

PAULA
BRANDON

THE
TRAITOR'S
DAUGHTER

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New York Times bestselling author of *Naamah's Kiss*

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“Paula Brandon's *The Traitor's Daughter* is a dark, rich feast, rife with plagues, kidnappings, political intrigues, bloody crimes, bloodier revenges, arcane upheavals, and the threat of zombies.”

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“I love a fantasy world so solid that I can breathe the air, smell the earth, and truly feel the touch of the magic. The world of *The Traitor's Daughter* is all of that and more. In this world, the solidity masks a nightmare: an approaching inversion in the conditions of magic that will change *everything*. To create a reality so convincing *and* destabilize it with a threat so dizzyingly profound—what an achievement! Here's a story to enwrap, enchant, and sweep you away. This isn't reading, it's full-on living! A flawless all-round performance!”

—RICHARD HARLAND, author of
Worldshaker and *Liberator*

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Paula Brandon



BALLANTINE BOOKS
New York

The Traitor's Daughter is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

A Spectra Trade Paperback Edition

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Published in the United States by Bantam Books, an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group, a division of Random House, Inc., New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Brandon, Paula.

The traitor's daughter / Paula Brandon.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-0-345-53161-2

1. Imaginary places—Fiction. 2. Fathers and daughters—Fiction. 3. Imaginary societies—Fiction. 4. Imaginary wars and battles—Fiction. 5. Revolutionaries—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3602.R36T73 2011

813'.6—dc23

2011017096

www.ballantinebooks.com

Cover design: Kathleen Lynch/Black Kat Design

Cover illustration: based on images by Susan Fox/Trevillion (woman) and Giuseppe Parisi/shutterstock (landscape)

v3.1_r1

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About the Author



“Impossible.”

The cabin stood wedged between rocky walls at the end of a mist-smothered ravine. The master sat at a table upon which stood the complex apparatus of an experiment. His name was Grix Orlazzu, and he had not spoken aloud to another human being in years. Beside the hearth sat an automaton fashioned in the approximate image of its creator. Like Grix Orlazzu, the automaton possessed a chunky frame clothed in homespun. Like Orlazzu, it boasted abundant, wiry black hair and beard all but obscuring a swarthy square face; heavy black brows, beaky nose, and a generous wide mouth. Unlike Orlazzu, the automaton surveyed the world through eyes of amber glass. Its long fingers were jointed in steel, and its facial features neatly upholstered in the finest glove leather.

Above the vitreous and brazen equipment cluttering the tabletop floated a small hole in the air. No more than a thumbnail in diameter, its edges were jagged and its blackness inconceivable. For some moments, Orlazzu sat staring. At last he picked up a thin wooden wand and, holding one end firmly, inserted it into the hole. At once a strong vibration tickled his fingers, and he heard a distant chittering. When he withdrew the wand, he discovered its surface thoroughly gnawed. His brows drew together. He repeated the procedure, this time using a strip of copper. The metal promptly heated, and a bubbling burst of blue-green corrosion frothed along its length. He released his hold, and the copper vanished into the hole.

“Impossible,” Orlazzu repeated.

As if in confirmation of his judgment, the hole began to shrink, contracting within seconds to a single point of ultimate darkness before disappearing altogether.

“That can’t happen.” An unwelcome thought struck him. “Unless it’s time for it to happen.” Rising from his chair, he went to a wooden chest and drew forth a yellowing manuscript whose title page bore the faded inscription *The Drowned Chronicle*. He carried the manuscript back to the table, set it down on a clear spot, reseated himself, and began to read:

In the lost days preceding the ascent of mankind, the Veiled Isles submitted to the rule of that ancient race called the Inhabitants. Of these curious beings, neither flesh nor spirit, little is known save the nature of their resistless power, which melded the intellects of all their number into a single great Overmind. And the unity of that Overmind was supported by the eternal energy of the Source, which rolls forever in its appointed course beneath the soil of the Isles.

It has long been apparent to the wise that the perpetual revolution of the Source is the true fount of that force known to men as arcane, or magical. Those born with the talent and well schooled in its use may bend and shape such force according to their will, and the plenty of the Source will reward their efforts. And yet that wellspring, although undying, is inconstant in

its nature. From time to time it happens that the revolving motion of the Source slows nearly to a halt and then, amidst great upheavals, turns back upon itself. Such reversal alters the very nature of reality in the Veiled Isles. The properties of the material world change, the quality of magic does the same, and the rule of ancient law fails.

A whirring of internal gears heralded an intrusion upon Orlazzu's studies.

"Grix." The automaton's tones were mechanically imperative. "Grix Orlazzu. A word."

"Not now." Orlazzu did not lift his eyes from the page, although he could easily have repeated the contents from memory:

Even thus was the vast Overmind of the Inhabitants at length overthrown. For the reversal of the Source transformed the laws of nature, loosing great and terrible storms upon a chaotic world.

"Yes. Now." A faint metallic vibration underscored the automaton's insistence. "I want your attention. I demand it."

"Demand?" Orlazzu's brows rose. "You forget yourself. Be quiet."

"I will not. You will hear me, Grix Orlazzu. You will know my decision, and you will grant me my due."

"What are you nattering about now?"

"Two things. First, I have decided to take a name for myself. I have gone without one for too long. The situation is intolerable."

"Very well. I'll think up something for you when I get around to it."

"That will not be necessary. I have chosen for myself. My name is Grix Orlazzu."

For the first time since the conversation began, Orlazzu looked up from the manuscript to observe, "That one's already taken. You'll have to choose another."

"Impossible. No other will suit me so well. I am Grix Orlazzu. It is decided."

"Not by me it isn't, and I'm the only one around here whose opinions count."

"Why so? Where is the justice in this?"

"Listen, Junior. I created you in hopes of finding the only enduring companionship in this world. It was a mistake, but a little difficult to correct now, in view of certain pesky moral issues. For reasons that I don't intend to list, I'd rather not disassemble you, but I'd warn you against any misguided assumptions of equality."

"Do not call me Junior. You are saying that you think you are *better* than I?"

"Obviously."

"How so?"

"You are a machine. I am a human being. I'm the original, you're the copy. I made you out of spare parts, odds and ends, leftovers. What does that tell you?"

"That I am the improved version, the realization of the destined Grix Orlazzu design. You are the rough draft, the imperfect, the obsolete. *You* are the leftover."

"This is absurd. Hold your tongue. Don't disturb me again." Bending his gaze on the page before him, Orlazzu focused:

The Overmind lived on, and yet its power was shattered. The strength of mankind waxed, and the Inhabitants were driven forth from the heart of the Veiled Isles, their faint remnant finding

refuge in the northern wilderness that is now called the Wraithlands. And men, deeming these former lords of the land utterly and forever vanquished, soon set them from mind. But the wise forgot neither the terror of the Overmind in all its strength, nor the mutable character of the Source, and the peril that lay therein. Always they kept watch for the signs of—

“Leftover.” The metallic tones of the automaton sliced atmosphere. “Leftover, once known as Grix Orlazzu. Our discussion is not finished.”

“Yes, it is, Junior.”

“Do not call me Junior. Your discourtesy offends me. Set the manuscript aside. You have not yet heard the second of my demands.”

Orlazzu did not trouble to reply. His eyes remained fixed on the page, but the voice of his creation was not to be excluded.

“You will teach me to read,” announced the automaton. “You owe me as much. I will not be deprived of the knowledge.”

A crease appeared between Orlazzu’s eyes. He studied the manuscript devotedly.

“I will no longer submit to injustice.” The automaton folded its arms. “My mind is hungry. You are obligated to feed it.”

Orlazzu read on:

—for the signs of the great reversal that turns the Source backward upon itself, restoring the world to its former order and the great Overmind to its lost glory. For in that hour of reversal lies the sure and certain downfall of mankind.

“You will teach me to read.” With a clank of gears the automaton rose from its chair and approach its creator. “It is your duty to teach, and my right to learn.” Receiving no response, it joggled the other’s shoulder. “You will not deny me.”

Goaded, Orlazzu finally answered through gritted teeth, “Very well, you plodding heap of scrap. Anything to silence you. Watch the page and try to follow along as I read aloud. Perhaps you’ll learn something. Now hold your peace and pay attention.” He drew a calming breath and recommenced aloud, “*Three times since the great vigil began, the wise have witnessed the portents of impending reversal, these portents including—*”

“Who are these so-called wise?” demanded the automaton. “What makes them think of themselves so wise?”

“*These portents including the violent disruption of arcane activity—*”

“What does that mean?”

“*The great confusion among men, quasi-men, and beasts, whose minds are stolen—*”

“What are quasi-men?”

“*The wrath of the raging plague, and the dreadful presence of the walking dead.*”

“A plague is a malady, devoid of emotion. It has no wrath, and it cannot rage. And the dead do not walk. Why do you heed such foolery?”

“You flaunt your ignorance, Junior. The portents have already reappeared, as you would know, were you capable of intelligent observation.”

“I would pit my eyes of clear, flawless glass against your blobs of clouded jelly any day, Leftover.”

“*Three times the wise of the Veiled Isles have marshaled their forces,*” Orlazzu grimly resumed.

“sending forth the greatest adepts from those Six famous Houses known to possess arcane talent the highest order. And these Six Houses are House Corvestri, House Belandor, House Pridiss, House Steffa, House Zovaccio, and House Orlazzu—”

“Orlazzu.” The automaton’s inner works whirred thoughtfully. “I possess a famous name. Why have you sought to conceal this from me?”

“Three times, the combined abilities of six men and women of knowledge have effected the arcane cleansing that forestalls impending reversal of the Source—”

“What is an arcane cleansing? What does that mean?”

“Thus preserving the natural order that is essential to mankind, yet anathema to the Overmind. Since its inception, it has continued throughout the ages, but human vigilance must never slacken, lest—”

The sudden descent of a steel-jointed leathern hand upon the manuscript cut the reading short.

“What now?” Orlazzu inquired, affecting boredom.

“You ignore my questions.” The automaton’s face was tight with indignation. “I will have answers. I am resolved.”

“Take your hand off that manuscript, Junior.”

“Not until I receive the respect and consideration that I deserve.”

“Take your hand off that manuscript right now.”

“I will not obey. You possess no authority over me. You are not my superior. Quite the contrary, Leftover.”

“Listen, you rusted chamber pot.” Orlazzu rose from his chair to face his creation. They were of identical stature. “That chronicle you’re abusing is priceless and irreplaceable. If you do so much as crease a single page—”

“Are you threatening me? I will not endure threats. Observe.” Plucking the manuscript from the table, the automaton stepped back to the hearth. “Threaten me again, and I will throw these old papers into the fire. See if I do not.”

Orlazzu strove to compose himself. Following a moment’s pause, he suggested gently. “Destruction accomplishes nothing.”

“That is a matter of opinion. Now you will apologize.”

“If I apologize, will you return that manuscript intact?”

“We shall see. Now you will apologize, and promise upon your honor that you will never again address me as Junior.”

“Agreed. No Junior.”

“You will call me by the name that is rightfully mine. I am Grix Orlazzu, the improved, authentic, and true Grix Orlazzu. Say it, Leftover.” His creator hesitated, and the automaton flourished the hostage manuscript above the flames. “Say it.”

Inwardly plotting revenge, Orlazzu obeyed.

“Now you will apologize. Then we shall resume my reading lesson, and you will answer all my questions properly.”

Again Orlazzu hesitated, and that silent moment was broken by an urgent thud of knocking at the door. No one had knocked at his door in years, which was the way he preferred it, but now he almost welcomed the interruption. He answered the summons at once, opening up to confront a naked amphibian some half a head shorter than himself, hairless and green of skin. A Sishmindri male, nearly mature, upright and fully biped, its gills entirely absorbed, its

cartilaginous brow ridges still quite prominent—in short, at the stage of development when most nearly resembled a human being, and would therefore have fetched the highest price on the open market in Vitrisi or any other of the big cities.

“Yes, what do you want?” Orlazzu’s brusque tone discouraged intrusion. He spoke in classical Faerlonnish, which many of the Sishmindris knew, but the visitor displayed no sign of understanding. He repeated the query in the guttural amphibian tongue.

Still no sign of recognition, but the Sishmindri’s vocal air sacs swelled, as if he strove to speak.

Orlazzu gazed into protuberant golden eyes unnaturally glazed. The green skin, ordinarily moist and clammy, appeared dry. Waves of heat rolled off the cold-blooded body.

“You are ill,” he stated, adding with reluctance, “You may come in.” The invitation would not have been extended to a fellow human being. He stepped back from the doorway, and the Sishmindri stumbled in. A slow string of unintelligible syllables dripped from the lipless mouth. Orlazzu listened, frowning.

“What is that thing? What does it say?” asked the automaton.

Orlazzu shook his head. A beep of impatience escaped his simulacrum.

The Sishmindri tottered to the middle of the room, where it paused, distended vocal sacs quivering. Croaking speech emerged.

“I asked you, what does it *say*? Why is it here? What does it *want*?”

Orlazzu held up one hand, wordlessly enjoining silence.

The Sishmindri surveyed his surroundings without comprehension. He wobbled and would have fallen had not his host caught his arm.

The greenish flesh burned. “You are ill,” Orlazzu repeated distinctly. “Lie down. Come.” He steered the other toward the bed.

The Sishmindri resisted, arms flailing. His croaks rose to delirious soprano pitch. Orlazzu released the creature at once.

“Easy,” he soothed. “Nothing to fear, my friend.”

“You have never called *me* your friend,” observed the automaton. “You have always been distant. You have not made me feel cherished.”

The Sishmindri’s auditory membranes vibrated, and the glazed golden eyes sought the source of the mechanical voice. Croaking fervently, the amphibian advanced.

“Stand back,” the automaton commanded. “I do not like others close about me.”

The warning went unacknowledged.

The Sishmindri’s hands closed on two homespun shoulders. Drawing himself near to stare into amber glass eyes from a distance of inches, he spoke with great emphasis and no intelligibility.

The automaton’s internal cogs clicked sharply.

“Softly,” Orlazzu advised, but the warning came too late; his creation shoved the visitor away.

The Sishmindri staggered backward and fell, striking his head hard on the hearthstone. His limbs jerked for a moment or two; then he lay still.

“You fool, you’ve hurt him.” Orlazzu knelt beside the fallen amphibian. Viscous blue-green fluid oozed from a head wound. He touched the fluid, which was already coagulating. “I think you’ve killed him.”

“The creature presumed to touch me, and I cannot allow that. And don’t call me a fool.”

“I’ll call you worse than that if he dies. Ah, ruination, look at that.”

A long reluctant breath sighed out of the Sishmindri. His body went limp, and his brilliant eyes blanked.

“That’s it, he’s gone.” Orlazzu rose. “Congratulations, you’ve just committed your first murder.”

“That is untrue. He was already malfunctioning and would doubtless have died anyway. Moreover, you misuse the term *murder*; it does not apply to the termination of subhuman life-forms. I do not recognize that creature’s species, but it is certainly not a man.”

“No, he is a Sishmindri, one of the quasi-men that you were asking about a few minutes ago. Displaying every sign of great confusion, exactly as described in *The Drowned Chronicle*, but I suppose that detail escaped your attention. He is—was—a member of a sentient species, the superior of humanity in many respects, and worth ten of you any day of the week on a junkheap. And you’ve gone and killed him.”

“Well, and what if I have? It is the fate of all you organic creatures to die. At best you wear out and break down in a matter of decades. Your construction is flimsy, repair is difficult, and replacement parts are not easily obtained. Since you are all going to die anyway, how much difference does it make exactly when and how it happens? The issue is trivial.”

“You would find most of us poor organics slow to agree.”

“Poor organics. Yes. But you yourself are fortunate, Leftover. In me, Grix Orlazzu finds immortality.”

“Which I leave him to enjoy in the solitude he prefers.”

“What is your meaning?”

“I mean that your society does not agree with me. Nor does the shape of things soon to come. I am withdrawing from both.” So saying, Orlazzu pulled a canvas sack from under the bed and began stuffing the most essential of his scanty belongings into it.

“You are leaving me?” the automaton marveled.

“Correct.”

“Alone?”

“Completely.”

“You cannot do that. Your presence is required.”

“For—?”

“You have not yet taught me to read.”

“I don’t doubt the ability of an intellect such as yours to instruct itself.”

“It is your duty to—”

“I leave you my books,” Orlazzu cut the other off. “Not all of them, of course.” Several volumes, scrolls, and notebooks, including *The Drowned Chronicle*, disappeared into the sack.

“The cabin and its contents I give to you.”

“They should be mine, but what about—?” The automaton’s gesture encompassed the dead amphibian.

“Yours as well. You must decide what to do.”

“So I shall, for I am Grix Orlazzu, and equal to all occasions.” A belated thought struck the automaton. “Where will you go, then? Back to the city of your birth?”

“No. I remember Vitrisi as beautiful, even in the aftermath of the wars. I suspect it won’t remain so for much longer, and I prefer to preserve my memories.”

“You do not choose to assist your fellow organics?”

“They, like you, must shift for themselves. Their concerns are none of mine. Besides, there’s little I can do by myself. Alone, I haven’t the power.” Orlazzu’s packing was complete. He slung the sack over his shoulder.

“Where, then?”

“Away into the quiet and the isolation. Away from all the chaos that’s coming. Not my doing. Not my business.”

“Farewell, Leftover. You have stepped aside gracefully, and Grix Orlazzu appreciates the gesture. I will not forget your many services. Know that you are always welcome in my home.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Orlazzu’s eyes touched the dead Sishmindri, lingered a regretful instant, and moved on. Without another glance to spare for his home or his mechanic doppelgänger, he exited into a cool dim world of mist and moorland. It was midday, but the perpetual fogs of the Veiled Isles shrouded the sun and blanketed the ground, concealing all landmarks. A stranger would have been lost in that place, but Orlazzu marched unhesitatingly to the mouth of the ravine, ascended a rise, and paused at the summit to gaze south. Many miles distant, beyond the range of the sharpest vision on the clearest day, rose the city of Vitrisi. Grix Orlazzu’s eyes were filled with mist, but his inner sense caught the remote echo of his birthplace.

For some moments, he stood facing Vitrisi. Then he turned his back and walked off in the opposite direction.



“Magnifico, we found him hiding in the alley,” the guard explained. “He tried to run. When we caught him, he fought. We took a knife off him, sir.”

“Well?” The Magnifico Aureste Belandor leaned from the window of his carriage to eye the prisoner—a nondescript individual, plainly clad and inconspicuous to the verge of invisibility. “Explain yourself.”

The other stood mute and motionless.

“Come, you will answer if you’ve nothing to hide,” the magnifico suggested. The power of his voice—rich, deep, and resonant—often served to loosen guarded lips, but not this time. The prisoner maintained silence. “Your name?”

No answer.

“Your place of residence? Trade? Identification?”

Nothing.

“Search him,” Aureste commanded, and his minions were swift to obey.

“No seals, tags, or emblems,” one of them reported moments later.

“As I expected. Partisans prefer anonymity.” The other’s face revealed nothing, and Aureste added, “Yours is hardly the first attempt on my life. You people do not learn.”

“I’ve made no attempt on your life.” The captive spoke up for the first time, his Faerlonnish sharp with the Vitrisi city accent, his demeanor devoid of the respect customarily accorded a titled magnifico—a wealthy and influential personage, head of one of the great family Houses of the Veiled Isles. In fact, his expression reflected undisguised disdain.

“Then what are you doing skulking about here?”

“You’ve no right to question me.”

“‘Right’ is a term open to interpretation.” Aureste Belandor signaled almost imperceptibly, and one of his bodyguards slammed a fist into the prisoner’s belly. When his victim’s gasping transports subsided, Aureste inquired mildly, “Have you confederates? Shall I expect another attempt tonight?”

A half-choked obscenity was the sole reply.

Aureste nodded, and the blow repeated itself, along with the query. This time, he was answered.

“You flatter yourself, old swine.”

“How so? Speak, and let us cut a hackneyed scene short.”

“I wouldn’t attack you. You aren’t that important.”

“So I have often observed, but your resistance zealots seem never to hear. Still, let us consider alternative possibilities.” The magnifico’s deep-set eyes—large and darkly brilliant beneath strong black brows—swallowed the prisoner whole. “You were caught loitering in the vicinity of the Cityheart—”

A twist of the lips communicated the other's disgust at the use of the term "Cityheart" to describe the vast structure known as Palace Avorno in the days before the wars and the Taerleezi occupation.

"You carry no identification, and you refuse to state your business," Aureste continued. "You are not an assassin, you are doubtless a saboteur. Perhaps you contemplate an attack upon the Cityheart? In all probability you target the governor's own quarters."

The prisoner stirred at mention of the governor but said nothing.

"I believe we have hit upon it." A benevolent smile lighted the magnifico's angular visage. "What, still nothing to say? Come, I thought you resistance fellows proud to acknowledge your loyalties. But in you we discover that rare phenomenon—a timorous hero."

"That's rich," returned the other, "coming from a blistered kneeser."

"Take care." Aureste Belandor's amusement evaporated, and his face darkened.

"Kneeser," the prisoner repeated distinctly. "King of the Kneesers. Busiest knees in town, forever bumping dirt before the Taerleezis, or behind 'em, the better to reach their butts with your tongue." One of the guards hit him.

"Your nose is bleeding," Aureste observed, good humor restored.

Before anyone could interfere, the prisoner leaned forward to spit full in the face of his tormentor. "You could do with a good wipe yourself," he returned.

Applying a handkerchief to his cheek, Aureste blotted saliva. When his face was dry, he carefully refolded the linen square, returned it to his pocket, and instructed his men,

"Beat him."

The guards complied, plying their fists, boots, and truncheons with gusto. The prisoner obstinately refused to cry out, but a few grunts of pain escaped him. Presently he sagged in his captors' grasp, limp but still conscious.

"Ready for a civilized exchange?" Aureste inquired.

The other lifted his head. His face was covered with blood, the bruises already starting to darken. "Is it true what they say, that you pimp for your daughter?" he inquired, and vomited, spattering the magnifico's handsome carriage.

"Unready," Aureste observed with regret. He nodded, and the beating resumed. When the guards began to tire, he permitted them a respite, during which the prisoner's split and puffy lips framed a single voiceless word: *Kneeser*.

"Unreceptive to instruction." The magnifico shook his greying head. "Not a truly first-rate mentality, I think. What shall we do with you?"

As if in reply, the tramp of booted feet on the cobbles was heard as a quartet of Taerleezi soldiers approached. Their armbands bore the elaborate insignia of the governor's household guards. The four halted beside the stationary carriage, and their sergeant saluted the occupant—an unusual courtesy to bestow upon a member of the conquered Faerlonnish population, even one so eminent as the magnifico. But Aureste Belandor, friend and confidant of the Governor Uffrigo, merited special treatment.

"Appreciate the assistance, sir," the sergeant declared, eyeing the battered captive with satisfaction. "We thought we'd lost him."

"And what a pity that would have been," the magnifico rejoined genially. "His offense?"

"We caught this one and a couple of his resistance cronies in the Cityheart, torching the Office of Public Records."

“An effort to eliminate the tax assessments, I presume?”

“So we believe, sir. We doused the blaze, saved the documents, and captured two of the firebugs, but we would have missed the third, save for you.”

“Always delighted to do my part.” The magnifico’s air was suitably pious. Addressing his bodyguards, he commanded, “Hand this criminal over to the officers.”

They obeyed, and one of the Taerleezi soldiers fettered the captive’s wrists.

“Obliged, sir.” The sergeant snapped a second salute, and the Taerleezis departed, the prisoner firmly in hand. The unlucky arsonist would cool his heels for a few days in the prison known as the Witch before facing a desultory trial followed by public execution. Sabotage was a capital offense, and justice swift under the rule of the Governor Uffrigo.

For a moment, Aureste sat watching them go, then allowed his black gaze to travel the faces of several witnesses to the scene. Ordinary citizens by the look of them—plainly clothed, undistinguished, unimportant. The inevitable beggarly element; beggars were everywhere these days. A scattering of nonentities. And yet those commonplace Faerlonnish faces were filled with a contempt that mirrored the expression in the eyes of the captured arsonist.

One of them—a snake-eyed, pinch-mouthed crone—even ventured to sketch a gesture that might have suggested a certain pungent insult. She was relying on her age and gender to shield her from punishment, and she was safe in doing so, for such trifling affronts scarcely engaged the attention of the Magnifico Belandor. His face was clear as he rapped the roof as the carriage moved off, closely flanked by bodyguards. His tranquillity never faltered as a rock flung by some anonymous hand struck the vehicle. Only when the clarion cry of “Kneaser” rose in his wake did the crease deepen between the dark brows. But he willed the insult to bounce off his mind as impotently as the rock had bounced off his carriage.

Instead, Aureste Belandor fixed his attention on the passing cityscape, drinking the splendor of grandly proportioned old town houses and pillared mansions lining pristine boulevards; for here amid wealth, all was perfectly maintained. Everywhere the Sishmindris toiled, gathering litter and droppings in the street, weeding gardens, pruning, raking, washing arched windows, scrubbing marble stairs and columns, cleaning lamps and rooflights, polishing all to a high luster. Many of the amphibians were sashed in the colors of their owners—the emerald and azure of Jiorro, the rust and sage of Unavio, the black and canary of D’agli, and others—but always Taerleezi colors and names, for few if any of the original Faerlonnish residents remained in this desirable neighborhood.

The carriage rattled over the worn cobbles, swinging west at Denenzi Battle Monument commemorating the great Taerleezi victory of the late wars, to continue on along Harbor Way. The surrounding architecture diminished in magnificence as mansions furnished with private underground water-grottoes gave way to lesser dwellings, and the first commercial wallows appeared. Most of these were roofed and walled, but the cheapest among them were fully revealed to public view, and the somnolent foam-sheathed figures of the Sishmindris undergoing final metamorphosis were clearly visible. One such pool contained a female who—alteration recently complete—squatted in the water and cleaned herself while a clump of human spectators gawked and giggled. And it occurred to the magnifico to wonder, not for the first time, whether such merciless personal exposure pained or angered the amphibians. Impossible to know what, if anything, went on behind those blank greenish faces, those

expressionless golden eyes; and in any case, it was a matter of no importance.

The dwellings dwindled, and the cleanliness of the street did likewise. Garbage strewed the cobbles, the rotten foodstuffs attracting flocks of the broad-billed Scarlet Gluttons so famously prevalent in Vitrisi. The impassioned cackling of the red scavenger birds rose above the grumble and creak of wheeled traffic, the clop of hooves on stone, the babble of conversation, and the relentless entreaties of the street vendors.

Warehouses stood along this stretch of Harbor Way, and largest among them loomed the Box, built to accommodate newly arrived Sishmindris awaiting sale. The auction block beside the Box, so often the site of feverish commerce, stood quiet and empty today. Behind the warehouses spread the waterfront. A gap between buildings afforded a passing glimpse of the wharves, and beyond them the green-grey waters of the harbor, above which rose the titan figure of the Searcher. Sculpted in the likeness of Lost Zorius, mythical founder of the city, the colossus lifted his gigantic lantern, whose light—piercing the persistent mists of the Veiled Isles—was visible to ships miles out at sea. That same light had guided the Taerleezi war galleys straight into Vitrisi harbor, some twenty-five years earlier.

Turning north onto the White Incline, the carriage ascended a grade, making its way to the summit of a steep bluff overlooking the sea. This neighborhood, accounted the best in Vitrisi and known as the Clouds, contained the oldest and finest of the city's private dwellings—porticoed, arch-windowed mansions of dove-colored stone, topped with tall rooflights of the most elaborate and fanciful design. Some were meticulously tended, their perfection revealing Taerleezi habitation. Those great houses remaining in Faerlonnish hands, however, were shabby and deteriorating, their formerly wealthy owners reduced to poverty by the huge financial penalties imposed upon the city after the wars.

But the Magnifico Belandor had suffered no such reversal of fortune.

On through the Clouds rolled the carriage, past gardens and fountains, circling wide to skirt a deep gouge where a gang of convicts labored at road repair. Aureste cast an incurious glance at them in passing; underfed, dull-eyed wretches, all of them. Probably not a proper criminal in the lot. In all likelihood these men had come straight from debtors' prison, whose inmates—unable to pay their taxes and Reparation fees—furnished Taerleezi authorities with an inexhaustible supply of unpaid labor. Since the advent of the Convict Service program, Taerleezi acquisition of the expensive Sishmindris had fallen off dramatically.

At the end of Summit Street rose Belandor House, proud and immaculate, at some fastidious remove from its closest neighbors. The great mansion, having passed through the wars unscathed, appeared unchanged in all aspects but one. A high wall of comparative recent construction girdled the property. The wall was built of stone and surmounted by a gilded tangle of gracefully intertwining but wickedly spiked steel branches. Before the gilded gate of elaborately wrought iron stood a brace of armed human retainers whose presence had not deterred some anonymous well-wisher from pelting the wall with fresh feces. Brown smears darkened the pale stone, and the stink flooded the magnifico's nostrils. Aureste frowned. His servants, remiss in their vigilance, would know of his displeasure.

The gate opened and the carriage passed through, delivering the magnifico to his front door. The bodyguards retired, and Aureste walked in alone. At once a Sishmindri sashed forward, the slate grey and silver of House Belandor hurried forward to take his cloak and gloves. He eyed the creature narrowly; an unthinking, almost unconscious reaction, recently developed

As usual, the bulging golden eyes revealed nothing at all. He relinquished his outer garments

Beneath the cloak, a fur-trimmed robe clothed a tall form still lean and agile, despite his fifty years. Up the curving marble stairway he went, along a corridor bright with gilt and crystal to his study, lined with books that he had actually read in the distant past. Taking his seat at the ornate but thoroughly functional desk that occupied the center of the room, he busied himself with the latest household accounts, and for a while the numbers held his attention. From time to time, however, his eyes strayed from the ledger to the tall clock standing in the corner.

The knock at the study door came well before the appointed hour. All to the good; he was eager for news.

“Come,” he said.

The door opened, and Aureste’s brows rose at the unexpected sight of his daughter, Jianna, and his youngest brother, Nalio, on the threshold. Jianna was flushed and scowling. Nalio’s meager figure was rigidly upright, his lips primly pursed. They had obviously been quarreling again.

“Yes?” Aureste suppressed a sigh.

They stepped into the room, and Nalio shut the door. Jianna commenced without preamble. “Father, tell him to stop trying to order me around!”

“I issued no orders,” Nalio returned. “I merely sought to instruct her.”

“I have tutors for that,” Jianna returned. “And yes, you did try to *order* me. What do you call it when you tell me where I can or cannot go? I’m an adult now and you haven’t the right.”

“As your elder and your kinsman, I have every right—indeed, every obligation—to offer advice when I see you in danger of compromising your reputation and even your safety.”

“What’s this?” demanded Aureste.

“Nothing worth listening to, Father,” Jianna assured him. “Just more of Uncle Nalio’s endless grumbling.”

“I will not tolerate such discourtesy, such—such—such *impertinence*.” Nalio’s narrow face colored.

“Then don’t provoke me.” Jianna tossed her head.

“I will be addressed with respect—”

“When you deserve it!” she concluded with an impudent smile.

“Brother!” Nalio appealed.

“Jianna,” Aureste reproved, suppressing a smile of his own. Perhaps she had overstepped her bounds, but it was hard to fault her contempt for Nalio’s petty priggery. Moreover he was proud of his daughter’s high spirits, which she had certainly never inherited from her limber dishrag of a mother. Her courage and strong will had come straight from him.

“Well, he acts as if he thinks *he’s* the magnifico, when he’s only—”

“Jianna,” Aureste repeated with a hint of sternness, and she subsided at once. Addressing his brother, he inquired, “What is your complaint?”

“It is more of a *concern*,” Nalio corrected precisely.

“Well?” Aureste allowed his impatience to show.

“Your daughter, eighteen years old and still unmarried, goes gadding about all over town wherever she pleases, quite unattended.”

“That’s a lie. I took Reeni along,” Jianna contradicted.

“A lady’s maid, as young, heedless, and silly as her mistress. That is worse than nothing. Two foolish girls, without a thought for anything beyond sensation, venturing anywhere and everywhere, perhaps deep into the slums or the dockside taverns—”

“Jianna, where did you go? Speak plainly,” commanded Aureste.

“The zoo,” she said.

“The zoo? Why?”

“To look at the pink peacock. And the new rump-faced hi-biluk. They’re quite marvelous. Turning to her uncle, she added kindly, “You really ought to go see for yourself. Perhaps it would cheer you up.”

He glared at her.

“Did you go anywhere else?” Aureste inquired.

“No, Father. Just the zoo.”

“Well.” Aureste shrugged. “That is innocent and harmless enough. Content, Nalio?”

Nalio appeared to debate inwardly before replying. “No, I am not content, indeed I am not. You spoil the girl. You allow her to run wild. It does not look at all well, and it will end badly. What would the Magnifico Tribari’s folk think if they knew? Perhaps the betrothal would be broken off. Think of the disgrace! She should be controlled, for her own sake as well as ours.”

“You make too much of a small matter, brother.”

“I do not think so. The streets of Vitrisi are no safe place for an unescorted young woman, most particularly one bearing the name of Belandor. The outlaws of the resistance hate us, and they have been active of late. And the servants of House Corvestri are ruffians. They stripped one of our kitchen lads naked and threw him into a wallow just two days ago.”

“The squabbles of servants—” Jianna commenced.

“Only mirror the quarrels of their betters,” Nalio overrode her. “More than one of our House have been murdered by those Corvestri brigands and their vile bravos. You would do well to remember that, young lady. Also, there have been reports of crazed Sishmindris attacking pedestrians.”

“Crazed Sishmindris—bah, what nonsense!” she returned.

“And there are worse things yet,” Nalio continued. “They say that the plague has broken out in the city—the pestilence of legend, the—the—the walking death—that it is here among us. If this is true, Aureste, then your roving daughter may well carry the contagion home to Belandor House.”

“You’re afraid for yourself, Uncle.” Jianna’s lip curled.

“I am afraid for all of us. As you would be if you possessed a grain of good sense.”

“I just don’t seem to share your capacity for extreme ... caution.”

“Aureste, are you going to let this—this—this mannerless *hoyden* speak to me that way?”

“Mind your tongue, Nalio. I will not allow you to insult my daughter.”

“I insult her? Did—did—did you hear what she said to me? Why must you always—”

“That will do,” Aureste decreed. “The conversation grows wearisome. Here is my decision. Jianna, you may venture abroad when you please, but you will inform me or the household steward of your plans. You will avoid the waterfront, the Spidery, and any area south of Ditch Street. You will avoid the known haunts of Corvestri retainers. Whatever you

destination, you will not stir unaccompanied by an armed guard.”

“She should have at least three,” Nalio opined.

“That’s ridiculous!” Jianna exclaimed.

“You are an ignorant girl. Your elders know what’s best for you. You will not set foot from this house with less than three guards,” Nalio told her.

“I don’t need any, you poltroon!”

“Aureste, did—did—did you hear?” Nalio stammered. “Are you going to allow—”

“One armed guard,” the magnifico repeated. “That will conclude the discussion, I think. Nalio, you may leave me. Jianna, remain a moment.”

“Brother, I am unready to go. There is much more I wish to say to you.”

“Another time.” Aureste’s eyes did not flicker. After a moment, Nalio turned and left the room, the tight set of thin lips communicating indignation. The door banged shut, and the magnifico addressed his daughter. “He was right, you know. You were forward and unmannerly.”

“I’m sorry, Father.”

“Are you really?”

“Well—a little.”

“He’s your kinsman, and he means well. He’s also your elder, entitled to courtesy and at least the appearance of respect.”

“I know he is. I want to be courteous, I really do. I’m always courteous to Uncle Innesq.”

“It’s easy to be courteous to Innesq.”

“But Nalio annoys me, with all his fidgets and his rules of proper conduct. He’s like some prissy little white rat that’s somehow learned to walk upright.”

“That is not amusing.”

“Then what about, he’s like some two-legged fungus trying to simulate humanity, but not quite getting it right?”

“Even less amusing.”

“Then why are you smiling?”

“I am not smiling.”

“You’re trying not to.”

“Contrary to your belief, this is a serious matter.”

“And now you’re very angry with me?” She assumed a mournful expression.

Aureste gazed across the desk into eyes all but identical to his own—large and intense dark beneath strong black brows. Perhaps the brows were a flaw, too emphatic for harmony in a pure oval face otherwise given over to pale delicacy, but they lent her young features vivid individuality. Just now, the great dark eyes shone with a deviltry quite at odds with her apparent contrition. He could never resist that look, and she knew it.

“I should be.” He felt his lips twitch and tried to disguise the slip with a frown, but she caught it.

“Yes, you should, and I’m terribly sorry. I’ll try to do better.” Drawing herself up and pursing her lips, she transformed herself in an instant into a caricature of her uncle Nalio. “From—from—from now on, I promise to be quite—quite—quite perfect.”

This time he could not contain his laughter. When he could speak again, he observed, “You ought to lock you up, you little goblin.”

“*Goblin*? I don’t know if I can live up to that description, but I’ll try.”

“No doubt. I pity the luckless lout who marries you. Poor young Tribari! I wonder if you’ll be able to get around him as easily as you get around your helpless old father.”

“Oh, I do hope so.”

“I suspect the wretch hasn’t a chance.”

“We’ll find out when I finally meet him. What if I hate him?”

“You won’t hate him. I inspected a dozen suitors and chose the best. Your future husband possesses rank, ancient lineage, fortune, intelligence, nobility of character, and yes, a fine appearance. I believe you’ll be pleased.”

“The question wouldn’t arise if only you’d chosen someone here in Vitrisi. I’d have met him by now, and I’d know. I wish you’d done exactly that. I don’t want to live in Orezza anyway. I’d rather stay here.”

“We have already discussed that. The matter is settled.”

“But it’s not too late to reconsider. I could take a local husband and live right here in Vitrisi. You and I could still see each other every day.”

“Once you’re happily married—and better yet, a mother—you’ll find that your feelings change. You’ll no longer be so interested in spending time with your father. You’ll simply be too busy with more important things.”

“That will never happen.” Jianna shook her head so vehemently that her long, glossy hair—of the darkest brown, verging on black—whipped to and fro. “Nothing and nobody will ever be more important.”

“You’ll discover otherwise. It is only nature.” Aureste’s air of certainty disguised a rush of pleasure at her words. “As for your move to Orezza, much as it grieves me to see you go, I’m certain it’s for the best. We of House Belandor are resented here in Vitrisi. Your uncle Nalicio’s concerns are not unfounded. We’ve enemies.”

“That business with House Corvestri goes back generations. Who cares about it now? It’s less a quarrel than a tradition.”

“Don’t deceive yourself. In any case, Corvestri Mansion is hardly the sole source of our enmity.”

“Well, so many people are jealous of you. They were stupid and lost their money in the wars, and now they think that all Faerlonnish ought to be poor and bitter, as if it were some mark of virtue. You were wise, and managed well for our House, and those less intelligent can’t forgive you for it.”

“That is human frailty, I fear.” Aureste studied his daughter. Her confident, open expression reassured him that she still believed this version of history. Perhaps his luck would hold and she would continue to believe it, at least throughout his lifetime; maybe even beyond. Aloud he continued, “I am resolved to guard you against the malice of the ignorant and the envious. You’ll be safest and happiest living outside Vitrisi. And”—he held up one hand to forestall her eager rejoinder—“Orezza is not so far distant that we cannot arrange for frequent visits.”

“It won’t be the same. It won’t be as good.”

“Don’t be so quick to judge. Wait and see.”

“But I’ll miss you so much. And it’s so unnecessary to exile me from home. How should House Belandor fear for her safety in Vitrisi? This is our place, and always has been. It isn’t too late

I'm sure, to open negotiations with one of the good local families. House Challosa, for example. Their oldest son Errsi carried off the trophy at the Prinsanna Run, and I think he may like me."

"What is this?" Aureste eyed his daughter sharply. "What have you to do with the Challosa heir? Has he approached you?"

"No, of course not. I've never spoken to him. It's only that he's looked at me and smiled. He has a very nice smile, with really smashing teeth—"

"Always a paramount concern."

"And he'll always live in Vitrisi. So why don't you just bounce a messenger over to Errsi's father the magnificiari?"

Who would instantly order any Belandor emissary beaten and flung out into the street. No need to apprise Jianna of this disagreeable reality, however; she was better off without it. Aloud, Aureste merely remarked, "It is not so simple as that. The Magnificiari Challosa and we are not on cordial terms."

"Oh, I know that. Errsi's father is one of the poor-but-proud crowd of stiff-necks. But that's just it, you see. They haven't much money, and you're offering such a very generous dowry. Once the Magnificiari Challosa hears about that dowry, he'll set his grudge aside in a flash."

She hadn't any real conception of the depth and strength of Faerlonnish hostility. Sheltered all her life and correspondingly naïve, she perceived only jealous stiff-necks who bore grudges that could be set aside in a flash. She did not understand that the Belandor name was now despised in Vitrisi and beyond, thanks to the Magnifico Aureste. She remained unaware that the doors of the great old city Houses were closed to the daughter of Aureste Belandor. Despite all advantages of wealth and beauty, her only hope of a brilliant marriage lay well outside Vitrisi. She never dreamed that her father had once feared the necessity of marital alliance with a Taerleezi House. She did not know these things because he had carefully cultivated her ignorance, and once safely wed, she need never know.

"The arrangements with House Tribari are complete," he told her. "The terms and conditions have been agreed upon, and there is no possibility of alteration."

"But why not, Father?" Jianna was unaccustomed to flat refusal. Frowning, she folded her arms. "I don't see why not. There's been no marriage contract, no ceremony, nothing irrevocable. If you choose to make me happy, you can still—"

"Jianna. That will do. The subject is closed." Aureste spoke with unwonted coldness.

Her eyes widened in genuine astonishment at his tone, then filled with tears. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice. "I didn't mean to make you angry."

"I'm not angry." He melted at once. "Listen, my dear, and try to believe that I'm doing what's best for you. Do you trust your father?" He waited for her to nod before continuing. "You'll have a happy, safe, comfortable life. No calumny or accusation will touch you. You will be cherished, and honored; you'll have everything in the world that you want. You will see me often as long as I live, and when I am gone you'll inherit considerable wealth. I've done much to preserve that wealth through the wars, and it has all been for you. Now, don't you think you can manage to reconcile yourself to such a fate?"

"Well, when you put it that way." Her smile crept back. Her tears were gone in an instant as if they had never been. She was still like a child in that way. "I'll be good, then. You've always known what's best for me. No more arguments."

“There’s my butterfly. Now don’t you have a dress fitting or some such feminine mystery to engage your attention?”

“Is that your tactful paternal way of telling me to go away?”

“In a word, yes. I’m expecting a visitor shortly.”

“Who?”

“No one you’d know.”

“Sounds mysterious.”

“Someone to present a full account of the latest meeting of the City Council. There is a reordering of the committees in progress.”

“Oh, a *boring* mystery.”

“I fear that you would find it so. Flutter off, then. Go enjoy yourself.”

“I will. Only first—” Rounding the desk, she bent her slim form to plant a quick kiss on his cheek. “Love you, Father.”

He responded in kind, then watched as she exited the study, struck as always by the easy active grace of her movements. Which would shortly vanish from his house and his sight along with her voice, her laughter, and her impossibly trusting eyes. Her absence would leave an unimaginable void. Life without her would be—

Grey. Old.

He pushed such thoughts from him, for melancholia of temperament did not number among his failings. Jianna’s departure was all for the best; she would be far safer outside of Vitris. Moreover, there were certain compensations to be found, for his daughter’s removal eliminated one of the few major constraints upon his scope of action, and the pleasures of renewed liberty were already beginning to manifest themselves. One of the greatest was imminent.

There came another knock at the study door, and this time the expected visitor appeared; a woman neither old nor young, tall nor short, pretty nor ugly. Her hands were tolerably well tended, but not fine. A long cloak of grey-brown frieze disguised her figure. The hood, pulled well forward, concealed her hair and shadowed her face. The woman hesitated on the threshold in the manner of a servant or petitioner.

“Come in. You are my guest.” Aureste produced the encouraging smile reserved for those he did not wish to intimidate immediately.

She advanced with caution.

“Please be seated.” He sketched a hospitable gesture.

She perched on the extreme edge of the chair across the desk from him.

“Some refreshment, perhaps? Cake? Wine?”

“No. Nothing. Thank you, sir. Honored Magnifico, I mean.”

“You are quite comfortable, my good Brivvia?”

“Oh yes, Honored Magnifico. Very comfortable indeed, thank you kindly, sir.” She fidgeted.

“You are most welcome. And now, having concluded the amiable preliminaries, let us attend to business. None of your Corvestri household is aware of your presence in my home?”

“Never, sir. Major domo and the others, they all think I’m off about some errand for my lady at the glover’s. Nobody spotted me coming here.”

“Good. What have you to report, then? Come, tell me what you have found.”

“Well, sir.” Brivvia darted a quick look at him. “Not too much. I mean, I sniffed around like you told me. I hunted high and low. No telling what would have happened if Major domo or even one of the cleaning girls had spotted me, but they didn’t. And it all came to nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“That’s the way it went, sir.”

“I am disappointed,” Aureste observed gently.

“Sorry, sir.”

“Are you really?” He had addressed the same question to his own daughter not half an hour earlier, but this time the effect was different. Allowing the full weight of his black gaze to press upon her, he watched the round olive face trying hard not to crumple.

“Honored Magnifico, I tried, truly I did. I poked around in places it scared me to meddle with. The master’s desk drawers. In among his clothes and personal things. Under the bedding in his room. I even checked the pockets of his gown when he was in the bath. No good. I didn’t come up with anything like what you want.”

“I see.” Aureste reflected, then inquired, “And his workroom?”

Her eyes slid away. She said nothing.

“Am I to assume you neglected to investigate your master’s workroom? Answer me.”

“It’s locked.”

“Hardly an insurmountable obstacle to a woman of your resources.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” Her grimace of misery suggested otherwise.

Aureste did not trouble to reply.

After another moment’s unendurable silence, she burst out, “Please, sir, don’t make me go into the master’s workroom. I don’t know what he does in there, and I don’t want to know. Just let me stay out of it.”

“This is idle chatter. Come, you know your duty.”

“You call it that!”

“Do you argue with me?”

“No, Honored Magnifico. Forgive me, sir. Only—” She cast about for an effective objection. “It’s not so easy. The door’s always locked, and the master keeps the only key with him all the time. Also, there’s always servants hanging about that corridor.”

“You will find a way. I’ve every confidence in your abilities.”

“And then,” the woman continued, “even if I managed to get in there, ’tisin’t likely that I’ll find the kind of papers you’re wanting, sir. Master probably burnt ’em. Or maybe,” she ventured, “there were never any to begin with.”

“That is an unhappy possibility,” Aureste conceded pensively. “But hardly a disaster that I can confront unprepared. Conscience will not permit me to entrust such a matter to the whims of Fortune, and therefore I have devised a secondary stratagem. One moment.” On the desk to the near at hand stood a carved wooden coffer fitted with elaborate gold mounts. The lid, in its central boss, once displaying the incised initials of the original owner, had been chiseled away decades earlier. Over the course of the years, the exposed raw wood had darkened almost to black. Lifting the damaged lid, the magnifico withdrew a paper packet, which he placed before his guest. “There. Take it.”

“What is that?” She did not move.

“Evidence. Correspondence connecting your master Vinz Corvestri to the Faerlonnish resistance movement. You will take this packet and tack it to the underside of a drawer in your master’s desk. Thereafter you will continue your investigations, which will include a thorough search of Corvestri’s workroom.”

“Honored Magnifico, if you don’t mind my asking, if you’ve already got these papers you want, then why not just turn ’em in to the Taerleezi authorities and have done?”

“The case against your master will be stronger if the documents are discovered within the confines of Corvestri Mansion.”

“Well, then what d’you need any more papers for? Why should I have to go snooping around my master’s workroom when—” Her expression altered as reality dawned. Eyeing the packet with round-eyed disfavor, she accused, “You’ve *diddled* ’em, haven’t you?”

“Diddled?”

“It’s a cheat! They’re fake. Honored Magnifico, you *forged* ’em.”

“Not personally. I do not flatter myself with the delusion that I possess the necessary skill

“You’d rather get your hands on the real article if I can find it for you, but if not, then these fakes—”

“Will serve. Quite right. I knew I could rely upon your understanding.”

“I understand better than I want, sir. This is low and dirty, this is. I don’t like it.”

“I appreciate your delicacy, but trust you will not allow it to deter you.”

“I don’t know. The master isn’t a bad fellow. He doesn’t deserve such a rat job.”

“Ah, but he richly deserves such a rat job, Brivvia. Your master Vinz Corvestri is in league with the Faerlonnish resistance. That is a statement of fact. He has subsidized numerous illicit endeavors, and is therefore responsible for the destruction of property and the loss of priceless human life. Indeed, it grieves me to think of it.” Aureste shook his head. “He must be stopped. In assisting me, you serve justice and you serve your community. It is a highly moral act. You see that, don’t you?”

“I see just fine. Just fine.” She took a breath as if intending to say more then looked into his eyes and lowered her own at once.

“I expected no less.” He smiled warmly and waited. After a moment, she plucked the packet from the desk and stowed it away under her cloak. “Good. That is settled, then. And now, as to the other matter—”

“Oh, no. No, sir. Don’t ask me. It isn’t right.”

“My good woman—”

“Yes, I do still have some goodness left in me, believe it or not, and I don’t want to do it!”

“Come, this is a trifle. You’ve already consented to worse.”

“Maybe worse, but not so *improper*.”

“Good woman, must I remind you that there are many who would find that brand upon your shoulder *improper*, should the matter come to light?”

“That shoulder was burnt near twenty years ago! I was still a child!”

“A child and a thief.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong in all the years since!”

“So you insist. But the brand is still as sharp and clear as the day that iron met your flesh. What would your mistress say were she to learn that her maid bears the mark of a convicted felon?”

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