

The Messenger



R. C. Smith

The Messenger
by R. C. Smith

www.rc-smith.net

First published 2017
This edition: 10/2021

The text is licensed under a Creative Commons CC-BY license:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Credit must be given to the creator.

Audio book read by Luxie Maxwell

<https://luxiemaxwell.carrd.co>

The audio recording is licensed under a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND
license: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Credit must be given to the creator (this applies to the author and the reader).

Only noncommercial uses of the work are permitted.

No derivatives or adaptations of the work are permitted.

The cover uses a photo by Tom Robertson on Unsplash

<https://unsplash.com/@tomasrobertson>

Do not read this text if you are offended by descriptions of sexuality and violence.
The author asks you not to read it just for those descriptions, either.

Other texts by R. C. Smith can be found on www.rc-smith.net

The e-books “Herons and Heroines” and “The Journey” can also be found on the
author’s page at the Dunyazad Digital Library,
www.dunyazad-library.net/authors/rc-smith.htm

TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Audio Book	4
Author's Foreword	5
Part I: The Pupil	
1. The Bey	6
2. The Tutor	8
3. The Father	16
4. The Khan	24
5. The Queen	29
Interlude: The Heron	32
Part II: The Messenger	
The Teller	34
The Tale	38

THE AUDIO BOOK

The audio book is narrated by Luxie Maxwell

The Interlude is narrated by the author

Part I: The Pupil

01. — Chapter 1: The Bey	5:43
02. — Chapter 2: The Tutor	22:50
03. — Chapter 3: The Father	21:22
04. — Chapter 4: The Khan	11:08
05. — Chapter 5: The Queen	5:52

Interlude:

06. — The Heron	5:04
-----------------	------

Part II: The Messenger

07. — The Teller	7:16
08. — The Tale (1)	17:09
09. — The Tale (2)	16:52
10. — The Tale (3)	11:07
11. — The Tale (4)	16:22
12. — The Tale (5)	4:28

Part I	67 min
Interlude + Part II	73 min
Total	140 min

AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

I wrote the first part of *The Messenger* (which didn't have that title then) in early 2015. Sabrina said she wanted more of it, but, to me, the story had been told. It was more than a year before I had the idea for the second part. I wrote the *Interlude* and the first half of the second part in late 2016. Though, more or less, I knew how to continue, as so often, I procrastinated — there was no hurry, after all, was there? — and when I finally wrote the final part, in March 2017, knowing at the end that time was running out but not aware of how fast, it was too late. She has never read it.

Neither the fictitious name *Al-Magest*, nor the titles *Bey* and *Khan*, as they are used here, are meant to suggest any realistic geographical or historical background of this story.

The Stardock jewels that appear in *The Messenger* reverently refer to Fritz Leiber's story *Stardock*, which is included in the fourth volume of the Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser series, *Swords Against Wizardry*.

PART I: THE PUPIL

1.

The Bey

What I remember most clearly from my first visit to the Bey is not the huge garden with its statues, fountains and flower beds, not the magnificent facade of the palace with its marble columns and its gold-covered turrets, not the grand staircase with its cordon of guards on each side, grim-faced motionless men in leather, their hands on their shiny swords, it is not the audience hall with its stained glass windows, its elaborately laid parquet floor, its precious carpets, its crystal flower vases, its gilded candelabra, its sumptuous upholstered chairs and benches, not the Bey's exquisitely carved silver-studded ebony throne, and not the imposing figure of the Bey himself — all this I remember, but from my later visits, not many of them, always in the company of my father, first as a child, unnoticed by the Bey, later, when my breasts had started to form, eyed by him, with cursory interest, but never explicitly acknowledged, never spoken to. No, what I remember from this first visit is the girl. My father's meetings with the Bey always were private audiences, there were very few people present, one or two of the Bey's advisors, a servant at a discreet distance, a few guards who kept to the background, after having searched my father for hidden weapons — at my first visit it certainly had been the same, but, as I've said, I do not remember it. I only remember *her*. Naked, of course. I think now that she must have been a recent present to the Bey. Naked, slim, fair-skinned, small-breasted. All her hair was shorn, on her body

and her head, even her eyebrows and her eyelashes. Both her arms were cut off at her shoulders. Her lips and her labia were sewn shut. She did not look deformed, though, the amputations and the sewing had been done carefully, with attention to her delicate beauty. She reclined, almost comfortably it seemed, utterly immobile, with one leg sideways to allow the viewer's gaze to travel between her thighs, on a small rug-covered recamier. What I remember most about her are her eyes. Huge, dark, wide open, unblinking, they looked at me, her huge dark eyes looked into mine, and I looked back at her, my whole body as immobile as she was, for the whole time that my father and I stayed with the Bey, or so it seems to me in my memory. Even then I understood that the Bey had made her a token not so much of his power, but of his spiritual sublimity, his elevation above the profanities of common human needs — he could afford, without missing something, without thinking twice, on a whim, to take away such a beautiful girl's hands, mouth and vagina, to take away all her *uses*, to have his acceptance of her uselessness displayed. Only later did I understand that her suffering was her use for him. But even then, on this first visit, as our eyes locked, young as I was, I felt a strange stirring between my legs. I saw her only one more time, a few weeks later. I noticed the differences. She was still beautiful, but she had lost weight — restricted to liquid food, she was more skinny now than slim — but what had changed most were her eyes. They were still huge but they were not dark anymore, they were bright, shining, sparkling, reflecting the dancing flames on the candelabra, and they were not looking into mine anymore. They were not looking anywhere at all, they had been replaced by exquisitely cut crystals. I do not remember if I kept looking at her, or if I turned my gaze away — maybe this audience only lasted a few minutes, as some of the later ones did — but I remember that when

we left, before anyone could stop me, I walked over to her and ever so lightly touched her, with the tips of my fingers, on her thigh. And I remember that in this night, when I touched myself, I had my first orgasm.

2.

The Tutor

As I have said, I never saw that girl again, nor did I see any other one like her, nothing ever reminded me of her when my father took me with him on his visits to the Bey, but of course I did not need to be reminded, and I did not need to be at the Bey's palace to think of her, I thought of her all the time. To the Bey, obviously, she had just been an idea, a fancy, something to be tried out once, to be savored for a moment, to be dismissed, to be followed by the next idea, the next fancy, and yes, in his gardens, at his palace, over the years, I did see some of those, who meant not more nor less to him than she had done. To me, they meant nothing — they were part of the scenery, they lived, they suffered, they died, under eagerly watchful eyes or alone and forgotten — but she, she, she had become my obsession. I learned to stay still. To take off my clothes, to recline on a not too uncomfortable piece of furniture, in a not too uncomfortable but revealing pose, to keep my eyes open, and to stay still. There was no one to reveal myself to, there was no one into whose eyes to lock my gaze, I looked into emptiness, into a corner of my large room with its sparse furniture, high ceiling, large windows, bare walls onto which the sun drew its patterns, shadows of the huge old trees outside, but I defied the temptation to look at the patterns as they moved, as the wind blew through the leaves and branches, as the sun moved slowly across

the sky — I looked into nothingness, as I stayed still, as I looked into her eyes, into her dark eyes, and into her crystal ones. Sometimes, though it scared me, I settled down opposite the big mirror and, for hours, looked into my own eyes. I never sewed my lips or my labia, but, occasionally, to prove to myself that I could, I pierced them with sewing needles. I had my two arms, but I learned to get through whole days pretending they were gone, not using them, keeping them tucked away behind my back, though sometimes I cheated. I had my eyes, real ones, not crystal ones, but sometimes I kept them closed, for a whole day, and I cheated only rarely. I did not shave my head, but for my sessions of staying still I hid my long dark-blond not quite golden hair underneath a plain white scarf, and when the hair on my body began to grow, between my legs and underneath my arms, I regularly removed it, with the wax from molten candles. The most important thing to me, though, the essence of my being her, was to be absolutely still, for hours. When I had gotten through a particularly demanding self-imposed task without cheating, I rewarded myself by touching myself between my thighs. Sometimes, though not always, I did it in front of the mirror.

I had time for these games, I was alone most of the time. My mother had died not long after my birth, I have no memory of her. Her tomb is in a hidden corner of our garden. There is a whispered rumor that her voice had been heard from the tomb for many days after my father had buried her there. The tomb is built of granite, only half immersed into the earth, with small ventilation holes in its padlocked heavy and now rusted iron door, so she might have been heard had she still lived, but I have never met anyone who whispered that they had heard her themselves, only that they had heard the tale. I have always shunned that part of the garden, but then, I mostly stayed inside the

house anyway, where it was cool, and safe, and quiet, and where I had my privacy. My father was gone most of the time, on his voyages, trading, or on one of his missions for the Bey. We only had a small staff of four — three women and a man, none of them of any interest to me — for the large garden and the house, which was big and old and not in the best repair and gave them enough work to do, so they were happy enough to disobey my father's orders and obey mine instead, which were to keep me alone as much as possible, and never, ever, intrude on me without warning and outside our prearranged times and locations. It helped that I knew, and they knew that I knew, that they were lazy and kept long breaks when my father was away, and (as I soon found out) regularly cheated with grocery and maintenance bills. It really was an arrangement to both their and my own benefit. Food they were to leave in an anteroom of my quarters — the staff lived in an outbuilding, and the house was large enough, with my father and me as the sole occupants, for me to have my own suite of rooms. From time to time I let them in to clean my rooms. They always praised me for how tidy I kept them, and how I always carefully put away all my toys. I had many toys, my father was quite generous in this regard, from every journey he brought me pretty dolls in garments of precious fabrics, and doll houses, and carved animals, and wooden ships, and carts with real wheels, and castles complete with warriors, handmaids, artisans, court-jesters, princesses, princes, towers, turrets, balconies, draw-bridges, dungeons, and moats. It was little effort for me to keep all my toys neatly stowed away, for I never played with them and never took them out.

When my father decided it was time for me to have a tutor I was worried, but I soon found out that I had nothing to fear from him. He was a young priest, looking even younger than what his years must

have been, lean, tall, dark-haired, mild-voiced, mild-mannered, mild-faced, and dressed in a black cassock. A castrate, as fit his profession, but, while having a melodious contralto voice, he showed nothing of the physical features, softness, flabbiness, obesity, that are generally believed to go with the loss of the male sexual organs — and he had lost them completely, by his own hands, and proud of it, penis and testicles, as I later had ample opportunity to see. I was happy to find out, almost on the first day, that he was as uncomfortable with the idea of our spending eight hours a day together, six days a week, for the benefit of my education, as I was. The agreement that we soon reached was that we had one meeting Monday morning, where he told me the syllabus for the week, and a second meeting Saturday evening where he satisfied himself, mostly by trusting my assertions, that I had mastered it. What he did in the time between I neither knew nor cared about, but what I did, unencumbered by annoying watchful or helpful eyes, but with full access to my father's huge library, was to read and to learn. When I was through with my week's curriculum (usually by Monday afternoon), I grabbed whatever books attracted my fancy, and eagerly absorbed whatever they had to offer me. I spent less time now sitting absolutely still and staring at empty corners, or into my own eyes in the mirror, though I still did it, but many more hours I now spent sitting still and staring into books. Still naked, of course. I could not sit *absolutely* still, for my eyes had to move as I read, and I could not pretend not to have arms and hands as I needed them to hold the books and turn their pages, but I pretended they were not part of my body, they were purely some ingenious mechanical devices for book-reading, and I could not use them for anything else, like, for scratching myself when some spot on my skin itched, or for holding a glass of water to my mouth when I got thirsty — violations of sitting still

that were not allowed anyway, but being without my arms made it easier to resist the temptation. And as before, to that other temptation, when I had been good at keeping my own rules, I often gave in, with almost as little motion, and with the same solemnity, and patience.

The change that came was sudden and unexpected. All those hours of sitting still, learning, reading, or silently abandoning myself to self-absorbed passion, demanded a compensation, and about twice a day I raced up and down stairs at full speed, along corridors, through flights of rooms, ending up in my bedroom where I threw myself upon my bed, against my bed, beating and kicking with all my force whatever soft targets it offered of mattresses, pillows and blankets, until I fell down exhausted, covered in sweat, utterly out of breath, but strangely exulted. If the house-keepers, whom I did my best to avoid, ever knew about it, they never mentioned it (and of course I never did it during the rare weeks when my father was at home). As a matter of course I kept these exercises from my tutor — like my exercises in immobility, like masturbating, like my own thoughts and dreams, this was part of my private life, not meant for the eyes of an intruder, and he would not have been less an intruder than anybody else. Until, one day, I made a mistake, or maybe he did — strangely, I never tried to work out exactly how it happened — one day, he was in my sitting-room, the room in which we usually met, and through the open door to my bedroom he saw my breathless violent desperate cushion attack. I became aware of him only after I had exhausted myself, and realized that he had stood there, watching me, for quite a while. I looked at him in horror. Too weak to scream, too weak to run, too weak to grab some clothes and hide my nakedness, all I wanted to do was die. I knew I had nothing to *fear* from him, I hadn't done anything evil or forbidden, but I had been *invaded*, and nothing could ever undo that, could it? I looked

at him in horror, and I expected his face to show silent contempt, suppressed or open ridicule, blank incomprehension, concern, guilt, embarrassment, denial, before turning away and leaving me to my misery — as the seconds passed, I pleaded with him, silently, to leave, but he did not turn, nor did his face betray any emotions. The silence, the tension, became unbearable. “You do not know how to fight,” he finally said. Of course I didn’t, even though I had leafed through some books of martial arts. “Do you want to *learn*?” I do not remember when I had last cried before, or if I ever had, but now I cried, and I did not feel ashamed. I did not really understand why I cried, either. “Yes,” I said, “I want to.” “We begin, then,” he said, taking off his cassock, underneath which he was naked. I wanted to protest, I was exhausted, I was emotionally shaken, I was not prepared, surely we could wait until tomorrow? But I knew that at this moment I had learned my first lesson, and I looked at him, and he bowed to me, and with as earnest a face as his, I returned his bow.

From that day on, my life changed. We exercised twice a day, three hours each, six days a week, except for the irregular intervals of time when my tutor was taking his leave — and, of course, except when my father was present, who, fortunately, showed little interest in the details and the progress of my education. (His interest in me, incidental enough as it was, was of a very different kind, after all.) We exercised with dummies which we built from blankets, pillows and cords, but mostly we exercised with each other. I learned the five paths — the path of the mind, the path of the body, the path of environment, the path of the opponent, the path of combat. “By teaching you the five paths, by teaching them to anyone outside the brotherhood, I break a solemn oath,” he once told me. We had never spoken more than the absolutely necessary before, and we still did not speak much, but

unavoidably we were closer to each other now. Before, I had not even cared about what to call him, now I asked him for his name — I was still very young, I was not aware that his name might not be the correct form of address. “Call me Al-Magest,” he said. I looked it up at my father’s library, it meant something like “the master, the source of knowledge.” It was good enough for me, my tutor had a name now, I never showed him but secretly I was proud of it. He hardly spoke about himself, and I never asked, but I learned that he was an exile, of his country, of his family, of the brotherhood — wherever, and whatever, they were. Even less I learned about his present life — like, where he went and what he did when he took his leaves, or even where he lived (which my father must have known, I suppose, but I never asked *him*, either). We did not have time for idle talk, of course — my training, incessantly exploring the limits of my physical and mental powers, transgressing them, expanding them, testing them anew, took all our time and breath. He never spared me, my body was constantly covered in cuts and bruises, and more than once I suffered broken bones (which he taught me how to treat, as he taught me many other healing skills) — I took up weird ostentatious sports, like climbing trees in our garden, falling down with conspicuous clumsiness, to account for my injuries when I feared they might become too noticeable even to casual and uninterested observers. During all the time, I never flinched, I never hesitated. I took my lessons with the same determination with which I had exercised immobility, and I still saw before me the still and silent armless girl with her dark and crystal eyes.

I learned. The years passed, and I learned, and I grew up. By the time when my father took me with him for the final visit to the Bey, my breasts had already grown to the size where I wished they would stop growing — I had never found large breasts to be beautiful or de-

sirable. The Bey, I suppose, felt differently, for he looked at me with a discernible lack of enthusiasm, as I stood before him naked. This had been the purpose of the visit, to let him look at me. Except for my too small breasts, I think I didn't look that bad, though. Even my skin was mostly unblemished and unbruised, as Al-Magest had left several weeks ago, and not yet returned. I kept up my exercises in his absence, but, bereft of a training partner, mostly regarding the first two paths, mental and physical self-control, and they didn't bruise me that much. My knowledge of the third and the fourth path helped me, without *doing* anything (and there wasn't much I could have done), to pass the Bey's scrutiny. "She will do," he said. Maybe it would have been better for me if I wouldn't have done, if I hadn't passed — should I have tried to fail? *Could* I have failed if I had tried to? I do not know, but as I stood there I was very sure that, whatever bad not failing might bring me, failing would easily have brought me worse.

So, whatever my own part in it finally had or hadn't been, "she will do" it was. I would do as the Khan's wife. As *one* of the Khan's wives, of course, but as his main wife, his public wife, for one year. The Khan took a new wife each year, from one of the provinces, to strengthen their ties with their ruler, to proudly display, for everybody to be seen, the unity of his empire, embodied in his august person. Why I had been chosen I did not know, but there probably had not been that many girls to choose from, once the Khan's decision had fallen upon our province for this year. The Khan's bride must come from a good and well-connected family, but not so good and well-connected that others might view their promotion to being the Khan's new in-laws as a threat to themselves — my father, I think, fit this perfectly. She must be young, but not *too* young, she must be reasonably pretty, she must be unattached — a teary-eyed bride lamenting the separation from her

lover would be a nuisance — and she must be educated and confident enough to be presentable, to be able to perform her representational duties. And, it was the Bey who had to choose her and approve of her, and who would suffer the consequences if he chose badly — so, given that he knew me, and given his close ties with my father (of what nature they were, I never knew), I seem to have been a logical choice. There were no further questions, no further tests, my father must have vouched for me.

We left the next day. I did not regret leaving my home, I had never really considered it my home anyway. I regretted that I could not say good-bye to my tutor. “Will you do it for me?” I asked my father. “If I see him,” he replied. There was one more question I had. “What will be after that year?” I asked, as we set sail. “Do not worry, they will find some use for you,” my father reassured me.

3.

The Father

The voyage across the sea, on one of my father’s merchant ships, took three days, or three weeks, or three months — three moments, three eternities, three times to learn. The cabin I shared with my father — his cabin, on his ship — was small, simply furnished, and fitted the austere personality that my father had made himself to be, or had made himself up to be. Ten by twelve feet, a bed, a bench, a table, two chairs, a cupboard, a chest of drawers, a washstand, a door, a small porthole near the ceiling, an oil lamp, two chamber pots, a flap next to the door for putting them out when they were filled, blankets, a few pillows, some plates, cups and cutlery, a jar with water, a bottle with wine, a huge trunk with our baggage. The furniture, the floor, the walls and the

ceiling were from the same wood, nondescript, dark, sturdy, stained. This was our room. For the whole voyage, except for one occasion, one that I would have preferred to avoid, this was where I stayed, to where I was confined.

“Three lessons you will have to learn,” my father told me, after we had come aboard and settled into our cabin — three lessons, three skills I needed to possess, before becoming the wife, if only temporarily, of the most powerful man in the Empire. I took off my clothes, and my father locked them into the trunk.

The first skill I had to learn was how to please a man. So far, my father had often enough pleased himself with me, and in various ways, but on these occasions all I had to do was to allow him the unimpeded use of my body, and not to interfere with his seeking of pleasures. This was, I think, what he preferred, not only from me but from any woman he sexually employed, but more than silently indulging passivity would be expected from the Khan’s wife, and, whatever his personal preferences were, my father was competent enough as a teacher. The sea was calm, I hardly felt the movements of the ship, I ate, I slept, I learned. I hardly felt the passing of time. What I learned was to use each single part of my body for a man’s sexual benefit — my fingers, finger tips, finger nails, toes, toe nails, hands and feet, arms, ankles and thighs, my hair, my forehead, my eyelids, eyelashes, cheeks, nose, lips, teeth, tongue, my throat, my shoulders, my armpits, my nipples, my breasts, my belly, my back, my ass, my vulva, my vagina — I learned to use them tenderly and with force, to do the expected and the unexpected, to grip and to release, to give and to withhold, to arouse, to tease, to satisfy, and to arouse again, while never, never, ever seeking gratification for myself, or allowing it to happen. This, sometimes, seemed the hardest part, though at other times it was easy enough. The only male

body, the only penis to practice with, was my father's. The sailors and the captain could not contribute to my education, because I had to remain pure, for my future husband. My father had brought a small blue flacon from which, unless it was time for us to rest, he poured a few drops of a colorless liquid into the palm of his left hand and licked it up after he had ejaculated, which allowed him to continue my lessons with little interruptions. He told me, but only once, that this potion put a great strain on his body, that it drained his life from him, that it could cost him years of his life, that he was doing it for me. Not feeling grateful to him would have been unkind.

The second skill that I had to learn, to make me a worthy wife for the Khan, after I had sufficiently mastered the first one, was to bear pain without flinching. After I had mastered the first part of my education to my teacher's sufficient satisfaction, this second part seemed to demand very little from me. My father would not do any damage to my body that might still be visible when I would be handed over to the Khan, so the pain I had to bear was mostly that of needles, even if my father knew how to use them with good effect, upon my nipples, my clitoris, or underneath my toe- and fingernails. I had to learn, he told me, to stay still, without movement, without a sound, when the pain threatened, when it approached, when it set in, when it grew and lasted and did not stop growing, but staying still was what I had already learned, what had filled a major part of my life, all those years since he had first taken me to see the Bey. And pain, I shrugged it off, it was just pain, an opinion held by a part of my mind, which I simply disagreed with, disengaged from, as I had learned to do, over the years, in my fighting lessons, of which my father had never known. But then, just before I felt complacency to set in at how easily I mastered this task, just before I began to wonder if by not showing a need to learn

I might be upsetting my father's educational program and if, for his benefit, I should let him hear a suppressed moan every now and then or let him see an involuntary ever so tiny twitch of my face or my hands or whatever part of my body his needles were about to go in, just then I learned that I had to learn, after all. "It's no good if you block out the pain," he said, "you have to admit it, allow it, feel it, and still not flinch." And then, when he held the tip of an awl against my exposed clit, when he slowly but steadily increased the pressure, when his arm strained, when the awl's slightly bent tip carved a deepening dent into me where it hurt most, when it finally broke through the skin and entered me and twisted and entered deeper and kept twisting, then I allowed the pain, and it washed over me in a sea of flaming agony, engulfed my whole body, overwhelmed me with its unexpectedness, turned me inside out, washed me away, threw me against a rock of splintered glass and let me lie with broken bones and a broken mind, and I welcomed it, and embraced it, and invited it in, and clung to it, and refused to let it go, and when, after a far too long eternity, the flames had subsided and my mind and body had again composed themselves, and I found myself where I had been before it had started, my father said, "You closed your eyes for a moment, but otherwise you have done well."

"Let me try again," I said, and he let me.

~

If I could have chosen one of the three lessons to avoid, it would have been the third one. Not because my father said it would be the hardest — I knew it wouldn't be that hard for me, but it was a lesson I didn't feel I needed, and this made it seem so pointless, such a waste. From the cargo of twenty-four slave girls I had to choose one who would

die — slowly and painfully, while the others had to watch, and while I would watch, too. Now that I had learned to bear my own pain, according to my father, I had to learn to bear that of others. “But they are your merchandise,” I said to him, in a pointless attempt at dissuasion, “they are *valuable*, aren’t they?” “Less than you are,” my father replied. “You are worth the expenditure. Education comes at a price. What do you think Al-Magest has cost me?” For a short moment I thought he meant he had *bought* him, but he was talking about my tutor’s fee, all those years. But, I suddenly understood at this moment, the Khan *had* bought me. My price certainly covered my upbringing, my education — the part my father had ordered, and the part he didn’t know about — and a hefty surcharge. I had been an investment, which had paid off, or would pay off if the Khan was satisfied with the deal. A dead slave girl was a negligible quantity in this business. When he asked me if I was ready, I said yes, and we went. It was the first time that I left our cabin since we had come aboard. My father did not want me to be naked in front of the crew. I put on a simple white linen dress. I hadn’t taken much clothing with me, or much of anything.

I knew that slaves often suffered terrible conditions on board of merchant ships, but on this ship this was not the case, at least not for the girls. The cabin in which they were kept was some ten feet wide and fifty feet long, and it was above the water line — on one side it had portholes through which light and fresh air came in. On each of the long sides there was a bench on which twelve girls were sitting next to each other, naked of course, their wrists chained to bolts above their heads, their ankles chained to bolts on the floor, their mouths gagged. All but one that is, who was their minder. Except during the night watch she was unchained, and she had a key to the locks — not to the door, of course — and one girl after the other, three times a day, was

unchained by her for fifteen minutes, during which she could take out her gag, stretch out her cramped limbs, sit down on a small table at one end of the cabin to a mug of water and a bowl of not very appetizing but nourishing mush, relieve herself over a hole at the opposite end, and, once a day, clean herself head to toes with a wet towel. The sailors were not allowed to touch them — all they could do was watch them through several small windows — and only the captain and the officers, every now and then, entered the cabin to enhance a chained girl's diet with their sperm.

And in this cabin I stood now, accompanied by my father, and several of the sailors. It struck me how similar the girls looked — long black hair, white skin, supple limbs, slim waists, large firm breasts — they looked as if someone had chosen a model, and ordered two dozens of the same type. Maybe this was how it was, or maybe it was just this year's fashion in girls. Only their faces were different, and their expressions. They knew why we were here, why I was here. I should have chosen quickly, randomly, to get it over with, but I looked from one to the other. In some faces I saw defiance, in some I saw apathy, in some I saw fear, in some I saw sorrow or even tears, some seemed to be close to fainting. Some avoided my eyes, some looked down, some looked at me pleadingly, some stoically, some tried to charm me with a smile. It was not only death I'd bring to one of them, but hours, many hours, of unspeakable agony. The silence stretched. "This one," I finally said, pointing to the one whose sad despondent expression had told me that she had already known, had always known, that the choice would fall upon her.

The men unchained her and removed her gag, then they gave her a potion to drink that would paralyze her vocal cords — her screams would be silent. While we waited for the potion to take effect she knelt

before us, thin, pale, slightly trembling, resigned. One of the men pinched her nipple, hard, and she opened her mouth, but only a light wheezing sound came out of it. It was time then, and she knew it, and her soundless scream rang in my ears, and in that of the other girls. About the men's ears, I do not know.

The first thing they did was to break her arms and legs, then they laid her down on the floor — only now I saw how dark with stains it was — and began to rape her, some of them not paying attention whether they caused agony in her broken limbs, others paying attention and deliberately straining and twisting them, and when they were through the others came and raped her, one after the other, and by the time *they* were through, some of the first ones had already regained their strength and raped her anew, and then, when they had satisfied themselves, they brought out their knives — strange knives with blades that were curved at their ends, sharp-edged on the inner sides of the curves — and, wielding them like huge claws, not stopping the rapes, they began to cut her, to rip her apart — slowly, expertly, not letting her die, not yet, not yet. “You can stop it,” my father said, had already said it before it had begun. He sat next to me, we had been given two stools to sit on, he did not participate in the rapes and tortures. “You can stop her pain, her torture, at any time, by simply walking away. When you leave, she dies. She suffers only as long as you stay and watch her suffer.” Hours passed. She tried not to move, as every movement increased her agony, she could not scream or speak, but her eyes spoke of her pain. I did not walk away, because I knew it was a test — learning my lesson meant I had to stay, and meant that I had to understand that I had to stay; had I failed, the lesson would have been repeated, with a different girl. But I also did not walk away because, as I had known, it was not that hard for me pass this test.

In the books from my father's library, without flinching, I had seen worse. By the time that the potion began to lose its effect she was too weak to make much sound, and ultimately, her eyes now gone, too, she became unresponsive to the men, the blades, and the pain, and, at last, they carried her away — to the galley, I suppose, where the cook would find a final use for her — and they wiped the blood from the floor.

It was too late in the day now to have the girls unchained, one after the other, so they missed the day's noon and evening meals, but the one who was their minder went to each one now with a cup and gave her water to drink, and cleaned up under her if she had not been able to contain her bowels. None of them looked at me now. Did they detest me for having caused the death of one of theirs? Did they silently thank me for having chosen *her* and spared *them*? Had the many hours of the agonizing spectacle drained all emotions from them? They did not turn their heads as my father and I left their cabin, and returned to our own, where a meal waited for us, and the night.

~

The remaining days of the voyage we mostly spent in silence. I had learned my lessons, or given a good enough impression of having learned them, there was nothing more on my father's agenda. He did not seem to be inclined to talk about the future that awaited me, or about any other topic, and neither was I. Among the few possessions I had with me — if they still were my possessions, if they ever had been — there were a few books, and I spent the time reading.

We arrived on a late evening. I saw little of the harbor, except that it was big, and I saw even less, or nothing, of the town. My father led me directly from our cabin to a carriage that waited for us where the ship had docked, and in which we were the only passengers. The windows

were hung with dark drapes, as we drove from the harbor to the Khan's palace. It was for my future husband to show me his country, his town, or whatever parts of them he might choose for me to see, if he chose so. It was for him now to decide where I would be, what I would do, what would be done with me, and what I would get to see, and some of it, without a doubt, would not be pleasant.

We left the carriage in a dark hall, where mine and my father's ways separated. A valet led me to my room. It was larger than our cabin on the ship, but windowless, and even more sparsely furnished. Comfortable enough for a prison cell, though. A cup with water on a small table, a candle, a chair, a chamber pot, a bed. I drank the water, put my dress on the chair, used the chamber pot, blew out the candle, and lay down upon the bed to sleep. I did not know when the wedding would be — assuming there *would* be an official ceremony — but I knew that the Khan would call for me in the morning. They would give me breakfast and a chance to wash before bringing me in to him, wouldn't they?

4.

The Khan

The Khan received me on the small bed in his huge private bedroom with its thick carpets. There was no conversation, there was only one purpose to my visit, there was only him, and my body. So this was it, now, this was what I had learned for. Soon he was breathing heavily, while I was silently debating my guilt.

I had read all the stories about the brave maiden slayers of strong and powerful men — ravishers, conquerors, oppressors, cunningly seduced to drink themselves into unconscious sleep, or poisoned by

drugs hidden in golden amulets, their eyeballs pierced with swiftly wielded hairpins, their hearts stabbed with slim daggers cleverly hidden in the folds of silken underwear, I knew all those tales, I knew the names of all those dauntless damsels, and from the moment I first heard about their deeds I had despised their perfidious furtive duplicities. I was not like them, I would not be like them. The Khan was wide awake, hardly weakened by the short act in which he had taken sexual possession of his new bride; not inebriated by drink, fatigue or drugs, not distracted by any wiles of what sexual allure I might be able to muster, he was firmly standing on his feet and his hands were free, when I said to him, “I will kill you now.” Only after I had said it I realized, with horror, that I had already failed. I realized that here was a man, a seasoned warrior, brawny and tall, hardly past the prime of his years, and confronting him was a slim girl less than half his age and half his weight, naked, unarmed, his sperm slowly dripping down her thighs — but it was too late, there was no way out. I could not take back what I had said, I could not turn it into a joke for he was not a man to be joked with, I could not escape. He raised his arm, not to fight me — this would have seemed a ridiculous idea to him — but to punish me, and this punishment, I knew, after having knocked me down and handed me over to the guards, would make the death of the girl on the ship seem merciful and quick. “I am sorry,” I said, more to myself than to him, for he could not possibly understand what I was sorry for, and I was sorry for myself, after all, more than for him. As a mental exercise I went through the five paths — focused my mind, took control over my body, took in my surroundings, read my opponent’s intents, deliberated my movements of evasion and attack, but he, of course, was already lying dead at my feet, his windpipe crushed, his neck broken, his head twisted at an hideous angle.

I had not been better than them, after all, it had not been a fair fight, I had not been able to give him a fair warning.

I stepped back, away from him, until my back was against the wall, opposite the small door, and tried to understand, why had I killed him, and since when had I known that I would? He had been the Khan since before I had been born. I knew, as everyone knew, that thousands had perished in his dungeons, and hundreds of thousands had perished in his wars, bled to death on the battlefields, burned to death in the conquered villages and towns, died screaming at the hands of his marauding, pillaging, raping, murdering troops, or starved to death next to their scorched and blood-drenched former fields. I knew this, but who had made me his judge, who had made me his victims' avenger? I was none of this, nor would I have wanted to be. He had bought me, he had raped me, but I had been offered to him, he had only taken what he had deemed rightfully his. For this, too, I felt no desire to be his judge. He might have killed me, eventually, but for the time being I had not been in danger of my life — I *had* not been, but now I was the slayer of the Khan, with nothing to speak in my favor, and no possible way of escape. So, why *had* I killed him, and myself in the process? I found no answer, but I saw *her* before me — the Bey's silent girl, with no hair, no arms, no orifices, her huge dark eyes looking into mine, shining crystal eyes — I stood still, as still as she had sat, and waited.

I had no sense of time, but I think I did not have to wait long — something must have told them that something was not right, the door opened, four guards entered, immediately followed by the Khan's daughter. Huge men with keen eyes and bulging muscles, dressed in black leather fighting gear, short swords in hand, elite fighters, professionals, highly disciplined, well trained. One of them their captain.

They were members of the Khan's personal bodyguard. Their task was to protect the Khan and to carry out his orders. The Khan was dead, beyond protection, beyond giving orders. Others might have thrust themselves at me, the Khan's obvious assassin, knocked me down, broken my arms, or killed me on the spot. They, taking in the situation, seeing that I was naked, unarmed, posing no danger they couldn't handle, froze. The Khan's daughter took a few steps to the side, away from them, and in the huge room she easily stayed some twenty feet away both from her dead father and from me. She was clad in a simple flowing high-necked dress of white silk, with a wide belt of black leather, with large silver applications. I had seen pictures of her, and I had recognized her immediately. She was older than I was, taller than I was, her breasts were fuller than mine, her skin was smoother, her hair was longer, darker and shinier, her stance was more graceful, her lips were redder, her face was beautiful and serene.

As we all stood immobile, my father entered the room — he had been told, he had run from where he had been — he gave me a short glance, then past the guards hurried over to where the Khan lay dead, bent down to him, rose up again, gave me another short look of horror, disbelief, disgust, and scorn, then turned to the Khan's daughter, and said, "What an awful tragedy. What a horrible crime. Do what needs to be done." It was my death sentence, but what might he have possibly done to save me, even if he had wanted to? Slowly, gracefully, she moved. Her left hand went down to her belt, touched one of the silver applications, and I saw that they were not applications at all, but knives. Silver throwing knives. She looked at me, and her arm came up, blade in her hand. I closed my eyes, I did not want to see my death. There was a swift rustling of silk as she threw, then a strange wheezing sound, then a dull sound as from a fall. I opened my eyes again.

The guards had not moved, the Khan's daughter stood where she had stood, my father lay next to the Khan, the knife in his throat, his blood spurting out, drenching the carpet. Then again a slow movement. The captain of the guards, facing the Khan's daughter, sank to his knees. "My Queen," he said.

She had nodded her head, acknowledged their pledge of allegiance, then sent them out of the room. Now she took another knife from her belt, then opened the belt and let it drop to the floor. When she raised the arm with the knife, again the left one, her throwing arm, I thought of closing my eyes again, but I kept them open. She did not throw the knife, she held it against her throat, touched the neckline of her dress, then cut through it, cut down all the way, until the dress fell apart, and with an almost imperceptible twist of her body she let it slide off her shoulders. She was naked underneath. The knife, pointed and double-edged, had left a softly bleeding red line on her body, from her neck to her crotch. The knife still in her hand, she walked over to me. While she looked into my eyes the tip of her knife touched my throat, broke the skin, then went down, between my breasts, across my belly and belly-button, down, down, drawing a bleeding red line on my own body just like hers. At first I did not dare to breathe, then my breathing became heavier. With a flick of her wrist she disposed of the knife, then she took hold of my hand, drew me down. On the soft thick carpet, watched by the dead Khan and my dead father, covered in each other's blood, we made love.

5.

The Queen

The sheets were smooth white satin, the bed was large and soft. Through the open window I saw the blue sky, a more translucent blue than I was used to, beautiful in its novelty to me. A breeze of mild, tangy air blew in. When I raised myself on the stack of soft pillows, the lower part of the window revealed the sea, a darker blue than the sky above it, specked with white sails, busy and calm, endless, eternal, soothing ... Her hand, gently, pushed me down again. “Three days of mourning,” she said, “three days for me to recover in solitude from the shock of my father’s sudden death from heart attack. Three days before I have to take up my duties as the Queen, and begin to console his subjects, my subjects now, for their tragic loss.” She smiled. “Three days in which to succumb to my grief, undisturbed ...” She half bent over me, the tip of the index finger of her left hand trailed the thin red line down from my throat, slowly, unstopably, not that for all in the world I would have wanted it to stop. I almost winced when she reached my clitoris, not from pain but from remembered pain, not from the shallow cut from her knife, but from the agony of the awl. A scar had begun to form on it, and I thought that it had lost some of its sensitivity, or all of it, it hadn’t been important, but I could feel it now, feel her, as she gently circled it, gently pinched it between two fingers, as she brought her face against mine, covered my mouth with hers, now only touched me lightly with one finger again, and then, with sudden force, thrust into me with her finger nail — screaming agony spread through me — I cried, I gripped her with my arms, my tongue filled her mouth, I pressed myself against her hand, her body, her soul — I sank into an ocean of orgasmic ecstasy.

“I want to be honest with you,” I said to her, later, as we lay exhausted and entwined. “When you stood before me with your knife, and let it run down my body, I showed you my trust, didn’t I? But I did not. At any moment, had you changed your grip and tried to stab me, I could have killed you.”

“I know,” she said. “And I had trusted *you*.” She took my hand, and led me out of the bed, onto the plush white carpet. A comb from her nightstand served for a knife, she touched me with it lightly. “But I want to *see* it,” she said. “Show me.” With a knife I would have had to break her arm, with a comb, and just for demonstration, I could simply throw her to the ground — the thick carpet would protect her from harm from the impact. I moved. A gasp, a sudden jolt, a swirling of space, too swift to register before it was over, and I found myself face-down on the carpet, her knees on my back, my arms bent, helpless in her grip. A moment later I was free, on my back, regaining my breath, and she smiled down upon me, before she bent down and kissed me.

“How ... how ...” My breath had not fully returned, from the fall, from the kiss.

“Trust and honesty, from now on, between us,” she said. She stood up, went to the window, and pulled on a cord that I had thought was there to move the curtains. “I want you to meet someone,” she said. “No need to get dressed,” she added as she saw me look around for my nightdress, which I *think* I had worn when she had brought me to this room? The door opened, and a man stepped in, tall, dark-haired, dressed in soft black clothes, with regal bearing. He regarded me kindly, as I stood there, naked, staring at him. “May I introduce to you,” she smiled at me, “from today on, the Commander of the royal guard. Formerly, the black sheep of the family. My dear little brother.”

He bowed. I just kept staring. I knew now who had trained her, who had taught her her fighting skills. I suddenly knew a lot more now, too, though I would need some time to fully comprehend it. “I ... I am glad to see you here,” I stammered. “I am glad, too,” said Al-Magest.

INTERLUDE: THE HERON

Like a heron rising from the lakeshore, gliding through the mist of dawn, without a sound, looking for prey, gracefully, effortlessly, and deadly.

Who has not heard the tales that are whispered about the messengers of the Queen? That their powers far exceed those of mere mortals? That a messenger can walk through closed doors, or even through solid walls? That she can make herself invisible? That she can pass through a crowd, through a phalanx of enemies, without being noticed? That she cannot be held, and cannot be bound? That she never tires, that she does not need light, nor water, nor food? That she can kill with a flick of her wrist, the touch of a finger, or even with a look? That she can force anyone who confronts her under her will? That, in a battle, she can defeat a whole army? That she knows her Queen's thoughts, and the Queen hers, no matter how many oceans, deserts and mountains lie between them? That she is always loyal to her Queen, and to the cause of justice, but would instantly die if the two ever diverged?

None of it is true, of course, or not in the way that people think, when they hear these tales, or, always whispering, repeat them — whispering, because you do not talk aloud about magic and the forces of darkness, for to those who cannot control them they might bring death and destruction if, inadvertently, ever being summoned.

In truth, there is nothing magical about a messenger's powers. All she does is to combine, and to untiringly practice, the skills of the athlete, the acrobat, the martial arts champion, the escape artist,

the conjurer, the navigator, the pathfinder, the hunter, and the warrior. Plus those of the herbalist, the poisoner, the surgeon, the healer, the torturer, the spy, the courtesan, the linguist, the scribe, and the cryptologist, and a few others, which each messenger chooses for herself, according to her talents and her likings. And, of course, the skills of the diplomat, and those of the military commander, though this, the most deadly of her skills, is the one that she hopes never to have to use. A messenger cannot walk through a closed door, but she can pick almost any lock. She cannot walk through a solid wall, but she can climb it. She cannot make herself invisible, but she can hide in broad daylight, by masquerading, by blending in. She cannot live without water and food, but she can find them in the most averse environments. She cannot kill with a light touch, but with a light scratch from a poisoned finger nail. She cannot force her will upon someone, but she can seduce, she can listen, and she can convince. And so on ... Yes, by the sheer power of her body and her mind, and her training, and her commitment to her cause, the things *are* true that are whispered about her.

And that she dies, when the cause of justice, and the cause of her Queen, ever ceased to coincide? To this, too, there is truth. The very strength that allows her to succeed, to overcome all adversaries, obstacles and dangers, depends upon her readiness to freely give everything, to give her life, if necessary, without hesitation — and any doubts about her cause would weaken her, incapacitate her, and make her fail. And failure, for a messenger, means death. But this is not her weakness, this is her strength.

PART II: THE MESSENGER

The Teller

Here is this story that I've heard — that I've overheard, one late winter evening, at a country inn, one man telling it to a group of people with whom he shared a table. Flickering oil lamps lit the taproom, one on each of the tables and two or three on the counter. The tables were almost as dirty as was the floor, there were no pillows on the ramshackle chairs and benches, from the stove in the corner came puffs of smoke and too much heat. I had had my share of dubious food and cheap wine, but was not drunk — it would not have been a good idea for a woman on her own to get drunk in such a place. I was tired, but not sleepy. I did not want to think — or rather, there were things I did not want to think about. I had run out of things to read. I tried to ignore the sounds — the snores of those who had gone to sleep on the benches, with their cloaks as blankets if they had them, the heavy breathing and the loud or muted sounds of pleasure or pain from those who occupied benches but slept not, the drunken laughter and the sudden curses from the tables where cards or dice were played, the occasional shouts for more beer or wine — the pub catered to both tastes — and among all those sounds, I dimly heard the voice of the story-teller. I had missed the beginning of his story, and, with all the noise, I missed much of the rest, and I never heard the end.

~

“Not a good idea *for a woman* to get drunk in such a place?” she asked.

“I understand what you’re saying,” I replied, “but it’s a *fact*, isn’t it? A man risks being attacked when he carries something of value with him, and, clearly enough, in this dump none of them did. A woman invites attack for the ever present value of her female body.”

“But by stating that her body has a ‘value’ other than to herself, you de-humanize and objectify her. It’s the hallmark of a society that treats women as objects, and their bodies as commodities. By accepting this so matter-of-factly, you are in fact reinforcing female subjugation.”

“How do I advocate subjugation by stating that something has value? It’s a simple fact — have gender equality, have a matriarchal society, there will always be more men wanting to rape women than women wanting to rape men — and don’t tell me it’s because women are never violent.” She’d hardly tell me *that*. I deserved the look she gave me.

“But exactly because rape is done by men to women, we have to address the sexualization and objectification of the female body as its cause.”

“Address it,” I said. “Address gravity when you stumble over a tree root and skin your palms. Or keep an eye on the ground.”

“*Gravity*? So you recur to a ‘sexual violence is a force of nature’ position, dismissing culture, politics, everything that constitutes our *humanity*?”

“No, it’s you who dismisses from our humanity all that doesn’t agree with you, but the problem is ...”

“The problem is,” she said, “you have a story we want to hear, don’t we?”

I had another story I wanted to tell first. Another story from a life I hadn't lived yet, but that's beside the point.

I got raped once, by three men. They were rough, and they took their time.

Afterwards, when we all got dressed again — my clothes were torn, but they had to do — one of them asked me a strange question. And I made one of my worst mistakes.

“Was this the worst thing that has ever happened to you?” he asked, and I said no, it wasn't even in the top ten.

“We can still make it.” It wasn't so much the words, it was the way he said it.

“And?” she asked, when my silence grew too long.

“I had to accept the inevitable. I didn't have a choice.” Not then, anymore.

“So they died,” she said, stating the obvious.

And only when they were dead I realized that they had been right, that they had heard right. My reply hadn't been as innocent as I had thought I had meant it to be, to defuse the situation — the disdain, the humiliation, that what drove them to their furor, had been there. Focus my mind — I had failed even at the first step of the first path.

“You still fail,” she said.

A cold shiver ran down my spine, and merged with the hot wave that was spreading from between my thighs. I paled — or maybe I blushed. How could I not have understood that I had *meant* those words to kill them?

Not for raping me — I'd never thought of killing them for that, and this was all that I had seen — but for *underestimating* me. Being underestimated can often be essential for survival — but I had wanted to prove that I did not need it to survive *them*. Prove it to myself,

for you cannot prove anything to the dead. And the success of my proof still echoed in the incongruous arousal that I had just felt, when, in fact, I had not proven my strength, but my weakness.

“Good,” she said. “So you finally got a lesson out of their deaths. That’s the one good thing that deaths are for.”

We both had our dreams. Her dream, the one she felt obliged to have, was to set right a world. Setting right a troubled girl was a minor task she casually, and expertly, did along the way. In mine, there was a story that I had to tell.

The Tale

These were the dark years. The forces of greed and corruption had unleashed a chaos that even they themselves had not been prepared for. Fear fueled violence and violence spawned fear, fires raged and blood flowed, destruction reigned, and when finally the fires had gone out and the blood had seeped into the ground or flowed away with the rivers, a formerly prosperous country was lying in ruins.

The Queen had not been able to protect her people, nor to protect herself. The walls of her palace were broken down, the roofs collapsed in the fire, those who still lived were disarmed and dragged into the gardens, or what had been the gardens, where the men died, and the women screamed for days and nights until they died, too. The charred and mutilated corpses lay strewn on the ground, their meat prey to the scavengers, winged or quadruped or sometimes walking on two legs, limbs were torn or cut off, bones were dragged away to hidden feeding places, cracked by sharp teeth, the remains diligently picked clean by insects, and finally, as the years went by, they sank into the earth they had come from, and which took them in again. There was no question, after the worst of the rage had exhausted itself, of ever identifying any of the bodies, whether to gloat over their demise or to give them a decent funeral, and for years men died in drunken brawls over boastful claims of who among them it had been who had raped the Queen in her vagina, ass or throat, cut off her breasts, slashed her sides, made her scream, had heard her beg for her life or beg for death, seen her die, or finally killed her themselves. And of those who knew that she would never have screamed nor begged, those who still lived did not dare to speak.

Many had died in those days of fire and blood, and of those who

survived, many then died of hunger and disease, and many of those who still survived killed and were killed in fights for power, dwindling resources, and territories of scorched earth. But eventually those fights came to an end, and a new order, or what passed for order after the rampant destruction, emerged. The country, once peaceful and united, was fragmented, the pieces ruled by feuding warlords, the people at the mercy of their lords and of the murderous bands of roaming mercenaries those lords lacked the power and the will to control. But still, time passed, and people lived, and survived, and worked, and built, and loved, and had their hopes, and dreams, and desires, and defeats.

And at that time the events had occurred that I had heard told about.

~

There was a man, a solitary man, not young anymore, his business had gone badly, he saw no prospects for himself.

There is a legend, which the man had heard, about a distant country in the North, which abounds in jewels of unrivaled beauty, which would be of enormous value in the country where the man lived — if he could make the journey and return, he would be set for life.

If ...

Others had tried before — some had never returned, some had returned broken in spirit and body, some had returned bringing a few pieces of value, but it had turned out that they had acquired them in other places — stolen them, or robbed them, or even earned them through hard labor, but no one had returned from that mythical place — no one still alive at that time, that is. In times long past, a few had made the trip, had brought jewels that now graced the treasure boxes

of the court and of a few wealthy merchants and warlords, and they had brought back the knowledge of that place — what had *been* knowledge, long ago, but now, by the relentless workings of time, had been blurred, reduced to a rumor, a legend, a distant tale.

He knew that his chances were zero, but what had he got to lose? He sold everything he had — little enough — and set out, on foot — the path over the mountain range he had to cross was too narrow and steep for a horse, and he had no need for a mule, not having any baggage to carry but what fit into a bundle on his back. And if indeed he found the gems, what he could carry home in the pockets of his trousers would be enough to make him rich far beyond his needs.

~

He must have walked for months, if not longer — as I've said, I hadn't heard the beginning of the tale — and he must have encountered setbacks and hardships and ill fate, and had lost his way, lost his confidence, lost weight, lost most of his hope, when he came to that village where he met the woman.

He didn't go into villages often, the depopulated but fertile country offered most of what he needed without him having to give of what little money he carried, but some things he wanted which nature and deserted ruins couldn't give him, and occasionally seeing a human face was among them. When he wanted to enter a village, he slept at a safe distance, then walked into it in the morning. As a rule, the people he encountered were neither hostile to him nor friendly. The times when people had traveled, had exchanged merchandise and news, had been eager for the foreigner to trade with, to exchange tales and freely share their houses and food and drink and, often enough, their bodies with them, were over. Commerce with the outside world, for what little they

needed from it, was done by trips to the nearest town, a few days away on decayed roads, by groups large enough not to be easy prey to bandits but not so large as to deplete the village from all who could defend it; trips undertaken on foot, with a few donkeys to carry grain and meat and cheese and raw hides to the town, and iron and fabrics and glass and leather back. The peoples' needs were simple, though, and most of what they needed, they made themselves. Tales they no longer had to tell, nor wanted to hear.

In this village, on the day he came to it, was market day. Groceries, livestock, tools, clothes, pottery, the usual stuff, little of which, except for what was edible, was of interest to him. Trade was mostly done in barter, but also in coins, still valid because people still accepted them, even though gold and silver held little practical use. Copper more so, but for this the coins were too small. Most of the goods were simply sold, but some were auctioned, and these — he had seen this in other villages — belonged not to individual villagers or traders, but to the village as a whole. Fruits that had grown on trees on public ground, fish that had been caught in a nearby stream by collective effort, things that had belonged to people who had died without next of kin, or the occasional object that no one wanted to claim ownership of, out of misgivings, superstitious or real. He was already leaving, carrying the provisions he had bought for himself, when, turning his head at the sudden silence behind him, he saw that the last one of those objects to be auctioned was a girl.

He stopped and looked, it had been a long time since he had last seen a naked girl. Tall, long dark hair, a firm if undernourished body, holding herself straight, her posture neither submissive nor defiant, but, it seemed to him from the distance, withdrawn. Far from being remarkable for beauty or strength, she still looked useful, for work as

well as for her owner's pleasure. Over the silence that had fallen he heard the auctioneer name a bid price that seemed very low to him. Since he was in no hurry, out of curiosity, he stayed to watch — it wouldn't be long until she found a buyer. The auctioneer called the bid price again. No one spoke, or raised an arm. The auctioneer called the bid price for a third time, and still there was no one to react, no one to break the strange silence. No one, he realized, was going to buy her. The auction was over.

For a short moment he thought it meant they would set her free. Then he heard the laughter, and knew better. All the men laughed — some just chuckled, others laughed loud, some cheered. Of the women, many stayed silent, their faces without expression, but those who laughed did it more merrily than the men. The girl did not seem to hear, or, if she did, she showed no sign that she cared. She stood still, seemingly impervious to the sounds, to the gazes upon her naked body, to the bodies that would soon descend upon hers, to the stones, or blades, or flames, that would soon, slowly and painfully, destroy it.

The man moved closer, to get a better look at her. From close up, he could see that she was much older than he had assumed, maybe almost his own age. Her body was covered in scars — she must have been a difficult slave, received a lot of punishment. Her eyes did not move, they were still fixed upon an imaginary point at the horizon, but somehow he had the impression that she had taken note of him. What was it that made him stand out, he asked himself — was it that he was a stranger? and then he realized, it was because he was the only man who hadn't laughed. It's because I didn't get the joke, he thought. And then, before he was aware of the words that were coming out of his mouth, he said, "I'll buy her." She still did not react, not even by the flutter of an eyelid — was she deaf? — but several heads turned

towards him. “Don’t,” one of the men said, with strong bare arms and a tired face. “I’m the blacksmith here. We are honest people, and you look like an honest man, too. We wouldn’t want to take advantage of you.”

“What’s wrong with her?” the man asked.

“She brings bad luck,” the blacksmith said. “She has never spoken a single word, nor made any sound. Most of the people here had owned her for some time. She hears, and she obeys simple orders, she never makes troubles, she works hard if there’s hard work to be done, but she — how can I say? — discourages you. I don’t know how she does it, but everyone who’s had her has soon wanted to get rid of her. And, call me superstitious, but since she’s been around, things ... have *happened*.” He shook his head, as if not really understanding his own words. “Leave, or stay and watch, or join the fun, but let her die, it’s better for you, and maybe for her, too.”

“Bad luck,” this was all the man had heard. Here he was, this was where all his good luck had brought him. Bad luck seemed like a promise to him. It took most of what little money he had, but it was spring, and the road ahead was through fertile land, before they’d come to the mountains. They’d survive somehow. He bought her.

The way she looked at him, when he gave the money to the man who held the village till, she seemed to think he had bought her for food.

They gave him a dress for her, ragged and dirty but still a dress, but she refused to put it on. He tore it up, used a strip to bind her wrists behind her back, and stuffed the rest into his bundle.

And then the blacksmith looked at the man, and said, “You don’t have a sword, you need one now.”

“Why?” the man asked. “She’s not that important to me. If they

hold me up, let them take her, I'm not going to risk my life fighting for her.”

“This is not how they think,” the blacksmith replied. “They see a man and a woman, they take her, they kill him.”

“So I need a sword to die fighting,” the man said. “I still can't afford it.”

“Come with me,” the blacksmith said, and they went into the smithy, their eyes needing time to adapt to the darkness, to the faint red glow from the ember, and as they stood a strange thing happened, time suddenly seemed to jump backwards, to a long gone golden age of kindness and generosity — or did it jump sideways, to an age that had never been? “Here on the wall is the first sword I've ever forged, when I was an apprentice with the old smith, when I wanted to see how much I had learned. It's not very good, but it is a sword. I've kept it out of sentimentality. I don't need it, it's not good enough to sell, but I couldn't bring myself to smelt it. And here's a scabbard. Take them.”

They left the smithy, stepping back into the sunlight, and into the present.

“Thank you,” the man said. “And I am sorry to spoil your fun by taking her away,” he added.

“Don't worry,” the blacksmith replied, “there are others.”

Then the man and the woman he had bought marched off, in mutual silence, he not sure if he could trust the villagers to let them go, until the village, when he turned around, was long out of sight.

~

The days that followed were uneventful. When they left the village it was still morning, and by the end of the day he had gotten used to walking with the sword dangling at his side. When he untied her

hands, so she could help with collecting fruits and berries which were ample in these parts, he found that the strip of cloth he had used had come loose, though it still held to her wrists. He tied it tighter when they went to sleep — he didn't fear her when he was awake and had an eye on her, she was a woman while he was a man with a sword whom hardships and years had not much weakened, but prudence demanded not to leave her unbound while he slept. In the morning, the knot was still firm, though for a moment he had a strange feeling that it wasn't the way he had tied it. By next evening, with their walking, it had come loose again. When the strange feeling that the knot wasn't the way he had tied it came to him again the next morning, he decided to put it to a test. That evening, behind her back, he wove a small twig into the knot at her left wrist. In the morning, the knots were how he had made them, only the twig was at her right wrist now. He was a man who took things as they came. He read the message, shrugged, and never bound her again.

His sexual needs were simple — about hers, there was no mention. When he wanted to use one of her orifices she yielded, not participating, but not discouraging his short-lived passion. Whether she herself found some pleasure in these encounters, or, her hands free now, on her own during the nights, I do not know, nor is it important.

She was better than him at finding food. When, as they often did, they came across deserted farmland, where nature had begun to reclaim her territory but trees and overgrown vegetable patches still bore fruit, it made little difference, but in the forests or on the heathlands that they crossed, she knew more plants or parts of plants that were edible, and spotted them more easily. Also, she knew better than he which plants were poisonous, and which animals, small or large, posed threats, and how to avoid them. She was mute, and he, taciturn by

nature and not quite sure as to how much she heard or cared to hear, spoke little to her, but even without words he understood her competence in these matters, and learned to rely on it. Still, when she showed him food that he didn't know, he waited until she ate from it before he did.

Occasionally he still went into villages, to buy with his dwindling stock of coins food that he missed — cured meat, sausages, bread, and sweet cakes made from dough and honey. He did not think it wise to walk into a village with a naked woman by his side, so he told her to wait for him in the wood, at a spot hidden from the barely discernible path they had followed. As a symbolic gesture, to show her what he wanted, he lightly tied her to a tree with the strip of cloth he had used to tie her wrists on the first days. He more than half expected her to be gone when he returned, but there she was, still tied, waiting for him. He offered her a share of what he had bought, and she refused the meat, but took from the bread and the cakes. She then took what still existed from the torn dress, and formed a bundle, so she could carry her share of their provisions — he hadn't thought before of letting her carry his bundle, or maybe hadn't trusted her to do it. He liked the way she looked, walking naked, slightly bent forward, with the load on her back, her breasts small but still large enough to sway in the rhythm of her steps.

He gave himself pleasure with her more often now, sometimes also during the day, when they took short rests from walking. The hair of her crotch, which had been shaved when he bought her, had grown back, which he didn't like, and one day he made her lie on her back while, strand by strand, he pulled it out. As with the other uses he made of her body, she took it silently, unrepulsed, unrepulsing. He himself did not shave his face, but kept his beard in check with an

old pair of scissors which he carried. Not long after he had plucked out the hair between her thighs she started to trim his beard for him, every few days, more evenly and neatly than he had been able to do on his own. When he looked at his face in the mirror of a still lake, he almost liked it.

The attack, when it came, deep in a forest, still early in the day, was sudden and unexpected. She was walking behind him on the narrow trail, her bare feet making no sounds on the soft ground. The wood was quiet, as if it held its breath. And then, in one quick silent motion, she jumped at him, grabbed the hilt of his sword, tore it out of its sheath, and violently pushed him to the ground. He fell, lying with his face down, stunned, the breath knocked out of him by a tree root under his chest — he fought for air, he fought to prop himself up — and then, over his pain and his own ragged breaths, he heard sounds, strange wild noises, screams. When he finally managed to look around there were three bodies, armed, dead, lying next to him. She had killed them. For a moment, she was the only one who was standing — then, as he slowly got to his feet, she handed him back his sword, knelt down, closed her eyes, and bent her neck. The land destroyed, the ancient laws now ruled again, unchallengeable. Having assaulted her owner, she could not stay alive.

“So, she’s kneeling, naked, arms behind her back, head bowed, eyes closed, and he stands before her, gripping the sword, blood still dripping from its blade. Don’t make this sound so overly dramatic. Even blindfolded and her arms tied, she’d still break his arm before he knew she had moved.”

“But she wouldn’t,” I said. Was it really so hard to understand? “He had saved her life at that village, which she could easily have done herself had she cared, but he had not given her any reason to live.

How could he? She had lost all that had been important to her. Had he wanted to kill her, she would have let him.”

“But he didn’t?”

“No.”

When she felt the sword, it was not the blade that struck her neck, but the hilt that touched her hand. She opened her eyes and looked at him, but she did not take it, leaving him clumsily holding it by the blade, his hands red from the blood he had not spilled. She turned to the dead, and from one of them took a sword that was better than his, and also a dagger. One of the dead was a woman — she took her boots, stripped her of her clothes, not much different from a man’s, and put them on, torn by the sword and soaked in blood as they were, and as he watched her dress he realized, the scars on her body had not come from punishments, but from battles. Then she went through the bags of the dead, sorting out the trash from the valuables they had robbed, then discarding it all, even some jewelry, except for the coins — copper, silver, and, though small ones, even some gold. Now that she was dressed and armed, she took his sword, cleaned it on a piece of garment that had stayed unsoiled, handed him a bandana one of the dead had worn to clean his hands with, handed him back his sword, and, finally, gave him the coins she had taken. All the while he hardly moved, only slowly reacting when she put something in his hands, watching her silently, stunned, not sure what was going on, what had changed, what would change now.

“Say, this is not turning into a love story, by any chance, is it?”

“No.”

“Because, you know, all the stories you’ve ever told were love stories, weren’t they?”

“Were they? This one isn’t.”

When they took a rest next to a stream she took off her clothes, to wash the blood and the scent of the dead woman out of them, and off her skin. Seeing her naked, as he had done all that time, suddenly felt awkward to him. When she had spread the clothes on a rock to dry, she lay down on a soft patch of moss, offering herself as if nothing had changed, and to his own surprise, he accepted the offer with little hesitation. As always, she neither participated, nor resisted. Nothing had changed — no, everything had changed, he knew it had — but it was as if she wanted him to feel that nothing had changed. To deceive him? To reassure him? Or, he finally thought, to reassure herself?

But what would she need to be reassured of? He understood now that, from the first day they had been together, neither fear of him, nor need of him, nor force would have kept her from killing and leaving him, and he very much doubted that it had been sympathy, either. Pity, maybe? He was surprised at how little this thought made him reel back. He wished he could talk with her, but this was no topic for asking yes-or-no questions that she could answer with a nod or a shake of her head. Whatever it was, he had to make the best of it, and the best of it was to stay with her, under her protection, as he began to accept that it was.

The days followed each other, as they followed the course that led them north. Food they still found in the woods, on deserted derelict farms, or, rarely, in villages that they visited — together, now, as she was clothed and they both bore arms. From time to time they were ambushed, left dead bandits behind, and took what they needed — what she decided that they needed. Once she suffered a nasty but not dangerous cut from a girl whose knife she had to take out of her hands, to kill her with it. It was a good knife, made from finest steel, strong, sharp and pointed, a knife that could stab, cut and be thrown, with a

smooth hardwood handle and a polished blade that, once she had cleaned it of the dead girl's blood, shone like a mirror. One bunch of attackers had been led by a man with a bow and a quiver full of arrows, which, among the trees, he had not known to make good use of, and now he never would. She took the bow and the quiver, and from that day on, they did not need to go into villages to add meat to their diet.

He stopped using her body, after he stopped finding pleasure in these silent acts. In the nights, he sometimes dreamed now that he heard a woman sing, a distant voice, singing plain but hauntingly plaintive melodies, with words which he could, in his dream, never make out. One night, straining his ears in his dream to hear her more clearly, he realized that he wasn't sleeping anymore, but still heard the voice. The night had been dark when they had lain down to sleep, but now a crescent moon shone through a gap in the cloud and seeped through the cover of the treetops, and by its faint light he could see that the place by the next tree, where she should have slept, was empty. Her things were still there, he saw with a relief the intensity of which surprised him, after his heart had seemed to miss a few beats, but where was she? Had she heard the voice, as he still did, and wandered off through the dark wood to look for the mysterious nightly singer, to see if she was mortal, a demon, or a forest nymph?

He could not go back to sleep, he could not sit and wait, so he decided to follow her. He stumbled through the near darkness, tattered clouds every now and then veiling the thin moon and then unveiling it again, with only the distant voice to give him a vague sense of direction — after a while he realized he would never be able to return to their sleeping place before the day broke, and even then it might be difficult, but it was too late to stop now, he only hoped the voice would not fall silent before he had reached it. It did not — and slowly, it got louder,

slowly, as she must have done before him, he got closer. And then he saw her.

There was a small stream, its banks strewn with mossy rocks — the aisle it made in the wood made the moonlight brighter here — and on one of the larger rocks she sat and sung, in a language he didn't know. She was looking in his direction, she must have heard him — he knew he had no skills of moving silently, particularly not in the dark — she saw him as he walked closer, and then as, bewildered, not trusting his legs to support him, he sat down on a smaller rock, staring at her in disbelief. When she ended her song she fell silent, for a while the murmur of the water running across the stones was the only sound in the wood — a soothing sound, to which he listened, while none of them spoke or moved.

“You *do* have a voice?” he finally uttered.

“I've never *said* I hadn't, have I?” she said, and, in the now pearly light of the crescent moon, reflected by the sparkling waters of the bubbling stream, for the first time ever since he had first seen her, he saw her smile.

~

They did not talk on the way back, which, though the moon had almost disappeared now, she found with a dreamlike certitude. Later, as they traveled on, they never talked much, he being taciturn by nature, she by training, but they did talk. And he understood now, that she had been shattered, and, slowly, slowly, she had been reassembling herself. And what she had needed from him throughout this difficult process, and still needed, was that most basic, most trivial of all commodities, and yet among the most valuable, like food to eat, water to drink, air to

breathe — human companionship. And now he realized his own need for it, too.

They had steadily been traveling north, he following the vague idea of where his promised land of jewels may be found, she following his lead — or had she?

She asked him for his destination now, though she already knew the answer. He told her about the land of jewels in the North that he was seeking, his determination, born of despair, to find it or, more likely, to perish trying — amazed at how much he found himself confiding in her, not only his plans, but his hopes and his fears, and his conviction, deep inside, that he was no closer to his goal now than when he had set out.

“It’s not a land, where these jewels are found,” she said, “it’s a mountain. Stardock.”

“You ... *know* it?” he asked, both excited and surprised that she would have actual knowledge of what to him had only been the vaguest of rumors.

“Yes, I know it,” she said. “As well as anyone does. It’s an old fairy tale. A mythical topos of desire. A paradigmatic place to yearn for. Like the Fountain of Youth, the philosopher’s stone, or the golden kingdom of El Dorado. And the jewels of Stardock. These myths not only span the ages, they also span the worlds.”

He did not reply, nor did he doubt her words. “I am sorry,” she added into the silence.

“What do we do now?” he finally asked, not even consciously aware that he had said *we*, as if the land of jewels had been her goal, too, now lost, as if it were obvious that they had a common decision to make, about a plan they would pursue together.

“I need to reach a town,” she said. She had things she had to do

now, now that she had reassembled her shattered pieces, even though she did not know if what she was looking for was any more real than any of the myths that she had talked about. She could not do nothing, though. She was alive, and this meant that she had to try.

“Which town?” he asked. “Where is it?”

“Any town,” she said. In a town, there was the hope that she might find hints, rumors, traces, signs, anything to go on from. “There is one to the north, we should be able to reach it in a few weeks, before winter sets in and makes it quite unpleasant here in the open country.”

Yes, of course, she knew where they were, where they were going. She had known it all the time, he realized it now. Their directions may have overlapped, both heading north, but she had set the course. He doubted the casual way in which she had said “any town,” he was sure that this town in the north was her preferred target, for otherwise, though he had no idea how she would have accomplished it, they’d have been walking west, south, or east, with him willingly following the direction she’d have chosen. He shrugged. It didn’t matter.

In his face she read her mistake, in wording, in inflection, in body language. She wasn’t quite up to her regular form, yet. This was important to know, but he was not an enemy, and not a threat.

“It’s going to be all right,” she said, and he believed her.

~

It wasn’t without hardship nor without dangers, but they reached the town, on a gray and windy day, before the winter would make things harder for anyone without a roof over their heads. For her, the town was the place to go to — if anything was left of the old order, any tiny seed around which hope might begin to crystallize, it would be where people lived and gathered, where none of the old hiding places,

meeting places, dead letter-boxes, caches or hidden signs would still exist, for those had always had to be ephemeral, but the rules for finding them, if any recent ones had been set up, might still apply. And one of the rules had always been, look to the North. For him, the town, first of all, meant rest — he had not expected it, but more than half a year of traveling and surviving had worn him down. Maybe, once he had some understanding of this place, he could look for work, but not on the first day.

They paid the gate keeper, what he claimed to be the official fee for strangers entering the town, plus what he claimed would keep him from having them thrown into the castle dungeons for some crime he didn't bother to name. They still had coins left to rent a room — like everywhere else, due to so many deaths, houses stood empty, and the rents for rooms were low. Neglected and in disrepair and with few panes of unshattered glass left in the window frames, the buildings still had walls and roofs and doors, though not much of the furniture was left, having been used for fuel in the first winters of the darkest years. There were trees enough in the surrounding woods, so that wood wasn't so scarce now, but the craftsmen were scarce who could do more with trees than chop them up for firewood, and the sawmills and workshops had been destroyed, and the carts, and the roads had lapsed into decay, and the horses and oxen had long been slain and eaten. The town behind its walls hadn't seen new destruction in the last few years, only further decay, but the surrounding countryside had.

The coins that were left would buy them food for maybe a week or two. “Why have you always only taken the coins of those bandits who had attacked us,” he had asked, before they had reached the town. “Why not the jewelry?”

She explained it so that he could understand. “It wasn't ours to

take. Never take more than you need, it brings bad luck. And then, the dead bandits' friends will shrug off the loss of a few coins as well as the loss of a few of their companions, but they might feel compelled to hunt down those who had taken the more valuable stuff. And, jewelry is conspicuous, it draws attention to us. Attention is bad. And who knows where they got it from — what if we tried to sell a piece, and someone recognized it? Not worth the risk." What she didn't say was that she had also done it to protect him. She didn't need the jewels, but *he* ... greed, a stupid move, and she'd have to kill him. Take more than you need and it brings bad luck. Not worth the risk.

It was about noon, now. They ate a simple meal — unlike accommodation, food was expensive, with so much of the agriculture in ruins, but there *was* food, which they ate without investigating too closely into what it was, and they even treated themselves to a jar of wine. She saw to it that he drank more than she did — not too much, though. They returned to the room they had found before they had lunch, on the third floor of a crumbling house near the town wall, a small dirty room with a window looking out across a narrow street onto the peeling plaster of the rear wall of some larger building. The window, its glass long gone, could be closed with a wooden shutter, almost a luxury these days, and the main attraction which this room held. The room was empty apart from a very roughly hewn table, a number of pegs on the walls to hang things on, and several blankets on the floor, dirty but not downright disgusting. Severe exhaustion, in combination with the wine, made him succumb to the overwhelming desire to roll himself up in two blankets and lie down on the floor, with a third blanket, which she folded up for him, to serve as a pillow. He slept almost the moment he touched the ground.

She hadn't wanted to lock him in, but she wasn't comfortable with

leaving him, dead to the world, unprotected in an unlocked room. On her way out she spoke a few words to the landlord who lived on the ground floor, a thin, elderly, stern and tight-lipped man. A few friendly words in passing, hardly more than a greeting, accompanied by a nod and a faint smile — so casually spoken that he could not even really remember them afterwards. What he did remember, though, was the ice cold shiver they had sent down his spine, and the absolute necessity, whatever happened, to keep the sleeping man on the third floor from any harm.

She had never been to this town, but, from paintings and engraved maps she had seen, in so much better and happier times, she had an idea of its layout, and that gave her an idea of where to look. The town was built around a steep hill, a rock about three hundred feet high, that some geological quirk had deposited here. At the top of the hill stood the castle, now in ruins. A paved street curved up from the town's main square. After a few hundred feet the houses on both sides ended, and the street, getting steeper, became a path. On the left side, if you walked up, carved into the mountain, was a row of caves, one next to the other — underground stalls that had been shops where on sunny days a steady stream of cheerfully jostling, laughing, shouting visitors, but also more quiet townspeople on a stroll up to the castle gardens, had bought refreshments, candies, shawls, hats, bags, local artwork, antiques and cheap jewelry fake and real, and, generally speaking, useful or useless trinkets of all kinds. Now only a few of those stalls were open, the rest either had their heavy iron-studded doors firmly locked and shut, or had been deprived of their doors, leaving bare gaping holes in the rock, most of them with their walls black from fires that had consumed the shelves, the merchandise, and, it was to be feared, also the merchants. Holes that showed the dimensions of those

stalls, about six feet wide, maybe eight feet high, and hardly more than twenty feet deep.

She paid no attention to the closed doors, but glanced into the open stalls, the empty ones, and the few that were occupied, their owners, whether male or female, hardly bothering to look back at her, their faces empty, knowing that in trying to sell their worthless goods to non-existent buyers they were just going through the motions, passing the time here to avoid having to pass it somewhere else. The wind blew a drizzling rain into her face now. Ahead of her the path led to a wall that had surrounded the castle gardens; the trellised gate in it, through which visitors had streamed to enjoy the greenery, the clean air, and the view over the city, now barred with heavy chains and solid rusty locks.

To her right the ground sloped down towards the town below it, but trees blocked the view. To her left the door of the last of the stalls, of the caves in the rock, stood ajar. She entered, closing it behind her. She was alone.

The room, with its rough walls hewn out of the rock, was almost empty, except for crudely made shelves left and right, displaying rather artless pottery and some pictures, watercolors and charcoal drawings, a few of them crudely framed and standing, others lying in a few thin stacks, the top ones having gathered dust. On the top shelves stood half a dozen burning candles, an astonishing luxury, given how scarce and expensive candles had become. At the back of the cave several coats, worn and tattered, were hanging from a row of iron cloak hooks. Someone must have had quite a heavy hammer to drive them into the rock.

The pottery seemed of little interest, but I took a closer look at the pictures.

“Wait — *I?* Who is ‘I’?”

I shrugged. “She. Her. Me. I. You know that this is my story. I’m telling it. So, do you want me to continue or not?”

Of course they did.

The pictures were of a fairly good quality, of a talented amateur kind. Vistas of the town, landscapes, the stuff that was, or had been, sold to tourists. Something seemed right. Something seemed wrong.

“Come in,” a female voice said, “here is another room where you can see more of my stuff.”

The voice had come from behind the coats. There was a narrow passage, its walls as roughly hewn as those of the cave, bent so that what lay behind it wasn’t visible from where it opened. I walked through. It opened into a vast underground chamber, with stonework walls, arches, and vaulted roofs. Candles were burning on huge iron candlesticks, and on ledges protruding from the walls. Oil lamps were burning on tables, which, apart from a few pillows on the uneven stone floor, were the only furniture. The woman, standing next to one of those tables, was older than I was, simply dressed, not looking much different from those in the other opened stalls that I had seen, only her eyes were more alert, and she seemed more eager to strike up a conversation.

“You wonder at the candles,” she said. “We are in the cellars of the castle, here. It’s a huge system of underground caverns, connected by tunnels and stairs, a labyrinth in which you can get lost and perish, if you don’t first fall victim to one of the numerous deadly traps. Much of it is empty, some of it is crumbling, but if you know where to look, there are things to be found. A huge stockpile of candles, for instance.”

Why did she tell me all this? Again, something seemed right, something seemed wrong, but increasingly I got the exciting feeling that there *was* something.

“Others do not fight you for those hidden treasures?” I asked.

“The castle is haunted,” she said. “They tend to keep away. It’s for their own good.”

There was an undertone of menace in her voice, now.

“It’s you who haunts the castle,” I said.

“Of course,” she replied. “But haven’t you come to look at the pictures, see if you want to buy one?”

I took up a batch from one of the tables and leafed through them, when, suddenly, my eyes fell on one that stood on the floor, leaning against a wall, half hidden in one of the many recesses, but still visible enough to anyone who entered this hall. A charcoal drawing, larger than most of the others. A landscape. The reedy shore of a lake, in the morning mist. A heron, rising from a shallow piece of open water. Above it, as in the direction of the path of its flight, gleaming through the mist and a patchy cover of thin clouds, a crescent moon, and the morning star. There was no mistaking it.

I yelled, as I grabbed a burning oil lamp and threw it, as it shattered on the floor and the oil spilled out and the flames leaped up and consumed the paper, lake, heron, moon, and star. “You irresponsible reckless stupid fool,” I screamed, overwhelmed, hardly noticing how irresponsible it was of *me* to scream, not knowing, with certainty, that no one else but this stupid woman was able to hear me.

I tried to get my emotions under control. What the picture said must be wrong, the Queen couldn’t be alive, could she? But *if* she was, this was not something to be shouted about, for anyone, friend or foe, so plain to see. In either case, displaying something like this was indefensible.

“How could you dare to draw this?” I asked. “You are not a

Messenger.” This was not a question, I had seen enough to know that she wasn’t.

“I had been so lonely,” she replied. “Forgive me. No, I am not. But I have been with one. We had been ... close. And then she died for me.”

“She died for you? You should have died for her.” If anything, I was angrier now at her than before.

“Maybe,” she said. “I was wounded. Alone, all I could do was wait. I have waited a long time for you, my Sister.”

“Don’t you *dare* to call me Sister,” I said. “You are not one of us.”

In her eyes, I could see that she understood even before I did. Not one of *us*. To someone who wasn’t, whoever she was, under no circumstances would I have been allowed to say this.

I didn’t like it at all, from what I had seen of her I didn’t really think she deserved it, but I had no choice. I drew my knife, the shiny steel knife with the pointed tip. “You understand what I have to do,” I said. She knew, and she knew the rules, and she showed that she accepted, by taking off her clothes. She stood before me naked, a bit heavier than me, larger breasts, older, but in a good shape, except that, like me, she had her deep scars. She looked at me as I stepped up to her, and she did not flinch as the knife broke her skin. It was done quickly, with little blood. A tiny trickle down one of her thighs — it had not yet reached her knee before I had stepped back.

“As long as the scars are visible, for about a year, they will show to anyone of the Sisterhood that I have authorized your protection. See to it that in this time you make contact with someone who can do more for you. And now tell me what you know about the Queen.”

I must have blinked because I only sensed, rather than saw, a sudden blurred movement, felt, before I could move, a touch, an impact

that I could not locate, and then she was standing twelve feet away from me, and I saw my knife in her hand.

It did not point at me, it was not a weapon for her, it was a mirror, she held it between her thighs, so that in its shiny surface she could see the cuts I had made.

“Well done, Messenger,” she said. She took another look. “Trained by himself, quite a distinction. But for a Queen’s messenger, you are slow to comprehend.”

It hit me with her first words, the rest I was hardly able to hear. A huge wave of shame washed over me, drowned me, took my breath away — another unforgivable failure, added to my other ones. Slow, so slow, had been my thoughts — yes, of course, I saw it now, she had always spoken the truth, spoken the plain truth when she had admitted that she was not one of the Queen’s messengers, when she said that she had only *been* with one, that they had been lovers, that her lover had died for her ...

“I resign,” I said, my breath just sufficing for these two short words. There were no other words for me to say, now, or ever. For a Messenger, there was only one way to resign, only one person to resign to, only one way the resignation could be received. I looked at the knife that she still held in her hand. I looked at her face as she threw it, and marveled that this was all the emotion she showed when she took a life, a hint of amusement. But it was *her* face, the Queen’s face, so it was well. The knife was a flashing blur at the periphery of my vision. I felt the impact, underneath my left breast, where the heart is. I felt the impact. I felt death. It hurt, but only mildly. I looked down at death just in time to catch the knife as it fell, the end of its hilt having bounced off my chest.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said. “I’ve said, well done. And besides, what do you think I have spent all that time waiting for? I need you.”

My audience of two applauded. Al-Magest and his sister, my lover, the Queen. Only about a month ago we had met, on the day that our fathers had died, from each others hands.

“A nice story, but did you really have to kill me for it?” she said.

“For that somewhat over-dramatic finale, I think it was necessary,” Al-Magest came to my defense. “And what better thing to give your life for, but art?”

“As long as it happens within the art,” I said. “But you didn’t die, neither of you. You were both badly wounded, and you thought it better to pass on the burden of Queenship to someone else, at least for a while. But I’ve left this out, I wanted to stay with making my point.”

“And you’ve made it,” Al-Magest said.

“So,” his sister said, “you suggest that we build a corps of loyal well-trained fighters, the Sisterhood of the Messengers ...”

“More than well-trained and loyal — unmatched in both,” I interrupted. “Sixty, I think, would be a good number. I want to be one of them.” I needed a *task*. I could not spend my time here, in friendship and love, without something to *do*.

“... as a reserve to fall back on, after a devastating breakdown of order and peace?”

“No, no,” I said. “To *prevent* it. Something like what I’ve described must never happen. We must keep it from happening.”

And so far, the sixty of us, and Al-Magest, and my lover the Queen, we have.

~

“In your story, what happened with the man?” my lover asked, when, for a while, the three of us paused in our discussion of the Messenger project.

“She went to fetch him, and introduced him to the Queen. ‘I owe him my life,’ she said, ‘without him, I would not be here.’”

The Queen looked at him, not liking too much what she saw, but withholding her judgment.

“I am in your debt,” she said. “Tell me if there is anything you want that is in my power to give you.”

His reply came slowly. “I have set out to find jewels, or death,” he finally said, almost as if talking to himself.

“I will not give you death,” the Queen said. She placed a wooden bowl, the size of a soup bowl, on the low table in front of him, then she removed a stone from the wall behind her, took out a leather pouch from the opening it revealed, and emptied its contents into the bowl. “Take what you can carry in one hand,” she said. He had large hands.

He looked at the jewels. Hesitantly, but the Queen made no objections, he took some of the stones into his hand, rolled them around, put them back, took others. He was not an expert, but he didn’t have to be, there was no way he could go wrong. Some of the jewels were among the best and most precious that anyone had ever seen. Others ... there were no words for them, there was no comparison, there were no names for the brightness and colors in which they shone.

“What ... are they?” he asked.

“Stardock jewels.” It wasn’t the Queen who spoke, but the woman who had brought him here, whom long ago he had heard singing, in the moonlit wood.

“But ... I thought ... hadn't you told me that was a fairy tale?”

“And do not most fairy tales have some truths in them?”

He sat with his mouth open, and with his hand filled with more riches than he had ever dreamed of. He not only saw the incomparable sparkling of the stones with his eyes, he felt it in his hands, he felt it, even with eyes closed, all over his body. He savored the moment. Stardock jewels. His eyes turned moist.

Among the other jewels, he had noticed that there also were some of glass. Well made, but, next to the genuine stones, easily spotted, and almost worthless. Small change, which, he understood, had its practical purposes.

He looked at the Stardock jewels that filled his hand, a long, longing, and thoughtful look. Then he put them back into the bowl. Picking up one of the glass stones, he said, “My Queen, may I keep this for memory?”

“With this memory, where do you want to go, now?” she asked.

“I have nowhere to go,” he replied, not complaining, a simple statement of fact.

“Come with us, then,” the Queen said, “if you wish to. There is work to do. A Queendom to resurrect.”

His voice failed him, but he stepped up to her, knelt down, and kissed her hands, not ashamed of his tears that flowed down on them. He did not see the slightly exasperated glances that the two women exchanged, but he felt the Queen gently withdraw one of her hands, and, comfortingly, lay it on his head. “It's all right,” she said. “It's all right. It's going to be all right.”