody, excretory fluid until he had to surface for breath. Up close, the vapors of the sewage nearly choked him. Pahhim surfaced further down, coughing.

Unable to speak, he shoved Pahhim down the channel. Behind them, Staal railed at the guards, cursing them for losing the two. Metal clattered against stone as they probed near the grate. Crixus and Pahhim splashed away from the Lamia and his mercenaries as quickly as they could manage through the toxic sludge. The voices receded into the distance. The two men churned through the sewage as if racing in the surf.

If they succeeded in reaching the caverns under the castle without choking to death on fumes, they could follow the drainage streams out into the valley.

"I'm blind," Pahhim gasped. "My eyes..."

"We're in a cave," Crixus said. "Follow the current." He coughed, feeling his lungs spasm in outrage at the air he sucked into them. "Take my hand." Pahhim stumbled into Crixus, and they fumbled against each other until their hands clasped. Together they stroked in the mire, away from Castle Nistru.

*

The echoes of their splashing grew longer and more reverberant until Crixus judged they had entered the caves he knew through rumors alone. The vapors dissipated into the space, giving them a respite from the choking fumes. Crixus called a halt and pulled Pahhim up onto a shoulder, out of the muck.

They collapsed on the slimy rock, breathing the fetid air as if it were a spring day in the mountains.

"Either we're in Hell or we've escaped," Pahhim said, gasping.

“We just left Hell.” Crixus spit up sewage, and spit again, trying to clear his mouth out. “I should have listened to Orazio and stayed on the coast.”

“But then our sacrifices would’ve been in vain. The rebellion has begun. The Lamiae’s days are numbered.”

“You *idiot*

“But the poison—”

“You poisoned *one woman*

Pahhim said nothing, his heavy breathing large in the black cavern. “A man came to us yesterday with your map,” he murmured.

“A man? You mean Staal.”

“So what? Damn it, Crixus, our people have been treated like cattle for centuries!”

“Staal killed Kerik after the assassination attempt on me. Why Kerik? Why hide his face?”

Pahhim said nothing.

“Answer me. How did Staal know about you two and your rebellion?”

Pahhim sighed. “He provided us funds.”

Crixus barked out a laugh. “He used you.”

“We were using *him*

“And now it will be crushed as part of an evening’s entertainment. Congratulations. You’ve guaranteed yourself another thousand years of oppression.”

“Shut up!” Pahhim sobbed in the darkness. “We were desperate! What choice did we have?”

Crixus rolled over on his back. Centuries of control and torment took their toll

on a people. No wonder a nascent revolutionary movement could be so easily subverted. Odds were that this was no isolated incident, that the lords of the Lamiae encouraged an ineffectual rebellion every few generations to wipe out those peasants with initiative. Even if the entire population rose up against the Lamiae, the Legionnaires could repel them from the castle in a bloody slaughter. The only inconvenience to the long-lived Lamiae would be a reduction in blood supplies while the valley repopulated over generations.

“Pahhim,” Crixus said. “I’ve saved your life. I want you to promise me something, so I don’t feel like I’ve given up my compensation for nothing.”

Pahhim sniffled. “What is it?”

“You can’t beat them from the outside. They have the castle and the Legionnaires. The only people who can get close enough to the Lamiae are their servants. If you ever want to drive the Lamiae from your lands, get the servants on your side first.”

The river of filth burbled alongside them as Pahhim considered Crixus’ request. “Aye, a good idea, but a bit late.”

“In this lifetime, perhaps. But Staal’s arrogance gave you a clue. The Lamiae are isolated and vulnerable. The threat of poison in their blood supply terrifies them. Follow that logic. Peck away at their sense of security. Make them desperate enough to listen to bad advice.”

A rock fell in the cave, bouncing off the stone floor.

“Did you do that?” Crixus knew the answer; the sound had originated far off.

“It could be our voices loosening stones,” Pahhim said.

They listened to the river, trying to pick out sounds in the swishing of the sewage.

“It could have been anything,” Pahhim whispered.

“Shhh,” Crixus hissed. He rose to a crouch, feeling around for a stone.

The sound of unshod feet in mud became distinct. It billowed out of the darkness

like rainfall.

“Someone’s here,” Pahhim said, fear breaking his voice.

“Get a rock,” Crixus said.

They heard murmuring, gulping, swallowing, the sounds of dozens of mouths unsuccessfully trying to speak. It was a nightmarish sound, something Crixus had heard while half-asleep, once, not so long ago. He remembered the creeping old man in the foyer and realized he had never seen another elderly Lamia in the Castle.

The ghosts of the Lamiae had found them.

36. Quarry

The decrepit Lamiae fell upon them before they could utter another word. Bony fingers clawed at their faces. In the darkness, they could not see the obscene, spotted, wrinkled skin, the rotting teeth, the rheumy eyes, the emaciated limbs. The Lamiae had lived for decades at the peak of health, but when old age found them it did so with a vengeance. Those who could not embrace death faded away in the caves, removed from the delicate sensibilities of their children.

But even the dying hungered, and Crixus and Pahhim coursed with the blood they longed for. Mouths clamped down on Crixus' skin, weak bites but with teeth made sharp and fierce by decay. A dozen Lamiae elders gnawed on his skin. They chortled with glee as his skin gave way and blood flowed down their throats.

“Get them off me!” Pahhim shrieked.

For every Lamia they shoved away, two took its place. Bones broke under Crixus' blows, ribcages collapsed, yet the ghosts bore him down into the mud. He fought first to protect himself from the bites and scratches then just to breathe as the press of bodies blocked off his oxygen.

Claustrophobia gripped him worse than the tight confines of caves and aqueduct tunnels ever had. He wailed and thrust them away with a surge of strength fueled by adrenalin, gaining air and freedom of movement. The mob closed on him again like a sea of sagging flesh. The moans of the Lamiae multiplied into a chorus of unfettered desire for blood.

His knees buckled. The swim in the waste channel had used up most of his strength. The brittle, skeletal forms piled on him until he couldn't move a limb. A thicker blackness wavered over his eyes as insensibility overcame him.

The Lamiae's wordless moaning turned one by one into howls. A new sound cut through the mob noise, a sharp thrum, repeated over and over. Crixus opened his eyes—he hadn't realized he had closed them—to see a ghoulish visage before him, lit by torchlight. The old woman had no eyes left and three teeth, covered with his own blood. He freed his arm and punched her in the face, feeling disgust as her cheekbones crumbled around his fist.

He found his feet and focused on throwing one Lamiae at a time away from him. Two torches burned on the cavern floor, illuminating two cloaked figures firing crossbows. The larger figure dropped the crossbow and drew a sword. He advanced on the pile of bodies covering Pahhim and hacked at them with precision. The smaller figure turned its crossbow on Crixus' attackers, who made no effort to dodge or flee.

In moments, the battle was over. The Lamiae who could still move scampered off into the caverns. Pahhim had curled up into a protective ball, his back black with blood. Crixus and the two rescuers panted together in the torchlight.

The larger figure took another quarrel from his quiver and handed it to the smaller, who still held a crossbow.

"I don't need it," she said in a familiar accent: Rondan.

The larger figure pointed his sword at Crixus and threw back his hood.

"I should've guessed we'd find you in a sewer," Madraig said, a grim smile on his face.

Crixus coughed, unable to speak.

The woman doffed her hood. Sheirra gave Crixus a concerned look.

"Don't move, Crixus," she said.

"He's not moving. He's barely standing." Madraig held the sword steady.

"I think his friend is injured."

"Take a look, love," Madraig said. "I've got a kit if you need it."

Sheirra set the crossbow down and knelt by Pahhim, who quivered at her touch.

"They're friends, Pahhim," Crixus said.

"Don't jump to conclusions, ser," he said, turning the honorific over in his mouth like a sour fruit. "You've caused me a lot of grief."

"Considering how far from home you are, I can believe it."

“Oh, it’s been quite a trip.” He glanced over at Sheirra, who had taken Pahhim’s bloody, foul-smelling shirt off and patted at his wounds with a cloth. “I daresay the toughest job I’ve ever taken on.”

“Then you still work for the Mercenary Guild,” Crixus said, unsure what it meant, except that the sword didn’t waver. He had more swords pointed at him in one day than in a dozen lifetimes.

“Are you joking? Losing you was a colossal failure. They booted me in a heartbeat. Not even bandits will hire me.”

Crixus shook his head. “It won’t mean anything, but I’m sorry. I never knew how much trouble I could cause.”

“One domino knocks the next over,” Madraig said. “You must feel pretty important by now.” Anger clipped his words.

“Hardly. I’m stunned to be alive. That’s a second time you’ve saved my life.”

“So it is. I suppose it’s forfeit to me now. The bounty for your capture should make up for the hassle.”

“Mdraig!” Sheirra said from the ground. “We discussed this. Put the sword down.”

The mercenary glared at Crixus and sheathed the sword. “It would be silly to kill you after saving you from becoming food for the counsel of elders.” He kicked at one of bodies. “Can we put some distance between us and this stack of corpses? It’s disgusting.”

They helped Pahhim to stand and walk to the far end of the cave, where they laid him down on a dry flat stone. Sheirra resumed tending his wounds. Madraig collected their unbroken quarrels.

Crixus tugged at his torn shirt. The delicate fabric had ripped in a dozen places and smelled like a privy. He ripped it off in pieces. The chill cave air seeped into his skin. He and Madraig stared at each other. Madraig was more of a ghost than the dying Lamiae elders, a remnant from a happier time the taste of which he had forgotten. It had been replaced with the metallic tang of blood.

“You’re not too popular here,” Madraig said.

“For good reason. I decided to help the rebellion... such as it is.” He gave Pahhim’s back a venomous look. “I seem to make bad choices, regardless of my intentions.”

“I’d say you make a habit of it.”

“Only since...” He trailed off. Only since he fell in love with Kharrina.

“Uh huh,” Madraig said. “Say no more.” He glanced back at Sheirra. “Is he ready to move? Our elderly friends may screw up some more courage if we linger here too long. Besides, it stinks.”

Pahhim got to his feet. “I can walk.” To demonstrate, he stepped up to Madraig and offered his hand. “My name is Pahhim. I’m in your debt.”

Madraig shook his hand. “Mdraig. Happy to help. That’s Sheirra.” Sheirra smiled as she packed up the medical kit.

“Do you know a way out of this cave?”

“That doesn’t involve swimming in shit? We do.” He tapped ash off his torch. “We follow the water upstream. This originates as runoff from the mountains.” They started to march alongside the water, leaving the stench of the sewer behind.

Pahhim grimaced. “You know more of our own land than we do.”

“From what I’ve seen over the last two months, you folks don’t get around much.”

“Months?” Crixus gaped at him.

Madraig winked. “You’re a clumsy fugitive. I found you on the first day I arrived in Nistru.”

Crixus blinked. “*You*

“You can thank me now, if you want.”

“Thank you,” he said with a sigh. “I can’t go anywhere without a guard, it seems.”

“It’s a sign of importance. At this rate you’ll have your own army.”

Crixus and Pahhim paused to rinse off in the now-clean stream. The bites on his back and limbs stung in the cold water. Pahhim discarded his shirt as well. In spite of the cuts, bruises, and chill, the sensation of cleanliness felt like a revelation.

“When we get out of this cave, he will have an army,” Pahhim said when they resumed their march. “You too, Madraig. There’s a war raging above us. Every honorable man is needed.”

“You weren’t listening to me, were you?” Crixus said. “Staal encouraged your rebellion for his own sport. Do you think he’d allow you a sliver of a chance of winning that fight?”

“We have no choice. We must try, or these men will die in vain.”

“Too late for that,” Madraig said. “Sorry, friend, but this Staal character played you like a puppet show for his vampire friends. You need more than a street full of pitchforks to beat the Legionnaires and gain the castle.”

Pahhim bristled but said nothing. They marched in silence for a time. At last Sheirra spoke up.

“Crixus, you owe us an explanation. What brought you to this horrible place?”

Madraig nodded at the question. “Let’s hear it.” They waited on his answer, expectant. Crixus could not have been more in their debt, yet he was reticent to reveal the depths of his own folly. Doing so was admitting to the world that remembered him that he was a fool.

“It’s a long walk,” Madraig reminded him. “But when we hit topside, there’ll be no time for chatter.”

“Very well. I’ll tell you the whole story and look the fool that I am. But when I’m done, I have one more mistake to make.”

Crixus launched into an account of the last four months, starting with his arrival in Restia with Madraig and the Guild's gold. When he told of the disastrous Pathii game, Madraig winced and muttered a curse. Sheirra gave him a questioning look, but he shook his head. "Later," he said. "Go on, Crixus."

Crixus described Chyorth's cover-up scheme, the overseas journey, his introduction to Orazio and then Sheirra. She laughed at his tale of how they tricked Chyorth out of the gold.

Madraig interrupted. "Wait. Let's get this out of the way now. Where is the gold?"

"In my quarters in the castle, along with a fortune in diamonds."

"I thought so. Go on."

The cave floor began to slope up, the water running faster and whiter. Crixus told them about his abortive efforts to sell his services on the Minq coast and his fateful meeting with Torrek and the Red Legionnaires. Madraig winced again. Crixus lingered on the stop in Basrat to underscore the depredation of the Lamiae on the lands around them. Pahhim voiced his agreement.

He spoke of meeting Barida.

"She's in the castle, isn't she?" Sheirra's question was soft with concern.

"Aye, in the Emperor's entourage now. I was worse than useless to her. I wanted to play the uninvolved tradesman, as if my work had no impact on these people's world. Now they're killing Pahhim's people and turning an innocent girl who begged me for protection into a whore." He caught himself. "I'm sorry, Sheirra."

"It's all right, Crixus. That's behind me now." She reached out to squeeze Madraig's hand.

"Oh. You're... you two..."

"It's been quite an adventure tracking you down, old boy," Madraig said. "I knew Chyorth was a scoundrel. Hell, I thought he'd killed you when I saw the blood. Then the trail led to *The Champion*, and that seemed strange to me. The harbor police took up chase with them, but it hit me that *The Fancy* cleared out

awful fast. I inquired about *The Fancy*

“It wasn’t intentional,” Crixus said.

“Well... you had me fooled. I let the Guild think you were dead, since I couldn’t prove anything. Better to lose a client to a murder than to trickery. Either way is bad.”

“Wait,” Crixus said. “Did you speak to Kharrina?”

Madraig cleared his throat. “No.” He added, “But I did mention my suspicions to her friend, that gal. Still, your lady probably thinks you’re dead, like the rest of them do.”

Dead. She would mourn his loss for a time, perhaps a year, then the suitors would line up again. He wasted four months trying to win his way back to her, only to run like a coward, covered in filth and blood.

Madraig was speaking: “I asked around Ambiri—”

“*Asked around*,” Sheirra said, sarcastic. “He means he whored there for two weeks.”

“I learned a lot,” he protested. She laughed. “And I met you, dumpling. Sheirra dropped a hint that she’d spent time with you.”

“It was an accident.” It was her turn to be defensive. “I mentioned that it was nice to see so many Greater Rondan faces...”

“It’s all right,” Crixus said. “I never asked you to keep my secrets. I’m glad you found me.”

“Yes, well,” Madraig said, “Sheirra and I hit it off pretty well—”

“You paid for me for a whole week. Flowers, expensive_ _

“Poems?” Crixus said, incredulous. “Like what?”

“Never mind that,” Madraig said, waving his torch. “I took a shine to her.”

“You courted a whore,” Sheirra said, grinning.

“I’m a mercenary. What’s the difference?”

She wrapped her arm around his, pressing her head against his shoulder. Madraig continued: “Sheirra and I figured you were on your way to Izhmir. We found your friend Orazio in a pub, drinking his payment away. He seemed to think you were dead or soon would be. He told us you’d left with Red Legionnaires for Nistru.”

“And now here you are.”

“Hiding out for months, watching your movements. With all those guards around you, it was difficult to make the snatch.”

“You could have aided the revolution,” Pahhim said.

Mdraig sniffed. “When you have a real one, send me notice. I don’t fight for free, though. A diamond or two will do.”

“So now what do we do?” Crixus let the question hang in the air.

Sheirra pointed ahead with her torch. “We surface.” The glow of distant sunlight lit the walls of the cave. The Rondans doused their torches. Able to see their footing clearly, the four emerged into a morning light as golden as the grandest Nistruvan treasure vault. They stood at the top of an abutment, looking out over the cultivated section of the valley near the completed aqueduct. In the distance the city surrounding Castle Nistru spouted black smoke.

“They’re still fighting,” Pahhim said. He clenched his fists. “Those are my men dying down there.”

“Then go if you’re that eager to join them.” Madraig said. “Or you can leave with us.”

Pahhim looked at their faces. A dozen emotions raced across his.

“You can’t win,” Madraig said gently. “Come with us, friend.”

Pahhim offered a hand to him. “Thank you, but no. I started this war. I have to be there when it ends.” He shook Sheirra’s hand, then Crixus’, giving him a rueful smile. “Alas, I just learned a new trade, too.”

“Good luck,” Sheirra said, her eyes bright.

Pahhim started down the slope. Crixus hesitated then began to pick his way down the rocky scree.

“What are you doing?” Madraig said. “I’m not done with you.”

“I told you I had one last piece of business with the Lamiae.”

Pahhim stopped and looked back at Crixus. “You’ll fight for us?”

“Not for you. I’m sorry.” He inhaled deeply. “For Barida.”

“Barida. The girl.” Madraig sighed. “Do you do everything for women, Crixus?”

“It appears that way.”

Madraig drew his sword. Sheirra grabbed his arm but he shoved her away. “You’re my ticket back into the Guild. I’ve come too far to let your guilty feelings ruin that for me.”

“Honey, don’t.” Sheirra said.

“Shut up, woman.” He advanced on Crixus. “I’ll poke those big arms of yours so you can’t fight. Or I’ll knock you out.”

“Then do it.” Crixus stood his ground. “I’m not leaving this valley on my own without her.”

“You’re—” Madraig’s face screwed up. “You’re making a mistake.”

“It won’t be the first.”

“How are you going to get inside that castle?”

“The aqueduct. It’s covered, but there’s a manhole every thousand feet. It will take us into their pumping station. I know those tunnels like the back of my hand.”

“And then we find your girl?” Madraig thought for a moment. “And those diamonds you lost?”

“Barida first. I’m no warrior. I’ll be lucky to get her out alive.”

Madraig stamped his foot. “Damn it, man. You expect me to throw away my chance to go home just because you finally figured out where your conscience is?”

“Sorry. I’m not much of a friend, I know.”

Madraig looked back and forth from Sheirra to Crixus. “I’ve got something I don’t want to lose, either, you know.” He lowered his eyes. “You want me to risk that too?”

“No. Let me go by myself.”

“To hell with that. You’re as stealthy as a bull in a pottery shop.” He turned to Sheirra. “Give him your cloak.”

She removed the cloak and held it out to Crixus.

“Wait here for four hours,” he told Sheirra. “If we’re not back by then, fall back to our camp. In two days, head for the coast and don’t look back.” Madraig took a sheaf of quarrels from his quiver.

“You’ll need those,” she said.

“I’d rather you had them in case you’re discovered. Shoot, reload, retreat. Keep moving.” He kissed her forehead. “Crixus and I won’t be long.”

“Give me a real kiss goodbye,” she said, putting her hands on his shoulders.

“This isn’t goodbye,” Madraig said. He patted her rump and she squealed. “I’m coming back for that.”

Crixus grinned at the mercenary as he joined him on the slope. “Thanks.”

“Thank me with diamonds,” Madraig said. “Something I can put on her finger.”

Pahhim resumed his climb down the hill. Together they made for the aqueduct.

37. Possessions

“So she resembles Kharrina.” Madraig made the question a statement. His torch complained about the water splashing around their feet in the aqueduct. Its flames licked at the stone overhead. Crixus had assured Madraig that the channel bottom was even, with no obstructions, so they jogged at a steady pace.

“She does.”

“And now you love her instead?”

“I can’t explain it easily. I see Kharrina in her. I feel responsible for her safety.”

“So it’s not for love, then.” Madraig said. “Nor is it for gold or diamonds. Or that hammer you prized so much.”

“That’s gone too,” Crixus said.

“For ethics, perhaps?”

“Probably.”

“She’s actually safer where she is now, you know,” Madraig said. “Hell, she’ll live in more luxury than we can hope for.”

“She’ll be a slave. I can’t leave her to that.”

“I can think of worse fates,” Madraig said.

“Then turn back.”

“I can’t.” Madraig laughed. “I like being a hero, too.”

“Is that what I am? I feel more like a repentant sinner.”

“We’re men, Crixus. It’s our duty to protect the women in our lives, regardless of how we account for them. You just never had to worry about it before.”

“If I’m dead I can’t protect Kharrina from anything.”

“Maybe you can.” Madraig called a halt. “Listen. I hear fighting.”

Pahhim had been in the lead, carrying Sheirra’s torch and Madraig’s crossbow. “There’s a manhole here.” He handed the torch to Crixus.

“Good luck,” Crixus said.

“And you,” Pahhim said. “If you have a chance, kill some Lamiae for us.”

“We’ll have plenty of chances,” Madraig said. “Watch your back.”

Pahhim climbed up the stone ladder cut into the wall of the aqueduct. He pushed the stone lid up, bathing them in sunlight, and slipped out into the air. The lid fell back into place with a final crash.

“Let’s go,” Madraig said. “His peasant revolt won’t last long against real soldiers.”

They sprinted the last mile. The gradient increased so that they were running downhill through water, slipping and bouncing along. At Crixus’ word, Madraig doused his torch in the water.

The aqueduct terminated in a series of basins twenty feet deep. They swam through these, clambering over the sides of one to dive into the next. The last basin ended in a collection of pipes, most no wider than a man’s arm.

“What now?”

“There.” Crixus pointed to a pipe two feet across. “It leads to a reservoir. Hold your breath.”

“For how long?”

“Until you surface.”

“Damn.” Madraig took three quick breaths and dove into the pipe.

Crixus did the same. His wide shoulders scraped the sides of the pipe. On a downturn, he feared he would become stuck, and claustrophobia filled his limbs with frantic energy while his lungs burned.

He flailed his way through the pipe, spilling out in the pool of water. The air tasted as sweet as a kiss.

Madraig hauled up him to the ledge surrounding the reservoir. “No one here.”

“Good,” Crixus said, spitting up water.

They took the narrow, winding staircase out of the subterranean station to a wooden door. Their wet cloaks stuck to their torsos; Crixus wrapped his around his arm, a makeshift shield. Madraig discarded his on the ground and drew his sword.

“I don’t hear anything,” he said. “Jump out?”

“Peek out, please,” Crixus said. “I’d rather avoid a fight.”

“Too bad. I’m looking forward to it. These beasts have it coming.” He cracked the door open. “Nothing this way.”

The hallway was empty. Crixus paused to get his bearings.

“Where is she?” Madraig craned his neck to look far down the dimly lit hall.

“Probably in the Emperor’s chambers. And thus very well guarded.”

“I don’t suppose there’s another convenient giant pipe leading right to—never mind.” He loosened up with a few swings of his sword. “You’ll need a sword if we’re going to fight our way to her.”

“I’d rather have my hammer. The laziest Lamia probably has more skill with a blade than I do, and they’re all thrilled to have a chance to play soldier.”

“Then call it, Crixus. Where are we going?”

Crixus thought of the diamonds left in his quarters. “To get your gold.”

Madraig’s brow furrowed. “What about the girl?”

“We’ll fight smart this time.”

The mercenary grinned. “You’re learning.”

Crixus led Madraig through the darkest, narrowest, most remote servant's causeways. The few servants they encountered fled from them. Crixus wanted to appropriate some servant's outfits but Madraig rejected the idea. "They know you by sight. No point in disguises now. Besides, my sword is a giveaway, unless we can ambush a lonely pair of Legionnaires who happen to wear our size in armor."

They gained Crixus' quarters without meeting resistance, though the sounds of shouting resonated through the castle. The battle took place outside, where the rebels strove to break the lines of heavily armored, well armed Red Legionnaires. Staal was out there somewhere, killing for sport.

His door was open. Light shown from within.

"Not good," Madraig whispered. "Me first." He crouched, holding his sword over his head and forward, ready to split the helmet of lurking Red Legionnaires. With a foot, he nudged the door wider to step through.

Crixus' heart beat so hard he thought it would leap from his chest. His breathing became shallow. Every fight he had ever been in had taken him by surprise, yet now he had to wait to strike. Or, rather, wait to fend off blows, since he had no weapon but his fists.

"Crixus," Madraig said. "Have a look at this."

The room had been ransacked. His tool bag had been opened and kicked across the floor. Sketches and notes were torn and scattered. Even the formal clothes left for him were ripped from the closet.

Barida sat at the foot of his bed, cradling his hammer.

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She hadn't changed out of the alluring lace of a Sacred Companion, though the veil had been detached to hang like a scarf. Tears glistened on her cheeks.

"Crixus," she said, her voice tiny like a butterfly. "You came back."

"I promised," he said. He crossed the floor to her but she shied away from him. "I've come to take you home."

Madraig scanned the furniture of the room. “Where were the diamonds?”

“In the desk,” Crixus said. Madraig began opening drawers. “Barida, give me my hammer.”

Choking back a sob, she held it out, the weight of the hammer tugging her arms down. He grasped the handle with a wave of relief.

“Nothing,” Madraig said. “Damn my luck, they cleaned you out. Why would they bother?”

“Please don’t hurt him,” Barida said over Crixus’ shoulder.

“Finally,” Madraig said, “a little action.” His sword whickered in the air. “You’re Staal, right?”

“Lord Staal.” Blade in hand, Staal stepped out from the bathroom. He wore a breastplate adorned with gold filigree and gems in the insignia of House Staal. Light chain mail covered his arms and legs, but his head was unencumbered. He moved as if the armor weighed nothing at all. The blood of rebels stained his leather gloves.

Madraig grinned fiendishly at him. “You look like a pansy in that getup. Let me teach you how a fighting man of Rond plies his trade.” He assumed the same blade high position as when they breached the room, both hands on the long hilt to provide the most power.

“He’s dangerous,” Crixus said. “Faster than you.”

“Why, thank you, Crixus,” Staal said. “I’ll dispatch your friend here first and then we can finish what we started in the sewer.” He took an en garde position, flexing his knees casually.

Madraig pounced with a yell. His cavalry sword, heavier and shorter than Staal’s, slammed down in a brutal arc. Staal brushed it aside, jabbing at Madraig’s shoulder in riposte. Madraig shrugged out of the way, a look of consternation on his face. In Rond few fought with quick, light blades. Madraig adjusted his stance, moving his sword to a middle position for better defense. Staal gave him little time to regain his momentum, lunging so fast that his sword was invisible except when Madraig caught it on his blade.

Staal spun about and cut Madraig's cheek with an upswing that would have cleaved his head in half had the mercenary not flinched away. Madraig backed up to the door, bumping it shut.

"Right," he said grimly, his bravado gone.

Barida grabbed Crixus' arm. "Run," she whispered. "His guards are on the way. Let them fight."

"I won't abandon him," Crixus said, pushing her aside. He hefted the hammer and advanced on Staal, who gave him a cruel smile.

"Two on one. You _might_ housand wasps. Crixus stumbled back, almost dropping his hammer in a clumsy swing.

Madraig took the opening to cut at Staal's off hand, but the Lamia weaved out of reach and tucked in with another quick jab to Madraig's leg. The sword left a small hole in his pant leg which welled up red with blood. Madraig grunted.

"Come on," Staal said. "I'm having a wonderful day!"

Barida tried to pull Crixus back. "Please," she said. "Please go!"

Crixus yanked himself free of her. "Together," he shouted to Madraig. "Now!"

They both charged the Lamia lord. Staal charged too then fell to one knee to slide beneath their attacks. He slashed at Madraig's back as he passed him, catching a piece of flesh. Madraig yowled in pain and staggered forward. Dark anger filled his eyes.

I'm going to get him killed, Crixus realized. Neither of us can beat Staal, not singly or as a team. I'll take Staal's secret with me to my grave, just as he planned. I swam to the bait like a hungry fish.

Staal danced back and forth, a military shuffle of gloating menace. His mad grin was proof that he had been scheming for years to create this moment. He would regale Lady Beryyal—whom Crixus suspected would survive her mild poisoning—with an account of his duel with the Rond mercenary and Crixus, the treacherous brute who tried to poison them all. Every attack he made was for his future audience as much as it was for drawing blood.

And that was Crixus' chance.

Crixus threw down his hammer. "Staal. Come here. Let's end this now." He approached the lord with his arms spread wide. "You're better than us miserable humans, we know that. Finish the job."

"Oh, Crixus," Staal said. His face contorted in disappointment. "Don't give up now! You can save your little girl and your friend." He nudged the hammer with his foot. "Pick it up. Let's have another round."

"I'm too tired. I know when I'm beaten. Just make it quick, like you promised before." He took a deep breath and turned to Barida. "Goodbye, Barida."

Her face went slack with horror. "No..." she said.

Madraig hunched over his wound, cursing. "Damn it, Crixus."

"I'm ready, lord." Crixus locked eyes with Staal.

Staal pouted, looking at the gasping Madraig and the weeping Barida. "Well, I suppose there's still more to do outside." He raised his point. "So it goes." His eyes went to Crixus' chest.

Staal lunged. Crixus twisted his body at the last moment, taking the sword in his left bicep. It sunk into his flesh; first he felt the impact, then a hot pain that made his eyes water. He forced his body not to jerk away, but leaned forward, running the blade all the way through his arm, scraping against the bone and out the other side. Once it had penetrated him, the sensation of the metal moving through his muscle was a different sort of tactile pain. He thrust his arm forward until it met the hilt of Staal's sword.

Then he grabbed Staal's arm. His strength in his arm faded as it stiffened, but his fingers locked on the Lamia's chain mail arm. Oddly, he felt the links of the chain mail bite into the insensate fingers.

Crixus loomed over Staal. He allowed the extraordinary pain in his arm to mix with his smoldering hatred for the cruel Lamia nobleman. All the unnecessary deaths he had witnessed, the dying peasants outside the castle, the moments of fear for Barida's life... rage welled up in him like a storm.

He smashed his right hand into Staal's face. The Lamia's nose broke under Crixus' meaty fist.

"Ha," Staal said, a foolish grin on his face as his own blood stained his lips. He tugged at his sword, but Crixus' flesh held it tight.

Crixus hit him again. The Lamia closed his eyes for a moment. Before he could open them, Crixus hit him. He longed to feel bone breaking under his hand, more than just the weak cartilage of a nose. With every blow he struck he wanted to show the cruel aristocrat that he knew the Lamiae's secrets: they were as mortal as the peasants they exploited. Staal's body shook as Crixus hit him again and again, until the cheekbones broke, the jaw hung free, the eyes filled with blood, the teeth cut through his cheeks. He pummeled him for a full minute, over and over, as white hot pain worked its way down his left side.

Madraig caught his fist. "Enough, Crixus. Crixus!"

Crixus couldn't open his left hand to release the dead Lamia lord. Madraig pried his fingers open. Staal slumped to the floor with a metallic clatter.

38. Rescue

“Hold still,” Madraig said. He braced himself with one hand and withdrew Staal’s sword from Crixus’ arm. Crixus swooned with pain and fell to one knee.

Madraig wrapped a scarf from the closet around Crixus’ arm. Barida, hands to her mouth, stared at them in silence. Once he secured the makeshift bandage on Crixus’ arm, he turned his attention to his own wounds. Crixus panted on the floor.

“He was dangerous,” Madraig muttered. “We should get out of here.”

“They’re coming,” Barida said.

Madraig retrieved Staal’s blade and tucked it into his sheath, where it rattled loosely. “Let’s move.”

Crixus nodded, still dazed from pain and the enormity of the murder. He allowed Madraig to help him to his feet.

“Come on, little girl,” Madraig said.

“I’m not going,” Barida said.

“For the love of Kaolis, you are,” Madraig said. In a swift movement, he seized her arm. She yelped.

Crixus shook his head to clear it. The pain fogged his vision. He saw Barida struggling against Madraig’s grip.

“We have to leave. Now.” Madraig’s tone was firm. “Now, Crixus.”

The gold of his hammer glinted at him. “Father,” he said, picking it up. He lacked a tool belt for it, so he held it in his free hand.

Madraig dragged a frightened Barida into the hallway. Crixus stumbled after them.

“Halt!” The voice that commanded them was familiar and imperious. The

Emperor strode towards them at the vanguard of a dozen Legionnaires. He carried a jeweled sword, so flimsy it seemed to be a toy.

Madraig pushed Crixus in the opposite direction down the hallway. “Run, damn it, run!”

Crixus staggered a few feet and stopped. Madraig brandished his sword at the Emperor of Nistru and his mercenaries. The fierce determination on his face had nothing to do with flight.

“Let me go,” Barida pleaded.

A dozen Legionnaire swords left their sheaths in a chorus of metal against wood. Madraig assumed the predatory crouch he had when facing the bandits in the woods, but with Barida attached to him.

Using his closed fist, he dashed Madraig’s hand off Barida’s arm. Freed, she ran to the Emperor who caught her with his free arm, holding his sword out protectively. Her eyes locked with Crixus, full of sorrow, fear, helplessness—and regret.

“Now we can run,” Crixus hissed at Madraig.

Madraig turned and bolted, favoring his unhurt leg. Crixus dashed after him. The Emperor shouted an order and the Legionnaires boiled past him in pursuit.

Crixus guided Madraig through the halls of Castle Nistru, taking the lead as the mercenary slowed on his wounded leg. The ornate trappings of the castle, which Crixus had once regarded with carefully concealed contempt, blurred as they passed them. He found the servant’s corridor that led to the foyer where he had camped for a week. They burst into the foyer, gasping for breath.

The fountain in the center of the foyer projected water twenty feet into the air in a glorious display, as its creators had intended, in three controlled jets.

Crixus urged Madraig to the far entrance towards the sounds of distant combat. They reached the grand central gate. Operators waited nervously, ready to open the gate on command. They gripped the wheels whose chains attached to pulleys set high in the ceiling.

“Open the gate,” Crixus said.

The operators, mere servants, looked confused. Madraig jabbed his sword under the chin of one. “Now,” he said.

The servants tugged at the wheels; the enormous doors groaned open to a scene of carnage. The rebels had mounted an all-out assault on the castle gate. Bodies, nearly all belonging to peasants, littered the square. The Red Legionnaires had formed a line of defense, swords bristling like a briar patch. The peasants wielded pitchforks, spears, hoes, shovels, any tool with a metal tip. The Legionnaires gave not an inch as wave after wave of crazed, desperate peasants swung their farm tools before being cut down.

The Legionnaires didn’t notice Crixus and Madraig squeezing out of the gate. They surveyed the scene with anguish. Chaos reigned but the Legionnaires would own the day. Many grinned with sadistic pleasure at the lopsided battle.

One man towards the end of the line had a familiar beard and profile. *Torrek*. Crixus led Madraig towards the mercenary captain. As they approached, he saw Ushe and Borge there as well, locked in combat with spear-wielding peasants.

“Over there,” he told Madraig and without hesitation wedged himself between his former travel companions.

Torrek made room, thinking they were Legionnaires, until he glanced over to see Crixus. He gaped in astonishment.

“I’ll be damned,” he said.

“Let us pass,” Crixus said. “Please.”

The old man sized a up bloody Crixus for a moment. Ushe and Borge stabbed oncoming peasants, too busy to notice. Torrek’s expression was unreadable. He raised his sword.

“Hell,” Torrek said. As Ushe and Borge dispatched their opponents, Torrek shoved Crixus into the breach. He and Madraig bulled through the surprised peasants, who were so focused on the red armor of the Legionnaires that they allowed the two big men to push through the crowd. In moments, Crixus and Madraig were free of the square.

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Sheirra swore like the sailors she had entertained when she saw the two bloody figures climb the hill. She rushed to Madraig, who dropped his own sword to embrace her and kiss her with unashamed passion. Crixus fell to one knee to rest as the lovers spoke quiet words of reassurance to each other. He thought of Barida's retreating back, and her eyes as she watched from the Lamia Emperor's embrace as Crixus turn to flee with the man who had hunted him down like a criminal. The pain in his arm throbbed still. His eyes burned with tears, but he fought to regulate his breathing as though nothing else mattered.

What will be, will be, he told himself. Barida is safe with him because he desires her. She won't be bled dry to satisfy their thirst, at least.

Sheirra knelt by him. "By Kaolis, Crixus, your arm is a mess." He produced the medical kit. "I don't have a bandage long enough to wrap around it." She took out a small knife and ripped off a strip from her dress. "This will have to do."

Madraig sat before him. "I'd say we're even now."

"What?"

"Staal would have eaten me alive. You saved me."

"Oh." He grimaced as Sheirra tightened the bandage. "I think you're still one up on me. The caverns."

"No." Madraig stroked Sheirra's hair as she worked. "If it weren't for you, I'd have never found this lass. I'd have drank and whored myself to death, alone in the world. I think that counts, too."

Crixus sighed. "I wasn't much help to Barida."

"She made a choice. At least you gave her a chance to do that." Madraig shrugged. "Can't say I understand women."

"We'll have to work on that," Sheirra said.

Crixus gazed over the valley, where pillars of smoke still burned in the outlying villages. Staal was dead, but the cruelty of the Lamiae would go uncontested for

years after they suppressed this revolt. Perhaps Crixus hadn't been a critical factor in it, but rather just swept up in the cycle of Nistru, as was Staal, Barida, and even the Emperor. Perhaps no just society could exist in the presence of so much wealth. Pahhim hoped that one man could make a difference. Even Kerik, by his failed assassination attempt, hoped that Crixus' death would change the course of events. Perhaps they were all wrong.

Nistru's fountains would run red again with more innocent blood than ever before.

"Let's not linger here," Madraig said. "I'm ready to quit this valley for good." He regarded Crixus thoughtfully. "But where should we go?"

"Rond," Crixus said. "You're taking me back home, right?"

"As a pauper? No." He tapped the ornate sword in his scabbard: Staal's. "We can sell this for a fair bit and split it three ways. That should take care of us for a time."

"It's not enough to pay my debts."

"Your debt to me is paid. Minq seems like an interesting place." He grinned at Sheirra. "The lady and I were talking about settling down in Arktos. It's supposed to be beautiful."

"And wealthy. Come with us," Sheirra said, taking Crixus' hand. "Make your fortune there. You've proven it can be done."

"The last time I followed his lead, I lost everything," Crixus said, with a sad smile.

"You don't have anything left," Madraig said, raising his eyebrows. "So there's no risk."

Crixus tapped his father's hammer. "I still have this. I can put it to work."

Madraig helped him to his feet. Turning his back on Nistru, Madraig limped towards their camp using Staal's sword as a cane. Sheirra gathered the medical kit and followed her lover, taking deliberate steps.

Crixus walked away from Nistru's fires and pain—where Barida would live out her days amongst the pageantry and blood baths of the Lamiae—without a final glance.

The End

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