

The Black Rose: Assassin

Jean Graham

The torch flickered uncertainly in the wall sconce, disturbed by an errant breeze that threatened to extinguish the already guttering flame completely and plunge the cell into total darkness. The sole occupant of the dank dungeon raised his head, alert and straining his ears for any sound, aware that the subtle movement of air probably meant that someone was coming down the passage although as yet the thick walls muffled any sound of approaching footsteps. The certainty that any interest in his person could only bode ill, prompted the young knight to again lean his head against the wall and, without expression, stare contemplatively at the rafters high above his head.

The dungeon, deep in the bowels of Almara Tor, was bereft of any fittings save the single wall sconce, a set of manacles bolted to the opposing wall and a wooden slop bucket in the corner. The knight considered himself fortunate that he had been given the freedom of the small cell and the Provost Marshal had not seen fit to chain him -- at least not yet. His crime, he knew, could draw down upon him the severest penalties allowed a knight and he pushed aside dire thoughts of expulsion from the order, hoping -- in spite of the painful indignity of being whipped -- that the council would settle for a birching as his prescribed punishment.

He ran a hand through his short, red-brown hair and, thinking of the thin cane descending across his back, flinched involuntarily. He had enjoyed the dubious honour of being the first novice in his cohort to go under the lash -- for gaming on the Holy Day if he remembered correctly -- and it had been an experience he had neither relished nor caused to be repeated in his years in the order. Still, it would be over and done with quickly, a definite improvement on the three long days he had already spent languishing in the castle dungeons, on short rations, awaiting the Council's decision. The trial, such as it had been, had established his guilt; a guilt he had chosen not to contest. Now he merely awaited sentence.

The sound of a key turning noisily in the lock brought the young man instantly to his feet, his bearing erect and an air of defiant pride clinging to him in spite of his status of prisoner of the Crown, as he waited for the door to open. His green eyes widened slightly as he recognised the figure of not only the Provost Marshal but of the head of the order, Elder in Chief, Dominic van Buren, but his expression remained bland and untouched by any obvious emotion. The presence of the two men however, was not a good sign, and if their demeanour was anything to go by, the knight was in for a more

difficult time of it than he had first anticipated.

The Provost signalled the turnkey and the door slammed shut with a hollow thud, leaving two of the most powerful men in the Order alone with the disgraced young man. For a moment neither the Provost nor the Elder spoke, instead the knight found himself under the scrutiny of two sets of intensely focused eyes which seemed to penetrate the very core of his soul. These were men to whom he could not -- would not -- lie.

Van Buren silently held out his hand, displaying the ring on his finger and the knight automatically moved forward to kneel and press his lips against the ornately decorated ruby, signalling his obeisance to the superior of the Order of the Sword.

The man sighed and withdrew his hand.

"Well, my son. I see you have at least not forgotten your manners."

"No, my Lord."

"However it seems you may have taken leave of your senses to have placed yourself in the unenviable position in which you now stand."

He looked pointedly around the bare cell, his eyes lingering for a moment on the wrist and leg irons, before turning his attention to the man before him. He gestured to the Provost.

"Do what you must, Leon. The process must be observed."

The Provost Marshal, at a burly six and a half feet tall took a step forward and towered over the younger man.

"Identify yourself, prisoner."

"Sir Ezra Standish of Breton, Knight of the Most Holy Order of the Sword, my Lord."

"And your crime?"

"I am charged and convicted of the offence of *lese-majeste*."

"Having been tried of this crime before Council, and been found guilty as charged, you must now face the consequences and submit to sentencing."

"My Lord." Acquiescence.

"Know this then, two days hence at sundown you will be removed to the outer bailey and there be stripped of all rank and privileges afforded a knight of this order, you will then be publicly flogged before the assembled Order and the people of the town who shall witness your penance. The sentence is thirty-five lashes. Once the sentence is carried out you will be formally expelled from the Order and banished from the royal city of Almara Tor and forbidden to ever enter its precincts again under pain of death. Do you

understand?"

Standish felt his stomach knot, and although his expression did not change, a light sheen of sweat appeared on his brow and he barely managed to contain the bile that rose in his throat.

"I understand."

"Is there anything you would like to say?"

The knight almost succumbed to the instinctive urge to resort to utilising the glibness of his tongue, to plead in his own defence, but realised soon enough that it would be a mistake to make any attempt to excuse his actions. The verdict had been pronounced, the sentence passed, and his only hope now was to take his punishment like the knight that he was without surrendering one whit of his honour. He would neither beg nor ask forgiveness. Standish slowly inclined his head accepting his fate with an outward dignity that belied the raging torrent of emotion that surged within him.

"No."

Expulsion and banishment. Having finally won his spurs, the knighthood he had worked so many years to attain was about to be taken from him, along with his citizenship without which he was little above the station of a serf. And for what? All for the sake of a wager. For a measure of gold he did not even need. He had won the bet, but in the process had lost everything that ever meant anything to him. Now his only option was to become renegade - a bastard knight without lord or master, shunned by the Holy Orders and denigrated by even the most lowly soldier of fortune.

Ezra lifted his head, realising that once again he was being addressed by van Buren.

"I had great hopes for you, my son. You could have been one of the best, instead you chose to risk all in an act of thoughtless folly. And so it ends." He sighed in genuine regret. "Might I at least offer you absolution?"

Standish ducked his head and wetted his lower lip with his tongue, a gesture coupled with a self-mocking smile that both the Provost and the Elder had come to recognise over the years as a precursor to the young knight's often sarcastic wit.

"Good sirs, you seek to strip me of my identity, of my livelihood and, indeed, my dignity, yet you ask if I would then beg your forgiveness for my transgressions? Transgressions to which there has been no admission of guilt on my part. No, Lord, my sins are my own and I'll share them with no-one but the Great Mother herself."

The provost stepped forward his face reddening.

“You forget yourself, whelp! You insult His Reverence.”

Van Buren calmly signalled restraint.

“The choice is his, Marshal Le Croix. He gives no offence by that choice.” He turned away from the provost to look intently into the knight’s unwavering emerald stare.

“Possibly you will change your mind once your punishment is effected. It is often the most recalcitrant who plead to be shriven once the lash begins to fall.”

Standish held the man’s gaze for an uncomfortably long time but the Elder did not yield and finally, it was the knight who dropped his gaze and turned his back, a clear signal that the interview was over.

“I think not, Père. Now is it too much to ask that I be left in peace?”

Hearing the Provost gruffly summon the turnkey, he knew he had made an enemy of Le Croix but as his time in the Tor was to be numbered in days it was of no great consequence. He waited for the heavy door to swing back into place with a thud before once again lowering himself to the rammed earth floor and for the first time in three days he allowed himself to show emotion as his eyes brimmed with tears. Impatiently dashing his hand across his eyes, he looked at the empty knife sheath on his belt. They had not even had the grace to permit him the courtesy afforded any condemned man, the opportunity to end his own life with honour. He closed his eyes and swallowed his grief.

Living or dead, his life was over.

The stone was cold against his back, the floor hard and unyielding and the fine fabric of his doublet and leggings did little to keep out the chill. The weather had turned as it often did in Spring and although there was only one tiny barred window in the cell, twenty feet above his head, he knew it was raining. He shivered and wrapped his arms around his knees, his misery complete. Even the sound of the cell door grating open was of no interest to him and he merely hunched his shoulders more at the freezing draught of air that blew into the dungeon through the open door.

“Here, lad. Take this.”

Ezra felt the comforting weight of a cloak settle around his shoulders -- rabbit-skin by the smell of it -- and only then raised his head to look at his benefactor. The turnkey, a man old enough to be his father, offered a gap-toothed smile and patted his shoulder.

“There’s enough woe and strife waiting in the days ahead of you, Sir, without letting you freeze your cods off in this forsaken pest-hole.”

Standish smiled tiredly at the unexpected gesture, and pulled the fur closer about him, grateful for its meagre warmth.

“My thanks.”

“Nay, lad, it’s no more or less than I’d do for anyone else in your place.”

To Ezra’s surprise, instead of leaving, the turnkey sat down beside him and pulled a heel of bread out of his voluminous apron, followed by a wedge of cheese and a small hip flask which the knight knew to be his own and which, if he was lucky, still held a fine Galalan rum. His eye flickered to the open door and the older man laughed.

“You’re welcome to try, Sir.”

The knight sighed, and shaking his head, held out his hand for some bread.

“No. Among my many misdeeds, taking advantage of a kindness has never been one of them.”

The turnkey grinned happily and pared a slice of cheese off the quarter wheel to accompany the bread he had already passed to his prisoner.

“I knew you were a true gentleman the moment I let eyes on you, lad. And let me say this, I think it’s a right shame what the Masters have planned for you.”

Ezra chewed and swallowed the dry bread with difficulty, looking askance at the friendly jailer. Was this then some kind of test? Tempting him with the opportunity to escape only to have him pursued and brought down by the dogs? He tugged at the edges of the cloak, drawing it closer about him and shivered, aware that this time the cold came from within.

“Would it were not so, jailer, but I have been found guilty and such is my sentence. I will bear it willingly or no.”

“Brave words, Sir.” He took a swig at the flask and passed it over to the knight. “Have you ever been flogged?”

Ezra surreptitiously wiped the neck of the silver flask before taking a healthy swallow, grimacing as he felt the bite of the raw spirit, then frowning as he tasted something beneath the strong flavour of rum.

“Once. As a novice.” He bit into the cheese, acutely aware of the hunger gnawing at his stomach, and again washed it down with a generous measure of alcohol. “By the Great Mother, but Père Franco had an arm on him then. I slept on my belly for a week!”

He looked up then, squinting to bring his eyes back into focus, regretting having downed the fiery alcohol so quickly on an empty stomach and cursing his lack of

foresight. The muscular form of the turnkey swam lazily in front of his eyes and he blinked to clear his vision. Slow-wittedness had never been one of his attributes but suddenly his tongue felt thick in his mouth and his limbs refused to respond to the warning signals his brain was sending out. He knew then that he had fallen into the simplest of traps -- the rum had been drugged -- and he realised, much too late, the danger he was in.

The jailer, his friendly mien transformed into something more feral, something hungry and openly lustful, reached out and in a dreamlike haze Ezra felt the man's rough hands upon him. The intrusively intimate touch galvanised him and he reverted to instinct, kicking out and rolling to his feet in a single action that took him out of reach of the pawing hands and grinning, gap-toothed smile. Blood and thunder! He had thought flogging was a penalty to be avoided, but what the turnkey had in mind for him was a far worse fate to the young knight's mind. Shaking his head, he tried to clear the fog from his sluggish brain, having no desire to be used as this man obviously intended but knowing that unless he could quickly gain some advantage that he would have little choice in the matter. The turnkey was no young man but he had enough muscle on him to be a serious threat if he should manage to lay hands on him.

The knight's hand automatically dropped to where his sword would have been and for a moment he was confused by its absence until he remembered he was weaponless, divested of both his rapier and main gauche before he had been imprisoned. He breathed deeply, drawing much-needed oxygen into his body, and dropped into a fighting crouch, hastily shrugging the rabbit-skin cloak from his shoulders. Weaponless, maybe -- defenceless, never. Disgraced or not, he was still a Knight of the Sword and he would fight to defend his own, albeit tarnished, honour if nothing else.

The turnkey laughed.

"Now don't be coy, lad. It'll go easier for you if you don't put up a fight. We can help each other if you go about this right. We could even come to some "arrangement" and I might be persuaded to turn a blind eye as you slip out of the back gate before they ever get the birch near that lovely skin of yours."

"Damn your eyes! I'll see you dead first."

Standish knew it to be an empty threat. He could barely make his body function as he wanted to, let alone best the man in a fight but whatever the outcome he was determined not to yield to the turnkey's unnatural demands.

Fuelled by a burst of adrenaline, initiated by nothing other than fear, Ezra launched himself towards the muscular jailer, feeling the bite of the man's blade across his forearm as he embraced him in a powerful clinch. All too conscious of the fact that his reflexes were slowed, the young Breton took advantage of the close contact and taking a deep breath smashed his forehead across the bridge of his opponent's nose. No gentlemen's fight this. The Master of Sword would be appalled but Ezra intended to use every move he had ever learned in the rudest taverns and alleys of the city, the street-fighting tactics that an honourable knight would never stoop to employ. As the turnkey howled in pain and fury, his eyes streaming tears, his nose streaming blood, Ezra sank his teeth into the gristle of the man's ear eliciting a still greater volume of noise as the enraged jailer struggled to escape the pain.

Spitting blood from his mouth, Ezra quickly changed his grip and his stance, but slowed by the drug in his system he was unable to bring to bear any leverage to overbalance the older man and instead lost his advantage finding himself held in a powerful headlock, with a knife at his back and a meaty forearm crushing his throat. The man's foul breath washed over him almost making him gag as the jailer brought his lips close to his ear.

"Don't make me do this the hard way, lad," he panted, snuffling noisily through his broken nose, the knife point drawing blood from the small of Ezra's back. "If you're sensible we can still come to some agreement."

"A pox on your agreement." Breath whistling through his partially occluded windpipe he forced the words out, determined not to give in.

Risking a blade in the kidney, the knight dropped into a crouch and lowered his right shoulder, sending the jailer in an arc over his head to slam heavily into the rammed earth, momentarily stunned and unable to regain his breath. The Breton hissed as the knife scored his back but the wound was not too deep, the blade not having the power to penetrate to any great depth. Still seeing double, Standish pressed this most recent advantage and snatched for the slim-bladed dirk, missing as the heavier man, realising his intent, quickly rallied. Struggling in silence punctuated occasionally by animalistic grunts, the two men fought for control of the blade, neither able to gain the upper hand. Ezra's fingers finally closed around the turnkey's broad wrist but he was unable to match the older man's brute strength and he found his arm being forced down, knowing that if once the turnkey could wrestle him to the ground he would be finished.

The drug had dulled both his senses and taken the edge off his reflexes but youth and vigour were still on his side and against the slower, heavier and older man he found he was not at such a disadvantage as he would have been against a more evenly matched opponent. Nevertheless he was tiring, and tiring quickly, but he cared little for the fate that awaited him should he lose. The knife tip was wavering less than a finger's breadth from his eye, the sheer power of the man's bunched muscles driving the blade ever closer and Ezra jerked his head away as the point, finding its target, flicked the tender skin of his eyelid sending a river of warm blood into his eye and momentarily blurring his already impaired vision.

Desperately gathering his fast disappearing reserves of strength, the Breton released the jailer's knife arm and grabbed his collar in both hands, allowing himself to fall to the floor, then as the heavier jailer started to fall with him, used his foot and the man's own momentum to throw him over his head, and to the ground. Panting heavily, he scrambled to regain his feet, standing menacingly over the wide-eyed and now frightened turnkey, one booted foot pinning the man's wrist to the floor, his handsome face a bloody mask and the green eyes blazing like emeralds aflame.

Mouth opening and closing in mute appeal, the downed and suddenly helpless jailer reminded Standish of nothing more than a landed fish and he showed no more emotion as he dropped one knee across the turnkey's throat, crushing his windpipe, than he would in delivering the mercy blow to that selfsame fish. When the last strangled, liquid gasp had faded away, Ezra bowed his head and closed his eyes, sick, and sickened by his own actions. Now he was a common murderer as well as a traitor.

Stooping to retrieve the bloodied dirk from the jailer's limp fingers, he wiped the blade on the man's apron, then looking up, stared for a long moment at the still open door before freeing the heavy bunch of keys from the man's belt and weighing them in his hand. Opportunity, he decided, was not only knocking, it was beating the door down with a battering ram and he had no intention of ignoring it. While as a knight he was honour-bound to remain and await his destiny, as a felon outside that code of honour he could make his own destiny. And his destiny was not going to be the ignominious banishment of a disgraced knight but freedom, and if freedom meant assuming the role of a bastard knight then so be it.

The deception would not stand up to intense scrutiny he knew, but for his purposes it

would serve. With a grim smile he locked the door and peered through the peephole at the bundled form of the dead turnkey, somewhat larger in bulk than his own fairly lean frame but, to a casual observer, a passable substitution. Yes, it would do and with luck he would be long gone before either his duplicity or his crime was discovered; without it he could be certain of ending his life on the gallows. He drew a pair of ivory dice from the pouch around his neck, throwing them into the air then capturing them in his fist as they fell. He had always been lucky.

The lower levels of the Tor were a rabbit-warren of inter-linked halls but the maze of tunnels and corridors was mercifully free of patrolling guards and Ezra moved quickly, relying on instinct to guide him where reason failed, the stolen jailer's keys affording him the additional luxury of unquestioned right of passage through any number of locked doors. Head aching from the after-effects of the drugged rum, he nonetheless unerringly navigated his way to the upper levels, confident that where his wits wouldn't serve him, his glib tongue would. After all, he was still technically a knight of the realm and as such had every right to be in the Tor, and provided that news of his arrest was not too widespread he might just get away with it. At least he prayed to the Great Mother that he would get away with it, else his head would shortly be atop a pike decorating the portcullis in good company among the other executed cut-throats and felons.

Standish shivered in the dank air and tightened his grip on the knife in his hand. A poor weapon indeed, and given the choice he would have preferred his rapier, but useful enough at close quarters, and if the worst came to the worst he was no novice with a thrown blade. Moving forward again, wary now in the more populated area of the castle, he crept soundlessly towards the final barrier that would see him out of the dungeons, with the stealth of the fugitive that he had become, prepared to fight to win his freedom.

He pushed gently against the solid wooden door, feeling it yield beneath his fingertips and taking a deep breath opened it just wide enough to allow him to slip through. The smell of roasting meat and baking bread that emanated from the kitchens sent saliva flooding into his mouth but the recollection of his most recent meal quickly quashed any further appetite for food, instead he found his stomach rebelling and for a moment thought he would be reduced to spewing up the bile that had risen in his throat. Inhaling deeply, he straightened and began to walk along the hall, assuming the air of a man who had every right to be just where he was.

Heart pounding in his chest, the young knight, darted quickly past the vast kitchen

entrance, moving towards the door that he knew would take him to the inner bailey. He had worked the kitchens often enough during his novitiate to know that this door led to the huge midden where all the offal, scraps and waste from the castle were sent. What more fitting egress, he mused, for a disgraced knight? Barely able to credit that he had not been accosted on his way through the very bowels of the keep, he pushed open the door and stepped out into the chill evening air.

They were waiting for him.

A score of armed men -- not knights these but skilled men-at-arms of the palace guard -- had fanned out in a semicircle and now watched him with coolly appraising eyes almost challenging him to make a false move. Had this then all been some trick, some elaborate trap to lure him to this end? He thought of the murdered turnkey and immediately cast the notion aside. Surely even a Church Elder would not condone the killing of a man -- even such a man as the turnkey -- in order to effect such a plan. As one, the men-at-arms lowered their polearms and in response Ezra raised his hands in surrender, allowing the insubstantial blade to fall to the ground.

"Well, gentlemen," he uttered finally, affecting a great deal more poise than he truly felt, "it would seem I have made a grave error in judgement."

"On the contrary, my dear boy, I would have been sorely disappointed if you had not made at least a token attempt to escape confinement."

Standish's attempt to maintain his equanimity failed as he turned to face the owner of the all-too familiar voice who had, all along, been standing off to his right in the shadows.

"My Lord." He bowed his head.

Van Buren flicked his cloak over his shoulder and took several steps forward signalling to the pikemen to be at ease but, Ezra noted, his escort, the Provost Marshal, continued to maintain an easy grip on the crossbow in his hand.

"Might I ask, what of the turnkey?"

The knight raised his head and looked squarely at the Elder, a hint of defiance in the emerald green eyes.

"Dead, my Lord."

Van Buren nodded slowly, digesting the news, his forefinger raised thoughtfully to his lips. After a moment of contemplation he sighed.

"Was it necessary?"

A slight frown crossed Standish's handsome countenance. He had just confessed to killing one of the King's jailers and the Head of the Order, a Church Elder no less, was asking him if it was necessary.

"Yes, my Lord, else I would not have done it," he replied smoothly, not sure of the game that was being played out but suspecting, with a sense of foreboding, that the stakes were his continued existence.

"Indeed," murmured Van Buren, moving to within an arm's length of the fugitive and turning the knight's face with his gloved hand to inspect the cut to his eyelid, "Tell me, Ezra, how do you justify murder?"

Standish angrily jerked his chin free of the Elder's grip.

"I need no justification, Sire, to slay a debased pederast who would take advantage of captives in his charge. Is not the practice of sodomy against the laws of the Church, my Lord?"

Van Buren smiled and rested a hand on the knight's shoulder.

"That it is, my son," he sighed, "and you have no cause for concern that you dealt the fatal blow to this man."

No cause for concern. Ezra raised a hand to his brow, swaying as he tried to decipher the hidden meaning behind the Elder's seemingly compassionate tone, finally succumbing to the light-headedness that was the end result of the drug still in his blood coupled with his hunger and the sudden anticlimax of his bid for freedom. Van Buren quickly moved to support him, and marking with alarm the blood seeping through the back of Ezra's doublet looked in sudden consternation at the young man.

"My son, you are hurt."

A game. Yes, a game politic. He was to be scourged on the morrow and Van Buren was mewling about a scratch from the turnkey's knife? The Elder was surely toying with him. An elaborate trap but designed for what purpose? As his eyes rolled up into his head and his knees buckled he heard from far away the commanding voice of Van Buren demanding that he be lifted up and taken immediately to the Elder in Chief's own apartments. As darkness descended he wondered what fate now awaited him.

The soft murmur of voices pitched deliberately low, registered at the periphery of his consciousness and he became aware of his own breathing rasping hollowly in his ears before his eyes fluttered open and he was able to bring colours and shapes into focus.

He struggled to rise as his confusion cleared and memory flooded back. Blood and Thunder! He had swooned like a maid, and in front of the Chief Elder no less. Faint from the too-rapid change in position, he was forced to concede defeat and with a sigh, again slumped back onto the cot as blood pounded in his temples and the stern countenance of Van Buren wavered uncertainly in front of him. By all the hells, it seemed that he had merely traded the cook pot for the fire. He thought he might be sick.

His second attempt, a few moments later, met with greater success as willing hands helped him to sit and indeed remained to support him as he drew deep draughts of air into his lungs and cleared the lingering fog from his brain.

“My apologies, Sire,” he managed at last, “I know not what came over me.”

“Nay, do not be sorry, Ezra. You have been sorely tested and for this I must be the one to make an apology.”

Standish blinked slowly, still not fully restored to his former quick wittedness and almost certain that his addled brain was playing tricks on him.

“Forgive me, my Lord. I don’t understand...”

Van Buren sighed heavily.

“No. I don’t expect you do. I have much explaining to do, but first, rest. My own physician will attend you, and you must eat, only then we will speak.” The Elder started to move away, then turned back, the hint of a smile on his face. “And Standish, one more thing. A bath would not go amiss.”

Ezra’s jaw dropped before he finally collected his scattered wits and shut his mouth with a snap, not wishing to appear as simple-minded as he felt.

“Yes, Sire.”

The Elder nodded, and apparently satisfied, turned on his heel and departed with a dramatic swirl of his crimson cloak, his substantial retinue following in his wake.

The physician was a kindly man of middle-years, well-versed in his art, and he bade the young knight divest himself of his doublet and undershirt, and prostrate himself on the narrow cot, a request Ezra complied with willingly, albeit slowly, on account of the wound in his back. Resting his head on his crossed forearms, only too grateful to be lying down again, he submitted to the healer’s ministrations.

As he worked the physician maintained a calming litany, opining that an unclean wound would soon fester and on the benefits of being sliced by a knight’s blade which was invariably kept meticulously clean as opposed to that of a commoner which would

no doubt have recently slaughtered the fowl for dinner, as well as pared fingernails and been used for any number of unsavoury purposes, none of which bore thinking about. Ezra found himself relaxing, not only being entertained by the curious collection of anecdotes of which the healer seemed to have an endless supply but being soothed as much by the man's voice as his sure but sensitive touch.

He had been too preoccupied to give any thought to the knife wound the turnkey had inflicted during the fight, but as the healer set about cleaning what he had considered to be no more than a scratch, he realised that he had sustained a more extensive injury than the initial pain had suggested. Now the small of his back burned with a ferocity that took his breath away and he began to wonder if scourging might not have been a more preferable alternative after all. Gradually the pain subsided to a dull throb and then eased further as the physician applied an aromatic salve. Soon he was overcome by a feeling of lethargy and the pain became merely a discomfort. So it was, with the comforting sound of the healer's voice in his ears he dozed, feeling nothing more than the occasional tug against the skin of his back as the fine bone needle passed through flesh and made him whole again.

"There! It is done."

Ezra came to with a start, as the physician slapped him smartly on the rump, and reluctantly pushed himself into a sitting position again. Raking his fingers through his hair, he reached for his clothes and stood up, wrinkling his nose in distaste as the reality of his unwashed state assaulted his senses. Van Buren was right, a bath would not go amiss. As if reading his mind, the healer pointed to an archway at the far end of the room.

"You will find a tub and some clean livery in the lavatorium, I believe, Sir."

Ezra nodded quickly, suppressing a smile.

"My thanks, healer. I trust I will have no further cause to use your services."

The physician glanced up and gave the knight a kindly, if doubtful look.

"We shall see. A man of your calling is only ever one step away from the surgeon's knife. If it is destined, we may yet meet again."

"The Great Mother grant that it is not so," responded Ezra, "Yet if the need is there I could ask for none better."

The man inclined his head, accepting the compliment, then raised a bushy eyebrow at the younger man.

“If you would take some advice from a plain speaking man, I suggest you do not keep the Elder waiting for long. He is a man of limited patience.”

Standish chose discretion as the better part of valour and hastened to the lavatorium, finding to his delight, just as the physician had said, a steaming vat of water and fresh clothing already laid out. Choosing not to pursue the analogy of the fatted calf that sprang to mind he stripped off his soiled attire and sank gratefully into the fragrant tub.

Van Buren, himself in less formal apparel than when Ezra had last seen him, rose from his place before the fire as the young knight was ushered into the Elder’s offices.

“Come, sit and take some wine with me.”

Standish glanced quickly around the chamber, unsettled that the most powerful man in Mother Church was granting him an audience without benefit of his usual entourage. At the very least he expected the Provost Marshal to be in attendance but unless the chamber was riddled with priest-holes then he was truly alone with the Chief Elder.

Ezra bowed stiffly.

“My Lord.”

Van Buren waved a casually dismissive hand.

“Oh, forget all that formal codswallop. Life’s too short, my son, to spend it bowing and scraping to one another. It keeps the bureaucrats happy but I have no time for it!”

The Breton moved forward warily, not quite sure if his brain was functioning as it should or if somehow since his swoon he had become addle-pated, for he certainly felt as if he had stepped innocently yet quite aptly into the role of fool. Sitting more because he suspected his legs would no longer hold him, Ezra accepted the goblet of wine from the older man and quaffed a good measure, hoping it would at least give him a moment to recover his composure. He was a Knight of the Sword for pity’s sake, not some puling novice who had yet to win his spurs! In the back of his mind a small voice reminded him that he was also a knight charged with *lese-majeste*, who was destined for an ignominious end.

Van Buren swirled the wine in his own goblet and swallowed a draught, before sighing and setting the bejewelled receptacle down on an elegantly turned rosewood table at his left hand.

“You are wondering what you are doing here.”

It was not a question.

“That is so.”

“Are you not also wondering why you are not now being strung up like the common murdering fugitive that you are?”

Ezra swallowed with some difficulty past the constriction in his throat that suddenly threatened to choke him.

“It has crossed my mind, Sire.” His indolent response showed nothing of his trepidation.

The Elder leaned forward, a cunning smile on his face.

“You are the cool one, are you not? What would you say if I told you that you were to be put to the question?”

For a moment Standish thought he would surely disgrace himself by losing control of his bowels as he considered with dread, the tools of the torture chamber, but he merely inclined his head and took a sip of his wine, pleased to see that his hand was still steady.

“Is my faith in doubt then, my Lord?”

“Answer the question, Ezra.”

“I would say that as Chief Elder that is your prerogative.”

Van Buren stood up and put one hand on the tall mantelpiece.

“It is indeed.” He drilled the young Breton with the full force of his grey-eyed stare.

“Have you no fear, my son?”

Ezra set down his own wine and took a deep breath.

“My Lord, I have the same fears as any sane man. I am trained to fight, to kill and to accept death before dishonour but I have the same weaknesses as any other man and fear that I could be broken, just as others have been, by the skill of the persecutors. No, Sire, it is not a trial to which I would willingly submit.”

“And unwillingly?”

“I pray I never have to find out.”

The silence lengthened and Standish waited, determined not to show any emotion that would reveal the extent of his dread.

Van Buren clapped his hands and suddenly straightened.

“Well, Ezra, you may have no fear on that account! My plans for you lie elsewhere and for the moment include neither the rack nor the ram.” He smiled again. “Although you may yet have cause to curse me, once you learn what lies ahead.”

“I am yours to command.”

The Elder frowned, not displeased but rather concerned.

“Yes, I know that, my son but what I am about to propose I ask that you do willingly, not because I have the power of my position to command your obedience.” He signalled for Standish to rise and impulsively placed a hand on the younger man’s broad shoulder. “Know this, my son, you are here not because you are to be punished but because I have the greatest faith in you. Now come. There are things I must show you.”

Green eyes betraying his confusion, the knight fell into step beside the taller man, his mind a seething mass of conflicting emotions. In a matter of hours he had gone from convicted felon and disgraced knight to a fugitive from murder and thence it seemed, to an even more uncertain future. He shrugged philosophically content to take every moment as it was given him. As long as that future did not include the removal of his head, or any of his body parts, including his skin, for that matter, he would be more than satisfied.

The young knight had thought himself familiar with the layout of the Tor but as he followed the Elder in Chief he understood that his knowledge was merely superficial and that the castle hid as many secrets as a priest’s confessional.

“You killed a man tonight.”

They had been walking in silence long enough for the sudden sound of van Buren’s voice to startle the Breton. As it wasn’t a question, Ezra decided that a response was not expected of him but it was obvious that the Elder had his undivided attention.

“Not your first by any means,” he conceded, not without a hint of admiration, “but possibly the first under such circumstances.”

Ezra thought it wise not to reveal that he had once before killed in very similar circumstances and left the pimp with his throat cut in a rat infested alley behind a tavern in the coastal town of Pali. A man should have some secrets. Even a knight.

“How did it feel?”

Ezra allowed himself a moment of thought before responding. Was he expected to show remorse or did the Elder want him to be completely devoid of compassion.? He could accurately and convincingly produce either emotion but he needed to know the rules of this game before he committed himself. As if sensing his dilemma van Buren smiled.

“Just the plain truth will do, Ezra.”

Standish raised an eyebrow. This man bore close watching.

"I felt no great satisfaction for having done it," he admitted, "but on the other hand I felt no great cause for regret either."

The Elder smiled again.

"Ah, yes. It was 'necessary'."

"Sire, while this may grieve you, I believe that a man fighting for his.." he paused, seeking the right word, "...'virtue' for want of a better word, has a greater interest in the outcome."

"Greater than a man fighting for his life? You would die rather than yield to another man's advances?"

Ezra stopped abruptly and looked evenly at the older man.

"I would kill rather than yield to another man's advances. Therein lies a subtle difference, my Lord."

Van Buren coughed and moved on.

"Quite."

Standish rubbed his head, both tired in body and tired in spirit after a day of rapidly changing fortunes, in which he had found himself being moved and manoeuvred like a pawn on a chess board.

"My Lord?"

"Yes. My son?"

"Forgive me for being so bold, but you knew this man -- the turnkey -- was likely to behave in this manner did you not? That this officer of the Crown was in the habit of soliciting favours from convicted felons?"

Van Buren strode on.

"Oh, indeed, Ezra. In fact we were counting upon it!"

If at that moment the Elder had not swung left, opening a cunningly concealed door, Ezra believed he may have uttered some offensive epithet aimed directly at the Elder in Chief. As it was, he was distracted by their immediate entry into a brightly lit room, filled with cloaked and hooded men. Heart leaping into his throat, the young Breton wondered if at last he had not been duped by the adroit Head of the Order and was indeed finally about to suffer penance for his crimes.

"Please be seated."

The tallest of the men in the room, Ezra had counted fifteen in all, indicated a high

backed chair with a casual wave of his hand and with a flourish discarded his cloak to reveal a plain outfit of midnight blue doublet and hose, unmarked by any device or sign of rank. Black knee boots trimmed with plain spurs and a black baldric across his chest lent a practical yet somehow sinister air to the man and as he made a circuit around the chair in which the Breton sat, Ezra found it difficult not to follow the man's progress with nervous eyes.

"You do not know me?"

"No, Sire."

"I would indeed be disappointed if you did." He halted in front of the young knight, dark eyes -- almost black -- boring into equally unwavering pools of green.

"And of the Black Rose? What know you of this?"

Ezra swallowed hard.

"There are always rumours, my Lord and the existence of a secret chapter of knights has long been stuff of legend."

"Go on," encouraged the stern-faced stranger.

"It is said the Order of the Black Rose is such a chapter -- one of spies and assassins -- answerable only to the ruling monarch of Almaric

The stranger rested his foot on a chair and leaned a forearm across his knee.

"You seem well versed in this "stuff of legend"."

Ezra's level gaze did not waver.

"Even the most fanciful legend has some element of truth, my Lord."

He did not miss the rapid exchange of glances that sped so subtly between van Buren and the tall stranger. At a signal that Ezra suspected came from the Elder in Chief, the remaining men cast aside their cloaks and the Breton found himself contemplating fourteen men of varying age and size dressed in like manner, every eye studying him in turn.

"Ezra, behold the legend. Before you stands the Order of the Black Rose."

The Breton inclined his head.

"Sires, I am indeed honoured."

The tall stranger laughed, his voice a booming baritone.

"You have no idea how honoured, son. For tonight you stand for selection to the Order, a privilege afforded to very few."

"I have no choice in this then?"

“Ezra, listen to me closely. The Order does not offer this lightly. It is a hard and dangerous path that we follow and only one in one hundred knights will ever show the abilities we seek. You were marked for attention within your first year as a novice and the Order has been watching you ever since. The secrets you thought you had, I can guarantee are known.”

Ezra paled, believing.

“I will not go so far as to enumerate your strayings from the path but be assured that there is nothing you have done, nowhere you have been, no wench you have bedded, no man you have killed, absolutely nothing that the Order does not know about you. Know only this, that you have been ours since the day you bested the Master of Sword during your novitiate, your fate was sealed when you entered the King’s chamber just two night’s ago -- a feat I might say unprecedented in the history of the Order.”

Standish’s eyes glittered coldly, the sardonic smile on his face never touching them.

“My capture, my trial, my sentencing and my escape -- a sham? This then was all nothing more than bluff...a test?”

“A necessary one, my son,” interrupted van Buren gently.

Ezra rose slowly from the chair, aware that all eyes were focused on him although no man made any move to restrain him, as walked slowly towards the Elder.

“That word again, Père Dominic. Necessary.” He stretched the word to make it sound almost an insult. “Was this then also necessary?”

The young knight pulled the linen blouson over his head in one movement, turning his back and revealing the wound from the turnkey’s knife.

“Was this perhaps an initiation? Were you so confident that I would prevail or would my failure have been merely an indication that I was not worthy of attention?”

“Your anger is justified,” conceded the tall stranger with a nod, “and I would expect no less of anyone considered a suitable candidate for the Order but you must understand that we have to be sure.”

The Breton shrugged back into the generously cut blouse, wincing as he over-stretched the lacerated muscles of his back.

“And what if I refuse this singular honour?”

The hiss of metal on metal as fourteen swords left their scabbards in unison gave him the only answer he required, and with a short laugh that signalled resignation rather than amusement he bowed his head.

“It would seem then that my fate is set, my Lords and I have but one answer to give. I stand before you as a knight of the realm and submit freely to your decision.”

Van Buren stood in front of the smaller man and rested his hands on his shoulders.

“You were destined for this, my son. Accept that you have talents that set you apart from other knights and embrace this challenge with all your heart and with all your soul. The kingdom has sore need of men of your mettle. Within this secret order you will learn to use those talents for the good of the Crown.” He smiled and looked up at the tall knight. “I leave him in your charge, Ferenc, but watch keenly lest the young cub best the old fox at his own game.”

Ferenc grinned, white teeth gleaming through his black beard.

“Have no fear, Dominic. This cub has a long way to go. And he may yet learn to curse the day that he ever heard of the Black Rose.”

Ezra looked quickly along the line of lean and hard faced men, and wondered if that was not already so.

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Sleep proved an elusive quarry and after many restless hours Ezra found himself once again at the embrasure looking out over the mountain from which the fortification took its name. A chill breeze still bearing the touch of winter’s snow blew through the opening and he shivered briefly but made no move to cover himself or move nearer to the fire that burned in the grate. Instead he leaned against the smooth stone and watched the first fiery rays of daylight spread in a golden halo over the Tor and wondered again at the sudden and unexpected change in his fortunes.

That he had been watched with such avid intensity throughout the five years of his novitiate and in the year since he had won his spurs made his skin crawl. To know that every action, everything he had ever done or said, had been scrutinised and analysed down to the minutest detail, only succeeded in reinforcing that there were some elements of his past that he would rather forget. He consoled himself with the certainty that at least his thoughts were his own. Stretching his arms above his head, he placed one hand on either side of the embrasure, until he realised that the position reminded him too much of being stretched on the triangle in preparation for a flogging, the symbolism of which came too close to the truth to be comfortable, and he leaned instead

with forearms on the sill, head bowed.

He was to leave Almara Tor. For Bon, no less. A minor provincial town at the very northern limits of Almaric on the Isbuhl Sea. A veritable backwater, smelling incessantly of rotting fish and tar, no doubt. Ferenc had been less than forthcoming in providing any details and while the young Breton's curiosity was piqued by what awaited him at the Order's distant Chapter House, his pragmatic nature led him to believe that he was not necessarily going to enjoy the next few months of his life.

Considering the journey ahead, he looked once again to the mountains and knew that he would miss their majestic splendour, just as he would miss the vitality of the capital and his companion knights of the sword. Not that he would be leaving any friends behind. He straightened and turned away from the window. What were friends but emotional encumbrances that only got in the way? At least that was what his mother had always taught him. He had learned at an early age that people fell into two categories: either they were useful to you, or they were not. If they could further your ambition or be in some way utilised then by all means foster an association, if not, then time spent would be time wasted. Ezra took pride in the fact that he never wasted time.

"Regrets?"

Ezra's heart skipped a beat but he managed to prevent his face slipping into the slack-jawed expression that had become almost commonplace for him in the preceding twenty-four hours, and not register the degree of shock that he truly felt in finding Ferenc in his room. Not only in his room, but leaning casually against the wall with arms folded as if he had been there for quite some time. Once again he had the uncomfortable feeling around this man that he had no secrets. The man was a veritable spectre.

"My family motto is: *Regrette Rien*." Responded Ezra with a tired smile, moving to pick up his shirt from the bed.

The bearded knight raised an expressive eyebrow.

"Regret nothing," he repeated translating the Bretonnese to Common. "That I can believe."

He moved forward and stood before the fire burning in the grate, turning to warm the backs of his thighs.

"Gods, Ezra! I'd forgotten how cold this cursed keep could be. How do you stand it?"

Standish slowly pulled the linen blouson over his arms, before slipping it over his head and allowing it to fall softly over his chest, wincing as the movement pulled at the

freshly healing wound in his back. The inflamed scar, its raw edges drawn together with stitches of sinew had already drawn Ferenc's careful scrutiny.

"It is fortunate that the journey to Bon will take several days. You will have some time to rest and heal."

"I'm learning to be grateful for small mercies."

Ferenc laughed.

"I trust your wit will keep you good company in the months ahead. This is not an easy road by any means." He became more serious and clasping his hands behind his back looked studiously at the young knight before him. "I know this difficult for you to accept now but the secrecy and the subterfuge are necessary. All this," he made a sweeping gesture with one hand that took in the room and by implication, the very Tor itself, "means nothing; less than nothing. It will be as if you never existed."

Ezra sat down on the edge of the cot and industriously started to pull on his boots, his face reflecting nothing of his emotions, then abruptly he stopped and looked up at the older man with a wry smile lifting one side of his mouth.

"Je ne regrette rien."

Ezra groaned and held the damp cloth to his forehead, undecided if he was going to be sick again or whether his stomach would remain settled with the foul brew that a sympathetically amused Ferenc had finally foisted upon him. For two days he had not emerged from the cabin he shared with his mentor, and the small room stank of sickness and stale air, but the rolling motion of the barge that had driven him below decks, kept him there seeking solace in his narrow bunk and the bottom of a bucket. Not half a day out of Almara Tor on the fast-flowing Tolbu River, the Breton had discovered that he most definitely preferred to have two feet firmly planted on dry land or, even better, his rump comfortably in the saddle of a well-muscled war horse, and had sworn an eternal pox on all things nautical. He almost retched at the mere thought of another day on the wallowing river barge, and to add insult to injury Ferenc had taken great delight in informing him that after an overnight stay in Auralia they would be boarding a fast seagoing barquentine in order to complete the trip to Bon in the shortest possible time.

The cabin door creaked open and the rank odour of things rotting swept into the room on a malignant breeze following in the wake of the tall, bearded knight.

"Gods, Ferenc! Shut the door," Ezra protested miserably, "Are you trying to kill me

altogether?”

“I’ve brought you something to eat.”

The young Breton sat up quickly, his pallid face turning slightly green at the mere mention of food.

“Are you deliberately trying to torture me? I believe you are taking far too much pleasure out of my current indisposition for it to be considered anything else.”

“If I did not know better, I would think we had perhaps selected the wrong man for our purposes,” ventured the knight, audaciously.

Standish sank down again and covered his eyes with the coolly moist linen strip in his hand.

“You did.”

Setting aside the plate of food, Ferenc sighed and sat down on the edge of Ezra’s bunk, reaching out to lift the cloth and study the bloodshot eyes beneath, before impulsively touching his fingers to the Breton’s sweat-beaded brow.

“You have a fever.”

“Is that supposed to cheer me?”

“Does your wound trouble you?”

“No.”

“Turn over. Let me see.”

“Ferenc...”

“That is an order, not a request!”

Ezra knew when not to argue and carefully turned onto his stomach, feeling the older man raise his undershirt to his shoulder blades, then bit back a sharp yelp as sure fingers met inflamed flesh.

“As I thought. It has festered.” He moved across the room to his own bunk and delved into his pack. “I have something that will help. One thing you will learn, Ezra, is that you have to take care of yourself. As one of our order you will work mostly alone and often in secret; as such you have no skills but your own upon which to call in times of great need. You must be your own swordsmith, scribe, confessor and indeed, physician.”

“My first lesson?” inquired the Breton, smiling crookedly.

Ferenc sat down again, unrolling a length of fine leather which housed an array of instruments, medicines and salves in various pockets.

“Your second.” He grinned suddenly at Ezra’s puzzled frown. “Your first was in remembering how to obey an order! Now hold fast, I have to take out these stitches.”

The stars were a brilliant scattering of diamonds across a backcloth of black velvet, the moon a pale crescent overhead, with not a sound to be heard but the creaking of the craft’s timbers and the soft lapping against the hull as the night breeze stirred the calm water. A few scattered clouds scudded airily across the heavens. The moon, playing hide and seek, being eclipsed by their insubstantial vapour, before coyly reappearing once the westerly wind chased them inland.

Alone at the bow the Breton took a deep breath, invigorated by the cooling breeze on his skin and refreshed by the bracing salty tang of the air, grateful to be free at last of the malady that had plagued his first days on board. They were in tidal waters now and once the tide was on the ebb, just after dawn he had been told, the barge would make the run into Auralia. He sighed. Dry land and solid ground beneath his feet again. At least for one day.

Leaning on the wooden rail he bowed his back, easing some of the strain on taut muscles and bruised flesh, and feeling anew the discomfort of a freshly sutured wound. Ferenc had proven adept as a locum physician and after dosing Ezra with some arcane preparation of his own making the young knight had soon drifted off into a doze that quickly became a deep and untroubled sleep. He had wakened several hours later to a cabin that no longer held the odours of the sickbed but which smelled of pine and clover, and through the open portal a faint draught of air had tempered the heat of his fever.

At the bearded knight’s bidding he had remained in his bunk until nightfall, finally rising with the moon and venturing topside to share the open deck with none but the sailors, who went silently about their business, as the barge pressed ever onwards towards Almaric’s western coast. Ferenc had been right. It was different at night. He stared pensively at the pale crescent of light in the sky and wondered if the difference was not in himself.

The poniard was in his hand, slipped deftly from the leather brace on his right wrist, before the sound that prompted his swift reaction had fully registered in his consciousness. Instinct taking over, he wheeled smoothly with the small blade concealed in his palm, ready to meet any threat. Instead he found himself face to face with a smiling Ferenc, hands held up before him in a gesture of submissive protest.

“Hold, Ezra. Forgive me, I should have given you fair warning.”

Standish sighed and tucked away the poniard, his heart still hammering in his chest.

“Lesson number three, Ferenc?”

The bearded knight joined the younger man at the rail and shook his head.

“No. No lessons, except one to remind me to approach a fellow assassin in the dark with due caution.”

The Breton ducked his head. Fellow assassin. The very words thrilled him, more so because Ferenc was openly acknowledging his status as part of the Order.

“You were right. It is different at night.”

“Maybe it is just our kind, Ezra,” mused Ferenc, “More often than not our kind of work is done under cover of darkness. We are the unseen, moving as shadows, with no more substance than ghosts.” He turned to face the green-eyed knight. “You are uncommon fast with a blade and now I see equally adept with poniard as rapier and main gauche. This is your customary array?”

“I like to keep a little something in reserve.”

“Yes. Yes, I can see that you do.” He chuckled. “You know, Ezra. I believe you will do very well with us.” His chuckle became a laugh. “Very well indeed.”

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Three Months Later....

The Breton sat at his customary place in the corner of the tavern, a flagon of karak at his fingertips and a set of dice in his palm. He had been at the inn for almost a month yet no one knew his name, and to one and all he remained The Breton, a man who diced habitually, drank moderately and had been known to offer up a song when the mood took him. No one remembered the exact time of his coming, and no one cared. He paid his board and lodgings, he stayed out of trouble and he entertained the customers with such elegant charm that they barely noticed that he won far more than he ever lost at the gaming table.

The evening was sultry, with no evening breeze to stir the heavy, damp air that clung lingeringly and uncomfortably to clothing and skin alike, and Ezra Standish was no less affected by the enervating humidity than the rest of the patrons. Rocking back he

balanced on the two rear legs of the chair and stretched his booted feet out in front of him. Gods, but the heat of the place was draining. He had already abandoned his Almarican mode of dress in favour of the less formal Kelorian attire, for practical more than aesthetic reasons, but he had to admit that he was pleased with the result. He smiled to himself, fully aware that the tavern wenches were in competition for his affections but as inviting as a dalliance with any one of them might be, he was in Keloria for a reason and bedding serving girls was not it. Maybe when his official business was concluded he would reconsider, after all the redhead was definitely a tempting proposition. Allowing the chair to settle back on all four legs, he downed the remaining karak in his cup and quickly stood up. Business indeed. With a flick of his wrist he tossed a few coins on the table before snatching up his cape and with a brief nod to the barkeep, strode out of the tavern and into the night.

It had been Spring when he had left Almar Tor for the Chapter House of the Black Rose in Bon. Now it was midsummer and he had spent a gruelling three months under the eclectic tutelage of not only Ferenc, his mentor, but every member of the order, each of whom had some input into his education. The one sure rule he had discovered, and discovered quickly, was that among the knights of the Black Rose there was no quarter asked, and none given, not even in training. He still bore a scar above his left knee from a stab wound Ferenc had inflicted with an awl during one particularly lively lesson. He had cause to be thankful that he was a fast learner, for failure in the Order had but one very permanent and not generally desirable outcome.

The streets were quiet and he strolled contentedly along the boulevard that fronted the harbour, a wide tree-lined avenue that lead to the main city square and from there to the palace. He had walked this same route every night for a month and knew every nook and cranny between the tavern and the royal residence, every possible bolt-hole and every potential hiccup that could send his carefully laid plans awry. Getting into the residence was going to be tricky but not impossible, but getting out again may just be his undoing, and if he was caught his fate was sealed. Mercy was not a quality traditionally meted out to any assassin -- and for the man who murdered a prince of the realm there would be none. Without a doubt he would be hung, drawn and quartered. If he was caught.

He paused in his promenade and glanced at the imposing architecture of the palace. No castle fortress like the Tor this but an elegant manor house, four storeys high with, to

his mind, conveniently positioned balconies and trellises ready for any sufficiently motivated opportunist to exploit. Ezra moved on, reluctant to be seen loitering in the area, and completed his evening constitutional by walking back along the sea front, his mind once again teasing out the minutiae that would allow him to not only successfully complete his mission but, more importantly from his point of view, to live to tell the tale.

The Breton hesitated with his hand almost upon the latch and slowly drew his main gauche with his left hand. Someone had been in his room. The hidden marker that he routinely placed across the door frame whenever he left was broken for the first time in a month. Not thieves -- he had nothing to steal, unless some footpad was desirous of purloining some particularly fine items of haberdashery. His money was in his purse, his weapons on his person, there was nothing else.

Taking a deep breath he raised the latch and pushed open the door to its fullest extent, not immediately crossing the threshold but allowing his eyes to get used to the dark before permitting his other senses to take over and moving into the room that had been his home for nigh on five weeks. Without haste he struck flint to tinder and lit the candles on the mantelpiece before turning, a half smile on his face.

"You can come out now." A slight rustle from the far corner. "Come on. Out with you. I won't bite."

A shape materialised into substance and he immediately regretted his words. This was one luscious peach of which he could have quite easily taken a bite.

"Marietta?"

The girl. The red-headed wench.

"Sire. Forgive me. I meant no harm."

He frowned.

"No harm done. Yet." He pushed the door closed with one foot and resheathed his blade. "Might I ask what you are doing in my room?"

"I thought you might be in need of some...company, Sire."

Ezra slowly unfastened his cape and tossed it carelessly on a straight-backed chair by the door, maintaining a disinterested expression as he gazed at the young woman standing only a few feet away from him with a mischievous smile on her face.

"Company?" He tilted his head. "And what makes you think I am seeking company tonight?"

Marietta tugged gently at the lacing of her bodice.

“Because you’re a man.”

He smiled and shook his head.

“A man, yes, a reprobate, no.”

She pouted then and with a disappointed sigh dropped to sit on the bed, her partially open bodice showing a generous and tantalising glimpse of breast as she leaned forward.

“I knew it.”

Ezra’s brow creased in puzzlement as he rested one hand on the bed post and looked down at the girl.

“Knew what?”

“You like boys.”

It was said with such sad finality that the Breton laughed then, almost wishing that the dark bud of nipple that he could see peeking coyly from Marietta’s blouse did not excite him quite so much, or that the urge to reach out and touch her freckled skin was not quite so strong.

“If I do, that’s entirely my business. Now you should go. It’s late.”

Sensing defeat, she stood up and sighed, slowly moving towards the door but without taking her eyes off him.

“You don’t really like boys do you?” Her eyes roamed appreciatively over his body. “It would be such a waste.”

Standish kept his face neutral.

“Go.”

As the door softly closed behind her, he collapsed onto the bed and moaned briefly as if in pain before starting to laugh. Gods, he must be getting old.

The heat was oppressive, moisture-laden clouds weighing down heavily on the port city with not even the hint of a breeze to relieve the enervating torpor of the day. This was the time of year when wealthy Kippsalans took to the hills south of Yprasta to enjoy the cooler, less sultry climate but for most citizens there was no other option but to go about their business and endure the heat and humidity of the coast.

Ezra had slept late into the afternoon as was his wont after a late night that routinely

stretched into an early morning, and had wakened to a stifling heat that sucked the energy from him before he could even stir from his bed. The single sheet of cotton that still covered him, all others having been kicked aside during the preceding hours, stuck limply to his body as he lay indolently contemplating the possibility of movement. Hunger, thirst and the call of nature all battled in turn for supremacy but even those basic needs succumbed to the energy-sapping lassitude that enveloped him. Hells, was there no relief from this accursed heat?

The damp bed linen clung to him as he sat up and ran a hand through hair already wet with sweat and in a moment of uncharacteristic retrospection he suddenly longed for the mild summers and crisp, cold winters of Almar Tor. Sighing heavily he reluctantly stood up and crossed to the dresser, sluicing the tepid water from the ewer over his head and shoulders, before impulsively dousing the rest of his body in the hope of gaining a momentary respite. Flicking water droplets from his hair and eyes he reached for a square of flannel to blot at some of the excess and considered his immediate future.

Tonight would see the culmination of many weeks of careful preparation that had started hundreds of leagues away in Bon. Tonight would see him enter the residence of the Kelorian royal family and complete the task assigned him: the murder of a prince. Murder not only sanctioned but arranged by the Church and carried out by a Knight of the Black Rose. By him. This was now, after all, his trade -- assassin and spymaster -- and as such he was destined for ever more to walk, if not the dark side, then in shades of grey. He had enough faith in Ferenc and the Order to believe that what he was about to do was justified, both morally and politically, but in a remote corner of his mind he questioned what would happen if ever that faith should waver. One thing above all else had been made clear to him from the beginning, he belonged to the Order body and soul and there was but one way out of this particular brotherhood.

Drying off and feeling none the better for it, Ezra deftly secured a light breech clout around his hips, yet another Kelorian mode of dress he had adopted as far more suitable to the climate, before pulling on a pair of generously cut pants. Crossing to the window he threw open the shutters, admitting a wave of heat and light that struck him like a physical force and immediately the knight felt the perspiration ooze from his pores to bead his skin. At least he could comfort himself with the thought that after tonight, one way or another, he would be leaving Kippsala.

The Breton picked up his main gauche and thoughtfully turned it over in his hands. A fine blade of tempered steel made by a master sword-smith that was so finely balanced, so carefully weighted, that for Ezra it was like an extension of himself. He thumbed a catch on the hilt and the blade sprang open forming a trident, equally effective at stopping a sword as stopping a man. This was his weapon of choice for such close work as he would be engaged in this night and he slowly closed the bifurcated blade to form once again a seamless whole, wondering if he should be feeling any sense of disgust for what he was about to do. He set aside the knife and reached for his blouse.

Prince Absalan. An embarrassment to the Kelorian throne and a threat to the Entente Cordiale that had existed for centuries between Almaric, Q'Ubbri and Keloria. After all, in the greater scheme of things, one man's life weighed nothing when balanced against the lives of thousands who would ultimately suffer should Keloria become embroiled in a war with her immediate neighbours. The disastrous effects should Ragnatha become involved in such a conflict did not bear contemplation and the ruling powers had elected to simply remove the threat. To terminate Absalan's existence and re-establish the status quo.

Ezra smiled as he finished dressing. Whatever they chose to name it, the act was murder and he was the instrument of its enactment. That he could kill the man was in no doubt, whether he could do so without being caught was another question entirely and if he was captured either before or after completing his given task, the repercussions would rock the Church to its very foundations and set Keloria and Almaric on a path to mutual destruction that would make the Forty Year War pale into insignificance. He could not fail.

The tap room was quiet. A faint and welcome breeze stirred the warm air as two boys tugged with rhythmic precision on the braided pulls which operated the huge fans that were suspended from the rafters. Shutters closed against the late afternoon heat and the musical trickle of water from the courtyard fountain suggested a coolness that however illusory was appreciated by the sweating Breton. The ale was cold, drawn from ceramic vats in the cellar that were maintained at an even temperature by an underground spring that ran beneath the tavern, and Ezra drank deeply quaffing a gill at one swallow before pausing for breath.

He was sitting at his customary table, with his back to the wall and looking out over

the almost empty room, when the innkeeper crossed from the bar and started to wipe down the table.

“Someone was looking for you.” He spoke quietly as he swept the cloth across the wooden surface.

Ezra took another long pull of his ale.

“Does this someone have a name?”

“Most men who hear it wish they had not,” warned the innkeeper gravely.

“I am not easily intimidated,” replied Standish, keeping his manner casual as he rolled a coin back and forth between his fingers.

The taverner laughed shortly.

“I’ll wager you are not but perhaps the name Dilpah Sabatha will rattle even your cage.”

The knight tilted his head to one side and looked speculatively at the innkeeper. Sabatha was the head of Kelorian Security -- the Seguridad. This was not the time that the Breton would wish such a person to have his name on his lips. The time to take decisive action had come none too soon it would seem.

“He asked for me by name?”

“Nay, but he was able to give a fair description, though I gave him nought for all his questions, and I’ll warrant he’ll be back.”

Ezra continued to roll the coin along the backs of his fingers as he looked long and hard at the taverner.

“How fortunate,” he smiled, “that I will be gone.”

“Your business is at an end then, Sire?”

“You might say that, landlord, but even had it not it would seem I have overstayed my welcome in this fair city.”

The innkeeper leaned closer, flicking an imaginary speck of dust from the table.

“Listen, lad, I believe a man’s business is his own but if Sabatha and his crew are out looking for you then nothing good is going to come of it.” He glanced around furtively. “You’ve been a good customer, Sir, but I’ve been around long enough to know that you are not what you seem. Are you in trouble?”

Ezra finished his ale and set down his mug, touched by the elderly landlord’s concern, but unwilling to lay any grief at his door. With an upward tilt of his eyebrow and a mischievous grin he flipped the coin he had been toying with and snatched it out of the

air.

“Not yet.”

The Breton slowly pulled on the soft gloves that fitted him like a second skin and glanced around the room that had been his home for the past month. As austere as a monk's cell it reflected nothing of the man who had occupied it and that was just how Ezra wanted it. A few items of clothing, all Kelorian made, remained neatly folded in the chest at the foot of the bed, no great loss if he should be unable to return. The very real possibility that he would have to flee Kippsala before the dawn engendered a moment of regret that he had not taken Marietta up on her offer of company the night before but he was not a man to dwell on missed opportunity and instead he turned his thoughts to the task at hand.

The fact that Sabatha had been in the tavern unsettled him in a way he could not even begin to describe. He did not believe in coincidence and that the Kelorian head of security should be actively searching for a man fitting his description on this of all days reeked of conspiracy and corruption. Almost without thinking, he briefly brushed his fingers against the knife on his belt, unconsciously seeking the reassurance of its familiar contours against his fingers before sighing deeply and moving to the shuttered window. Trust was no longer something to be taken for granted and he was not entirely sure that even now there might not be some ulterior motive behind his instructions from the Order. Schemes within intrigues within conspiracies, of which he was but a small cog in a complicated mechanism of political manoeuvring, were the daily bread of the Black Rose. He was an instrument; no more than that, wielded cleverly by the long arm of the Order and there was no doubt in his mind that he was expendable.

With a grim smile he snuffed out the single candle burning on the nightstand and silently cracked open one of the shutters admitting a sliver of pale moonlight before looking out into the still, balmy night. He stood for a moment, breathing evenly, his senses tuned to the sounds of the night as he listened and watched. Sabatha had come looking for him. If he was a man worth his salt he would have posted lookouts and Ezra had no intention of being fingered by a Seguridad agent this close to his goal. Damn the bastards! He waited several more minutes, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, becoming almost as one with the darkness as he stood in shadow, relaxed but alert and biding his time.

It was a soft sound. No more than a sougling on the night air, but it was enough. One man, not ten strides distant in the alley, bored enough with his task to become careless. Ezra carefully closed the shutters and quickly crossed to the door, his pulse quickening with anticipation. This would not be as straightforward as he would have wished but he was in the mood for a challenge and the Securidad were as good an introduction to the night's festivities as any other. Confident of his own abilities, he spared a moment to sympathise with his watchers once Sabatha got hold of them.

The cellar was cool and the underground spring that ran beneath the tavern bubbled and gurgled pleasantly as it swirled around the vats of ale and disappeared into a conduit that diverted the stream under the street to reappear several hundred chains north at a grotto near the harbour. Ezra paused at the narrow opening and watched the water eddy and swirl for several heartbeats before sighing resignedly and steeling himself to enter the chilly brook. He gasped at the shock of it as he slid into the channel, the icy stream climbing to his waist before his feet struck bottom. Gods, but it was cold enough to turn his blood to ice in his veins. The current was strong and he moved easily with it along the stone lined conduit, his ears filled with the sound of rushing water as it forced its way through the narrow confines of the aqueduct which was already no wider than his shoulders and which was narrowing in diameter with each passing stride.

Two and a half miles had never seemed so long. The last half mile he had to crawl, still half submerged in fast-flowing and freezing water, on his belly with his arms stretched out in front of him, barely able to manoeuvre his shoulders through the natural stone pipe that the man-made tunnel had become. In complete darkness he had followed the course of the stream, his teeth chattering as the cold seeped through to his very bones, sharing the latter part his of journey with the water rats that inhabited the far reaches of the brook as it neared the harbour. Gradually the utter blackness altered subtly, not enough to be considered in any way lighter, merely less black until foot by foot the darkness yielded and became grey. The grotto, he knew, was a haunt of sailors and dockside doxies escaping the watchful eye of the constabulary as they indulged in forbidden liaisons and as he groped his way along the mossy channel he fervently hoped he would not have to remain in the frigid water until some Kelorian woman of easy virtue entertained her maritime customer before he could make good his escape.

Silence. Ezra edged forward on his elbows, his movements masked by the gurgling of the water as it spilled over the lip of the conduit into a splash pool at the rear of the

grotto, and keeping his head low glanced around the cavern. The moist heat gusting from the harbour was a welcome change in temperature although the Breton knew that he would soon be cursing the humidity again when he emerged into the open. With an athletic grace he dropped from the narrow spout into the pool and waded to the edge, levering himself out of the natural basin with a thrust of his arms to stand dripping and shivering in spite of the cloying warmth that was caressing his exposed skin.

Padding without a sound to the mouth of the cavern he stood in the shadow of the irregular stone arch and peered out into the night. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, he gripped the backs of his arms and lowered himself to the ground, shaking like a man with the ague as his body struggled to warm itself. Hells, but that water had been as cold as a Breton widow's welcome. Leaning against the wall he finally unwrapped his arms and, checking again to make sure that there was no one about, he pulled off his boots and emptied them of water before wringing out his stockings and pulling the damp wool back onto his feet. With a weary sigh, he drew on the soft leather boots, then laughed quietly to himself. Not an auspicious start to the night's work but those Seguridad lackeys would have a long night of waiting for him to venture forth.

The Breton finally got to his feet and moved cautiously beyond the stone arch of the cave mouth into open ground. The heat was a blanket, smothering him in its cloying embrace but for the first time in a month he had no cause to curse it. He gave thanks for the darkness of the night and the fact that his dark-hued and close fitting garb concealed the fact that he was soaked to the skin. Passing quickly along the Boulevard moving between the shadows he finally dropped out of sight, slipping with practiced ease into a narrow alley between two establishments before scaling a wall and with catlike grace swinging onto the roof top. For a moment he lay flat along the shingles, regulating his breathing and listening once again for any sound that someone may have been alerted to his presence in a place that he had definitely no right to be. Again his fingers sought the reassuring shape of the knife at his belt, caressing the leather-bound hilt that fit so perfectly into his palm.

Springing to a crouch, he duck-walked along the eaves for a short distance before nimbly crossing the roof's spine and descending the other side, to make a nicely executed leap onto the neighbouring roof. Flat-topped, he quickly covered the distance from one side to the other and without pause jumped down and across onto the next rooftop in line, a good four feet distant and three feet below. Glancing around he listened

attentively for a moment before continuing, aware that his blood seemed to be humming in his veins as his heartbeat quickened with the sheer anticipation of success. The royal residence was but a stone's throw away and he knew from his nightly reconnoitering that at the very limit of the street a vast olive tree spread its branches over the palace wall. He was under no illusions that the leap, while by no means impossible, was likely to be a stretch even for him but it was the most straightforward means of entry to the palace grounds and worth the risk. He slipped his hand into his jerkin and felt the oilskin pouch of aniseed secreted in the lining. There were sure to be dogs and he had no intention of becoming their quarry. The strong-smelling spice was an effective diversion which he had used on occasion in the past, serving to confuse any hound on the scent.

As prepared as he was ever likely to be Ezra moved quickly over the remaining roofs in the row to finally crouch in readiness for his decisive leap to the olive tree. He had calculated the distance again and again during his reconnaissance but from this vantage it looked insurmountable and for a moment he doubted his own fortitude to see the venture through. Bowing his head, he filled his lungs with air and expelled the breath slowly through his nose forcing himself into a state of calm. Hells, he had no qualms about slipping a blade between a prince's ribs but hesitated at a leap across a space that was less than twice his own height. *Courage, Ezra, courage.*

The night was so very still. The Breton was sure that he could hear as well as feel his own pounding heart but common sense told him that his imagination was playing tricks on him. A slight breeze had sprung up and from the portside taverns he could hear faint strains of music and laughter but from the royal palace there was not a sound. He was wagering on the fact that most of the royal family had retired to the hills until the hot season passed and that the residence was minimally staffed. Prince Absalan however was far from unprotected and in addition to his personal body guards, the man was surrounded by cronies and sycophants who rarely left his side. The palace, it was rumoured, had been the source of one long soiree since the King and Queen had left over a month before for Yprasta. Ezra expected that tonight would be no different, in fact he was counting on it.

Taking a last look at the drop between the roof on which he crouched and the outstretched limbs of the olive tree he backed up to give himself enough of a run to launch himself across the gap then quickly genuflected and muttered a hasty prayer. He wondered briefly if either one of the two deities that he addressed would be offended by

him hedging his bets but he preferred to leave nothing to chance even in matters of faith. Taking a deep breath he rocked for a moment on the balls of his feet preparing for the jump, reminding himself that he had always been a star pupil in the gymnasium and hoping that his skills would not forsake him now.

The moment between taking off from the solid tiles beneath his feet and feeling the rough wood under his leather-covered palms as he snatched at the spreading branches seemed to have elongated although in truth only seconds had passed. His shoulders had protested at the strain as his body hung suspended by no more than his fingertips then, after a moment of doubt that he would be able to maintain his precarious grip, he had found purchase on a lower limb with his feet and allowed himself to drop lightly onto the broad branch below that he fervently hoped was strong enough to support him. Crouching like a squirrel in the leaves he waited. So far, so good. If anyone had heard a sound on this quietest of nights then they had not troubled to investigate its source. Turning he moved through the dense foliage, and within moments had crossed over the palace wall with its iron tipped spikes and was descending through the branches as easily as if the tree had been a ladder. A final drop of some ten feet saw him lithely let himself down, to land safely on the soft, springy grass of the lawn beneath. Brushing himself off, pleased to note that his clothing was now merely uncomfortably damp, he gave quick thanks to Jahenna and Xeres that his bones were still intact, again acknowledging both deities. Just in case.

The residence was shaped like an inverted E, a flat expanse of frontage running from west to east with three perpendicular and equidistant wings facing north. A modest establishment when compared to the Tor in Almaric but impressive enough, Ezra decided, in a vulgar sort of way. Still, the Kelorians tended towards the ostentatious and the royal palace was certainly no exception with its twin staircases of pink marble sweeping majestically from the crushed shell forecourt to meet under a vast portico that lead to the oversized and lavishly gilded main entrance.

After crossing what felt like several acres of parkland Ezra had slipped furtively through the orange grove and was within spitting distance of the ivy-covered lattice climbing decoratively and invitingly up the fascia of the building when he abruptly stopped as if meeting a solid wall of resistance. After a moment he faded back into the shrubbery and wrestled with the suddenly overwhelming urge to follow his instincts and

flee. He had counted himself lucky that so far his progress had gone unchallenged but now, on reflection, the ease by which he had come thus far reminded him uncomfortably of his escape from the dungeons at Almara Tor. Cursing softly under his breath, he melted into the shadows, leery of any further movement. Unable to shake the conviction that he was being played for a fool, a marionette responding to every pull of the string, he was momentarily torn between his sworn oath to the Order and the desire to ensure his own continuing existence.

Swiftly running a hand through his still-damp hair, he suppressed the sigh that sprang to his lips, not willing to chance making even that small sound. If indeed he had been compromised then he had little chance of success, yet he felt honour bound to see the task through. His hesitation lasted barely a minute, recognising that failure was not an option. The Black Rose would not tolerate it and his own innate sense of self-esteem would not entertain it. Squaring his shoulders, he looked up at one of the lighted windows above his head and smiled to himself in the darkness. This was going to be a most interesting exercise.

The sentries, two of them, were clearly not expecting trouble. They had paused in their tedious rounds to share a pipe of tabac and now leaned indolently in the shadow of the row of outbuildings that bordered the kitchen garden talking quietly. Ezra had smelt the aromatic weed alerting him to their presence long before he had heard the low tones of the two men and he was still deciding whether the guards were merely being lax or whether they had been instructed to turn a blind eye to any intruders. Whatever the reason, for the moment the sentries were making no pretence of doing anything other than smoking and passing the time of night with a tale. The Breton made a detour and skirted the garden in a wide sweep, passing between the piggery and the stables before approaching the mansion again on the eastern side. He spared a glance at the waning moon and knew he was running out of time. If he was going to act, it had to be now. He sighed and wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve feeling the familiar surge of apprehension flutter through his belly. Now or never. With his back to the wall he sidled along the rough stone until he reached the first window and with deceptive ease slid his knife blade between the sashes, flipping the catch with a satisfying snick of metal. With as much haste as he dared given that time was now of the essence he coaxed the window open and with a last quick look over his shoulder, entered the palace.

The Kelorian monarch and his retinue may well be taking the waters at Yprasta but there were enough staff remaining at the Kippsalan residence to make life difficult for the Breton. Had he been merely interested in the family silver or the fine works of art that lined the walls, he could have already turned a handsome profit and made his escape, but theft was not any part of his design. Easing cautiously from one open door to another he wryly recalled Ferenc's term for what he was about to do and suddenly found the whole prospect incredibly amusing. Political adjustment. Well, the politics of Keloria, not to mention Prince Absalan himself, would certainly be adjusted this night -- if he could just find the canny bastard.

Voices filtered down the hall followed by drunken laughter and Ezra sighed melting again into the shadows. The revels for which Absalan was notorious were in full swing and showed no signs of abating although it was already fast approaching daylight hours and the young knight was beginning to fear that his chances of quitting the palace under the cover of darkness were rapidly evaporating with every passing moment. From what intelligence he had gleaned of Absalan's personal habits, the man was inordinately fond of strong wine, loose women and the finest Q'Ubrian hash-Ish, preferably all three in abundant measure. With any degree of luck the Prince would be willing to lend his cooperation in his own demise by allowing Ezra to find him either drunk, drugged or at the very least, distracted by some willing female. From the noises emanating from the salon just a dozen strides down the hall the Breton suspected that all three may not be out of the question.

"My Lord? May I be of assistance?" Polite inquiry.

Ezra cursed inwardly but promptly took advantage of the fact that he had been mistaken for a guest and was not, as yet, being challenged as an intruder. To assume the mantle of an inebriated nobleman was not difficult for him, after all he had enough experience in that particular role to play it with more than enough conviction, and as he turned he slipped into the slurred and somewhat belligerent speech of the drunkard.

"Whassat?" He peered at the manservant as if trying to bring him into focus, but in truth quickly checking out his chances of overpowering the young steward. His immediate assessment was not much brawn and probably fewer brains. No contest. "Pox ridden whore...you see her? Promised me....where'd she go? Leadin' a man on..."

He staggered slightly towards the steward and saw his nose automatically wrinkle in distaste, remembering then that after his nocturnal swim he no doubt smelled less than

fragrant. Pressing his advantage he stumbled and reached for the young man, who to his delight quickly attempted to retreat. Making a retching sound, Ezra was gratified to see the steward's eyes widen, horrified no doubt that a guest was about to disgrace himself and vomit spectacularly in the hall.

"Sir! I beg you. The carpet...."

The young man, so intent on steering Ezra to a nearby ante room failed to see the subtle change in the Breton's stance and expression and as a result the sharp jab that struck him on the angle of the jaw dropped him like a stone without even a whimper of protest. Catching the young manservant as he collapsed, Standish quickly dragged him into the ante room and out of sight. Binding and gagging him to forestall any unpleasant surprises later, Ezra came to the conclusion that the ruse may yet work again and to that end he stripped off first his gloves, then his close-fitting doublet which, he had to admit as it dried, had taken on the distinct aroma of a wet dog. His blouson had not fared as badly, the fine lawn having dried quickly against his skin, and he shook out the loose folds glad again of its generous cut and unlaced enough to reveal a deep wedge of well-muscled chest. Pulling out a length of shirt-tail he let it hang loose and adjusted the front of his pants to give the impression that he had lately come from some hasty carnal liaison. Satisfied that he could pass as a suitably degenerate *confrere* of the Prince and his cohorts, especially with the current lack of sobriety among them, he stepped back out into the hall.

The salon was a riot of colour and noise, redolent with the rich aroma of food and wine underscored by the sweet scent of hash-lsh and other less savoury odours that Ezra associated with bar-rooms, brothels and barracks. Quickly scanning the room it was obvious to the Breton that there was no one likely to question either his presence or his purpose, indeed there was hardly a man still on his feet and those that were appeared to be in such an advanced state of drunkenness that remaining upright was becoming a definite challenge. Around the room *huqqahs* bubbled quietly, shared between friends with as much abandon as they seemed to be sharing their partners. At the furthest extreme of the salon, Absalan reclined on a dais, his eyes glazed as he puffed contentedly on the water pipe and watched the activity on the floor below with slack featured disinterest. Several men and an equal number of women, obviously the royal son's favoured coterie of friends and confidantes, lounged in indolent repose around their dissolute prince.

Aware of the danger of being marked as a cuckoo in the nest, he dropped onto a mound of cushions and grabbed the unclaimed mouthpiece of a *huqqah*, drawing the smoke of the *charas* through the cooling water and into his lungs, while his free hand snared a goblet of wine from a low table. With a long, slow breath he exhaled the smoke and lay back on the soft bed of scattered pillows, the tiniest of smiles tugging at the corners of his mouth. Holy Mother, but his preceptor at the Tor would suffer an apoplexy if he could but see his former pupil now. The old tutor had told him he would come to no good -- and for him to entertain the notion of the Breton among pagans, indulging in the practices against which he had warned all his young students would merely serve to prove his point. For a moment Ezra closed his eyes, lightheaded from the hash-lsh, then took a quick swallow of the wine which took but one mouthful for him to realise that it too, had been fortified with some narcotic. Poppy juice, he decided after another tentative sampling. Gods, no wonder there was no man capable of rational thought in the room. He raised the goblet again but allowed none of the wine to pass his lips as he took a surreptitious accounting of the occupants of the salon. Among these whores, toadies and sycophants would be at least one or two trusted retainers; surely even in Keloria the Prince Regent would not be left without a guard. Before he made any move, he would know these men, because on such detail his life depended.

“Vous vous amusez bien?”

Ezra’s heart skipped a beat, tripped over itself and steadied as he affected ignorance to what was being asked of him by a sultry, female voice that had materialised at his right shoulder. Slowly he started to turn but a hand covered his eyes while it’s opposite crept under his shirt and skimmed across his chest. A soft breath caressed his ear.

“Do not pretend Breton,” the whispering voice teased, “My little lover of boys.”

Marietta!

“This is the last place I would expect to find you, Marietta.”

She laughed, a rich, husky sound that managed to sound both sensuous and threatening at the same time.

“I might say the same about you, my Breton.”

He quickly captured her hand and drew it away from his eyes, forcing a smile as he easily unbalanced her and pulled her onto the cushions beside him, taking a moment to comprehend that this was the same woman who had propositioned him in his bedchamber just one night before. Powdered, perfumed and in a gown that revealed

more than it concealed, he allowed his eyes to roam appreciatively over her and yet again had cause to regret the circumstances of their meeting. It took another moment for him to realise that she was openly eyeing him in much the same way.

“For a tavern wench you play a dangerous game.”

“As do you, Breton.” The smile slipped from her face and she rose to lean on one elbow, her eyes hardening as she looked intently at him. “You have no business here.”

“And you, my Lady?”

The sarcasm did not go unnoticed by the redheaded woman and she tilted her head letting her unbound tresses cascade over her shoulder as her eyes strayed again to the open front of his shirt.

“Me? I am what I am. I make no pretence but you? You are...” She hesitated but still did not take her eyes off him.

“And what am I?” His own voice dropped menacingly.

Hells, he did not want to have to silence this woman but if she even suspected the half of why he was there then he was a dead man. He tightened his already bruising grip on her arm as an icy cold finger of dread traced a line down his spine, the pieces suddenly falling into place like the tumblers in a lock. Sabatha at the tavern. Marietta. He moved quickly to pin her with the weight of his body, for all the world looking to a casual observer as if he was about to ravish the redheaded woman but his designs were of an entirely different nature. If she was any threat to him or his mission, she would die in the space of a heartbeat with a knife blade slipped between her ribs and no one in the room would be any the wiser. She was a tasty wench, no denying that, but he had no intention of literally losing his head over such a woman as she.

“Answer me. What do you know?”

Marietta tried to move her arm but the Breton had her wrist firmly in his grasp.

“I know Sabatha wants you,” she spat, “And that he will pay handsomely. You must be important if the Seguridad has you in its sights!”

Ezra kept his face a mask of indifference as he slowly scanned the room, suddenly afraid that he had been betrayed and had walked blindly into a trap. His gaze travelled back to the young woman for the moment lying submissively beneath him and he slowly shook his head.

“You lie.” But he knew she did not and he sighed heavily in resignation. “You sold me to Sabatha.”

She shook her head, tears forming in the corner of her eyes and realising that he was truly hurting her, marginally eased his grip but his trust did not extend to releasing her altogether.

“Never. Sabatha is a pig.”

“Then why are you here, Marietta?” he asked quietly. “A tavern wench at the King’s Winter Palace? What is your part in this?” The woman turned her face away and he carefully slid the knife from his belt with his left hand. “You have one minute, my love. This game has already moved from dangerous to deadly. You must make your choice or take your chance.”

“I am not your enemy, Breton,” she whispered, searching his face for, and finding, no hint of credence or indeed compassion there. The tip of the knife in the knight’s hand pierced the skin under her ribs drawing blood and she gasped in shock, her face paling as she understood his intent. “*Bien, ne me croyez pas!*”

“I don’t. Now who are you? Why are you here?”

“I am the person who may very well save your life, Breton. So listen well, before we both see our deaths in this Kelorian pest hole!”

Standish considered the depth of conviction in her words yet knew that he too could emulate such certitude when called upon while glibly lying through his teeth. There were but two options open to him that he could see. Assume that she was as skilled in subterfuge as he and so equally untrustworthy, or believe that she spoke the truth and could in some way help him.

“You had best speak quickly, and convincingly, madam. Your life hangs on your next words.” Marietta nodded once, a quick jerk of her head but still she remained silent and Ezra became impatient. “Well? I don’t have all night.”

“I was charged with the task of watching you,” she confessed, adding hastily, “but not by Sabatha.”

“How do you know that?”

She heaved under him then, a sudden desperate movement as she struggled to push him aside but he smoothly adjusted his position, and with a deep sigh of exasperation she surrendered to his superior strength.

“Because I don’t work for the Seguridad!”

He laughed.

“You’ll have to do better than that.”

“Bastard!”

“I have no reason to trust you. I’m not a believer in coincidence, yet here you are and here I am. Explain that to me.”

“I cannot.”

“Cannot or will not?”

She twisted her neck as if to escape his unwelcome attentions but he could tell she was looking about the salon.

“Breton, by your leave, we are watched,” she confided flatly, “We can debate my intentions towards you for a night and a day but I guarantee that you will not quit the palace alive if you do not follow where I lead.”

With that she pulled his head towards her with her free hand and kissed him full on the mouth, murmuring as he froze in an instant of confusion: “Xeres aid me! You do know what to do with a woman, don’t you?”

The barb was enough to prompt the young knight into an enthusiastic demonstration that he did indeed know what to do with a woman, fully aware that his very survival could well depend on the credibility of this performance. While he had been taxed with more demanding roles in his life, he could not recall one instance in which he had felt so completely ill at ease as he did now, in what could prove to be the deadliest of liaisons.

“Margeaux, my sweet. Is this ‘gentleman’ troubling you?”

The voice was smooth and oily, and most definitely sober, the cultured accent an indicator of noble birth or at least the pretence of nobility. Ezra nuzzled the woman’s neck as she turned to address the questioner, keeping his face averted as his heart hammered rapidly against his ribs.

“Not at all, Dilpah,” she replied, a little breathlessly, “Why? Are you jealous?”

Ezra heard Sabatha’s soft laugh and wondered if the man was merely toying with him or if truly he had no idea that the ‘gentleman’ to whom he referred was the very one he currently sought. Marietta arched her back stretching sensuously as she deliberately and provocatively thrust her pelvis forward, her attention still on Sabatha.

“Ah, Margeaux, so fickle. Yet the eagerness of youth cannot replace the experience of age.”

The Breton snorted derisively, fully aware of the risk he was taking but unable to contain his amusement at the pompous pronouncement by the Seguridad chief, and unwilling to let the slur on his prowess pass without comment. In fact the realisation that

to ignore the man would arouse more suspicion than to react in the typical posturing of a young male whose sexuality was in question prompted him to mumble a suggestion that the man remove himself to look for a hag his own age. Marietta laughed delightedly and gently bit the knight's neck.

"Maybe later, Dilpah," she promised vaguely, "As you see, I am otherwise engaged, so if you don't mind..."

He heard an indignant sniff from the unseen Sabatha and as the soft sound of receding footsteps registered, he began to laugh, then yelped as Marietta pinched him.

"Are you mad?" she hissed, "To stir the viper in his own nest is not wise."

"Nor is straddling both sides of the battlefield, Marietta. I would still know whose side you are really on."

"Have I not just proven that? I could have offered you up to Sabatha - I still can."

"My dear lady, all you have proven is that it is not a fortuitous time to show your hand. The game is still not won."

"Or lost." She stroked his face. "Believe me, I will do anything I can to help you. I know not what your plans entail but there is a reason for you being here tonight and it is not to show me the thrust of your rapier!"

"No," agreed Ezra soberly, but with the hint of a smile making his green eyes sparkle, "I can only say this: I have pressing business with the Prince tonight that cannot wait."

"How can I help?"

Ezra tilted his head, still unsure of the woman's purpose but his instincts telling him that he should trust her.

"Why are you doing this?"

She lowered her eyes and rested a slim hand on his shoulder.

"We are two branches of the same tree, Breton. I cannot say more, but know me for a friend and take aid as you find it. Use me as you see fit, I will not betray you whatever your purpose here tonight."

The knight struggled to come to grips with this sudden change in circumstance, with the possibility that this woman could be leading him into a trap and with the unexpected emotions that she had succeeded in awakening in him. His heart urged trust, his head advised caution and time was running out. He bowed his head, a gentle sigh escaping as he weighed the alternatives. When he raised his head again his expression was neutral but his eyes bore a hardness that spoke of unconditional resolve.

“Can you get me close to the Prince?”

“Breton.....”

He pressed a hand to her mouth, stopping the words before she could utter any protest.

“Can you do it?”

“Yes.”

He nodded, satisfied.

“Then let us waste no more time.”

Absalan had once been a handsome man, but the prodigal son of King Cudrun was now reaping the harvest of the decadent life he had pursued through his three and thirty years as Crown Prince. In the Breton’s opinion the man was a bloated, dough-faced drunkard with all the charm of a slug and as much appeal as a poxed dockside whore. In fact, decided Ezra, on getting close to the man, the pox was probably the least of his numerous ailments. The prince’s glazed stare slid slowly from Marietta and fastened on him, a spark of curiosity momentarily lighting the dull and lifeless eyes. With a tired sigh, he inhaled from the *huqqah* at his right hand and half-heartedly released the smoke as he contemplated the two newcomers to the dais.

“Margeaux, my dear. You’ve brought me a present! How utterly delightful. I need something to distract me from this incredibly boring soiree. See, everyone has either drunk themselves into a stupor or have long since retired to bed and be bedded.”

Marietta laughed and sat down, pulling Ezra down beside her and briefly kissing him before turning to Absalan.

“Your Highness, you could not possibly be so cruel as to poach an honoured guest’s paramour!”

Absalan laughed, a sound that made the fine hair on Ezra’s arms stand on end.

“Honoured guest, indeed! Come now, Margeaux, don’t be selfish,” he responded, petulantly, “He’s got such beautiful eyes. Won’t you at least share?”

Marietta reached out and patted Absalan’s knee with a familiarity that disturbed the Breton and once again he wondered if he were not making a huge mistake in trusting this woman. A woman who was a self-confessed confidante of the Prince himself.

“I’m open to negotiation,” whispered Marietta, *sotto voce*, “but I don’t think he is.”

Absalan raised an eyebrow and wet his lips, as his gaze travelled down Ezra’s body

before again seeking out and meeting his eyes.

“Pity.”

The Breton drew Marietta back against him, the memory of the turnkey at the Tor all too fresh in his memory for him to be comfortable with the direction the conversation had taken. Great Mother preserve him from such men as these! Killing this loathsome creature would not be such a difficult task after all.

The prince swept his hand in an all-encompassing gesture to indicate his immediate surroundings.

“Look, dears. Asleep or drunk, every one. Now I must amuse myself and just when I’m beginning to think there is no life left in the party, my dearest *courtesan*, and her beautiful lover come to entertain me.”

Ezra was hard pressed to maintain the neutrality of his expression, the truth behind Marietta’s most favoured status with the Prince suddenly dawning, the knowledge in itself a painful barb in his side.

In a swift movement belying not only his bulk but his advanced state of intoxication, Absalan tossed aside the pipe and reached out to grasp a handful of Marietta’s long, red hair.

“You will entertain me, will you not, my sweets? I tire of this. You may accompany me to my chambers.”

Ezra rose sinuously, mirroring Marietta’s movements and offering his arm to steady the dangerously weaving prince, hiding his revulsion at the mere touch of the man’s hand on his sleeve. Barely able to believe the sudden and contingent reversal in fortunes, the Breton could not resist a cunning smile as he caught a surreptitious wink from the redheaded woman on Absalan’s right. Following Marietta’s lead he strode confidently beside the royal son and repeated to himself a litany that no sacrifice was too great in order to accomplish his task; given time he might even be able to convince himself it was the truth.

None of the training that had been drilled into him at the Chapterhouse in Bon had prepared him for this particular eventuality. He could kill in any number of different ways, he could break into the best defended of fortifications undetected, he could assume various personas at a moment’s notice, he could even repair a broken blade given the right tools and stitch his own wounds but he had yet to discover the secret of rejecting the amorous advances of a degenerate prince without giving offence while at the same

time trying to effect his immediate demise.

Absalan's apartments were a spacious suite of interconnecting rooms in the west wing of the palace, overlooking the orchard and, decided the Breton, advantageously placed for a hasty departure which he believed would become necessary in the not too distant future.

"You have a name?"

Ezra turned warily as the Prince addressed him directly for the first time.

"Egan," he replied smoothly, "Egan St. John."

"Egan. An unusual name for a Bretonneur. You are a Breton are you not? With those eyes it would be hard to deny your heritage?"

"My mother was a Galalan," supplied the knight easily as qualification.

"Ah, a veritable Southern belle, no doubt?"

Ezra smiled enigmatically in reply and moved to the next window which opened onto a balcony which interested him far more than Absalan's attempts to lure him into conversation. He had yet to determine exactly what the Kelorian's idea of entertainment construed but whatever it was he suspected that he was not going to enjoy it.

"I've heard the Galalans are a passionate people," drawled Absalan, persisting in trying to draw the obviously reluctant Breton into a dialogue. "Perhaps you have inherited that particular trait."

He heard Marietta's tinkling laugh.

"Oh, indeed, I can certainly vouch for that."

"Really. How very interesting."

The prince's softly murmured reply did absolutely nothing to reassure the young knight and

Ezra shot the woman a cautionary glance but she merely returned a quick smile and moved to stand beside the prince, assisting him out of his heavily brocaded doublet as he wheezed and puffed with the effort of extricating himself from its constraints. Content to remain on the periphery, the knight dropped listlessly onto a chaise lounge stretching one leg along its length, while he rested the other boot heel on the floor unaware, as he stared intently at the intricately embossed ceiling, that Absalan followed his every move. The fact that the three of them were now alone, without bodyguards, retainers or assorted hangers-on, both thrilled and alarmed him. The Prince had imperiously dismissed his personal servants although he knew a guard to be still stationed outside

the door, the same guard who had relieved him of his main gauche before he had been allowed to enter. His face relaxed into a smile as he thought of the knife concealed in his boot and the garrotte secreted in his belt. If the worst had come to the worst he still had his bare hands and was equally capable of using those to achieve the same ends. Not as quick or as tidy as a blade but nonetheless surprisingly efficient.

He could hear Absalan and Marietta talking quietly although his mind had disengaged from the mundane and was operating now on a different level, calculating and devising a plan of action that would not only see the job done but leave him alive to tell of the encounter. What Marietta's reaction would be when he executed Absalan remained to be seen. She had pledged her help but how far would she be willing to go? As far as assassinating the Crown Prince of Keloria? With a sigh he bent his knee and planted his booted foot on the delicately embroidered fabric of the chaise, the epitome of indolent nobility, as he considered his next move.

"Egan? Come. I would talk with you a while."

It took a moment for him to respond to the unfamiliar name and he concealed the hesitation with a suitably bewildered expression that he hoped the prince would attribute to the cumulative narcotic effects of *charas* and poppy-laced wine.

"My Lord?" He sat up, thickening his accent and running a hand through his hair, deliberately tousling it rather than finger-combing it into any sort of order to strengthen the impression of inebriation. "Forgive me."

Absalan, seated comfortably on a divan with Marietta already beside him, smiled indulgently and patted the empty space to his right with a throaty chuckle.

"My dear boy, how can I possibly refuse?"

Conscious of the fact that he was in still a state of semi-undress, his shirt hanging untidily open from his earlier encounter with Marietta, Ezra resisted the impulse to cover himself and obediently rose and crossed to the divan, pragmatism winning over his natural reticence. In a distant corner of his mind he stowed the persona of the man that was Ezra Standish and assumed instead the mantle of a Breton nobleman who would not flinch at the very idea of being wantonly pawed by a depraved and pox-ridden prince. After all, his sole purpose - his *raison d'être* -- had been to get close to Absalan, he could hardly complain now that end was to be achieved with so little effort on his part. With an informal bow to acknowledge the prince's status, Ezra did as he was bade and sat, stretching his legs out in front of him and crossing his ankles as he leaned languidly

against the mound of pillows behind him -- and waited.

The royal son, ever the gracious host, poured a generous measure of muscadine for each of them before sighing contentedly and, to Ezra's surprise, raising a toast in the knight's native tongue.

"Qui ne risque rien, n'a rien."

Nothing ventured, nothing gained. A subtle invitation.

Ezra, sitting up, swirled the sweet musky wine around his mouth as if savouring its rich flavour but in truth relying on his senses to uncover any hint of adulteration.

Detecting nothing in its taste that suggested it was anything more than a fine muscatel, he swallowed, meeting Absalan's eyes over the rim of the glass and slowly smiled. *A more fitting toast, my prince, you could not begin to imagine.*

"Oui, vous avez tout a fait raison."

He dropped his voice to a low and husky growl, the words rolling musically and fluidly off his tongue as he turned his head and held the older man's gaze, aware that his deliberately phrased agreement had been taken as tacit acceptance by the prince. Ezra took another long, slow swallow of the strong wine -- Dutch courage -- before setting aside the almost empty glass. No turning back now. At the corner of his eye he was conscious of Marietta's even scrutiny, the merest hint of surprise in one fractionally raised eyebrow as she watched the subtly suggestive interplay between knight and prince.

The Breton was still not prepared for the surge of revulsion that accompanied Absalan's first tentative caress, or the sheer sense of panic as the man's hand touched his exposed skin, sliding with distressing familiarity across his exposed chest. With a huge effort of will he sustained an equanimity he did not feel while managing to both keep his distaste from showing on his face and control the urge to dash the prince's insistently questing fingers away. Instead he allowed the older man to have his way, and hoped that Absalan would mistake his quickening breath for aroused passion rather than the Breton's anticipation of his imminent demise. Ezra, falling back under the prince's amorous advances, sank down into the pillows, his left hand moving closer to his boot in readiness, wondering how long he had before Absalan realised that he was not about to rise to the occasion. Not now. Not ever.

That Absalan had about as much finesse as a rutting boar did not surprise Ezra and that he barely succeeded in keeping clear of the mouth that sought to capture his was a

tribute to the Breton's agility and wiry strength. Fending off the determined Kelorian, whose hands and mouth seemed to be in a dozen different places at once, Ezra's scrabbling fingers finally closed on the slim-bladed weapon in his boot and as he drew the dirk from its concealed sheath, he looped his other arm around the prince's neck. In one quick and savage movement he twisted the man's head and clamped an iron hand over his mouth, as his knife hand came up and slid the razor sharp blade deep into the prince's back. In a vicious left to right motion, the Breton moved the blade between the ribs in a coldly efficient manoeuvre that neatly severed Absalan's kidney. The Kelorian stiffened, disbelieving, his eyes wide with shock and pain, his last cry contained by the Breton's hand over his mouth while his own bejewelled hands clawed ineffectually at his killer's chest. Ten heartbeats, twenty, thirty -- a lifetime -- and the prince gave a strangled cry as the life drained out of him, the light in his eyes fading and winking out for the last time as he collapsed -- dead -- into the arms of his would-be lover.

For a moment Ezra did not -- could not -- move, his hand still clutching the dirk buried almost to the hilt in Absalan's back, as he tried to bring his ragged breathing under control and come to terms with the enormity of his action. It was done. This was indeed *lese-majeste*, and without a doubt if he was caught this time, neither Dominic nor The Black Rose would be able to help him. He would hang. It was Marietta's voice that brought him swiftly back to reality.

"Great Holy Mother, you've killed him," she breathed, aghast, "You've killed the Prince!"

Ezra thrust the rapidly cooling body of the Kelorian royal son away from him, feeling at once sickened and exhilarated. Hastily wiping the blade on Absalan's shirt, he tucked it into his belt and turned, his face flushed and green eyes glinting like chips of emerald, towards Marietta.

"Are you with me, or against me? Speak now, or join your..." He gestured to the body on the divan, "...Prince."

She took a small step back, her eyes never leaving his face.

"Have no fear, Breton. I said I would help you."

Ezra looked quickly round the apartment, all too aware that any chance of a successful exit from the scene diminished with every passing moment.

"We must go then! As you can appreciate, madam, I care not to stay for the hanging."

She shook her head emphatically.

"I cannot go. I have my own work still to do here but I will see that at least you are free and clear."

"Marietta, no! You cannot stay!" he protested. "They will hang you just for being here."

The redhead moved forward and with a gesture that told him her intentions were benign drew his knife from his belt, and offered it to him hilt first.

"Here. Cut me. I tried to stop you but you were too strong."

The Breton looked from the woman to the knife, frowning yet knowing what the woman was suggesting was possibly the only way to buy him some time.

"No...this is not..."

He stopped as Marietta quickly reversed the knife and drew the blade sharply across the palm of one hand then, with more difficulty, across the other then finally opened a long slash in her forearm, biting her lip against the pain of it. She gave him back the knife, her face pale.

"Now, strike me." Again he hesitated, wanting there to be some other way out of this. "Breton!" she urged, her voice now commanding, "You must do this for me or else you may well forfeit my life as well as your own. Hit me; then I will give you just two minutes before I will scream murder."

With a quick nod Ezra agreed, the plan not sitting well with even his mercenary nature yet he could see the sense in it.

"My thanks, lady."

A half smile crossed her lips.

"Be warned. One day I will call in this debt, Breton, but for now you must hurry!" she insisted, "Do it. Now!"

Without warning the back of his hand cracked across Marietta's face, snapping her head back and drawing blood from her lip. Reeling from the force of the blow, one hand flew to her injured face but as he reached out to steady her, mortified at the ease with which he had been able to strike her, she waved him impatiently away.

"For the love of Xeres, go!"

Dropping to her knees, she hung her head shaking out the flaming tresses to cascade like foam to cover her bruised and swollen face. As he sprinted to the window, he heard her quietly weeping and with a heavy heart but without a backward glance, he vanished nimbly over the edge of the balcony.

Marietta had been true to her word. Ezra had no sooner shinned down the ivy-covered trellis and set foot on the ground when a piercing shriek split the pre-dawn darkness and the alarm was raised. Feeling like the hare before the hounds, he resisted the temptation to break into a run and instead slipped quietly among the shadows and into the orchard. What little time he had before the entire palace -- indeed the whole of Kippsala -- was roused, he intended to put to good use and not, as his pursuers might suspect, in placing as much distance between himself and his crime in the shortest possible time. That way lay madness and the surety that he would be captured long before he could slip out of the city and make his way to the rendezvous that would, if all went according to plan, see him safely out of Keloria.

The trees, by some artifice still heavy with fruit, stood in long orderly rows, the rich smell of rotting apples rising from the ground where fallen fruit had been crushed underfoot and he was suddenly transported to the home of his childhood and the yearly apple harvest that supplied the enormous cider vats in the cellars which had assured his family their modest wealth. That had been too many years ago to count, and he had not seen Bretonnia since the day he had left the estate, a callow stripling of fourteen, with no more than the clothes on his back and the sword of his grandfather in his hand. Shaking the image from his mind and firmly shutting the door on a past best forgotten, he wound through the dark forest of trees and struck north towards the royal game park and the river that he knew wound through it, as behind him he heard the first sounds of pursuit.

Cursing, he picked up his pace. Men he could outrun, dogs he could only hope to outwit. With a sly smile he drew the anise from where he had securely tucked it behind his waistband and set about laying a trail that would hopefully send the dogs in any direction but the one he had chosen. Any time he lost now was worth the advantage he would gain in not having a pack of hounds on his trail. He ran then, on and on, hearing the distant sound of barking and the impatient cries of men. Always fleet of foot he let no obstacle bar his way, hurdling fallen timber and forest debris without a break in stride, and prayed that he would soon intersect the river from where he could follow its course to the sea -- and freedom.

The deadly and unmistakable whisper of a crossbow bolt as it was unleashed from the powerful weapon struck dread into the Breton's already fast-beating heart as he dropped low, hoping to avoid its lethal kiss and the solid thud as it struck home in the

tree bole but a foot to his right assured him that the marksman had his measure.

“Hold fast! Move and you die!”

Ezra considered the option of ignoring the brisk command, after all the crossbowman had the disadvantage of having to reload the cumbersome weapon but the knight could not dismiss the possibility that there might be more than one man. He bandied the alternatives in his mind and decided that he could ill afford to be delayed even for one brief moment. To die now or die later was no choice at all. Trusting to chance, and with a speed and agility born of desperation, he dived sideways rolling smoothly to his feet and launched into an erratic sprint. It was almost, but not quite, enough to see him out of danger and as he ran into the trees, a second missile grazed his right hip. He stumbled, but quickly regained his balance and cursing bitterly his misfortune, continued at an ungainly loping run. *Damn and blast all gamekeepers to merry hell!* Had the bolt flown true he would have been crippled, as it was he had been gifted a painful and bloody but not life threatening souvenir, and his only thought was to avoid leaving a trail of blood that might yet be followed.

The gamekeeper, he determined, had been alone but the cunning bastard had been armed with a double crossbow. His mother had always warned him to leave nothing to chance but sometimes there was no other choice but to play the cards that had been dealt. He was beginning to suspect that somewhere along the line in this particular game he had been slipped the joker. Hip throbbing, he halted for a moment and leaned forward to catch his breath, sparing a moment to check the wound and attempting to stem the flow of blood which was quickly soaking into his pants and running warmly down his thigh. In the east the sky was beginning to lighten with the first hint of the dawn and the knight sighed. He could run no more. The boat would wait only till full light then would be forced to wait until dark for it to return to the secluded bay that was the agreed meeting place. He doubted he could fend off capture if he should fail to make the rendezvous. He had assassinated the Crown Prince of Keloria and the chase, he knew, would continue until he was either captured or killed. Either way he was dead and that was not how the Breton intended this to finish.

They followed. He could hear the hounds not too far behind although he smiled as he recognised the confused baying of bewildered dogs no longer on a certain scent. Shouts and alarums came from several different directions both near and far yet it was obvious that none had so far picked up his trail. He straightened again, prepared to move on,

knowing it would take but little time for the gamekeeper to set them arights. Gods but he was tiring of this. Fit as he was, the blood that oozed more slowly now from the wound was steadily weakening him and he felt his heart beat uncertainly in his chest. He wiped the droplets of sweat from his brow and again measured the distance to the glistening line that he knew was the river. So near, yet still so far away.

The thunder of hoofbeats drummed on the hard ground approaching quickly -- a single rider -- and he bowed his head. He could not hope to outrun a horse. Nevertheless, he summoned what stamina he had remaining and broke into a jog, keeping to the dense edge of the treeline where a man on foot might pass more easily than a man on horseback. This game of hide and seek he could surely win. He was after all Ezra Standish of The Black Rose and his task was not yet done.

He did not see the snare. Meant for smaller game than him, it was craftily concealed between two sturdy timbers and as he tripped the wire, he crashed heavily to the ground, the noose tightening viciously around his ankle and biting into the supple leather of his boot. Ignoring the renewed pain in his hip, he hurriedly scrambled into a sitting position, reaching to free the wire snare from around his lower leg, fearful that the noise of his fall would alert the pursuing rider. Mindless of the cuts that the thin wire was inflicting on his fingers he succeeded in loosening the noose, easing it wide enough to free his ensnared foot. He would have laughed at the irony of it if he had not already been in such pain from his wounded hip. To commit regicide and escape capture only to be brought down by a game trap was too droll even for his naturally cynical sense of humour.

“You.”

Ezra slipped the snare from his boot and with a resigned sigh, bowed his head, an almost imperceptible shake and a brief mocking smile the only indication that he had even heard the all-too familiar voice. Had he ever really entertained the idea that he could possibly escape? Smooth, oily, managing to load the one word he had uttered with a thousand different accusations, saying nothing yet saying everything. Sabatha. The young knight wisely decided on a rare moment of prudence and remained silent.

“I have been looking for you, you Breton bastard!”

“Well, Sir, it would seem that now you have found me.”

“I should kill you here and now, you filthy murdering swine.”

Standish absently rubbed at the scored leather of his boot, apparently more

concerned with the state of his footwear than his immediate future in the hands of the dreaded Seguridad.

“You may certainly try.”

The Breton’s quiet challenge and indifferent attitude incensed the older man.

“Arrogant whelp! I would not give you the satisfaction of an honourable death. When I have finished with you, you will grovel at my feet and beg for mercy before you beg for a swift end.”

Ezra laughed derisively and rested an arm across his raised knee as he looked in obvious amusement at the mounted Sabatha.

“My apologies in advance but I neither grovel nor beg,” he replied smoothly.

Sabatha urged his horse forward a step to better look down at the man on the ground.

“You will,” he hissed softly, “Believe me, you will.”

The mocking smile did not leave the Breton’s lips as he looked evenly at his nemesis.

“A question, Sabatha. You knew of me. How?”

“I have many eyes and ears available to me,” he answered with a degree of conceit that suggested the man had sources above and beyond those of his office, “And enough money will loosen the most guarded of tongues.”

“Tell me, am I worth the price you had to pay? After all, your prince is dead and I am still alive.”

Sabatha leaned forward and Ezra was sure that the Seguridad Chief was going to spit on him but the man’s face merely twisted into an expression of malignant fury.

“Not for long, my friend, and I can guarantee that long before you are finally released from this life you will wish yourself dead many times over. The cells of the Seguridad are deep and my men are skilled.” He laughed. “And I believe they would appreciate the opportunity to sport with some fresh meat.”

Ezra quickly came to his feet, with the fluid grace of a striking snake and Sabatha jerked reflexively back although it was obvious that the Breton was at a disadvantage in facing an armed and mounted man.

“Then you will excuse me if I decline your invitation. My Breton bones object to cold, damp places and I have no interest in your kind of sport.”

Sabatha moved his horse, cruelly sawing at its mouth in order to turn it and block Ezra’s passage.

“I have searched for you for almost a month, you whoremongering son-of-a-Breton-bitch. I have turned this city upside down looking for you and still you managed to elude me. You gain entry to the palace, cuckold me in front of the entire palace and then kill my Prince! You have made a laughing stock of me!”

Ezra put his hand out to snare the horse’s bridle, and laughed, gently stroking the animal’s velvet muzzle.

“Come now, be fair. It was hardly a challenge.”

Realising that the Breton had manoeuvred him into an unfavourable position, Sabatha kicked at his horse but the animal was torn between responding to its rider’s urgings and the hand on its bridle controlling its head, and danced uncertainly, rolling its eyes in fear.

“You will die for this, Breton!”

“This conversation is becoming tedious, Sabatha. Please forgive me, but I do have a more pressing engagement.”

Ezra grinned at the horseman, his green eyes alight with a manic flame as he drew the still-bloody dirk from his belt and, too late, the Kelorian understood that for the first time in his long career he had severely underestimated an opponent. The realisation that he would not have the opportunity to do so again was the last thought that crossed his mind as he was dragged, struggling from his mount.

The Breton let the horse go, sending it on its way with an affectionate pat as he stood and looked from the edge of the chasm at the silver ribbon of water, shining in the first rays of the morning sun. A hundred yards downstream the water passed through a sluice gate and ran swiftly on, winding its way to the coast. Taking a deep breath, he spared a moment to look over his shoulder knowing he was but one step ahead of his pursuers, but then again that was all he needed. With a barely perceptible shrug of indifference he dived smoothly from the edge of the cliff and into the fast flowing river. Let them follow if they would, he had an appointment he had no intention of missing.

oooOOOooo

Ezra knew from the gentle fluid motion of the vessel that they were under sail although his recollection of coming aboard the ship was indistinct. He remembered being

plucked from the bay, so exhausted after his long swim and weakened from loss of blood, that he had to be dragged into the waiting row boat just as the sun had burst in all its glory over the horizon. Lying in the scuppers too spent to even move, he had listened to the gentle creak of the oars in the rowlocks and contentedly watched the sun rise, valuing at that moment above all else the fact that he was still alive to do so.

The rest was a half-remembered blur of noise and activity. At some stage he had been stripped of his wet clothing and he briefly recalled the surgeon attending him but he had soon slipped into a deep, dreamless sleep from which he had only now awakened. For all he knew it could have been hours or it could have been days since he had made his escape from the palace, but given the fact that he was ravenous and that a trip to the privy would not go amiss in the not too distant future he concluded that the latter was more likely to be the case than the former. In fact from his point of view the further the ship was from Keloria the better he would feel, and if truth be known he would not rid himself of the haunting spectre of capture until once again he set foot back on the familiar soil of Almaric.

With a sigh he closed his eyes and tried to put the thought aside that he had just committed murder. Tried to forget that two men were dead because of him and that he had killed in cold blood for no other reason than he had been told by the Order to do so. It was impossible. If he lived for a hundred years he would never forget. He wrestled with the irrefutable fact that there was no going back -- ever -- that this was his future. With this one act he had committed to the Black Rose, as they had intended, body and soul and suddenly the distance between the rhetoric and the reality had ceased to exist and he had become one of them -- an assassin.

Slowly, he sat up and rested his arms on the portal rim. Expression thoughtful, he stared for a long time into the far distance, feeling the salt breeze caress his skin and gently ruffle his hair as the ship surged through the water towards home. Leaning there, watching the birds wheeling and diving and listening to the creak of the rigging and soothing rumble of the crew singing a shanty as they worked, he was suddenly very glad to be alive.

oooOOOooo

“Your Grace?” The secretary waited for acknowledgement before continuing.

Dominic van Buren glanced up from the missal he was illustrating, putting a finishing stroke on a border decoration before setting aside his pen and laying down his magnifying glass. He was getting too old for such fine work and his joints suffered terribly from the damp winters in the Tor.

“Yes, my son?”

“I have just received a message to inform Your Grace that the Crown Prince of Keloria, Absalan, has been assassinated.”

Dominic sighed and pushed aside the beautifully worked missal.

“How dreadfully distressing. You must send my condolences to the King and Queen immediately.” His tone suggested that he was not nearly as distressed as perhaps he should have been under the circumstances. “Send a suitably worded response won’t you, Elric?”

“As you wish, Your Grace.”

Dominic rose slowly and walked slowly to the window that faced North.

“I do hope I’m not expected to attend the funeral. Kippsala is such a dreadful place at this time of year.”

“No, Your Grace.”

Van Buren waved the secretary away with a dismissive gesture.

“Just the usual, Elric. My deepest sympathy and so on....”

A silent nod and the young man turned to leave.

“Just one thing, Elric. Was the perpetrator of this heinous act apprehended?”

The secretary sighed and shook his head as if sadly contemplating what an evil place the world had become.

“Unfortunately, it appears that the assassin escaped but not before adding to his crimes by also killing the Kelorian Chief of the Seguridad, one Dilpah Sabatha.”

The secretary then left as discreetly as he had arrived and as the door closed behind him Dominic turned towards the open window and stared thoughtfully northwards, a slow smile of immense satisfaction, quite unworthy of a man of the cloth, spreading across his face.

“Bless you, my son.”

