

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER



"Steven Brust
might just be America's
best fantasy writer!"

— Ted Williams,
New York Times,
best-selling author of
To Green Angel Tower

STEVEN BRUST

DANGEROUS APPEARANCES

"There is no doubt," said Alieria, as if in answer to a question, "that there was a spell laid upon this fellow before his death; the traces of it remain. I suspect what it was, yet I cannot—"

"Lady Alieria," said Khaavren, "if you would be good enough to tell me what you are doing here, well I should be entirely in your debt."

"Why, I am investigating this body, in order to learn how he came to die."

"Or," said Sethra, "perhaps to remove all traces of the spell, so that nothing can be learned."

Alieria looked at Sethra for a long moment before saying, "I don't know you, Madame."

The Enchantress bowed. "I am called Sethra Lavode."

Alieria bowed in her turn. "Very well, Sethra Lavode. I am called Alieria e'Kieron."

Sethra bowed once more, and if she was surprised that Alieria displayed no reaction upon learning her identity, she gave no sign of it.

"Now," said Alieria, "that introductions are made, there remains the matter of your last remark, which sounded to my ears very like an accusation. I must, therefore, beg you to make it either more explicit so that I may respond appropriately, or to recast it in such a way that no response is called for."

"Perhaps you are unaware," said Khaavren, "that to find you down here, engaged in I know not what activities with respect to the bodies, puts appearances against you."

"Appearances, My Lord?" said Alieria, in a tone of voice, and with a simultaneous look, expressing the greatest disdain. "I have often heard that phrase, *Appearances are against you*, uttered by those who wish to conceal an accusation. Who are these people who believe appearances, My Lord? Would you care to name them?"

"I am one," said Sethra, putting her hand on the dagger at her side.

STEVEN BRUST

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BOOKS BY STEVEN BRUST

The Dragaeran Novels

Brokedown Palace

The Khaavren Romances

The Phoenix Guards

Five Hundred Years After

The Viscount of Adrilankha, which comprises The Paths of the Dead, The Lord of Castle Black, and Sethra Lavode

The Vlad Taltos Novels

Jhereg

Yendi

Teckla

Taltos

Phoenix

Athyra

Orca

Dragon

Issola

Other Novels

To Reign in Hell

The Sun, the Moon, and the Stars

Cowboy Feng's Space Bar and Grille

The Gypsy (with Megan Lindholm)

Freedom and Necessity (with Emma Bull)

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For The Fabulous Lorraine

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Five Hundred Years After

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Being in the Nature of a Sequel to

The Phoenix Guards

Describing Certain Events Which Occurred

In the Year of the Hawk

In the Turn of the Orca

In the Phase of the Dragon

In the Reign of the Phoenix

In the Cycle of the Phoenix

In the Great Cycle of the Dragon

Or

The 532nd Year of the Reign of Tortaalik the First

Submitted to the Imperial Library

From Springsign Manor

Via House of the Hawk

On this 3rd day of the Month of the Lyorn

Of the Year of the Iorich

Or

In the Eleventh Year

Of the Glorious Reign

Of the Empress Norathar the Second

By Sir Paarfi of Roundwood

House of the Hawk

(His Arms, Seal, Lineage Block)

Presented, as Always

To the Countess of Gamier

With Gratitude and Hope

Cast of Characters

« ^ »

Of the Court

Tortaalik I— *His Majesty The Emperor*

Noima— *Her Majesty the Consort*

Jurabin— *Prime Minister*

Rollondar e'Drien— *Warlord*

Countess Bellor— *Superintendent of Finance*

Nyleth— *Court Wizard*

Khaavren— *Ensign of the Imperial Guard*

Brudik— *Lord of the Chimes*

Lady Ingera— *Lord of the Keys*

Navier— *His Majesty's physicker*

Dimma— *His Majesty's Chief Servant*

Daro— *A Maid of Honor to Her Majesty*

Dinb— *Master of the First Gate*

Of the Phoenix Guard

Thack— *Khaavren's corporal*

Tummelis e'Terics— *A guardsman*

Naabrin— *A guardsman*

Menia— *A guardsman*

Sergeant— *A guardsman*

Tivor— *A guardsman*

Kyu— *A guardsman*

Ailib— *A guardsman*

Heth— *A police-man*

Of the Imperial Palace

Duke of Galstan (Pel)— *An Initiate into Discretion*

Lady Glass— *Chief of the Sorett Regiment*

Erna— *Master of the Order of Discretion*

Klorynderata— *A servant at the palace*

Of Lord Adron's Company

Adron e'Kieron— *Dragon Heir*

Aliera e'Kieron— *Adron's daughter*

Molric e'Drien— *Adron's chainman*

Durtri— *A sentry*

Geb— *A soldier*

Dohert— *A soldier*

Eftaan— *A soldier*

Of the Lavodes

Sethra— *Captain of the Lavodes*

Dreen— *A Lavode*

Tuvo— *A Lavode*

Roila— *A Lavode*

Nett— *A Lavode*

Of the City

Raf— *A pastry vendor*

Leen— *A would-be assassin*

Greycat— *A ruffian and a conspirator*

Laral— *A Jhereg*

Chalar— *An Orca*

Dunaan— *A Jhereg*

Grita— *A Half-breed*

Baroness of Clover— *A Dragonlord*

Baroness of Newhouse— *A Dragonlord*

Count of Tree-by-the-Sea— *A Dzurlord*

Cariss— *A Jhereg Sorceress*

Tukko— *A Jhereg*

Mario— *An assassin*

Of Others

Aerich— *Duke of Arylle*

Fawnd— *Aerich's servant*

Steward— *Aerich's servant*

Tazendra— *Baroness of Daavya*

Mica— *Tazendra's lackey*

Sir Vintner— *A Lyorn delegate*

Lysek— *A Jhegaala*

Seb— *A messenger*

Preface

In Which It is Demonstrated that the Works of Paarfi of Roundwood Display Both the Rigors of History and the Raptures of Fiction; With Examples Taken from Each of His Historical-Romantic Works.

"Fiction, therefore, is more philosophical and more significant than history, for fiction is more concerned with the universal, and history with the individual."

—*Ekrasan of Sibletown*

"Truth is stranger than fiction."

—*variously attributed*

« ^ »

WITH THE FOUNDERS OF OUR entire critical tradition expressing such opinions, it is no wonder that historical fiction, such as the volume you hold in your hand, occupies an uneasy position between scholarship and romance, and is pelted with opprobrium from both camps. When Paarfi of Roundwood published *Three Broken Strings*, those to whom he was responsible at this university's press asked him to use another name than his own, under which the press had occasionally published his historical monographs. He refused to do so, with the result that those who read his romance were in a position to purchase and read his historical monographs as well, and to put sorely needed money into the coffers of this institution.

This happy outcome did not prevent the repetition of that same request when *The Phoenix Guards* was about to go to press; but since by then Paarfi had already become engaged in various disagreements with the university press concerning the presentation of footnotes and maps for his latest monograph, he once more refused it; and once more, his ardent readers purchased his monographs as well. Some of them have written to the university expressing their disappointment in the monographs, but it may be assumed that those who were satisfied did not bother to write.

Writers of romance protest that there is no invention in historical fiction, no art, and no craft; writers of history protest that there is no scholarship in historical fiction, and furthermore that it is all, if not invention, at least that distortion which can be even more pernicious. Writers of historical fiction have so far kept quiet and gone about their exacting business.

Let us examine the works of this author with these protests in mind. It is well to note that while these romances do not purport to be history, they are read by historians, as well as by those who will learn their history in no other way. The first have always been concerned about the second.

Three Broken Strings was liberally accused of invention by several respected scholars, notably by the author of *Bedra of Ynn and Lotro: An Historical and Poetical Comparison*, and by the editor of *Mountain Ballads*. There is in fact no invention in *Three Broken Strings*, insofar as each of the episodes it details is attested to in at least three sources. Not all of these are reliable, as Paarfi clearly states in his preface; but none of them is his own invention. Where thoughts are attributed to the hero they are taken from his own published words; dialogue is taken from the earlier sources, notably *Tales of Beed'n*, *Mountain Ballads*, *Wise Sayings of Five Bards*, Vaari's *A Brief Consideration of Adverb Placement in the Colloquial Tongue*, and the unpublished letters catalogued as Yellowthorn MSS 1-14 and lodged in the library of this institution.

As for art and craft, *Three Broken Strings* was derided for possessing neither, notably by the honored author of the *Short Life of Lotro* and the three noble souls who kindly contributed their opinions, without giving themselves the credit of affixing their names, to *Literary Considerations*. But all of these protesters, historian and critics alike, are in fact deriding the book for not being a novel. It exhibits, if anything, an excess of both art and craft. The episodes of Beed'n's life are divided not chronologically, but by type: love affairs, political entanglements, artistic wrangles, travel, poetic composition, musical performances, and so on. The means whereby episodes are associated are often ingenious; the structure is not entirely successful from a narrative point of view, but one cannot deny that art and craft were expended upon it. It is true that no consistent portrait of the minstrel emerges.

But as a collection of the available information, the book is valuable to the student; and as a collection of lively and affecting stories divided into types, it is, as its sales amply attest, of value to the lay reader as well.

Historians had nothing to complain of in this first effort, although complain they did. Lay readers did not, in fact, complain, but there is something to complain of on their behalf: the arrangement and unity of the book are scholarly rather than artistic.

The subject chosen is so lively and so popular a figure that these defects are less serious; this perhaps accounts for the absence of complaint not only on the part of the readers, but on the part of the usual critics as well.

These defects are in any case remedied in *The Phoenix Guards*, which is a coherent narrative of the sort ordinarily associated with the romance. This circumstance has caused historians to complain even more vigorously that, the shape of the story being what it is, some liberty must have been taken with the actual events it depicts.

And yet when one considers the available sources, this alleged liberty has not much scope to exercise itself. In any scene involving more than one person, it will be found by the assiduous researcher that at least one of them wrote a letter or a memoir, or talked to someone who did. The activities of the villains in the case were thoroughly explored at their trials. The Teckla lackey Mica, whose overhearing of several interesting conversations was so important to history, told his own personal history at great length to his companion Srahi, who wrote all of it down, if in a less than organized fashion, and

preserved it with her household accounts. Hence even the asides concerning Mica's state of mind cannot be called invention.

If one considers even the meals the companions are said to have eaten on their travels, one finds that the records of the inns they stayed at—and indeed made a considerable impression on—have been preserved. There is, admittedly, no actual record of what Khaavren's party ate on their journey from Adron e'Kieron's residence to the Pepperfields, but the food Paarfi puts into their mouths was in fact ordered by Adron's cook and steward and was therefore present in his kitchen at the time necessary, and was the sort of food generally carried by travelers.

In the interests of accuracy it must be admitted that one aspect of our author's depiction of these events is not, in fact, strictly in accordance with the actual practice of the times. The mode of speech employed by those at court, and by Khaavren and his friends as well, in casual discussion or when leading up to speeches actually recorded in history, does not represent, so far as can be determined, any actual mode of speech, past or present. It is taken from a popular anonymous play of the period, *Redwreath and Goldstar Have Traveled to Deathsgate*, where it is found in a game played by the principals to ward off unwanted inquiries. The proof of this is the exclamation of one of their executioners at the end of the play, "The Dog! I think I have been asking for nothing else for an hour." This, or similar exclamations, are used several times in *The Phoenix Guards*, and more often in the book you now hold, to indicate that the time for empty courtesy is over.

But in the subtleties of its employment, the gradations of consciousness with which it is used, the precise timing of its termination, this mode of speech does in fact give very much the flavor of the old court talk without that speech's tediousness or outmoded expressions: it is a successful translation that does not distort anything of significance to anybody except a linguist.

So we answer the historians. But if they are silenced, the romancers rise up in their stead. Where are the art, the craft, and the invention, if every event, thought, and even meal is attested to in the records? Our three self-effacing critics all asked these questions, as did Vaari himself. They are readily answered. The art, craft, and invention reside in two places.

The first is in the structure of the story, in what Ekrasan called the arrangement of the incidents. Note that, while *The Phoenix Guards* might have begun by detailing the intrigues brewing in the imperial palace, and sprung wildly from person to person and room to room, garnering evidence as the historian must, it does not. It enters the city and the palace with Khaavren of Castlerock, and it stays with him while he finds and befriends the main actors in this history.

It may be objected that the main actors are rather Seodra, Adron e'Kieron, Lord Garland, Kathana e'Marish'Chala, and various other important figures, many of whom do not make their appearance until late in the book. But this is precisely where the genius of our author shows itself. Here is the second place in which art and invention may be demonstrated: in the choice of viewpoint. When Khaavren enters the city, he is nobody: he must meet people, discover things, have matters explained to him. The lay reader, whose knowledge of history is imprecise, if not actually erroneous, is in just Khaavren's position. And the author does not carry this technique to extremes, but heightens suspense at the right moment by showing us those who plot against Khaavren and the empire, while Khaavren proceeds in blissful ignorance succeeded by bewilderment—a state, it should be remarked, in which readers, should they find themselves there for too long a time, are apt to become impatient. The events are historical, but the order in which they are presented to us, and the vantage from which we view

them, are determined by the author.

The Phoenix Guards is a tale of adventure and intrigue, and has been so structured. The volume you hold in your hands is of another sort entirely. This is a tale of inevitable tragedy, and of the shifts and strange chances whereby some saved themselves, and others perished. It also tells of events that will be familiar to the most oblivious of readers. It is possible to be ignorant of what happened when Crionofenarr met Adron e'Kieron on the Pepperfields at the beginning of the reign of Tortaalik. But no one can be ignorant of Adron's Disaster.

The structure of the book you are about to read reflects this difference. It is not the role of the scholar to ruin a first reading of a fine book by tediously expounding on its scenes. But let us just glance at the very opening, in which a messenger arrives to speak to the Emperor. Our author stops to describe the messenger and her accoutrements, but when he has finished, he informs us that her progress has not been impeded by his own halt, and that while he has told us about her she has moved through the halls of the palace and stated her mission, and is about to be received by the Emperor. The author seems helpless before a moving sequence of events that cannot be halted or slowed, but proceeds to its fatal conclusion with the force of some catastrophe, a flood or thunderstorm, being presently experienced.

This is not, of course, the case, as an examination of the balance of scenes and viewpoints, the moments at which personages old and new to Paarfi's readers are presented, the arrangement, in fact, of the incidents, will amply demonstrate. But his work conveys a far different sensation than the earlier one, more complex and lasting, heavier of heart though not devoid of laughter. We leave the precise explication of these effects as an exercise for any reader so ungrateful as to continue in the mistaken belief that the writing of history demonstrates no art. Those who have been persuaded otherwise, or were too perspicacious ever to have fallen into such error, may merely enter into the stream of events and be borne along to its terrifying conclusion, while the scholar slips away unnoticed.

D.B.

Dean of Pamalar University

R2:1/2:1/2/12

BOOK

ONE

Chapter the First

Which Treats of Matters

Relating to the State of the Empire,

And Introduces the Reader to

The Emperor and Certain of His Court

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UPON THE FIRST DAY OF autumn, that is, the ninth day of the month of the Vallista in the five hundred and thirty-second year of the reign of His Imperial Majesty Tortaalik I, of the House of the Phoenix, a messenger arrived at the Imperial Wing of the Palace and begged an audience with the Emperor.

Before delving into the source and content of the message, we trust we will be allowed to say two words about the messenger herself, because this will provide an opportunity to set before the reader some of the conditions which prevailed at this time and in this place, and will thus equip him to better understand the history we propose to unfold.

The messenger was a young woman of perhaps four hundred years, whose roundish face, stocky build and straight, sort brown hair without noble's point, all indicated unmistakably the House of the Teckla—a diagnosis easily confirmed by the roughness of her skin and the calluses on her hands. But far more interesting than her fallow state (if we may be permitted such a word to refer to her appearance as provided by nature) is her cultivated state, or the woman as she presented herself to those who guarded the Imperial Wing.

She was dressed in the yellow, green, and brown of her House, but the yellow was the pure, bright color of those flowers that grow in the lower valleys of Tursk, and took the form of a silk blouse embroidered with russet needlework of an exceptionally fine character. Her leather riding pants were also russet, and flared widely around her boots, which were dyed the bright green of new grass and had wide extensions in the form of wings emerging from the heels. She wore, as well, a woolen cloak of a tan color, with a clasp in the form of a dzur, wrought with fine silver wire.

These details now having been placed before the reader, let us make haste to follow her progress, which has not halted for our indulgences; while we have been describing her dress, the Teckla, whose name is Seb, after stating her mission, has been granted admission into the presence of His Majesty the Emperor, and we can, therefore, follow her and hear the delivery of this message ourselves.

Because, being a Teckla, she could not be given a safe-conduct badge, Seb was escorted by one of the guardsmen on duty, a certain Dragonlord called Tummelis e'Terics, who brought her to the officer on duty, who looked the Teckla over briefly but thoroughly before signifying, with an almost imperceptible nod of his head, that she could pass. This was all taking place, be it well understood, in the First Antechamber (or the Last Antechamber, as some have it, but we will hold to the usage of the historians of the period of which we write, and hope that our readers'

perspicacity will surmount any confusion this causes), which connected to the First Lower Level Imperial Audience Chamber, to give its official title, or the Throne Room, as some historians have it or the Portrait Room, as it was actually called.

At the point at which we begin our history, it has just passed the quarter-hour after the third hour after noon, and the Portrait Room doors are, consequently, standing wide open. Seb, notwithstanding her House, walked with full confidence among the nobles and courtiers who milled about the room, who in fact filled the room to the point of straining to the utmost the ingenious cooling spells that the Athyra Marchioness of Blackpool had set upon it.

At length, upon reaching a point directly before His Majesty, where waited Brudik, Lord of the Chimes, Tummelis, her mission accomplished, gave the messenger into Lord Brudik's care. This worthy, who had held his post for some fifteen hundred years, turned to His Majesty and announced, in his droning voice, "A messenger from Her Highness Sennya, Duchess of Blackbirdriver, and Dzur Heir."

His Majesty was just then amusing himself in a customary way, between bantering conversations with various courtiers: He was attempting to make himself angry, then sad, then happy, in order to make the Orb, which rotated above his head, change color. He was, as usual, achieving only indifferent success, wherefore the Orb glowed with the pale red of annoyance, which changed instantly to a delicate green as, at the Lord Brudik's announcement, he looked up with an expression of mild interest.

"Ah," he said. "From Sennya."

"That is it, Your Majesty," said Brudik.

"Well," said His Majesty, trying to remember if he had ever heard the name Sennya, and, if so, in what context, "then, let the messenger come before me."

As the worthy Seb steps up to address the Emperor Tortaalik, we will permit ourselves to quickly sketch the changes that have occurred in the outer, and, to some extent, the inner character of His Majesty since we last had occasion to bring him to the attention of our readers, which was at the beginning of his reign, in the history of *The Phoenix Guards*.

The Emperor, we should note, had changed but little in appearance. He had begun to paint his fingernails, forehead, and ears (all of which on this occasion were a bright red that set off the gold of his costume), and he now wore diamonds on all occasions, in the form of rings, bracelets, earrings, headdress, and necklaces; but neither his face nor his physique had undergone any transformation excepting only the addition of a few lines in the former and a bit of settling in the latter. Our readers will remember his delicate skin, of which he took greater care than ever, bathing every day in scented oils; his pale blue narrow eyes; and his fine, yellow hair, which was of medium length and curled inward below his ears.

As for those aspects of his character which are not readily visible, we may say, with the perspective that only distance brings, that the fundamental shift in his personality had begun some four hundred years earlier, when he was forced to exile his sister for taking part in an attempt to introduce poisons into his drink through certain specially prepared goblets which were impenetrable to the mysterious

powers of the Orb, although not, as it turned out, to the more mundane abilities of Gyorg Lavode. In point of fact, it is certainly the case that Tortaalik's sister had been the chief mover behind the entire affair, which information His Majesty did his best to suppress, although whether out of affection for his sister, a desire to limit the scandal, or for other reasons entirely, we will not speculate. But he had certainly changed since then, becoming gradually, over the course of the next few centuries, at once whimsical and morose, devoting much effort to idle amusements, and much time to doing nothing whatsoever, this pursuit being occasionally interrupted by sudden and short-lived periods of intense interest in the doings of the State of which he stood at the prow.

Of the many changes in the makeup of the court, the two most significant were the retirement of His Discretion, the Duke of Wellborn, and the appointment of Jurabin to the position of Prime Minister, which, in combination, gave His Majesty the inclination and the leisure to pursue his own amusements, such as they were. The reader may rest assured that, if these two changes have more far-reaching effects than we intend to describe at this moment, we will discuss them as occasion warrants.

The messenger, Seb, to whom we now have the honor of returning, performed the proper obeisance before His Majesty and said, "I bring you, Sire, greetings from the holdings of Her Highness, Sennya, and I bear her wishes that Your Majesty will deign to hear the message she has done me the honor to entrust to my care, and which she desires me to impart to Your Majesty."

"The greetings," said His Majesty, "are acknowledged. And we are anxious to hear whatever intelligence you bring us."

"Then, Sire, I will at once relay this message."

"And you will be right to do so. Is it written?"

"No, Sire, it was entrusted to me, by Sennya herself, from mouth to ear."

"Then you may deliver it the same way."

"I shall do so, Sire," said Seb. She cleared her throat and began. "This is it, then: Sire, Her Highness, Sennya, faced with a personal crisis of the most extreme character, begs to be excused from the Meeting of the Principalities. She hopes she has not too much incurred Your Majesty's displeasure by making this request, and hopes, moreover, that Your Majesty will do her the kindness of granting it."

His Majesty frowned, and the Orb took on a slight orange cast. He then looked around, and his eyes fell on the barrel-chested form of Jurabin, who was moving, or rather, bulling, his way through the courtiers to reach the throne. His Majesty stirred impatiently; Seb appeared quite at ease, although a few courtiers noticed that a certain amount of perspiration was evident at her temples.

Jurabin arrived at last, and leaned forward to allow His Majesty to whisper to him.

His Majesty quickly explained what had transpired, and Jurabin, upon hearing the news, looked at His Majesty with an expression of mild surprise, and accompanied the look by pronouncing these words, "But, Sire, what question does Your Majesty do me the honor to ask?"

His Majesty flushed slightly, and the courtiers, who were unable to hear this conversation, noticed th

the Orb darkened. "In the first place, Beespatch," said the Emperor, referring to Jurabin by title, as His Majesty always did when annoyed, "It was my opinion that you, as Prime Minister, ought to be made aware that yet another Delegate—in fact, an Heir—has backed out of the meeting. Other than that, I have not done you the honor to ask you a question, although, if I may make a suggestion—" His Majesty's voice was heavy with sarcasm—"you may want to consider whether we ought to no longer accept excuses of any kind. If this continues, no one will be at the meeting at all."

Jurabin perceived that he had, perhaps, annoyed His Majesty a little. He said,

"Forgive me, Sire. My poor brain is straining to bear what is, perhaps, too much of a load, and so if I am brusque with my sovereign, believe there is no disrespect intended."

His Majesty relaxed, and signified with a wave of his hand that it was of no moment. Jurabin continued, "If my advice in the matter is of any use to Your Majesty—"

The Emperor signified that his advice was welcome.

"—I would say that by refusing to accept these excuses, Your Majesty would run the risk of being called a tyrant. Moreover, this is only the forty-sixth cancellation, which means we can still expect over two hundred delegates, which seems to me sufficient."

"Mmmph," said His Majesty. "That depends how many more cancellations there are."

Jurabin bowed, but did not reply, seeing that he had convinced the Emperor, who then addressed the waiting messenger with the words, "Very well, the request is granted. Give your mistress my warmest regards."

"I will not fail to do so, Sire," said the messenger, who then backed away from His Majesty, bowed low, and left the room to return to her mistress. As she left, the Emperor turned to his Prime Minister and said, "I wish to have two words with you, Jurabin."

"Of course, Sire. I hope I have not been so unfortunate as to incur Your Majesty's displeasure."

"No, no, but this last messenger has brought to mind certain matters, and I wish to discuss them with you."

"As you wish, Sire. But allow me to point out that the time Your Majesty does your courtiers the honor of spending with them—"

"Is up even at this moment, Jurabin. Will you grant my wish for a few minutes of conversation?"

"Of course, Sire."

"Then attend me. We will go to the Seven Room."

"Lead, Sire; I will follow."

His Majesty rose, whereupon all of the lords and ladies of the court who had managed to find chairs rose as well, and the entire assemblage fell silent and faced his Majesty, who sketched them a

perfunctory salute. He looked around for the officer on duty to escort him, and found this officer standing imperturbably at his side.

"The Seven Room," said his Majesty.

The officer bowed, and led the way through the throng, which parted before him.

The Emperor and the Prime Minister followed at a leisurely pace; the Orb, a pale green, serenely circled His Majesty's head as he walked. Upon leaving the hall via the Mirrored Doors, which a servant hastily opened, the officer led the way down the Teak Passage, up the Green Stairway, and so to the room with seven walls where His Majesty most liked to hold private conversations. The officer himself opened the one door to this room, and, after satisfying himself that the room was unoccupied, stood aside for His Majesty and the Prime Minister to enter, after which he closed the door and placed himself in front of it.

His Majesty sat in his favorite chair—a gold-colored chair with thick stuffing and a small matching footrest—and indicated that Jurabin should sit as well. When the Prime Minister had done so, in a plain chair facing His Majesty, the latter said, without preamble, "What have you been doing, Jurabin, about the finances of the Empire?"

"Sire," said Jurabin, who appeared to be caught slightly off guard, "I have been doing all that can be done."

"And that includes?"

"Not a day goes by, Sire, that I do not endeavor to find some new economy.

Today, for example, I—"

"New economies, Jurabin? Is that all that can be done?"

"That is all, Sire, until the Meeting of the Principalities."

"Ah, yes, the meeting. The meeting to which we have just received yet another cancellation. Jurabin, the meeting is to take place, the Princes and Deputies ought to begin arriving within the week."

"Perhaps, Sire," said Jurabin; who, while he seemed mildly startled at His Majesty's sudden interest in matters of policy, did not appear unduly concerned about the presence or absence of the Princes and Deputies.

His Majesty shifted impatiently. "Will you deny, in any case, that this rash of cancellations has the smell of conspiracy?"

Jurabin cocked his head. "There is a certain fragrance, Sire, but sometimes we think someone is cooking fish, when, in fact, we are only near the ocean."

"I usually know when I'm at the shore, Jurabin," said His Majesty.

"How is that, Sire?"

"Because my feet are wet."

Jurabin bowed at this witticism His Majesty did him the honor to share, and said,

"Well, then, Sire, are your feet wet?"

"If there is a conspiracy around me, Jurabin," said the Emperor, "I am unable to see it."

"It is not, perhaps, a conspiracy, Sire," said the Prime Minister, "either around us here, or among the Princes."

"It is not?"

"Perhaps not."

"Then, you are saying that perhaps it is?"

"That is not precisely my meaning either, Sire."

"Well then," said the Emperor, "What is your meaning?"

"To speak plainly—"

"The Gods!" His Majesty burst out. "It is nearly time for you to do so!"

"I believe that many of the Deputies are, quite simply, afraid to appear."

"Afraid?" cried the Emperor. "How, Sennya, a Dzurlord, afraid?"

Jurabin shrugged. "The Dzur are brave enough when faced with battle, Sire; many of them have no special courage to face less tangible dangers—especially dangers they do not comprehend."

"Less tangible dangers? Come, tell me what you mean. Are they afraid of me, do you think?"

"Not you, Sire; rather, of each other."

"Jurabin, I confess that I am as confused as ever."

"Shall I explain?"

"Shards and splinters, it is an hour since I asked for anything else!"

"Well, then, this is how I see it."

"Go on. You perceive that you have my full attention."

"Sire, the Princes have been called, as is the custom, to determine the Imperial Allowance for the next phase, which begins in less than fifty years."

"I prefer," said the Emperor, "to refer to it as the Imperial Tax."

"As you wish," said Jurabin. "Though it can hardly be considered a tax, when, unlike the other Imperial Taxes, the Houses set their own portions, from a total amount which is, by law, determined by the Empire."

"Nevertheless, the term 'allowance' offends me."

"Very well, Sire. To continue, under Imperial Law, dating from the Sixth Cycle, the Princes will meet and come to some agreement about the portion each House must pay."

"Yes, yes, I understand that. Go on."

Jurabin cleared his throat and continued. "Yes, Sire. The issue, just at the moment, is difficult for the Princes."

"That's just it, Jurabin; what makes it so? Or, rather, what makes it more difficult than usual?"

"Well, in the first place, there is the House of the Dragon, which demands that its entire portion be waived, to offset the expenses of raising armies."

"Raising armies? For what reason do they raise armies?"

"There are encroachments of Easterners in the South, Sire. In addition, there are Teckla rebellions threatening in several western duchies. We have received petitions for Imperial aid from the Duke of Atwater, the Duke of Lonerock, the Duchess of Greatworks, the—"

"Well, but I had thought we had made peace with the Easterners."

"Sire, there are many Easterners, and they do not all speak with each other, nor do they adhere to each others' treaties. The agreement Your Majesty had of the kingdom east of the Pepperfields at the beginning of Your Majesty's reign still holds, but there are others—"

"Hmmp. A sloppy way to do things, it seems to me. They should be brought under a single banner."

"That, Sire, is what the House of the Dragon, through its Heir, Eastmanswatch, is proposing."

"How, Eastmanswatch is behind this?"

"According to my sources, Sire—"

"You mean your spies?"

Jurabin shrugged. "It seems that the Duke opposes such an action, but nevertheless brings it forward on behalf of his House, which favors it."

His Majesty shook his head, as if refusing to consider the internal politics of the House of the Dragon. "Well," he said, "and the Teckla? Has their House been asked about these uprisings, and warned that the Heir of the House may, under law, be held accountable?"

"They pretend, Sire, to be unable to meet the demands placed upon them, due to crop shortages,

caused by general climate changes in the West over the last two hundred years, which has led to thirty or forty seasons of drought, which trend is expected to last well into the next phase. This same drought has caused their demand for a lessening in the payments they make to their landlords, and has also led to numerous uprisings, which seem to be continuing, perhaps even increasing."

"Drought? Haven't we sorcerers for that sort of thing?"

"The cost, Sire—"

"Ah, yes, the cost. Well, what of the cost?"

"The House of the Athyra has claimed that, should they call up the required sorcery, they would be unable to pay their portion."

"They have said this?"

"Yes, Sire, through their Heir, Tropyr."

"Well, that hardly seems unreasonable."

"Yes, Sire."

"And as for the lessening of the payments, can't this be done in an equitable manner?"

"Sire, most of those affected are of the Houses of the Jhegaala and the Lyorn, and the matter has been taken up by the Iorich, to study the legalities. But, as an Imperial matter, naturally the Iorich charge heavily for their services, and—"

"The Gods!"

"Yes, Sire. Especially as the Vallista are adamant on mainlining the full payments—"

"The Vallista?"

"Yes, Sire, most of the mines in the North are owned by Vallista, and they depend on trade with the West to feed the Laborers, who have been growing restive, due to short rations. This has resulted in lower production, which, in turn, reduces the amount of shipping, so the House of the Orca is claiming extreme poverty among many of its nobles, and will have a great deal of trouble in contributing to the Imperial Allow—Tax."

"I see."

"Moreover—"

"How, there is more?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Go on."

"Various of the poorer Houses have banded together, to prevent the more powerful Houses from taking advantage of them."

"It is always thus."

"Yes, Sire. In this case, the Tiassa and the Jhegaala have formed an alliance along with the Dzur and the Iorich, while the Hawk, Tsalthoth, Jherag and Issola are supporting the Orca and the Lyorn. The Teckla might have come to some sort of agreement with the Yendi; we are unable to be certain—one never knows what the Yendi are doing."

"Well?"

"It is very confusing, Sire, but it seems the alliances are shifting a great deal, and everyone is trying to guess who will be forced to pay heavily, who will be able to escape paying heavily, and whether the Imperial Treasury will, in fact, be able to operate at all."

"I see."

His Majesty fell silent for a moment, then said, "These alliances—"

"Yes, Sire?"

"Can we break them up?"

"We have been trying to do so, Sire."

"With what results?"

Jurabin made a slight shift in his chair—almost his first movement of any kind since they had begun speaking. The Emperor was aware that this indicated that the Prime Minister was somewhat unsure of himself. "Sire—"

"Yes?"

"The alliances have been increasingly unstable, in part due to our efforts."

"Well?"

"The result is none of the parties are strong enough to stand against your will."

"That is good, I think."

"Yes, Sire. But it also means that many of the Princes and Deputies will be unable to avoid offending the Empire, or their own party, and in some cases, however things go, they will be certain to offend both."

"I see."

"And that is why many of them, either from fear or confusion, have been backing out of the meeting."

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