



The Mirador

Sarah Monette



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK



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Praise for *The Mirador*

“The third installment of Monette’s *Mélusine* series continues to evoke the wonders of an ancient and mysterious city and its memorable inhabitants . . . Impeccable story-telling with adult themes reminiscent of the works of Terry Goodkind and Jacqueline Carey makes this solid tale most suitable for mature readers.” —*Library Journal*

“Monette continues the fantastic saga begun in *Mélusine* and *The Virtu* with virtuoso narratives, theatrical, political, and magical intrigues.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“A thrilling, sometimes heart-wrenching series of crises leading to a conclusion that opens the door to something new.” —*Locus*

“As usual, Felix and Mildmay are fascinating characters—their points of view are distinct and compelling . . . The shape of the story is complete while leaving a number of tantalizing ends dangling for the next book.”

—*Romantic Times Book Reviews*

Praise for *The Virtu*

“Compelling . . . The magic is delightfully inventive . . . Perhaps best of all is Monette’s authoritative voice, abundantly blessed with originality, sophistication, and artistry.”

—*Booklist* (starred review)

“A humdinger of a fantasy, full of action, romance, intrigue . . . and, of course, wizardry . . . Monette loves language and is unafraid to delve into dark corners, which makes for a novel that is both poetic and suspenseful.”

—*BookPage*

“[A] wonderful follow-up to her extraordinary fantasy debut, *Mélusine* . . . every bit as original and satisfying as its predecessor.” —*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“Fascinating . . . In the course of escalating adventures that will leave your knuckles white and your mind ablaze, these half brothers manage to find (or rediscover) some small measure of order in a very disorderly world. Monette brings their story to a strong conclusion, but I’d gladly follow her into the labyrinth again—with or without their company.” —*Locus*

“Monette creates an interesting world with fascinating and complex characters . . . a fun read.” —*SFRevu*

“An engagingly intelligent fantasy.” —*Library Journal*

Praise for *Mélusine*

“A lush novel, rife with decadent magic, debilitating madness, and dubious deeds, told in a compelling, entwined narrative. The setting is richly imagined, a sprawling city at once strange and familiar, and the characters are vivid and alive.” —Jacqueline Carey, *New York Times* bestselling author of the Kushiel’s Legacy series

“Open this book and fall under its spell . . . a spellbinding, gut-wrenching, breathtaking quest that resonates with truth and heart.” —Joan D. Vinge,

Hugo Award-winning author of *Psion*

“Brilliant and original . . . Monette writes with a deftness that never loses its way among the intricacies and anguishes of her plot, world building, and characters.”

—Jo Walton, World Fantasy Award-winning author of *Ha’penny*

“If *Mélusine* weren’t four-hundred-plus pages long, I might have tried to finish it in one gulp—it’s that good, and it moves at a commendable pace for a character-driven novel with a complex, twisty plot.” —*Locus*

“Set in the wondrous city of Mélusine, Monette’s extraordinary first fantasy novel focuses on two captivating characters from two very different worlds. [Monette] is a highly original writer with her own unique voice.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“An exciting debut by talented new writer Sarah Monette.”

—Cecilia Dart-Thornton, author of the Bitterbynde trilogy

“While Monette’s story engages, her characters deserve a standing ovation. Mildmay’s off-color personality and often wickedly funny narration keep the story and the other characters fresh.” —*Booklist* (starred review)

“I was hooked from the very first page . . . lush and mesmerizing, so carefully constructed that I often found myself rereading passages as if letting the smoky flavors of a good red wine roll over my tongue . . . I couldn’t have asked for a more satisfying book.”

—*GLBT Fantasy Fiction Resources*

“Elegant, joyously written . . . an exquisitely painful romp, a return to an old kind of fantasy with a gleaming new edge.” —*Interzone*

Ace Books by Sarah Monette

MÉLUSINE
THE VIRTU
THE MIRADOR



The Mirador

Sarah Monette



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THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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For information, address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

eISBN : 978-0-441-01618-1

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a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,

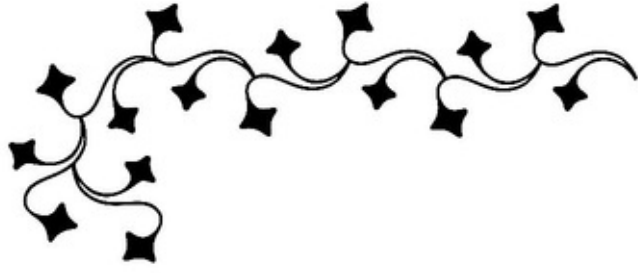
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For Sarah Wishnevsky

Part One



Chapter 1

Mildmay

So to begin with, General Mercator was dead.

There'd been rumors for months that he was sick and then that he was failing and then that he was dead, but the news had come for sure that morning. General Mercator'd been in charge of the Bastion for longer than I'd been alive, so I guess it wasn't no surprise that nobody in the Mirador quite seemed to know what to do now that he was dead.

So Lord Stephen had cancelled all the committee meetings and soirées and stuff that was what the Mirador normally did with its time. Me and Felix had gone back to the suite, and Felix and Gideon had talked the thing to death, because that was how Felix was, either you couldn't get him to say anything, or you couldn't get him to shut up. They'd been reading since dinner while I played harp after hand of Hermit's Pleasure, but all at once Felix shut his book and said, "Do you want to go see *Berinth the King* tonight?"

"I don't mind," I said. Mehitabel was in it.

"Well, I don't mind either," he said—teasing me, but only a little. "It's a nice change from arguing with Edgar and Simon about the nature of the stars."

"You could wear your new coat," I said, hoping I could keep his mind off me. "The one Rinaldo says—"

"Is an affront to seven hundred years of aesthetic philosophy. I could, couldn't I?" He loved to wear this red-violet color that clashed with his hair something awful. He said enough people stared at him they should suffer for it. The new coat, aside from the color, had gold bullion around the cuffs and down the lapels. "Loud" don't quite begin to cover it.

A little pause, and he looked at Gideon. "Do you want to come?"

It wasn't no big secret that you could hardly get Gideon out of the suite with a crowbar and an oar team. I don't blame him— powers and saints, if I'd had the choice, I'd've been right there with him and I don't know which one of us had the worse deal. I mean, there's me with the obligation d'âme and being the guy that offed Cerberus Cresset, and then there's Gideon being Kekropian for one thing and having had his tongue cut out by the Duke of Aiaia for another. And then there was the fact that he was sleeping with Felix and everybody and their dog knew it. And the Curia wouldn't let him take the Cabaline oaths. No, I don't know why. Felix and Gideon were both so pissed off about it that I didn't even want to ask. So, anyways, he didn't go out much, and like I said, I didn't blame him.

But Felix kept trying, first one way, then another, and mostly Gideon said no, but sometimes he said yes. And tonight, he gave Felix a crooked sort of half-smile and nodded, and got a smile back, too.

"All right," Felix said. "Let's go see *Berinth the King*."

Mehitabel

After the worst rehearsal in the history of the world, I went back to my dressing room. Well, *fled* back to be perfectly honest, and if I had a plan at all, it was to make faces at myself in the mirror until I felt better.

But when I got to my dressing room, there was someone already there. He was about my age, Kekropian-dark, not like the people in Marathat with the leaven of Tibernian blood, well-dressed and as sleekly self-pleased as a cat with a songbird pinned beneath one plump paw. He would have been perfectly cast as Uriel Glabney in *The Siege of Kerchesten*.

I drew myself up on the threshold like every outraged cuckold in every comedy de Ferric ever wrote and said, "You have the wrong room." Corinna's taste in men was frequently ghastly.

"Oh, I don't think so," he said. And paused. And smirked. "Maselle Cressida." Cressida was the code name I'd had in the Bastion, when I'd been a spy; anyone who used it was therefore a spy from the Bastion himself, and oh didn't that just put the hatpin through an already foul day.

The door swung shut behind me, and I heard the bolt thump home.

I could have screamed, like a good little bourgeoisie, or fainted, like the ingenue I was getting too old to play. I said, "Who are you?" and made sure I said it crossly.

"Come now, maselle," he said in Kekropian. "Surely you do not believe I will give you my real name. Why don't you call me Vulpes?"

The Midlander word for fox. So he knew about Mildmay. "Very well, Messire Vulpes," I said and swept him a curtsy, more to relieve my feelings than out of any real hope it would annoy him. "Now that I know who you are, may I ask what you're doing in my dressing room?"

"*Lieutenant* Vulpes, please," he said finickingly. "And I should think that would be obvious. Maselle Cressida. I have come from Major Goliath."

"Of course you have," I said, all weary irony; *he* couldn't tell that my mouth had gone dry. "General Mercator is dead, then?" I had prayed—actually *prayed*—that when Mercator died, his spymaster Louis Goliath would be caught in any purging Mercator's successor decided to do. Clearly, I was not that lucky.

"General Parsifal's *caefidus* arrived this morning."

Gemma Parsifal. A great many people must still be smarting from the debacle of Malko Gennadion, if Gemma Parsifal had been appointed to the generalship.

"What do you want?"

Vulpes shrugged fussily and said, "Information."

"What sort of information?"

"*Useful* information. Will anyone bother us in here?"

"No," I said. "And if you're waiting for me to invite you to sit down, you're going to be standing a awfully long time."

"Temper, temper," he said and wagged a chiding finger at me, sitting down on the less rickety of my two chairs. I wanted to force-feed him that finger, and the hand it was attached to, but he was a wizard. I'd never even get close to him. And coming as he did from Louis Goliath, anything I did harm him would only rebound tenfold onto my own head. Or someone else's.

But I didn't have to roll over and show my belly, either. And there was some value in playing the

thing grimly out—no shortcuts. “Can you prove that you are what you say you are?”

“And what is it that I say I am, Maselle Cressida?”

“A creature of Louis Goliath’s.”

His smile disappeared, and I was glad to see it go. “I am no one’s creature, maselle. But I am here on Major Goliath’s behalf. Will his seal be sufficient proof?”

“It will do,” I said negligently, as if he bored me.

He took a folded half-sheet of paper out of his pocket; he had lifted the seal cleanly, and it was Louis Goliath’s signet all right, that thing that looked like a badly drawn wheel but was really a spiderweb. “And I have a token for you.”

He was smirking again as he handed me a grubby slip of paper. I gave it only a glance, only enough to know who had written those straggling words. Nothing more.

I inspected the seal with far greater care, then gave Vulpes a long, slow, considering look, the sort of look my grandfather had used to spectacular effect on wives and children and intransigent players. It made Vulpes fidget. “Oh very well,” I said, turning away from him indifferently. “I don’t suppose you have either the skill or the balls to have forged Major Goliath’s seal.” And then, as if I’d forgotten about him entirely, I sat down at my dressing table and began repinning my hair.

Vulpes’s face, as reflected in my mirror, was a treat. I’d learned a lot about wizards from observing Felix Harrowgate over the past two years, and one thing I’d learned was that wizards were completely unprepared to have an *annemer* ignore them. They didn’t know what to do with it—especially wizards who had spent any amount of time in Mélusine, where the Cabaline wizards were marked by their rings and barbaric tattoos, and where the common people were deathly afraid of them.

I’d found, though, that compared to old-school Eusebian wizards, Cabalines were a collection of indolent and good-natured tabby cats. And Vulpes, for all his swagger, was not a Eusebian of the old school. He was not Louis Goliath.

If he *had* been Louis Goliath, he would have had the sense to outwait me. I was the one with the performance of *Berinth the King* that evening; I was the one who had to placate *him* to get him out of my dressing room. But he let himself be rattled into forgetting that. He said, in a hard, false nonchalant voice, “I believe you know Gideon Thraxios?”

“I do,” I said. I did not turn away from the mirror.

“What do you know *about* him?”

“He’s a refugee from the Bastion. His tongue was cut out, so I assume he’s one of those cultists.” I made sure I continued to sound bored, half-distracted, as if it all meant nothing to me.

“And?” Vulpes prompted, confirming my suspicion that he had come from the Mirador. He knew perfectly well what “and,” or he wouldn’t be trying to make me tell him.

“I didn’t realize your curiosity was vulgar,” I said—dear God, if I sounded any more bored I’d have to pretend to fall asleep. “He’s Felix Harrowgate’s lover.”

“Is it a relationship of long standing?”

“They’ve been lovers for as long as I’ve been in Mélusine. Nearly two years.”

“Is the relationship a, er, happy one?”

I slewed round to stare at him, the gesture just exaggerated enough to sting. “In what sense

lieutenant? As the knight and his lady in a romance? Or are you asking me if Messire Thraxios sexually satisfied?”

He was too swarthy to show a blush, but I knew I'd offended his prudish Eusebian soul. He said stiffly, “Do they quarrel?”

I didn't try to bite back a shout of laughter. “Do they *quarrel*? You realize that's the same as asking if Felix has a pulse?”

He glared at me. “Do you think their quarrels are serious?”

“Meaning, do I think Felix would ever throw Gideon out? Not a chance.”

“What about Messire Thraxios? Might he leave?”

“Where would he go?” I said callously.

“I . . . see.” He changed the subject briskly: “Why has Messire Thraxios not sworn the Cabaline oaths?”

“Surely you're better qualified than I am to answer that question.”

“But I'm asking you, Maselle Cressida. Why?”

“I don't know. I try not to have anything to do with Cabaline politics.”

“That will have to change.”

“You would do better to cultivate a wizard.”

“Who says I'm not?” His smile was sharp and ugly. “But still, maselle, I have asked you, and you should like you to answer.”

“And I did. I told you. I don't know.”

“Oh, come now. Your lover has told you nothing? I find that hard to believe.”

I said lightly, “Mildmay doesn't like to talk about what he calls ‘hocus-stuff.’ ”

“Then you will have to induce him.” But at least he seemed to believe that I didn't know anything, for he stood up, saying as he moved unhurriedly toward the door, “I will expect you to be a good deal more informative next time, Maselle Cressida. ”

“But what do you want to know?” I said. The exasperation in my voice was quite real; I only hoped it was adequate cover for the equally real desperation that was cold lead in the pit of my stomach. “Why Gideon hasn't become a Cabaline—”

“You have a wide *acquaintance* among the court,” he said with a sneer. “Use it. Go trawling. I will tell you if you find anything interesting.”

The door shut behind him with a small, decisive snick. I waited, but when a full minute had passed and he had not popped back in like the Necromancer in the pantomimes so popular in the Lower City, I concluded he had really gone. *Then* I let myself look at that grubby slip of paper and touch the ink blotches of Hallam Bellamy's fingerprints.

I'd let Mildmay believe Hallam was dead, and God forgive me, sometimes I wished he was. The wizard had broken his fingers, cut off both his thumbs; I was trying not to wonder how he'd held a pen at all.

SO SORRY TABBY was all he'd written, in sprawling, clumsy letters I didn't need my spectacles to read, that and a squiggle that was a sad travesty of his wizard's sigil. I sagged down across my dressing table, pillowing my head on my forearms. Once you sell your soul to the Bastion, you never

get it back.

Mildmay

The cult of Felix worked like usual on the Empyrean staff. The ushers fell over each other to get into the second-best box. The best box was for the Teverii, just in case one of them decided to come. Lady Victoria never did. Lord Stephen came for premieres, and he'd come to see *The Tragedy of Horatio* three times. Lord Shannon came a lot. Small favors—tonight the Teverius box was empty. Which meant Felix was in a good mood. He was telling a story about the lady in the box opposite and who the father of her third son was supposed to be. Gideon grinned, and he must've said something because Felix laughed out loud. They'd forget I was here in a minute or two. We might go backstage after the play, if Felix was feeling nice, and then we'd go back to the Mirador. They'd go into the bedroom, and I'd go into mine. I'd lay there and pretend like I didn't have a clue what was happening on the other side of the wall.

Mehitabel wouldn't be alone tonight 'less she wanted to be.

By the time the curtain went up on *Berinth the King*, it was too late for the story to save me from my own stupid head. The best it could do was distract me for a while, but everything was waiting for me when the play was over, right where I'd left it.

We did go backstage for a minute, but it would've been smarter of me not to. You get in mood sometimes where you have to prove to yourself that the world is a pile of shit. So Felix and Gideon hung around in the stage-lobby while Felix flirted with Corinna Colquitt—she knew it wasn't going to place, but it didn't do her no harm to be seen flirting with him. And Gideon just watched, smiling a little. Madame Colquitt wasn't no threat to him.

I went back to Mehitabel's dressing room. Something about the play had pissed her off. I knew that as soon as I walked in the door, just in the way she was pulling the pins out of her hair. Probably Madame Dravanya, because so far as I could tell *everything* about Madame Dravanya pissed Mehitabel off.

So I went and opened my stupid mouth. “Surprised I beat the rush.”

“What's *that* supposed to mean?”

“Usually, I can't see you for all the boy-toys.”

Her back was always straight—it was the way she carried herself, like a queen—but I saw it go stiff. She didn't turn around, just gave me a look like pure black murder in the mirror and said, “If I didn't know better, I'd think you were jealous.”

Meaning, don't pull this shit on me. Because, powers and saints, we'd *had* that fight, gone round and round 'til we were both dizzy and sick with it. And what it all came down to was, I couldn't marry her, and she wouldn't've had me if I could. I knew I should be glad she was willing to have anything to do with me at all—even if it was mostly fucking—and, you know, if I didn't like it, wasn't nobody forcing me to keep showing up to get kicked in the teeth. I just, I don't know, I wanted her to want me for more than my cock, and I wasn't sure she did.

Right now, from the look on her face, she didn't want me at all. “Were you like this with Ginevra or did she pander properly to your masculine vanity? Before she dumped you, of course.”

My breath hitched in like she'd hit me, and, powers, I kind of felt like she had. And sacred bleeding *fuck* I must have caught her on the raw, because she'd never said nothing *that* nasty to me before, and we'd never talked about Ginevra at all. Mehitabel'd always pretended like she didn't know, even though we both knew she did.

I opened my mouth, shut it again. Mehitabel said, "You call me by her name in bed sometime? When you say anything at— oh for God's sake! Would you just go away already?"

Somehow, it seemed like good advice. I went.

Mehitabel

Mildmay shut the door behind him carefully—a tidy-minded man, he was—and I made a face at my reflection. "Oh, very well played. What will you do for an encore, kick him in the crotch?"

It wasn't that I'd lied—he did sometimes call me Ginevra. It was just that I'd never meant to tell him. Unless of course, I thought, disliking myself intensely, I'd just been saving it. Because I knew exactly why I'd said it. I was scared and angry and needed to lash out at *someone*. And Mildmay was safe. I knew he'd forgive me. The worst of it was that I actually felt calmer, better able to attend to tonight's business with a clear head.

Corinna and Susan between them had the Empyrean's ushers and prompt-boys well trained, and hadn't hesitated to take advantage of that. The prompt-boys in particular loved the sense of intrigue—God only knows what stories they told each other about our goings-on. So there'd been no difficulty finding out which boxes were being used tonight.

Lionel Verlalius had come, but he'd brought his fiancée—an insipid creature and I hoped he'd be happy with her money as he thought he would. Barnabas and Harcourt Malanius were in their family box, but I *really* wasn't in the mood for a threesome, and picking one over the other wasn't worth the resulting aggravation. Arthur Lelius, Rudolph Novadius . . . Felix, who was not himself a problem—even a factor—but I hadn't needed an exasperating and time-consuming scene to know that Mildmay *was* a problem.

I'd been right about that.

But the prompt-boy had also told me that Lord Peter Jessamyn was attending the play, and I spotted him myself: Peter Jessamyn, sitting alone and meek as an anchorite's cat in the box he and several other wizards had gone shares in for the season.

Peter Jessamyn was ideal for my purposes; I'd sent him a primly worded note in the first intermission, to which he'd responded, equally primly, in the second. And since Peter could hardly be expected to be enthusiastic with Mildmay playing Eofor Henning all over the place, I'd cleared the stage the quickest—and dirtiest—way I could. I'd told the doorman to stop everyone else.

I was glad of the knock on the door; feeling guilty about something you've done on purpose is a terrible waste of time. And I liked Peter: middle-aged, nondescript, soft-bellied and soft-handed, and a keen and cynical observer of the Mirador's politics. Also a considerate and imaginative lover. Not as good as Mildmay—*no one* was as good as Mildmay, who sometimes seemed to forget that he, too, had a right to climax—but a charming bed-companion. And he liked having me on top.

We went to The Harpy's Kiss, where Peter had thoughtfully bespoken the Rose Room and a la

supper. We talked about the play while we ate; Peter nearly made me choke with a wickedly accurate imitation of Susan Dravanya, and I retaliated by describing, and even acting out bits of, the mime and furious cat-fights that were an inevitable part of life backstage. “One of these days, Drin is going to murder Bartholmew and then go shooting out on stage with his hands covered in blood. Because he will never occur to him to wash them.”

“Well, as long as he waits until the fifth act,” Peter said reasonably and grinned at me over the rim of his wineglass.

I grinned back. It was easy with Peter. We enjoyed sex with each other; we enjoyed gossiping with each other. He appreciated the cachet of being my paramour—Mildmay’s scornful cant term “boy toy” echoed unpleasantly in my head—and I quite liked having a lover who wasn’t high-profile, who didn’t have to please anyone but himself. And who didn’t *want* anything from me except bonobos and rattlingly good sex.

We managed that all right, and in the aftermath, lying together companionably to wait and see if Peter was going to be good for a second round—sometimes he was, and sometimes he wasn’t—it was so easy for me to trace one of the swirls of his tattoos and say, “Did these hurt very much?”

“Oh, you know. Not much more than setting yourself on fire.”

“Why do you *do* it?”

“Become a Cabaline? Well, the alternative is to be a heretic and get set on fire for real.”

I shuddered and I wasn’t entirely faking. “You could leave.” He shook his head. “Wouldn’t want to. And being a Cabaline is worth a little pain.”

“Why? I don’t understand why anyone would want to . . .”

“You’re annemer. You can’t understand.”

“Try me. Why is it better to be Cabaline than to go to the Coeurterre or the schools in Norvernia or Magna?”

“You really want to know,” he said, half skeptically.

“It puzzles the living snot out of me,” I said promptly, and he laughed, distracted.

“Different wizards will give you different answers, of course, and the Virtu has a good deal to say about it, with it, too.”

“I don’t understand *that*, either.”

“My sweet, if you want me to explain thaumaturgic architecture to you as well, we’re going to be here all night.”

Thaumaturgic architecture was his specialty; he probably wasn’t exaggerating. “No, I don’t,” I said firmly. “Just tell me why *you* wanted to be a Cabaline.”

“That question’s not much better. But all right. When I was young, I thought I wanted to be powerful, and all I knew about power, growing up in Breadoven, was that the Mirador had it. By the time I was actually ready to swear the oaths, I knew I wasn’t powerful and wasn’t going to be. So one answer to your question is that becoming a Cabaline offered protection. The warding spells, you know. And a chance to do my work in peace. And . . .” He was frowning. “I don’t think I can explain the rest of it. But I suppose I like feeling that I’m part of something much larger and much older than myself.”

“You’re right,” I said, smiling at him. “I am no wiser than I was.” A lie, since protection was a very

good reason indeed for Gideon to want to become a Cabaline. I kissed Peter's nose. "Are there lots of wizards who feel that way—I mean, did you have a lot of competition?"

"Competition?" he said blankly.

"Well, they don't take everyone who asks, do they?"

"Powers, no!" That was genuine, appalled horror; I let myself laugh.

"So how do they decide? And who does the deciding anyway? "

He told me about the Curia and the complicated systems of sponsorship and patronage and the list of criteria—some of which seemed exceptionally nebulous and vulnerable to interpretation—and I listened and wished I could take notes.

When I'd heard enough, it was very easy to shut him up. And it turned out he was good for a second round after all.

Mildmay

Oh, I was in a shitty mood. It was just as well Felix and Gideon wouldn't have noticed me if I'd gotten up on the table and started dancing, because I *would* have picked a fight with Felix, just because I could. That kind of mood.

I went into my room and threw myself on the bed. I sat there and stared at the wall—the other side was Felix and Gideon's bedroom and Kethe knows what they were doing in there, I didn't want to—and spun my butterfly knife, first one way, then the other. I'd used to do it for practice, when I was a knife-fighter—and for swank, too. And then it got to be a habit, and I'd never got around to making myself quit.

And powers and saints, it was better than thinking.

But sometimes, no matter how much you don't want to, you get to thinking anyway. And after a while, a thought got in my head. If I was calling Mehitabel Ginevra—and no matter how mad she was at me, she wouldn't make up something like that—then there was something wrong. Something very fucking wrong.

And it wasn't Mehitabel's problem, neither.

See, Ginevra was dead. She'd been dead for indications. We'd been lovers, and we'd crossed Vey Coruscant, who was boss of Dassament and a blood-witch besides. And when the Dogs got on my track, Ginevra walked out on me, walked straight back to her stupid poet. And a decad later, she was dead. Somebody'd told Vey Coruscant how to find her. And the cade-skiffs had dragged her out of the Sim with her throat cut.

All at once, I had to move or I was going to start screaming. It was past the septad-night so I wasn't likely to meet anybody else wandering around. I let myself out of the suite and started walking. I didn't care where I was going. Truth to tell, I didn't notice. I was thinking about Ginevra, like a knot you can't untie and you can't fucking leave alone.

I hadn't realized it had got so bad. I know how stupid that sounds, but blessed saints, if I'd *known* I was calling her Ginevra, I wouldn't've fucking done it. I'd known I was still dreaming about Ginevra, but I'd kind of got used to it—got to where it seemed like it was normal, and maybe that was the

problem.

I was dreaming about a dead girl maybe two or three nights in the decad. That couldn't be good could it? I mean, I ain't big into dream-casting or nothing, but you didn't fucking need to be. And so what I was doing while I limped around the Mirador was trying to figure out how to shut it down. Which, yeah, I should've been working on a long fucking time ago, but I couldn't do nothing about that.

"So what *is* the big fucking deal?" I said out loud in the Buried Rotunda because there wasn't nobody around to hear. It wasn't like I'd never known anybody dead before. And sure, I'd loved her, but I couldn't hardly remember her no more. I mean, I remembered things about her, but I didn't remember *her*, and I knew it.

Well, what did you do when somebody died?

You went to their grave. But I didn't know where she was buried. Probably out in the Ivorene where I'd never find her.

You made offerings, burned a lock of their hair or something of theirs you still had, to a saint or the god they'd particularly followed or Phi-Lazary or Cade-Cholera. But I didn't have nothing. *Nothing.*

You got together with other folks what knew them and had a wake, but even if any of Ginevra's friends were still alive, they sure as fuck wouldn't want to talk to me.

You settled your debts with them. You did things they hadn't gotten finished. You found answers to the questions they'd been asking.

And there, finally, I caught hold of the end of something I could use. Because there were questions, oh fuck were there questions, and they all clustered around when Ginevra had died. Somebody'd sold me to the Dogs. I didn't know who. But it got me out of the way real neat. Somebody'd sold Ginevra to Vey Coruscant. I didn't know who'd done that, neither. I didn't know if it was the same person had done both. Or not. And I didn't know which idea I hated worse.

And well, fuck, Milly-Fox, if you got questions, then you need to talk to somebody with answers.

I knew right where to go, too. There wasn't no problem about that. The *problem* was that it meant going down in the Arcane and, well, me and the Lower City weren't exactly on speaking terms no more.

How bad you want them answers, Milly-Fox?

But I knew ways to go—secret or forgotten or just not used—and I figured I could get where I was going without getting lynched.

I could probably even get back again.

Felix

Gideon sighed, his body tensing in climax, his hands knotting in the sheets. He was very good; I never tried to touch my head when I did this for him. I swallowed copper-salt warmth, my throat muscles working around him, and then eased slowly back, kissing his thigh, the line of his hipbone, buying myself what time I could.

Gideon touched my shoulder gently, almost shyly. :Do you want to . . . ?:

Neither of us ever said the word.

I *didn't* want to, particularly, but saying so would only lead to another of our increasingly frequent futile arguments, and I wanted that even less.

I went carefully, slowly, biting the inside of my lower lip when the urge for power got too strong. Gideon was sacrificing as much of his autonomy as he could in submitting to me—and he could not think of it in any other way. I could not be so ungrateful as to tell him it wasn't enough, especially when the one time I had dared hint at the ways of tarquins and martyrs, his revulsion had been all too palpable.

Gideon thought submission was demeaning. I knew it disturbed him that he enjoyed it, that I could make it good for him. He never asked me to submit in return, and it was something I could not offer. The words jammed and died in my throat even in imagination.

He achieved no more than half-hardness, although I kissed the knobs of his spine, stroked him, used clever caresses I'd learned at the Shining Tiger. Finally, he said, :Don't bother about me. Once is a night. I'm good for tonight.:

:Are you sure?:

:Please. Just go ahead.:

My teeth sank into my lip until I tasted blood. Bright pain kept my hands gentle against Gideon's hips as I thrust and strove and finally climaxed. We cleaned up silently, and then, finally, I could escape into sleep.

In my mental construct of Mélusine, Horn Gate was now bound open by wisteria vines. It led to the Khloïdanikos and nowhere else. I kept the other gates closed and tried to ignore the so-called Septa Gate, where even in my construct, the truth bled through and the Sim exited the city. The Khloïdanikos was the only oneiromancy I was interested in.

Thamuris and I had been meeting for two years, and the Khloïdanikos's geography was warping itself very slowly around us. Horn Gate had a stable location now, a brisk walk past a ruined orchard wall to the bench which Thamuris and I had chosen as our meeting place.

I stopped, as I always did, to check on the mostly dead perseïd tree that stood against the ruined wall. I didn't know if the tree still retained any symbolic connection to the waking world, but it had been linked to Mildmay, to the huphantike that Thamuris had cast and that I, in my blind arrogance, had enacted. It might have been superstition or it might have been penance—either way, I could not enter the Khloïdanikos without making sure that the perseïd still had some life in it, even if only a bare handful of green leaves.

I had learned not to hope for more.

The tree looked as bleak as ever tonight, and I did not linger. Thamuris was waiting, stretched out on the bench and staring up at the stars. He preferred the Khloïdanikos at night, when myriad paper lanterns stood beside the path, hung from the bridges, floated on the koi pond, nestled in the branches of the perseïd trees. The moon did not wax and wane here, but bloomed always full and beautiful in the sky; the stars, against the velvety blackness of the sky, glittered in constellations that neither Thamuris nor I could recognize.

The astrologia of the Khloïdanikos was an abiding mystery, one we returned to again and again.

“Any progress?” I asked, by rote.

“Well,” Thamuris said, swinging upright with an ease he hadn’t had in the waking world for three years or more, “I found Astrape.”

I goggled at him unbecomingly. “You’re joking. Where?”

“Where Hydrastra should be.”

“You *are* joking.” But I looked south, to where the cluster of seven stars should have been, and sure enough, recognizable now that I knew what I was looking at, there was the bright cruel light of Astrape, named for the lightning the ancient Troians had thought she governed.

“And Hydrastra?” I said after a moment.

“Yes. Where Astrape should be.”

“So they put the sky in upside down.”

“And backwards. It’s harder to tell, but I’m pretty sure *that*”—and he pointed to the west—“is the upside down mirror image of Arktidion.”

“This is going to give me a headache,” I said. “Have you a theory yet as to *why*?”

“It seems to me that it might have something to do with, um . . . well, with why the Khloïdanikos has remained extant—remained *stable*—for centuries.”

“Which is certainly a question deserving of an answer. Go on, Thamuris. Tell me.”

For all that he was a Celebrant Celestial, Thamuris was self-deprecating to the point of insecurity about his intellectual abilities. I had learned to tread carefully, not to say things that would sound condescending or as if I were merely humoring him when I listened to him.

He said, “From what Khrysogonos and I have been able to find, which isn’t much, the weakness of most oneiromantic constructs was that they needed periodic reinforcement. Otherwise they collapsed into the dreams of the person who made them or—if I understood the passage correctly, which I may not have—just dissolved back into the waking world. Or both, maybe. The monograph I’ve been reading is written in a dialect I’m not very good with.”

“Either, or even both, would make a certain amount of sense. But what does it have to do with the lunatic sky?”

“Well, those stars aren’t going to collapse back into the waking world, are they?”

“No,” I said, looking at Astrape so egregiously out of place. “And you couldn’t just *dream* them either. It must have taken a great deal of work.”

“Oh yes,” Thamuris said. “And I think it works like . . . like an armature. Once they set the stars, it didn’t matter if the garden shifted a little here and there. Because those stars—”

“They’re not a dream,” I said. “They’re thaumaturgic architecture.”

“If you say so,” Thamuris said doubtfully.

“No, really. It makes sense. And you’re right. It explains why the Khloïdanikos doesn’t seem to need . . . anything. And why there are ghosts.”

“You lost me.”

“Think about it! The stars—to get them like that, they must have picked a particular day, mapped them all out, transposed them. It’s why the moon doesn’t have phases, either. There’s *one day* in the

Khloïdanikos. Well, one day and one night, but you know what I mean. So everything that happens . . . it, happens at once.”

“Now I’m getting a headache,” Thamuris said. “So why haven’t we run into ourselves, then?”

“Who’s to say we won’t? I think it’s a very *slow* day, and since we can find either night or day . . . don’t know.”

“You think I’m right, though?”

“I’m sure of it. Those stars are what keep the boundary. And that’s why we’ve never found the walls, either.”

“Sorry?”

“When we went looking for the boundaries. We didn’t find them, because they’re up there.” He jabbed an emphatic finger at the night sky. “The gardens can go on forever, as long as they’ve got the sky overhead.”

“That’s . . . very odd.”

“It’s *brilliant*. I would never have thought of holding a boundary that way.” I sat a moment contemplating. “Do you suppose we can work out what day they used?”

“The astrologists have charts—I know that much. I can send Khrysogonos to plague them. Does that matter?”

“Probably not. But I *would* like to know just how long this has been . . .” Not “here,” because that wasn’t a place. Not exactly. “Has been extant. It might help us figure out how and why the Khloïdanikos *does* change. Because it does.”

“Yes,” Thamuris said. “And I admit, I have been wondering a little if the boundary is, um, permeable both ways.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can’t explain it. Not yet. Let me marshal my thoughts first.”

“You don’t have to mount a defense against me.”

“I know.” But his smile was nervous, fleeting. “You’re just . . . you can be a little overpowering, you know. And I don’t . . . I should go.”

“Thamuris!” I caught his wrist, and then flinched back. I was usually careful not to touch him, for I could feel the consumption in him when I did. I risked a smile, half in apology. “I know I get excited about things. But I’ve never wanted to make you feel . . .”

“Crushed beneath your advance?” he said dryly. “It’s all right, Felix. Just let me take things at my own pace.”

“All right. If you’re sure—”

“It’s who you are. I don’t expect you to change.”

He couldn’t know why that made me wince—an echo of Gideon I did not want, a reminder of my own foolishness in believing it could be true—and I said hastily, “I’ll try to remember not to browbeat you in the future.”

That got a proper smile. “Don’t make promises you can’t keep. But I really do need to go. Xanthippe wants to show me to a healer visiting from Theodosia.”

“But I’ll see you Jeudy?” I couldn’t keep the anxiety out of my voice.

“Of course,” he said and strode away with a vigor and brisk-ness he only had here, in this garden dreams.

I stayed until the Mirador’s dawn, watching the twisted constellations in the Khloïdanikos immutable sky.

Mildmay

Felix hated the Lower City. For him, it was all about hate, the way he hated Pharaohlight and Simsid the way he’d hated his keeper and his pimp. He didn’t get why I missed it, didn’t get how I could even have been okay with my life there. And he didn’t get that I’d been brought up to hate the Mirador the same way he hated the Lower City. He hadn’t lived in the districts where the Mirador went witch hunting. He’d only seen that from the Mirador’s side, where it got called “necessary purging”—and you want a phrase to spook you the fuck out? Think about that one for a while. Nobody in the Mirador really understood that Cerberus Cresset being the Witchfinder Extraordinary was a reason for somebody to want him dead. And I was only in the Mirador because of Felix. Last fucking place I ever thought I’d end up. He didn’t get that, either.

I was sort of wishing I did hate the Lower City the way Felix did, because then walking through the Arcane wouldn’t’ve hurt so fucking much. Wouldn’t’ve been like a list of things I couldn’t do no more, places I couldn’t go, people I couldn’t talk to. And, you know, it did hurt. And it hurt worse because I couldn’t tell nobody about it. Nobody who’d listen to me could understand what I meant. And the people who’d understand were never going to fucking listen. They’d say I’d made my choice and it was too fucking bad if I didn’t like it.

Three hookers and two pushers gave me the come-on in the three blocks I walked down Rue Souterraine between the back alleys of the Limerent and the Goosegirl’s Palace. I guess they figured my money was good anyway.

The bouncer on the side door of the Goosegirl’s Palace recognized me straight off. I knew him, too. Tiny d’Orisco. Biggest guy I’ve ever laid eyes on—six and a half feet tall and almost as broad.

“You,” he said.

“Me,” I said and waited, not in grabbing distance. I could hurt Tiny in a brawl, but he could hurt me way worse.

“Whatcha want?”

“Talk to Elvire.”

Tiny grunted. He gave me the sort of look he gave drunk guys just before he bounced them, then stuck his head in the door and yelled at one of the eunuchs to tell Elvire that Mildmay the Fox was on the doorstep.

“If she tells me to joint and gut you, you know I’ll be happy to oblige,” Tiny said while we were waiting.

“I know,” I said. She could, too. I was betting she wouldn’t, because the thing I knew about Elvire was that she was a junkie for information. She wouldn’t turn me away if she thought I had something

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