

## Prologue

“I’ll see you soon, Quirabel,” Lord Aric told his young daughter, “and I’ll bring a special present for you, from Marl. A clock, perhaps.”

Quirabel glanced at the birthday gifts already scattered around the floor. “I don’t need any more presents,” she observed. “So I’d rather you stayed here.”

Her father chuckled. “I’d rather stay, too, but I’ve already delayed my departure in honor of your special day. Farewell, daughter, and behave yourself.” He ruffled her hair, then turned to Quirabel’s mother. “You’ll come to the courtyard to see me off?”

“Of course, my love,” Lady Alasha said.

Quirabel’s parents left, and the child looked up at her nursemaid. “I’m going to sea too, when I’m old enough. I’m going to have all kinds of adventures, just like my mother and father.”

The nursemaid shook her head. “You’ll grow up into a young lady, and then you’ll be married to some nice Xendrian lord and go to live in his castle, or he’ll come to live in yours. That’s the way of it, for people like you.”

“I’m *not* people like me,” Quirabel affirmed. “Now, I have to make sure all the ships are coming and going as they should.”

She trotted off to her father’s study, where she often went while he was away on business, to play with the ledgers and bills of lading, the bundles of quills and packets of sealing wax. Here, she’d dispatch a galleon to a foreign port, laden with silks and spices and trinkets. There, she’d order the delivery of a cargo of ambergris and sandalwood. Next, she’d send her fastest barque through the heart of an imagined tempest, to bring her father safely home.

The huge teak desk where she made her playground was polished from long years of use, and kept emphatically locked. But today Lord Aric had left in haste. As the child eased herself up onto his high chair while clutching the usual brass handle, instead of holding firm the drawer slid out. Quirabel gave a yelp of dismay and tumbled to the floor, loudly followed by the drawer and its contents.

The sudden crash brought her to the verge of tears – but Quirabel’s nature was more inclined to curiosity than to crying. A fascinating leather folder lay on the brown rug before her face. She flipped it open and her eyes grew large.

The etchings inside were not intended for any child.

Delighted and perplexed, she turned from one sheet to the next, gazing at an incomprehensible world of flesh, steel and leather; supple women and powerful men trapped in perversion, their flesh and essences laid bare by the artist’s skill.

What struck her most was the verve and color of the images, the passion that had gone into their making. She didn’t understand what was represented by those bold strokes of pigment; neither did she understand why the nursemaid, on discovering her young charge absorbed by the sketches, took the matter so ill.

Before Quirabel knew what was happening, the collection had been swept back into its folder and the child was bent over her nursemaid’s knee, receiving the spanking of her young life.

The study was kept locked after that – and Quirabel found herself thrown less into her own company as arrangements were made for other children to come to the castle to play, or for her to go down to one of the houses in Malkenstorm Town. And if she took the lead in the games they played, while the other children – girls and boys alike – competed for her favor, well that was only natural. Her noble parents, she soon came to understand, would have been disappointed if their daughter had contented herself with a more subservient role, and so she suppressed that side of her nature and nurtured the other.

And if Quirabel sometimes took advantage of the power that came with popularity, exploring too closely the line between play and something darker, that too seemed natural. Some of the children, stung by her barbs and humiliations, drifted away from her circle. Others simply fawned all the more – and she lost interest in them.

The ones she liked best were those that either gave as good as they got, or that dried their eyes and, an hour later, or a day, returned to offer their acceptance and friendship, but not their abject surrender. These two kinds of playmate became the companions of her childhood, each giving and receiving according to their growing needs.

Years passed and children came of age, disappearing to whatever trade or service life demanded of them. Quirabel herself grew into a refined, educated young lady who’d almost forgotten her childish wilfulness – and the leather folder. All she understood was that something unimaginably significant had happened once, something that had moved her deeply and then been snatched away.

The only detail that remained was a vague recollection of a brown rug scattered with strange, alluring images that twisted and faded as she looked at them, and the incomprehensible, stinging fury of a sour old woman.

Lisen noticed the ruffians as soon as they entered the tap room. In truth, every serving girl in the place noticed the trio – and not in a welcoming way, for one glance was enough to tell a woman what kind of men these were. The three of them claimed a corner booth, and their leader – distinctive in an eye patch of wrinkled black leather, and with his good left eye gleaming blue by the light of high-hung lanterns – called loudly for ale.

They propped their swords beside them and began to drink and dice, watching all the while with hard eyes. Several times, Lisen sensed their gaze on her, and overheard the lewd, loud jests that the oldest of the three made to his one-eyed companion. She scarcely even blushed at such things any more; why would she? She was a serving girl and for sale, and men were men, even if few looked as hard-bitten as these.

The grey-beard who thought himself a wit was pock-marked with pale rheumy eyes; Lisen instantly christened him ‘Ugly’. The youngest was smooth-skinned, sallow and oily, as if he seldom saw either soap or sun. The manner and bearing of the third (‘One-Eye’, Lisen silently named him) declared him to be the leader of the three. Her heart sank when Ugly summoned old Farnham the innkeeper, for surely he meant to pay her night-price – but no, his attention was on young Xiris who had just glided by the men’s booth, raven-haired and barefoot, on her way to the kitchen with a stack of empty platters.

“How much for the young one?” Ugly said.

Old Farnham glanced nervously toward the door, as he’d often done before, when someone offered to pay night-price for Xiris – or for Lisen herself, when she’d been younger. “That one’s not ready yet. Her bride-auction’s in a few weeks, though, if you happen to be passing by, but in the meantime she’s only to serve at table.” He hesitated. “I treat my girls as I would treat my own daughters, see.”

Ugly cursed and spat onto the sawdust-sprinkled floor, but One-Eye chuckled. “Then I’ll venture to hope that your own daughters’ destinies have preserved

them from your loving care.” Even amused, he looked grim and dangerous, with a straight pale scar marring the sun-bronzed cheek below the leather patch. His dark short-cropped hair caught the lantern light, glittering with strands of red copper and premature silver.

The innkeeper forced a laugh. “How about this one?” He crooked his finger at Lisen, who approached the trio’s table reluctantly. “As pretty as the other, and with a full measure of youthful charm. If she takes your fancy, best pay your silver penny now, or you’ll most likely be disappointed.”

One-Eye looked Lisen up and down. “I’ll consider it.” He waved her away. As she withdrew, she saw him beckon Farnham closer, saw him whispering into the old man’s ear.

Nobody chose her that night, which made a welcome change from the usual – though an exotic-looking foreigner had thanked her with a smile for the bowl of mutton stew and flask of wine she’d served him; to go upstairs with him would have been no great hardship. Lisen hadn’t been surprised when the foreigner retired alone; he didn’t look like someone who’d need to pay for a girl to share his bed.

The tap room was tidied and the other girls called their good nights and drifted upstairs with their clients, one-by-one. Farnham shuffled off to bed too, yawning and wheezing. Only Lisen and Xiris remained to clear away the evening’s debris, washing the cooking pots and crockery, and extinguishing the fires for safety’s sake.

Lisen liked the younger girl and felt sorry for her. She’d been in the same position herself, less than two years before: scurrying between kitchen and pantry, cellar and taproom to earn her keep, endlessly humiliated by casual offers made for her body, endlessly relieved by the innkeeper’s rejection of them.

Until the night of her bride-auction. A baying crowd pawing and jeering at her; a purse emptied into the innkeeper’s outstretched hand; a world changed forever. The same cataclysm lay in wait for Xiris – the swelling curves of her young body, the golden glow of her soft skin, the admiring glances she received – all these things declared that it wouldn’t be long now. But what could either of them do? They were Farnham’s bonded servants, not exactly slaves, but not free either, until their term of indenture was complete. And even if free, where would they go and how would they live?

Lisen pushed such thoughts away, and smiled. “It seems too long since we’ve spent time together. I’m glad nobody paid my night-price.”

“But someone did,” Xiris said. “The one with the eye-patch. I heard him as I was coming back from the kitchen; he was jangling coins and telling Farnham not to promise you to anyone else.”

Lisen’s smile faded into puzzlement. “But they didn’t want me ... the ugly one asked for you, and Farnham refused.”

"The one with the eye-patch had the purse, not the ugly one."

"Then why-?"

The door from the tap room swung open, and the three ruffians crowded into the kitchen, first the pockmarked old one, then his younger perspiring companion, and finally the one-eyed leader.

"I beg your pardon, sirs," Lisen said. "But we're busy clearing up, as you see."

One-Eye perched himself on a scrubbed oak table and produced a coin that he spun between his knuckles, rolling it from one finger to the next so that it glinted in the candle light. Lisen's gaze followed the coin as she weighed possibilities. "You'd best take that to Farnham, if--"

"The innkeeper has his share." The man flicked the coin again. "This is yours, if you want to earn it."

Of course she wanted the silver; it would bring freedom a little closer, hasten the day when she'd be able to buy out her indenture. "Farnham knows?"

"You saw me paying him, didn't you?"

"I saw you talking to him." She narrowed her eyes suspiciously and returned her attention to his spinning silver. "Why should you pay twice?"

He shrugged. "Why should Farnham get all the coin, when you have all the trouble? And it will be more than the usual trouble."

"I won't do anything that--"

The sallow one cut across her. "You'll do as you're told. Your Master don't want the likes of us rousing him from bed and asking for their silver back, do he?" He twitched his cloak aside to reveal the studded jerkin beneath, and the scabbarded blade at his side.

She took in these details, and glanced at Xiris. The girl had shrunk back into the corner, next to the fireplace. Lisen returned her attention to the leader. She tried to keep her voice friendly but non-committal. "Tell me what you want and I'll tell you if I'm interested."

One-Eye's voice softened, as if to coax her into compliance. "Play along, and we'll tell Farnham how well you did. He'll keep his reward, and you'll have yours as well, and the night's hurt will be kept to a minimum." He flipped the coin spinning into the air, then palmed it.

The grey-bearded ugly one said, "Play us false, and who knows what'll happen?" He paused and grinned. "Best not play us false, neh?"

Lisen gave a resigned shrug. It seemed she couldn't refuse, but then she was used to that. "What do you want?"

"You're to visit one of the guests," One-Eye said.

"That's against the--"

He interrupted. "Be still, lass. Get it into that pretty head of yours: Farnham's in agreement with this."

“Which guest, then, and what am I supposed to do with him?”

“Every female in the tap room spent the evening making eyes at him,” One-Eye replied. “I expect you’ll find a way to pass the time.”

He meant the foreigner, Lisen realized. She hadn’t been the only woman whose gaze had lingered on the man’s slim exotic looks, on his dark-curved locks and grey eyes. “Why should you pay me just to go into his bedchamber?”

“I’ll have more from you than just that,” he said. “When you’ve been with him for a while, you’ll call for help, loudly and urgently, and we’ll rescue you from your attacker.”

A moment of incomprehension, then understanding came: they meant her to cry rape. She shook her head. “I’ll not accuse a man falsely.”

One-Eye turned to his men. “Well, lads, what do you think of that?”

Ugly said, “I told you Farnham had gone soft, neh? He kept only two or three girls in the old days, but young and well-trained to the whip, so they’d beg for the chance to please. Now it’s become like any whore house.” He drew a wicked-looking dagger with a curved blade, whose edge had been honed until it glittered like ice. “Shall we show her, boss?”

One-Eye held his hand up. He turned to Xiris. “You, lass, what’s your name?”

“Xiris, sir.” She was trembling, Lisen saw.

“Xiris. An unusual name. Arbian, I’d wager, by the looks of you. But you’re not dark enough to be full-blooded ... was it your mother, or your father?”

The girl swallowed. “My mother, sir. I never knew who my father was.”

One-Eye guffawed with laughter. “Then you have the advantage of me, for I knew neither parent ... but I have known my share of Arbian women. More than my share, if I’m honest, for I’ll not deny they make excellent whores.”

He inspected Xiris more closely. “I started young; one of them might have whelped you, for all I can tell. You’re lucky to have inherited her looks instead of mine!” He snorted with laughter, and his men dutifully joined in. One-Eye turned back to Lisen. “It’d be a sad thing, for a father to see his own daughter come to harm. Xiris is best out of this. You’d be doing the lass a kindness.”

She looked from face to face. None held a hint of compassion. The ugly one stared at Xiris, licking his lips. Lisen nodded. “I agree. Let her go.”

One-Eye said, “You heard her. Go to your room, or wherever you sleep. Pull the blanket over your head and stay there until morning.” He regarded her. “And don’t you dare come out, no matter what you might hear.”

Xiris shot a scared, guilty glance at Lisen, and fled.

“There, she’s safe,” One-Eye said. “As for you, I need you undressed before we go upstairs. Best do it yourself, I’d say.”

Before she could do more than shake her head, the sallow one had seized her wrists and twisted them behind her back. His body smelled like leaven left

on the hearth too long: sour and musty. She began to struggle but then the old pockmarked one was in front of her, showing his dagger again, and she became perfectly still.

With a single sweep of the glittering blade, he slashed the lacings of her bodice. From breast bone to waist, leather thongs parted as if they were no more than silk ribbons, and the garment gaped wide. Underneath, Lisen wore a linen blouse, and this he ripped open, scattering buttons across the kitchen floor. He jerked the fabric aside and studied her.

"My preference was for the other one, but you've some good years in you yet, neh? I was thinking that your belly'd be flat, and your titties plump and shapely, and they don't disappoint." He leaned closer, pulling on the bunched fabric of her torn blouse. "Best make sure that *you* don't disappoint."

He took hold of both bodice and blouse, shrugging them up and back over her thin shoulders, and then down over her arms so that she was doubly pinioned, by his comrade's hands and by her own clothing. Next to go were her skirts and petticoats, first the leather belt from about her waist, then the eyes and hooks ripped away from the skirt while seams split and shredded until all was ruined and cast aside. Rough hands pulled the bodice and blouse down about her waist, then over the flare of her hips until they fell about her feet.

She could scarcely believe that such a thing could be happening: that the men could have stripped her so efficiently, or that the kitchen's fire-warmed air could feel so cold against suddenly-naked skin. Part of her mind lamented for her ruined clothes, for how was she to replace them? Another part shrank from considering what further ruin might now befall her.

"If you take your own shoes off," One-Eye said, "I should think they'd end up in a fit state for you to wear them tomorrow."

*Tomorrow.* Perhaps he wouldn't permit the ugly one to use the curved blade, then. Perhaps the three of them would only use her – for their pleasure or for whatever plot they were hatching – and leave it at that. Lisen kicked one shoe off, then the other.

Ugly stooped and retrieved the shoes. "Too slow," he said. Lisen gave a shriek as he tossed them into the hottest part of the fire ... the clothes, perhaps, could be mended given time, but the shoes were irreplaceable. The stink of scorching leather filled the room. Despite the greedy, dancing flames, the flagstones were cold – much colder than Lisen had expected. She became aware that she was shivering.

One-Eye shook his head sadly. "There was no call for that," he said. "The lass took them off, fair and square."

"Farnham's wenchs always went unshod in the old days," Ugly said. "It's how things are supposed to be."

One-Eye sighed. "We're here to take care of the Old Bear's business, not to re-live the glorious past. Sorry, lass, but we must bind you now, as it seems our foreign friend upstairs likes his birds well-trussed."

The ugly one retrieved Lisen's belt. His sallow companion held her hands together at the small of her back; a moment later she felt the cool supple leather encircle her wrists, once and then twice in crisscross fashion. They drew the belt snug against her skin, then buckled it.

"Make sure it's good and tight but don't cut off the blood," One-Eye said. "Our friend would surely pull it tight, and since he would leave bruises, so must we."

Lisen gasped as her captors tightened the strap another notch and slipped the belt pin into place again. "Please," she said. "There's no—"

She bit her words back, because the knife point was suddenly a hand's breadth from her cheek. Its owner pushed his pockmarked face close to hers, and she smelled his ale-sour breath as he said, "All we need from you is to do as you're told, neh? Isn't that right, boss?"

"Indeed," One-Eye said. "You'll visit our exotic friend, and call for help."

Lisen tried to still her trembling. "You'd accuse a man of rape for no reason?"

"I have my orders, just as you do."

For the first time, Lisen thought beyond her current predicament. Would she be able to betray the foreigner? When the time came, would she be able to falsely call for help?

Her captor might have had only one eye, but that didn't hinder him in reading her mind. "If you double-cross us, if you don't shout out – good and loud, now – then our agreement is undone. That would be no good, would it, lads?"

Ugly produced his knife again, and Lisen gasped as his rough fingers seized her right nipple, twisting and tweaking it, pulling her protesting breast away from her rib cage. Then the blunt back of the knife scored across her skin, just where the flesh darkened around the trapped nubbin of flesh.

"If you hold it tight like this, it don't take hardly nothing, not with a sharp 'un like Ladykiller. Quick and tidy, neh? Girl's hooded or blindfolded, the first she knows of it is when she can't feel the pinching no more. Hah!" He gave an extra hard squeeze as if to emphasize his point, and Lisen yelped in sudden pain.

"Shame when it comes to that, though. Never seen one yet who didn't wish she'd chosen different, afterwards." The sallow ruffian spat on the kitchen floor. "Waste of a good pair o' titties, if you ask me." He cupped her left breast, lifting it from underneath and raising it almost to the same level as its over-stretched twin, then stooped to inhale the scent of what he held. "It ain't like the world's full o' good 'uns."

His pockmarked friend sniggered, and Lisen sagged with relief as he released her abused nipple, allowing the captive flesh to settle back against her ribs.

"Aye, a waste indeed," One-Eye said. "And it would be a waste of our foreign friend upstairs, too, 'cause my orders are that he's not to leave this inn alive, unless it's in the custody of the Watch. And we don't want blood spilled tonight. Not yours, not mine, not the pretty young Arbian's, not our friend's. So it won't come to that." He stared at her. "Will it?"

"No." She stared at the ugly one's blade. "It won't come to that."

The sallow one retrieved Lisen's ruined clothes, and then they hustled her up the stairs; first One-Eye, cupping a flickering candle in his hand, then Lisen, then the two ruffians to make sure she didn't try anything – as if she could have, trussed and naked as she was. Her skin crawled with the expectation of being touched by the men following her, and sure enough, halfway up the creaking staircase, a hand insinuated itself between her thighs and moved sharply upward.

Despite herself, Lisen gave an outraged squeal.

"Be still!" hissed the man ahead of her. The invading hand dropped away. They chivvied her along the passageway at the top of the stairs, and paused outside one of the doorways. How many times had Lisen gone into the room beyond? How many guests had paid the night-price that entitled them to fuck her in that bed? How many times had she swept the floor, straightened the bedclothes, emptied the chamber-pot? Now it seemed as if those things had been done by another girl, endured by another girl.

The leader blew gently into his shielding hand and the candle died. A latch clicked. Then came the slow squeak of hinges. When the door was open, she sensed something sailing past her head – the tatters of her clothes, she realized. Rough hands jostled the naked skin between her shoulder-blades, shoving her bodily so that she almost fell across the threshold.

The door creaked closed. She stood, silent and sightless, straining to hear the rumbling snores or deep breathing that would tell her the foreigner was asleep. Her whole body was quivering, as if exposed skin could somehow sense what was happening in the dark.

Or was it fear? She tilted her head toward where she knew the bed to be, but heard nothing. Then...

"Who goes there?"

The accent told her it was the man she sought, and her sense of direction told her he was not in the bed. Could he have awoken at her entrance and sprung silently to his feet? She stared into the darkness, willing her eyes to adjust. What was she to do? What if he were armed? What if he took her for a burglar or assassin, instead of a whore sent to cry rape against him?

"Please sir, please don't hurt me!" At least there was a chance that such a plea would work, with this man. With the ruffians outside, she'd had no such hope.

A light flared, chasing the blackness from the room, and then a single candle

glowed into life. The foreigner was standing by his bedside table, setting a small box down. He was naked, lean and well-made, his body defined by muscle and sinew, and for a moment she wished that things could be in truth as she must make them appear. The foreigner's gaze almost burned her bare skin, so intent on her that Lisen understood exactly where his attention was given: first to her eyes, then her breasts, then lingering on her legs and bare feet, finally registering the fact that her hands were secured behind her back.

His expression told Lisen that he approved of what he saw; his jutting cock confirmed it. He took a step toward her. "I thought I had awoken, but I must still be dreaming. They call me Cabarro. And you are Lisen, unless the bellowing fool of an innkeeper had it wrong all evening."

She couldn't do it, not to a man who'd taken the trouble, among much bellowing and many girls, to remember her name. "Truly, sir, you are in great—" But then she remembered Xiris, and the Ladykiller, already unsheathed for all she knew, waiting beyond the bedroom door. "I'm sorry, sir," she whispered. "There's no help for it. You're lost and betrayed, no matter what I do."

Cabarro raised an eyebrow. "Lost?"

Lisen raised her voice, wincing at how false it sounded: "No, I beg you, do not violate me a second time!"

"A second time?" Comprehension dawned across his features and he sprang toward his sword belt, which was slung over the foot board of the bed. He drew the blade and the door burst open to reveal a bright lantern held aloft, filling the room with dancing shadows. Ugly and Sallow tumbled inside, their faces betraying a mixture of triumph and fear. One-Eye stood behind them with a cocked crossbow, training it at Cabarro's naked belly. Farnham the innkeeper hovered at the back in his nightshirt, peering past the others into the chamber.

– "Now then, what's going on here?"

– "Seems to me we'd better hand him over to the Watch."

– "Has this foreign scum hurt you?"

Lisen turned away from the intruders, and from the man she'd betrayed, hunching herself over as if that could relieve her mortification. "He ... he ..."

"He forced himself on you? And without your Master's consent? Yes, I'll warrant it was so. Look, the lass is too distressed even to speak!"

"What lie is this?" Cabarro glared at his accusers. "What kind of establishment permits its guests to be so troubled, instead of leaving them sleeping peacefully in the beds they've paid for?"

One-Eye said, "Give it up, raper. You've no chance."

It was true, Lisen knew. The foreigner was naked and out-matched, facing fully-armed men. He eyed the crossbow and laid his sword on the floor.

One-Eye lowered his weapon, but didn't relax his guard. "Best be still and do

as we say, else I'll geld you where you stand for what you've done to this poor helpless lass."

Cabarro sounded surprisingly confident, considering his position. "I've done nothing except to be roused from sleep." He glared at Farnham. "For your sake, I hope you can provide an explanation for this intrusion, not to mention a fat purse in compensation for it."

Farnham said nothing, and Cabarro continued, "I'll have restitution for this, innkeeper. You'll remember my words, and rue the choices you've made, on the day I come to claim it."

One-Eye glanced at Cabarro's now-flaccid penis, then at his discarded sword. "Brave words – but hard to believe, considering that you're both unarmed and unmanned."

Cabarro met the other's gaze. "You swim beyond your depth, sir. I am an accredited emissary from Marl, bearing messages for the Lord of Malkenstorm. The laws of embassy entitle me to free passage."

With his free hand, One-Eye beckoned his men. "Take this scum downstairs and call the Watch to collect him. The innkeeper will bear witness." He glanced at Lisen, who was unable to meet his gaze. "So will the lass."

The two ruffians made to seize Cabarro.

"Let him clothe himself," One-Eye said.

Ugly shook his head. "After the way he ripped the poor girl's clothes off?" He pointed at Lisen's discarded bodice and skirt, which had landed close to the window. "I say we treat him as he treated her, and make him go naked."

One-Eye fixed his subordinate with a stare and shook his head. "Let him clothe himself."

Cabarro hastily took the opportunity to do exactly that.

"What of the raper's goods?" Farnham asked, as the two ruffians hustled their prisoner from the room.

"Keep them for your trouble," One-Eye replied, "and in compensation for the unpaid use of the lass. You can collect them after my business is done. Now leave us, and bring a doctor presently."

"I'll see to it instantly."

One-Eye shook his head. "An hour will be soon enough."

Farnham bowed and backed away, closing the door as he went.

One-Eye turned to Lisen. "So here we are, with the ravisher caught red-handed and the doctor on his way to confirm the crime, and no rape to speak of. That leaves us in an interesting position."

"Please let me go. You promised that I'd–"

"Aye, I promised that the hurt would be kept to a minimum," he said. "But I've paid your night-price, and now I'll have what I bought. We must play our part

to make things seem as they're supposed to be." He looked her up and down. "Though I'll not pretend the prospect doesn't please me. Still, I'm not an unreasonable man; I could delegate this to one of my helpers, if you prefer, though I'd not recommend it."

Lisen thought of the other two: the greybeard with the Ladykiller, and the sallow one with his sour smell and moist skin. She shook her head.

"Most gracious of you, I'm sure," One-Eye said. "I might not turn the ladies' heads as I'd wish, but it'll be a sad day when a pretty girl like you chooses gutter filth over the likes of me."

"If they're gutter filth, why do you lead them?"

He shrugged. "A man's got to earn a crust, and if they weren't following me, they'd be doing something worse." His single eye never left her as he set about unbuckling the boiled leather jerkin that he wore for protection. He cast the jerkin aside, then pulled off his undershirt. He was well-muscled with a massive torso; a strong man still far from his middle years, lean and hard though Lisen knew from experience that such men often ran to fat if their professions didn't keep them active. His body was more bronzed than she'd expected, and bore a scattering of coppery, tight-ringed hair.

The leather bonds were biting into her wrists. "Please untie me," she said.

One-Eye kicked his boots off and unbuckled his belt. "I prefer you like that, for now. The more helpless you are, the better I'll enjoy you. Nothing personal. Does it hurt?"

She nodded.

"Good." He stepped out of his breeches. Now he was as naked as she was – he had only his eye patch; she had nothing except the belt, still cutting cruelly into her wrists. "You're not going to tell me that a lass in your line of work isn't used to a little pain, are you?"

Lisen shook her head.

"Well, I'll not let you come to harm. Turn yourself around and let me look at your hands."

She obeyed, acutely conscious that she was exposing her naked rump to him, praying that the sight wouldn't tempt him to make use of it. But what difference did it make? He was going to enjoy his purchase, one way or another. If he wanted to see what was available, he could just walk around her. He could do whatever he pleased.

"The color of your hands is good," he said. "You've nought to worry about, though your wrists will be bruised. To be expected, that, considering you've just escaped the clutches of that foreign devil. Now turn and face me again. Good."

*The clutches of that foreign devil ...* Lisen struggled to comprehend the enormity of the lie, and the likely consequences for its victim. "At least tell me why?"

One-Eye shrugged. "Orders. It's best not to inquire about these things too closely, and it's not like we've harmed him. Job's done now, anyway."

"What will happen to him?"

"Less than what would have happened if you hadn't played along. So don't be too hard on yourself, lass. Forget him; attend to me instead." He moved toward her and put his hands on her bare hips, drawing her closer. Obediently she stepped forward, until her body was tight against his. His arms came around her, hands moving up her flanks, finding her bound wrists, crossing to the space between them, exploring the small of her back.

He lowered his head toward her and she tilted her face up, offering her mouth. This was her job, wasn't it? This was what he'd paid for. His lips found hers and he kissed her long and hard, probing with his tongue. She answered with her own, not from passion but from weary duty, from the need to appease.

It was the same kiss that she gave to all the men who bought her, if they even took time for kissing.

She tried to wriggle into a different position within the confining belt, but the leather had yielded as much as it could; it didn't shift by a finger's breadth. Her wrists were a knot of agony. An hour, One-Eye had said; Farnham was to do nothing for an hour. She couldn't endure this bondage for an hour. Yet what choice was there? The man's power over her was complete.

There was nothing left, then, except to hope that her surrender would be of more value to him than the belt. When he broke the kiss she said, "Please, I'll do anything, give anything you want. Let you do whatever you like. Anything at all. Just unbind me."

He considered her request and then said, "A pretty enough promise. Kiss me as if you mean it, this time, and I'll consider whether to take you up on it." Then he stooped to claim her mouth again.

This time, she tried to put her heart into it. She closed her eyes and pushed herself up onto the tips of her toes, so that her mouth strained against his. Instead of waiting for his tongue, she sent forth her own, exploring and claiming. She sensed his answering flicker and followed him back, tongue-tips dancing together, allowing him to lead her as he willed. He bit down gently, trapping her inside his mouth. She froze for an instant like a fish on a hook, on the verge of a panicked pulling-away – but that wouldn't count as *meaning it*, would it?

What *would* count? Lisen had nothing to guide her, no yardstick of lust or love or even any particular liking for a man. She'd been little more than a child when sold into Farnham's bonded service, and grown too swiftly into this half-world that had no place for human love or dignity.

Proper women do this all the time, she told herself angrily. She couldn't imagine finding any joy or passion in kissing the men who paid her night-price. The

betrayed foreigner came into her mind; Cabarro, he'd called himself. What might have happened between them, if things could have been different? Some spark had passed between them; she'd felt it and was sure he had, too. His frank inspection and the response of his male parts had left no doubt that he'd desired her.

So she lied to herself that she was with him, that it was his hands she felt claiming her trembling flesh, his belt encircling her bruised wrists, his teeth nipping her tongue and holding it prisoner. She strained higher onto her bare toes, offering even more of herself to be trapped, if that was his desire. Cabarro released her tongue and probed with his own, and she trapped him in turn between gently pressing teeth. The pain in her wrists, her nakedness and her helplessness were all a joy to her, because Cabarro liked it so. He liked *her* so. He liked the fact that she came to him through her own desire, and not for a silver penny. She heard her pulse rushing in her ears, felt her heart hammering in her chest.

The man broke the kiss and stepped back, bringing his hands from her waist up to her shoulders. It wasn't Cabarro, of course. It was One-Eye. His cock stood up like a flagstaff. A tear escaped from Lisen's eye and rolled down her cheek.

"I was going to use that belt to warm your behind a little, once I'd removed it," he murmured. "But now I think there's no need." He moved around her, and as he passed she saw that his upper back was marked with a dragon, tattooed in red and black and shimmering gold, curling its great snake-like body and barbed tail as it reared up to spit a fireball from its open jaws. She only glimpsed it for a moment before he was behind her and out of sight, unfastening the belt from about her wrists. "So instead I'll bind you again, to the bed. But not so tightly this time."

Lisen examined her chafed wrists, then dropped them to her sides. "You want me on the bed?"

"Aye. Lean back on the pillows, and push your hands up close to the wall."

She obeyed, thrusting her hands on either side of the central post of the headboard. One-Eye came to the bed and straddled her. He reached up and bound her wrists securely but gently, tethering them to the headboard, rendering her utterly helpless and exposed again. Then he looked down for a long moment, his gaze flicking from breast to breast, then up to her face, then back again to her breasts. He reached down and touched her left nipple, trailed his fingers across and down to her belly, back up to the other breast.

"Who were you thinking of just then, as I was kissing you?"

Lisen shook her head; the man gazing down at her might have bought her body, but her thoughts remained her own.

"You said you'd give me anything I wanted," he remarked.

She looked up at him. He was right; she'd promised. "I was thinking of Cabarro," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's not every day I witness a girl finding something in herself like

that. But you're to stay here with me while I fuck you, with your eyes open and looking up at me. I want to see exactly what I'm doing to you, and how you respond to it, understand?"

Lisen nodded.

He shifted his attention from her breasts to her face, stroking her cheek for a while, then the corner of her mouth, testing her lips with his fingertips. She tried to ignore the smoky, salty taste as he slipped his fingers inside and drew circles on her tongue. "Suck them," he commanded, and she obeyed.

Then he withdrew his hand and thrust it between her legs, probing at her secret mound, working the folds of flesh apart with spit-slick fingers. She shuddered as he forced his way fully inside, at the humiliation and the dry pain of the invasion. Before she realized what was happening his hand was back at her mouth again. "More," he commanded, and again she parted her lips and tasted herself this time, as his fingers collected another cargo of her spittle.

This time, when he probed her again, the entrance was a little easier. "That will do," he said, and guided his cock between her legs. She felt the moistness of its tip giving way to the dryness of its shaft as it stabbed into her with a single swift motion. She gasped at the sensation. Would she ever get used to this? How could she? Lisen had never been able to degrade herself with the lie of extravagant pleasure, which some of the other girls dissembled. All she could do was to hide behind a controlled mask, passive and compliant. Judging by the way they kept returning to her, plenty of Farnham's customers were happy to see that mask.

"Does it hurt?" One-Eye's voice was hoarse. "Be honest."

She nodded hesitantly, gazing up at him.

"Don't try to hide it from me," he said. "I need to see it."

He thrust into her again, and this time she winced and screwed up her face at the invasion. Another thrust, another stabbing assault sent between her legs and into her body. She heard herself whimpering. She'd never done that before, no matter how much it hurt.

His right hand reached around and down, questing for her buttock. He gripped a taut handful of flesh and squeezed, digging his nails in hard. Lisen opened her mouth to squeal, only to be muffled by the edge of his other hand pushing between her teeth. His fingers smeared a tear-track across her cheek. Another thrust came, deeper and more violent than before. "Bite me," he gasped, and Lisen responded with a tentative, terrified nip. His fingernails clawed at the meat of her buttock again, even harder this time, and his left hand pressed further into her mouth. "Harder." She bit down, bit until she thought she must surely taste his blood. He gave a final thrust and a deep grunt, and exploded into her.

He remained still, and inside her, for a long time. Then he withdrew, and a moment later he'd released her wrists from the headboard. "There," he said, and

rose from the bed. Lisen made to get up too, but he held out a restraining hand. "Stay like that until the doctor arrives. What will you tell him?"

Lisen stared at him. She couldn't think of anything to say.

He shrugged and began to dress himself. "As good a story as any." Once he'd belted his jerkin, he pulled a silver coin from the purse at his hip, and spun it across the room so that it landed among her ruined clothes. He hesitated, considering, and then flicked a second coin, and a third. "Leave them lie until you're alone," he said. "Farnham is as like to steal them as not, and I wouldn't trust this so-called doctor any further."

She nodded, struggling to comprehend how such cruelty could give way to kindness. Those coins would be the first silver added to Lisen's little hoard of coppers, saved against the far-distant day when she might buy her indenture back. "Thank you," she made herself say.

He looked at her in surprise.

"For the silver," she explained, though she knew it was more than that. Yes, he'd hurt her and reveled in her pain, but she knew how much more cruel he could have been. "And for untying me, and for sparing me the whip when I'd sworn you could do as you liked."

He gave a half-grin, and for the first time she saw the grimness leave his face. "There's whores that'll endure a whipping, if you pay their price. They're even happy to let you bind them, once they've learned to trust you a little. Then there's lasses that'll submit themselves, if it means pleasing their chosen man, though I'll not claim to have found one of my own." He fell quiet, studying her. "And then there's your kind."

Lisen tried to hide her confusion. "My kind? What do you mean?"

"Nothing, perhaps." He opened the door, then turned back toward her, tweaking at the corner of his eye patch as he did so. "Except that it's not me that should first lay a whip on you." This time, his half-grin looked a little wistful. "If you ever snare him, I hope he's strong enough to take what you have to offer."

Quirabel first clapped eyes on the prisoner as she was ambling home after a summer afternoon's ride, and he was being taken to the dungeon. She sent the merest hint of restraint along Mist's bridle, gentling the little mare to a walk, allowing the arrest party to stay well ahead of her on the leafy lane.

It didn't usually take *four* watchmen to bring in a miscreant, but this one had something about him. She spent a moment reflecting on what it might be: not the man's physique, she was certain, though he was certainly well-made; narrow-hipped and broad-shouldered, with wavy long hair that suggested a hint of exoticism to her Xendrian eyes, and supple long legs that suggested he would give the paunchy guards a run for their money, if he once gave them the slip.

No, it was more his bearing, something about the way he moved, something that suggested that these guards kept his company because he permitted it, and not because he was compelled.

Perhaps that was why one of them carried a cocked crossbow – Maris, she saw, who used to stare at her most disconcertingly once she'd reached a certain age, until Quirabel learned the trick of gazing right back in a way that made him blush and look elsewhere. Today, Sergeant Maris kept his gaze, and his crossbow, aimed firmly at the small of the prisoner's back.

The others hustled their captive along – or were they trotting at his heels and clutching at his elbows? Quirabel smiled, for she could easily have imagined it so. She loosened the reins a little and touched her heels to Mist's flanks, urging the mare to a trot. It took only a few heartbeats to catch up with them, an instant longer to pass them, watching from the corner of her eye. She just had time to see how Maris flushed at the sight of her, before returning his attention to his prisoner. The prisoner turned to stare as she went by, too. Quirabel felt his eyes burning into her back as she cantered toward the castle gates.

It took a long while – until she was back in her chamber, in fact – to shake the feeling of his eyes on her. She changed hurriedly, because her ride had made her

late for a task in the castle library; her tutor Doctor Thyssen had directed her to a volume called *Malkenstorm: Origins and Founding Statutes*, from which she was to study the earliest history and laws of her family seat. The library's shelves groaned under the weight of her ancestors' deeds and misjudgments—and so did Quirabel, when she was forced to read about them. Unfortunately, groaning just made things worse. The less Quirabel liked a subject, the more enthusiastic Doctor Thyssen became about it, as if his greatest delight was in torturing, rather than teaching, her.

Of all the tutors she'd had over the years, he was the strangest and also the longest-serving, for he'd been the castle's doctor ever since she could remember, having only lately taken to teaching as well. Such an eminent man could hardly be expected to waste his time instructing a young child, after all.

Quirabel found the volume she sought and carried it to a window seat overlooking the castle's main courtyard—a position she chose as much for the fact that it might offer her a glimpse of the prison party, as for the daylight. And sure enough, there they came, with only two watchmen remaining now that they had the prisoner safely inside the castle walls. She watched them cross the courtyard below, heading toward the dungeons. Then she turned back to her studies.

She'd expected tedium and the book was full of it. She flicked forward, hoping to find an illuminated page—or at least one that was written in a less crabbed hand—and a sheaf of vellum fluttered from where it had been caught in the binding, a folded packet whose yellowing surface crawled with dark-shaded drawings and flowing script.

Quirabel was about to reach down for it, when—

“I trust the *Founding Statutes* are proving more instructive than the view from the window?”

It was Doctor Thyssen. Quirabel hated the way her tutor sneaked and spied and sniffed around her, as if hoping to uncover some transgression. His oft-stated goal was to provide Quirabel with an education befitting a young person of quality, yet the more he hectored her, the more she baited him. This time, she shrugged and glanced through the window. “I was distracted by the commotion below, just now.”

Just as she had intended, the Doctor came to see for himself. He brought his face close to her head and turned his long nose toward her, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Then he peered through the window.

As he did so, Quirabel placed her foot on the parchment, flattening it against the library floor. Her slipper was too narrow to cover it completely, so she bent over her book again, rearranging the folds of her skirts to hide the fallen bundle. Doctor Thyssen, she knew, would not approve of mysterious packets that tumbled from ancient documents.

"I see no commotion," the tutor said as he straightened up.

"Truly? I could have sworn the new prisoner nearly escaped." She patted the book on her lap. "But surely these descriptions of the castle have enchanted me; the scribe has brought his subject quite to life." She glanced pointedly toward the library door. "In fact, I am anxious to continue with a most fascinating passage about the granting of our original Market Charter."

"And I have a patient arriving presently, for a consultation. A most difficult case, though intriguing. I shall disturb you no longer." Doctor Thyssen sniffed again, gave a mournful shake of his head, bent his elongated frame into an awkward bow, and departed.

Despite what the tutor said about an appointment, Quirabel knew that it wasn't beyond him to spy through the keyhole – or to examine her on the subject she was supposed to be studying, for that matter, so she skimmed another chapter. It would mostly be gone from her head in a day or two, but by then Doctor Thyssen would have moved on to a new area of knowledge. When Quirabel could endure no more, she set the tome aside and bent to adjust her slipper – and to palm the hidden bundle. Then she replaced *Malkestorm: Origins and Founding Statutes* in its place. A shelf that held one such mystery might hold another, so she took down all the nearby volumes and riffled through their yellowing leaves, but no further treasures revealed themselves.

She returned to her window seat and unfolded her prize. The first page was a work of art but also a disappointment: a meticulous plan of the upper levels of the castle, skillfully drawn and labeled in a strong, neat hand. Quirabel traced twisting passages, winding stairways and stately galleries until she found her bedchamber, high in the North Tower. The next sheet, as she expected, was a similar sketch of the middle levels, while the third showed the layout close to the ground.

Studying the maps more closely, Quirabel noticed certain details that seemed puzzling: several buildings were missing, while the Great Hall was shown as being subdivided into a dozen separate chambers. How old must the maps be, she wondered?

Still, the papers told her little that she didn't already know. A map of the underground level – the castle's dungeons – would have been interesting, because Quirabel was not permitted there; the guard room at the entrance was always either locked or occupied and even though she could twist most of the men around her finger, they wouldn't disobey the direct orders of Lord Aric – which were that the castle dungeons were strictly off-limits to his child.

Could she have missed a fourth sheet, or left it in the book's binding? She leafed through the bundle again, gently rubbing the parchment between thumb and fingers to make sure none of the pieces had stuck together, and that was when she noticed the pattern that adorned the back of the final sheet.

She'd taken it to be no more than ornamentation at first, a fancy of whomever had drawn the maps, but now she looked closer she saw it was far too detailed for that. It was a tiny spider's web, made of dots and lines and whorls so fine and so intricate that Quirabel wondered if faery folk (a race on whom she'd given up several years before) or daemons (whose existence, like that of the gods, was still a matter for debate) must have done the work.

She screwed up her eyes and held the parchment in front of her nose. It could almost be a plan, just like the others, except that the cramped labels and jumbled patterns were too tiny to make out. If only she had a hand lens ... but such things could only be gotten from a Marlish workshop, or from the occasional trader who could afford to carry such costly trinkets.

Lord Aric was a native of Marl and still had business there; he'd set sail for that smoky island only a few days before. He'd have been pleased to bring his daughter a lens, if only she'd known to ask for one.

It was too late now. She must either find another way, or leave the mysterious map unstudied. She racked her brains, trying to think of where she might find what she needed, and then she remembered her astronomy lessons. If she understood the matter aright, the great pebble of crystal that formed the front-most element of the castle's star glass might serve. The observatory chamber was kept locked when not in use, but surely she'd be able to find someone among the castle staff who had a key?

Quirabel pushed the map into the front of her bodice, and hurried from the library.

Irin lingered for a moment outside the Doctor's study, catching her breath after the climb up the North Tower's spiral staircase. She dreaded the coming consultation and would have gladly postponed it – forever, if that had been possible. But it wasn't. Doctor Thyssen never forgot an appointment; neither did he forgive tardiness. Gently, timidly, Irin knocked on the oaken door panels.

“Come in.”

She pushed the door ajar and slipped inside, then closed it behind her and turned the key in the lock. Doctor Thyssen required complete privacy. Irin, too, would have been mortified if anyone else had intruded into one of these consultations.

The Doctor shook his head, leafing through the leather-bound punishment book in which Mira the housekeeper recorded infractions among the lower servants. “I had hoped,” he said, “that you would mend your ways, after your last visit.”

Irin peeped at his face and then lowered her gaze. The Doctor's glittering eyes told her plainly that his hope had been the opposite of what he said. She could hardly mention such a thing, of course. To do so would have made her position a hundred times worse. Instead, she tried a different tack: “Please sir, may I know what I did wrong?”

“Of course you may. Cast your mind back to the many occasions on which you have failed in some duty.” He paused, giving her a severe look. “You do understand a maid's duties, do you not?”

Irin nodded.

“Then you should be able to tell when your work is lacking. Now, during our last consultation, you tried to ward the cane away with your hand. Such foolishness could leave you with an unpleasant visible mark, couldn't it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“We can't have that.”

Irin shook her head.

“And tell me, why can we not have that?”

Irin’s voice was low. “Because nobody else must know.”

“Quite. Nobody else must know.” Doctor Thyssen brushed his grey hair aside, smirking. “I have to say that personally, I would be prepared to overlook your failings as a domestic, since you at least seem eager to improve yourself, but I doubt your employers would be so tolerant. If they were to learn how disappointed Mira is in you, of the hours she and the other domestics spend setting your errors to rights, well, I wouldn’t like to speculate on your future.” He paused in thought. “But perhaps your family finds itself in kinder circumstances than before?”

Again, Irin shook her head.

“Then your father is no better.”

“No sir.”

“Alas. Your family must count on you keeping your position here, I suppose.”

“Indeed they do, sir.”

“Quite.” The Doctor reached to one side of his desk and turned over a tiny silver hourglass. “You will disrobe.”

The first time Irin had received this order, she’d made the mistake of stepping toward the modesty screen provided for the Doctor’s more noble patients – an error that had provoked a lesson she would never forget. She knew better now. She was to unclothe herself where she stood, in front of his desk, and she was to be naked before the last grains fell to the bottom of the glass. Once stripped, she was to submit herself to the examination that would follow.

Then, with the source of her willfulness identified (usually it was the area from her waist and buttocks down to her knees that was most at fault, though occasionally the culprit turned out to be some other tender part of her body) the Doctor would then apply the medicinal powers of his cane.

The bodice lacings eluded her. Why had she forgotten to loosen them before she came in? Not too much, of course, or the Doctor would notice and punish her for cheating, but she should at least have unknotted them. She shot a frightened glance toward the glass, then shrank from Doctor Thyssen’s furrowed brow. Redoubling her efforts, she sent her fingers flying along the lacings. The bodice came loose at last and she pulled it off, stepping out of her shoes at the same time. Then she unhooked the waist band of her skirt and let it fall – no time to fold it or set it aside. Less than a thimbleful of sand remained as she shrugged the straps of her shift aside. The gauzy garment slipped down, dragging against the hourglass of her figure even as the sand drained through the hourglass on the desk, clinging to her hips for an eternal, insubstantial moment – during which the final sprinkling of sand drained away.

Doctor Thyssen shook his head. “I had thought we were making progress. I had

thought you understood the importance of performing your tasks promptly." He looked her up and down, then glanced down at a second ledger that lay open beside the punishment book, scrawling a note in the margin. "So simple a command and yet it was beyond your ability. Or is it wilfulness? If you only were more tractable, Mira wouldn't find it needful to send you here, would she?"

"No, sir." Irin tensed her body to keep from trembling, resisting the urge to cover herself with her hands. She'd never grown used to being stripped and displayed for this man – for any man – though she knew better than to reveal the discomfiture she felt. There would be plenty of time for that later, as she paid the price of her shortcomings, whatever they were supposed to be – for such details always remained obscure. The housekeeper never expressed any dissatisfaction directly to Irin; it was always through the Doctor. The two were as thick as thieves. Irin would find no help from her superior – and no pity from Doctor Thyssen.

"Very well," he said. "On the couch with you, and let's see what the trouble might be this time. Which area did we treat last time? Inside your thighs, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir." Irin settled onto the couch, which was upholstered in smooth leather and raised to a convenient height for the Doctor's examinations.

"And how was that for you?"

"It hurt me, sir."

"As it should. Would you say it hurt you more, or less, than the usual?"

To ponder a question was to risk a brutal reprisal, so she answered instantly: "More, sir."

"Just as I would expect." The Doctor made a few more notes, then rose, approached the couch, and eased Irin's thighs apart, inspecting the welts that still stood out plainly against her smooth pale flesh. He ran his finger along one of the narrow bruises, then caressed her from knee to groin. Irin did her best to stifle a shudder. Doctor Thyssen continued, "The skin here is unusually delicate, and offers but little in the way of a barrier to the efficacy of my treatment. Perhaps today we will revisit the area ... but no. We must not be seduced by the responsiveness of your legs into overlooking the needs of your arse. On your belly."

Irin rolled over. The Doctor prodded and probed her buttocks, before separating them to inspect what lay between. Inwardly, she cringed. Everything there was his to command: her arse to whip, her arsehole to penetrate. He would thrash her first, she knew, and then he would take his pleasure once her rump was red and burning, when his casual, sadistic plundering of her bare backside would be ten times worse.

"A mere fortnight, and barely a bruise," he said. "If the marks fade too soon, so does the efficacy of the treatment. Today we must go further, don't you think?"

Only one answer was possible: "Yes, sir."

“Then we are agreed. Considering what happened last time, it will be necessary for you to be bound. Start with the belt.” He tossed a bundle of leather straps onto the couch by her side.

Irin rose to her feet and picked up the largest strap. She encircled her midriff, sucking in her belly as deeply as she might—the buckle would not even reach the first hole unless she did so, and the Doctor insisted that, for proper restraint, the third fastening point must be used. She pushed the end of the leather strap through the buckle and hauled it in until the tongue of the buckle touched the first hole. She pushed every atom of air from her lungs and pulled as hard as she could. The belt moved against the roller, bringing the second hole into play and then the third. She slipped the tongue into the hole and released the tension. The cinch bit horribly, but it was better than the consequences of disobedience.

On her first visit to the Doctor’s chambers, she’d refused to tether herself. It was a maid’s lot to obey those set in authority over her, she knew, but she had been terrified of what might follow once she was helpless. Her stand had done no good; the Doctor had caned her brutally where she stood, showering blows across her flanks, buttocks and breasts until she yielded to his demands.

The next time – armed with true and certain knowledge of what it meant to be utterly helpless, and of how cruelly a bound girl could be abused and enjoyed – she had refused again, determined to be stronger this time. After all, it was surely better to be whipped while free, than to be whipped, and worse than whipped, while trussed up.

But again, her resolve did not long outlast the Doctor’s cane. After that, she came to understand that it was better to face her torture willingly, than to resist and thereby double it. Irin had never refused the Doctor’s bonds again.

She adorned herself with the leather collar, anklets and bracelets, one by one. The Doctor had ordered them made according to her measurements and they fitted perfectly, each with a single precise hole for the buckle tongue to find. The collar was furnished with a short chain, like a hound’s leash, that dangled coldly between her shoulder-blades. She went to the end of the couch, with its headboard of black wrought-iron, and bent down to shackle her ankles to two discreet openings cunningly concealed in the twisting design of the couch’s legs. Steel rings were set at the side of her belt, and these she slipped over hooks hidden among the headboard’s iron curlicues. The first went into place easily, but the second was a stretch; the belt was already so very tight. When she finally secured it, she was held so straitly that she knew she would be unable to move – she would scarcely be able to flinch – no matter how cruelly the Doctor set about her exposed haunches.

All she would be able to do would be to scream.

A final task remained: her leather bracelets, and the dangling collar chain, which terminated in a spring-loaded shackle. Her wrists were to be fastened to the chain,

but this last piece of restraint was beyond her. All she could do was to press her hands behind her back, lifting them as high as she could.

The Doctor stepped forward and took her left wrist, pressing it upward until Irin felt her joints creak in protest. She bit her lip to keep from yelping as the Doctor snapped the shackle into place, then repeated the process with her right arm. Now she was utterly powerless, trussed like a fowl made ready for roasting in Mira's kitchen.

Doctor Thyssen busied himself for a while, pottering around the study, opening a drawer now and again, or leafing through papers and jotting down notes with his scratchy quill. If Irin had craned her neck she might have watched him, but she chose not to. Instead she closed her eyes, listening to Doctor Thyssen's movements, and to her own breathing, and the beating of her heart.

A tapping noise came: it was the Doctor, she knew, testing his cane against the edge of his desk. It wouldn't be long now. How was she to bear it? How was she *not* to bear it? She'd borne it before, of course, but this time would be worse. Every time was worse. Was her flesh growing more sensitive, or was the Doctor treating her more cruelly? Irin had no way of knowing.

The cane hissed through the air and cut into her naked left buttock.

It was worse than she could have imagined, worse than she remembered. Had she suppressed the memory? Had her tormentor truly never struck so hard before? She had no time to ponder the question, because the cane returned instantly, slicing across her right buttock and igniting a line of fire to match the one that was already burning on the other side of her rump.

Irin realized that she'd been holding her breath. She let it out in a long, sobbing sigh.

"Don't think your moaning will help you, girl." The Doctor sounded husky, almost breathless, as if the beating affected him almost as much as it did her. "The rod is insensate. It hears no screams and knows no pity." He laid the cane across her buttocks again, revisiting precisely the same points that he'd struck before. Irin cried out as new fire was kindled on skin that was already aflame: "Please, oh please sir, I can't bear it, it's too much."

"Nonsense," Doctor Thyssen replied. "This will make the impressions last a little longer." He delivered four more strokes, two across each of her bottom cheeks, a fingers breadth away from the first set. "Best begin as you mean to continue, eh?"

Another four, and another four, and now the first few strokes seemed gentle in Irin's memory, no more than a lover's caress. Each blow set a new tongue of flame racing across her flesh, and each new flame burned hotter than the last and mingled with it, until it seemed that her very skin must ignite and go up in smoke – and Irin would have gladly had it so, if it would bring an end to this torture.

But an end would have been merciful, and mercy was alien to this man. He strode around the end of the couch, raining more strokes onto her naked arse, then onto her exposed thighs until both the backs and the sides of her legs were aflame, and then for good measure he stood behind her and pelted her flanks with a flurry of blows.

A lull came, and Irin realized that she was still pleading for him to stop. It was perfectly useless, but she was begging for a respite. She was also jerking herself to the left and right, frantically pulling this way and that with all the strength of her tethered legs – and that was perfectly useless, too: the belt and the iron hooks were far beyond her strength.

“There. Do you suppose that’s enough to cure your ailment?” Doctor Thyssen asked.

“Yes, yes,” she heard herself sobbing. “Please, enough.”

“Really? Then what would you do for me, if I were to stop?”

“Anything,” she gasped.

“Of course you would.” He moved to his desk, then returned. “You’ll deny me nothing, no matter what I do.”

It was true, she knew, but she couldn’t bring herself to admit it. That would remove the last threadbare shreds of the illusion that she could influence what was to happen, that she could promise and cajole and whore herself into a suspension of pain. “Please–”

“In my professional judgement,” Doctor Thyssen said, “I would not say that we are even half-way through the treatment.”

“Nooooo–”

“But we cannot have you bleeding onto your shift, so I prescribe an unguent to keep the skin nice and healthy...”

Something icy and wonderful drizzled onto Irin’s burning flesh. It was a thick and sticky oil, she knew, because the Doctor had used it before when his cane came close to drawing blood. Nevertheless, the furnace of her tortured skin and the urgency of her pain made the oil seem as cold and as liquid as water, melting against the inferno of her flesh so that it scattered and bounced like gentle falling rain.

“There,” the Doctor said. “That will keep your hide supple enough to take the benefit of continued treatment.” He set the container aside and began to massage the liquid into Irin’s smarting buttocks, trailing it down over her thighs, then working more into the shameful crack between her cheeks.

Then he stopped.

“Please,” Irin said. “Not yet. A little longer. Just a moment. Please.”

“Do you not recall what I told you about the importance of timeliness?” the Doctor asked, and began again.

During the first part of the beating, Irin had counted each blow, anticipated it, steeled herself for it. Such niceties were far beyond her now. The world held no numbers, no reckoning that could be limited or considered, no guessed-at total that might perhaps be borne. The world held no individual called Doctor Thyssen, who might possibly be appeased, and no fear of what he might do with her afterward. The only thing that existed was a fiery inescapable cane that commanded every scrap of her attention; her only response to it was a long yammering scream, a wordless pleading for an end.

Only gradually did she become aware that her plea was granted. She was still too stunned to consider what would happen next; the only thing that pulled her back to her present plight was the whisper of cloth as Doctor Thyssen opened his breech lacings.

"No," she managed to say between sobs. "Please, sir, let me go now."

"Really? You don't want me to pleasure you?"

"Please sir, no."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't do anything that you found unwelcome. If you should change your mind, be sure to tell me exactly what you'd like me to do, and I'll do my best to oblige. There. I can't say fairer than that, can I?"

He was going to let her go ... Irin could scarcely believe it. She shifted her wrists, trying to loosen the bracelets so that he'd be able to unfasten them from her collar leash ...

"While you're considering the matter," the Doctor said, "we might as well take the opportunity to ensure that the treatment has been efficacious." With that, he set about her naked buttocks once more.

"Noooo!" she screamed. "Please! Please stop!" Somehow, she remembered what she must do if that were to happen, and managed to catch her breath between two blows before saying quickly, "Fuck me sir, please fuck me."

Every word of his answer was punctuated with a stroke of the cane. "You-truly-want-me-to-fuck-you?"

Every blow brought forth a fresh scream, but Irin mastered herself as quickly as she could. "Yes! Please! Fuck me!"

He paused and caressed her burning rump. "As I said, this is about what you want, my dear. You must let me know exactly how you wish to be fucked. Here?" A rigid finger invaded her anus, probing within the ring of muscle until her whole body quivered at the intrusion. "Or here?" The Doctor quested further down, exploring between her parted thighs until he was stroking the slit of her sex.

If the Doctor spilled his seed there it could mean more tansy tea with the sickness it brought, but that was better than the alternative: when he chose to use her arse, Doctor Thyssen always took so very long to spend himself, grinding his belly against her burning buttocks and plumbing her most shameful depths until she

would almost – but not quite – have welcomed the cane back instead. “There,” she said. “Fuck me there, please.”

“Far be it from me to deny so pretty a girl anything she wants.” The Doctor pushed his cock against her pussy, casually rubbing the coarse fabric of his opened breeches against her tortured flesh as he did so. Irin let out a yelp of pain, then a gasp as he penetrated her – because even though some oil had trickled down between her legs, there wasn’t nearly enough to ease his passage, which was sudden and unhesitating, and which caused her even more pain.

What else could there be but more pain, with a man like Doctor Thyssen?

Irin clenched her teeth and concentrated on doing what she must do, which was to rhythmically clench herself about his cock, for this, she had learned, would end the ordeal as soon as possible. A second thrust, and a third, and the Doctor gave a deep moan as he spent himself inside her, and with that he was done.

He straightened himself up and moved away. Irin kept her eyes closed, waiting to be released. Eventually, she felt his fingers busy at the small of her back, as her aching wrists were let loose from their leash. The rest she was to do for herself: unhooking the belt from the iron headboard, unshackling her ankles, and removing the various straps.

“You may dress yourself,” the Doctor said.

Stiffly, she retrieved her clothes from where they had fallen. Her backside and legs felt as if they had been flayed raw. The shift was made of smooth cotton, but it still stung and burned as she slipped it on. The weight of the skirt was even worse, but she could hardly go without it. Even the bodice made her wince as she tightened its laces. Irin knew from bitter experience that she would not be free of the pain for several days. She would certainly not be sitting down, or sleeping on her back.

“You should be as right as rain now,” Doctor Thyssen said. “Be sure to come back, if the problem recurs.”

“Yes sir, thank you sir,” she made herself say. “Please may I go now?”

“One moment.” He went to a closet and took out a bundle of fabric: a richly embroidered green silk gown, Irin saw. “The next time you visit me, you’re to wear this.”

She gaped at the garment. “But sir ... this is meant for a lady.”

Doctor Thyssen held the silken bodice to his nose and inhaled deeply. “Indeed, it belonged to one, and now it’s grown too tight around the bust for her – but I think it will fit you, for you’re of a similar height. If not, make whatever alterations are needful.” He held the garment up to the light and then glanced at his silver hour glass. “It’s more complicated than your usual garb. I should practise removing it, if I were you.”

“Yes, sir.”

"And this, for your poor sick father." The Doctor handed her a vial of blue liquid. "I trust the potion eases his suffering ... and that he's glad to have the friendship of so generous a doctor."

"He is, sir."

Doctor Thyssen nodded gravely. Anyone who didn't know the man's appetites and motivations, might easily have imagined he was truly concerned for his patient's welfare. Irin knew that was a lie, of course. Her father's medicine was simply part of the bargain – along with the coins he paid to Mira – that secured Irin's body for his cruelty and lust.

"He relies on you, doesn't he?" he said. "See that you don't let him down."

"I won't, sir. Thank you, sir." She felt tears starting. Were they for her father's sickness and long decline, or for her own hopeless situation? She couldn't tell.

"Very well. No doubt your wilfulness will provide Mira with reason to send you back to me soon enough. Be sure to wear the gown."

"Yes, sir." Irin waited until the Doctor waved her away. Then she scuttled to the door and fled – and almost ran into somebody coming the other way, climbing toward the top of the tower. It was young mistress Quirabel, the Lord and Lady's daughter.

"Sorry!" Irin squeaked.

"Don't be," the young mistress said. She narrowed her eyes. "Are you unwell? Irin, isn't it?"

"Yes, Miss. It's all right. I'm fine."

"Why are you crying, you poor thing? I remember, your father's unwell, isn't he? Were you seeing Doctor Thyssen about him?"

"About my father ... yes, that's right." Irin clutched the vial closer and wiped away her tears with the back of her hand. "The Doctor gave me some medicine."

The other girl's eyes took in the bottle, then the garment. "Where did you get my old gown?"

"Please, Miss. I ought to be going."

"I think you'd better come with me."

"Honest, Miss, I—"

"Who has the key to the observatory?"

"It's in one of the closets, Miss. So the maids can get inside for cleaning."

"Show me."

Moving carefully to hide how bruised and stiff she felt, Irin led the other girl to the closet and retrieved the key. "I could let you in, except the Doctor don't like anyone—"

"Don't worry about old Thyssen," Lady Quirabel said. "I need to fetch something from the star glass, for my studies. Come on." She led Irin to the observatory in the tower's topmost turret, and waited for the door to be unlocked. The circular

chamber was pierced at each point of the compass by a large embrasure giving access to the sky. Stone steps led up to the roof. The young mistress asked, "Have you ever been up there?"

"On the roof, Miss? No, I just dust and sweep down here."

"You should try it on a starry night sometime, since you have the key."

"I'd never dare, Miss. I'd be skinned alive, if Mira caught me away from the kitchens without permission."

Lady Quirabel shot her a calculating look. "So you had permission today, then."

"Yes, Miss. I had to see Doctor Thyssen."

"To fetch medicine for your father, and my dress."

Irin had been hoping that the dress would be forgotten. She said nothing.

Lady Quirabel went over to the star glass, a long flared tube of brass and crystal, mounted on a great wooden tripod. "Lock the door," she commanded.

Irin moved to obey. "I ought to get back to work, Miss. The housekeeper gets put out if—"

"You can tell Mira that you were helping me."

"But it ain't—"

Lady Quirabel held up her hand for silence. "That's better," she said. "Now, tell me what's the matter, and where you got my gown."

Irin stared at her shoes. What explanation could she give, that would protect the shameful secret of the Doctor's abuse, and also prevent her from seeming a thief? Even if she'd had hours to consider the matter, she knew she wasn't nearly clever enough to come up with a believable story.

She took a deep breath. "Doctor Thyssen..."

"Well?"

"He gave it to me, Miss."

Lady Quirabel frowned. "But why should he even have my old clothes, let alone hand them out to servants?"

Irin hesitated. "He didn't say, Miss."

"Then I shall ask him myself." The young mistress stepped toward the door, reaching for the key.

"No!" Irin caught herself. "I mean, please, Miss. Don't tell him."

"Then you'd better answer my questions yourself."

"Please, just let me get back to work, Miss. I'll only get in trouble, and honest, it's not what you think..."

"I don't know what to think. I find you in floods of tears in the corridor, carrying one of my old gowns—"

"I ain't no thief, honest, Miss!"

"I'm not saying you are. I mean, what would you want with it, when could you

wear it? But I'm as curious as a cat who smells something fishy going on behind Doctor Thyssen's locked door." The young mistress narrowed her eyes. "Is there anything between you and him?"

"I swear it ain't my fault, Miss. I didn't do nothing. Him and Mira have got it in for me, and that's the long and short of it." She began to weep again, still clutching her burdens and making no effort to hide her face. And then, before Irin was even aware of it, Lady Quirabel had reached forward and gently brushed the tears away with her fingertips.

"Come, now. It can't be as bad as all that." The young mistress pulled a kerchief from her sleeve. "Dry your tears and tell me everything. Whatever this secret of yours is, you can trust me with it, I promise. Tell me what's wrong and we'll see if we can't set it right."

"I'm supposed to visit him wearing your gown." Irin dabbed at her eyes. "I see him regular, like." She felt the gentle pressure of the other girl's hands on her cheeks, cupping her face, and stood compliant and silent. Lady Quirabel leaned closer and said in a low voice, "Has Doctor Thyssen been behaving ... improperly toward you? Did he give you my old gown in payment?"

Irin shook her head, as violently as she could within the constraint of the other girl's cupping palms. "Oh no, Miss! It ain't like that. Mira sends me to him for treatment, 'cause she reckons I ain't doing a proper job of work. He gave me the dress 'cause he wants me to wear it, next time I see him."

The young mistress studied Irin more closely. "We're very alike, you know. My hair is a little darker and I think your nose is prettier, but our eyes and cheekbones are very like. I wonder if old Thyssen wants to pass you off as me?"

"I don't understand," Irin said.

"Don't you think we look alike?"

Irin's tone was doubtful. "Maybe ... except you're much more beautiful, of course," she added hastily.

Lady Quirabel chuckled. "But why would he want to? Perhaps it will become plain once we see how you look in that gown. Put it on while I get what I need from the star glass."

Put the gown on? That would mean undressing, which would mean revealing what Doctor Thyssen had done. *Nobody else must know.* "I couldn't, Miss."

"Then I'll help you. A gown like that isn't easy to manage if you're not used to it."

"That's what Doctor Thyssen said. But—"

"The sooner we finish here, the sooner you can get back to work."

Disrobing for the daughter of the house was no more part of Irin's duties than disrobing for Doctor Thyssen. She drew a breath to start to protest but somehow no words came out as Lady Quirabel stepped forward and set to work on the

bodice that had been so recently removed – and which was still partly unlaced. A small frown crossed the young mistress’s features when she saw how loose the lacings were, but she said nothing.

Irin made a final attempt to change the course of events. “Please, Miss, it ain’t right.”

“Don’t look so horrified,” Quirabel said. “If you were my lady’s maid you’d help me dress and undress, wouldn’t you?”

“I suppose,” Irin said, “though making soup and scrubbing pots and pans is more my line.”

“I’d have thought a kitchen maid would be pleased to move upstairs.”

“Well I suppose, except I wouldn’t know what to do.”

“Of course you would, and anyway I could teach you – starting now.”

“But–”

“Hush now. Raise your arms.”

It was useless; Quirabel was stronger willed and more determined, that was all. And somehow, it felt pleasant to be carried along by the other girl’s desires.

“That’s better.” Quirabel set the bodice down and unfastened Irin’s skirt, then folded it and placed it with the bodice. Now all that remained to Irin was her shift – and she found herself blushing at how patched and threadbare it was, compared to the luxurious silken underthings that the young mistress surely wore next to her skin.

Lady Quirabel fingered the thin fabric. “The cotton must feel nice at this time of year, but it can’t be very warm in the winter. If you’re very good, I’ll let you have one of mine.”

“I’d best put the gown on, then,” Irin said quickly, clutching at a final chance of salvation and modesty.

“No, it doesn’t go with your shift. The neckline’s all wrong, and that’s the best part of it. I was about your size, not so long ago; I can’t wait to see your face, when you realize what a well-cut bodice can do.”

Irin saw that the gown was indeed cut daringly low, designed to showcase something entirely other than a serving maid’s rough-spun undergarment. “I suppose it doesn’t really go,” Irin said, as despair mingled with relief that the decision was made, that there was no point in struggling any more.

“Anybody would think,” Lady Quirabel said, “that you didn’t want to undress in front of me. Well, I will have you undressed, like it or not, and then we’ll get you into the gown.” She pinched the flimsy straps away from Irin’s bare shoulders. “Up we come...”

Quirabel had never seen another girl’s nude body before. She hadn’t expected it to be so...

"Beautiful. Don't hide."

"Please, Miss." Irin made no move to lower the thin arms that were wrapped about her small breasts and bony ribcage.

Quirabel lowered her gaze. The girl's body was covered in gooseflesh – which was hardly surprising, given the open embrasures of the observatory, and the cool breeze. A series of red marks curved around her thighs, almost like a vivid tattoo.

"Turn around."

Irin stayed stock still, so Quirabel stepped around her. "Doctor Thyssen did this?"

Miserably, the naked girl nodded.

Quirabel reached forward, gently cupping one reddened buttock. Irin winced at her touch. The girl's flesh was so hot it seemed to be on fire. "Does that hurt?"

The maid nodded again, but she relaxed a little. "It stings all the time. But your hand is cool. It's nice to get the cloth off, and into the breeze."

Quirabel moved her hand to the girl's other flaming cheek. "How can you bear it? Being whipped, I mean. How do you manage to keep still?"

Irin hesitated. "Usually he straps me down. If I struggle, he might make a mark somewhere that'll be seen."

"But why do you let him bind you?"

Irin's face reddened. "I got no choice. If I try to say no, it just makes him crueler."

Quirabel shook her head in wonderment. "I thought it was bad enough, being tortured by his lessons."

"Doctor Thyssen, torturing you? He'd never dare, Miss."

"Perhaps not." Quirabel looked at the gown, folded neatly and lying on the stone floor. "But I'll wager he wishes he could. Otherwise, why choose someone who looks like me? Why dress you in my old clothes?"

"Please don't tell no one," Irin said. "I'd do anything, if only you wouldn't tell."

Quirabel let her gaze drift over the other girl's nakedness, then stared pointedly at her breasts, hidden behind the modesty of her hands. "So you say, but you still haven't done as I just told you."

Irin reddened further, and dropped her hands to her sides.

A thrill ran through Quirabel's frame at the girl's instant obedience; she seemed to be learning a lot, today, about herself as well as about the secrets of other folk in the castle. She resolved to learn even more. "I don't understand. Why beg me to leave things as they are?" She brushed her fingertips over the welts running across Irin's skin again. "My mother would send him packing within the hour, if this were known."

“The housekeeper likes him; she’d make me pay in other ways,” Irin said. “And I need the medicine for my old Da.”

Quirabel scooped up the vial from the shelf where the girl had placed it, and pulled the stopper to sniff at the contents. The liquid smelled bitter, not wholesome at all. “Do you know what this is?”

“Da says it helps with the pain—”

“Does it make him better?”

“He needs it.” Irin studied the floor. “Else he gets worse.”

“I’ve read of such things,” Quirabel murmured. “Arbish potions and such. I don’t think your father should take any more.”

“He needs it,” Irin repeated.

Quirabel set the potion aside. “My own father is away at sea, but I’ll talk to my mother to see what may be done.”

“Please don’t. I’m in enough trouble as it is. Lady Alasha would go straight to the housekeeper, and she’d send me back to Doctor Thyssen.”

Quirabel realized that the girl was trembling, either from cold or from the fear of being discovered by her tormentor. For reasons that she knew she’d need to examine later, she regretted the prospect of allowing the other girl to dress again, to have that lovely, abused nakedness hidden, but still ... “You’d better get dressed, even if it stings.” She went to the star glass and unscrewed the great curved crystal from the front.

“Do you still mean me to wear the gown?” Irin asked.

Quirabel shook her head. “Not now. If you visit me in my chamber, I’ll give you a silk slip to go under it, and show you how the fastenings work.” For a moment, she considered delaying the invitation until Irin’s flesh had had a chance to heal, but she was impatient to study the girl’s welts more intimately. She wanted to cup her hands over those dimpled burning cheeks again, to experience the wincing and relaxing of hot flesh against the soothing coolness of her palms, while imagining how it must feel to the other girl.

“I’d like you to come as soon as you can,” she said casually. “If you really meant your promise of obedience, then come tonight.”

“I did mean it, Miss, and I’ll do my best ... but I might not be able to sneak away. We’re supposed to have our supper when the work’s done and then go straight to bed, Mira’s very strict.”

“What would she do if she caught you?”

“Send me straight back to Doctor Thyssen, I expect,” Irin said.

“And you’d risk that?”

“You promised not to tell, and I promised to do what you said.” The girl shrugged. “It’s not like she won’t send me back to him anyway.”

“Well, that’s not what I want for you,” Quirabel said, “so I’ll speak to Mira, ar-

range for you to come and scrub out my bath tub or something.” Perhaps she’d try to wheedle some precious ice out of the housekeeper at the same time, she thought, to soothe the girl’s welts. Or prepare a cool fragrancd tub in her bath-room; a long soak would surely do Irin some good.

And the stable-master kept jars of salve and liniment that he used on the horses and also to doctor human cuts and scrapes. Quirabel knew the value of this medicine, from the time she’d lost at tug-of-war with the halter of a bolting horse, and suffered rope burns to her palms, and some nasty bruising from the courtyard cobbles. Perhaps she’d go to the stables and fetch a jar of the stuff.

Perhaps she’d fetch her riding crop at the same time...

For the briefest moment, she asked herself what she could possibly be thinking, in considering such things. In all honesty, she didn’t know herself.