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## Inside the Front Cover

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"**A** splendid tale."

---*Publisher Weekly*

"**FANS**... will revel in Alexander's magnificent conclusion to his trilogy... [An] adventure that is told with tongue-in-cheek humor and eloquent language."

---*SLJ*

### "I NEED MARIANSTAT!"

"**THE CITY** is the key," said Florian. "Without it, all the rest will fail. When I'm close enough to attack it, the city itself must rise up. It must be taken from within, whatever the cost. And held, whatever the cost, until I reach it."

"Armed insurrection? Can it be done?"

"It must be done. And more. From now until the day I come back, there must be constant resistance. Cabbarus must not have a moment's peace. Let him live in terror of every day and night. Sap his strength and his will. The people will see that he can be beaten. Then, when the signal is given, Marianstat will be ready to support me."

"It will," said Theo.

"Only if the city has a leader. One it can trust, and that I can trust. A Leader who is also acceptable to the queen. The clear choice is you."

Theo stiffened and drew away.

Florian gripped his arm. "Give me Marianstat."

The words plunged Theo into nightmare..."

## Dedication

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*For the old, who are children of their past. For the young, who are  
their own best hope of the future.*

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## About the Author

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**LLOYD ALEXANDER** is also the author of the five-volume *Chronicles of Prydain*, widely considered a classic fantasy cycle. *The Black Cauldron*, the second in the series, is a Newbery Honor Book, and the final volume, *The High King*, was awarded the Newbery Medal.

About *The Westmark Trilogy*, he says: "Books, not authors, decide when they want to be written. Vague shadows of *Westmark* and the volumes that followed had been in my head for half a dozen years before I was able even to put a word on a page. World War II was long over, and I had come home from Europe with my Parisian wife and daughter. I had been writing happily for a good while, and had discovered that stories of fantasy worlds were, for me, the best way to express my attitudes and feelings about people, problems, and relationships in our real world.

"Still, questions stuck in my mind: the uses and abuses of power, not only the conflict between good and evil but--- far more difficult--- the conflict between good and good, noble ideas broken by violence even in a good cause; and, in the midst of tragedies, events that were hysterically, incongruously funny. I have no idea why *Westmark* chose to be written precisely when it did. More surprisingly, I found myself dredging up distant memories of what I had seen and known myself in combat. I did not find answers to questions raised and expect I never will. Nor was it an attempt to exorcise my own demons. No, I keep and cherish those demons. I like to believe they're my conscience."

Lloyd Alexander lives with his wife, Janine, and their cats in Drexel Hill, Pennsylvania.

## **PART ONE Citizen Weasel**

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**KING CONSTANTINE IX** of Regia had been killed three times and was bored with it. He wanted a bath. He tossed aside his fencing mask and foil, dismissed his master-at-arms, and went striding from the exercise gallery to his apartments, peeling off his clothes along the way.

At eighteen, Constantine was a long-legged, well-knit young monarch with the ruddy complexion of his royal ancestors. The fine flaxen hairs on his upper lip had prospered; they could be recognized as a moustache. The bout had given his face an added flush; he felt pleasantly tired. Apart from being killed--- his parry *en tierce* needed improvement--- he was in the best of spirits.

His uncle was not. When Duke Conrad was vexed, he overate, and he had grown very corpulent these past months. He had some difficulty keeping up with his light-footed nephew. The duke sat uncomfortably on a stool in the alcove while valets poured water over the king's head.

The royal tub, shaped like a large, ungainly shoe, was one of the king's latest fancies. Conrad disapproved of it: another example of his nephew's attraction to novelty in furniture as well as politics. The tub, new-fangled and therefore menacing, infuriated Conrad as much as its occupant, who had disappeared under the water. The duke's heart leaped as he allowed himself the joyous fantasy of his nephew remaining submerged. Conrad's dream shattered when the king resurfaced, spouting.

"Would you like a bath?" Constantine wiped the dripping hair out of his eyes. "It's quite refreshing."

"What I would like, Connie, is your attention."

"You have it," said Constantine. "In fact, you've had too much of it these days."

Conrad clung to the shreds of his temper. "This Westmark business must be settled once and for all."

"I thought it was."

"You cannot, you dare not continue to recognize the present government of Westmark."

"Why not? they recognize us."

"Because the queen insists on keeping revolutionaries in the highest offices of state. Her consuls, as she calls them: Florian, Justin, and that other one, Theo. Brigands and cutthroats, all three of them. Those butchers are destroying the aristocracy. They've been rewriting most of the laws; they want to slice the noble estates into pieces and

turn them over to the peasantry. And the queen agrees. Indeed, she encourages and approves. That fellow Theo even expects to marry her."

Constantine beckoned for a towel. "That's her business. What's it to do with us?"

"Everything," said Conrad. "It is a contagious disease. It infects, it spreads. We already have a rash of it. Your own subjects are making outrageous demands---

"Modest ones," put in Constantine, frictioning his scalp. "I prefer giving them something willingly now to having them take everything later."

"Give a vicious dog a scrap of meat," said Conrad. "He will gobble it up, then tear off your arm."

"Skin ailments, now dogs," said Constantine. "What, exactly, do you expect of me?"

"As for Westmark, renounce the treaty you made with that royal guttersnipe. Close our borders, end all trade. Enforce the strictest embargo. Here at home, take firm action against malcontents. Hang a few. You will be astonished how quickly the others come to see reason."

"Is that all?"

"It makes an excellent beginning."

"Good," said Constantine. "You've told me clearly what you have in mind. I can tell you clearly what I have in mind. I don't intend to do a single one of those things. You don't have to think about history, but I do. I'd rather be written up as a generous, understanding monarch---

"Mend your ways," Conrad broke in, "or you shall have a remarkably short history."

"Would that displease you?"

"Now, really, Connie---

"Now, really, uncle." Constantine looked squarely at him. "I'm glad we've had this talk," he went on, "because we won't have to chew it over again. I don't want to hear any more about putting an embargo on Westmark or hanging my own people. That's flat." He grinned. "Are you sure you don't want a bath?"

Conrad left his nephew soaking in the heel of the tub. Once out of the steamy alcove, the duke breathed easier. His mood brightened. He felt relieved, not only because of the fresh air. He had finally decided to take action.

He had given the king every chance. The young fool was set on a course of utter destruction. For a long while, the idea had floated in Conrad's mind. Sometimes it whispered. Sometimes it shouted. Sometimes it sang sweetly. He had even lost sleep over it. Yet his decision had now come quite simply: not a decision so much as accepting an absolute necessity. Understanding that, Conrad wondered why he had ever hesitated.

ONE OF the duke's estates lay in the countryside a little distance from Breslin Palace. A few days after his talk with the king, having made certain arrangements, Conrad



went there to tend his dogs and horses and confer with his bailiffs. He was also, secretly, entertaining a guest.

After visiting the kennels and stables, Conrad strolled to one of the cottages. The duke's guest, lean and sallow, somberly garbed, was sitting by the fire. He did not rise. Supposedly, he was not there at all, or anywhere else in the kingdom. Already exiled from Westmark, he had been banished from Regia. However, with the knowledge of only his most trusted aides, and some others in Westmark, the duke had been housing, feeding, and catering to the demands of the former chief minister of Westmark: Cabbarus.

Now, at last, there was the prospect of Cabbarus shortly leaving. This cheered the duke personally and politically. Conrad always felt uneasy in the man's presence. He had, at one time, judged Cabbarus a common, though diligent, schemer. Since the end of the war--- its outcome had been a humiliation for Cabbarus most of all--- Conrad had glimpsed a wild animal under the man's waxy skin, gnawing at him from within, glaring out from behind the slate-colored eyes. The man's body was simply a cage for the beast.

"You must prepare to return to Westmark," said Conrad, after they exchanged the briefest civilities. He expected this news to raise at least a flicker of pleasure. Cabbarus merely gave him a long look.

"In what capacity?"

"As we have all agreed. Head of state."

"I refer to my specific title," said Cabbarus. "In time, of course, I shall be acclaimed as king. Until then, I prefer something to suggest guidance and service. *Director* would be suitable."

Conrad was tempted to answer that he did not care a fig what Cabbarus called himself as long as he did his work. Instead, the duke nodded. "Most suitable."

"There are prerequisites."

Conrad waited. The future director of Westmark was going to talk about money. Statesmanship always turned on the penny.

Cabbarus beckoned. His confidential secretary, bearing papers, stepped from the shadows. Pankratz had chosen exile with his master. An admirably faithful act, Conrad thought, and wiser than staying in Westmark to be hanged. Short and stocky, bandy-legged, with huge muscular calves, Pankratz had been nicknamed The Minister's Mastiff. Well chosen, Conrad thought: a dog to serve a wolf.

"You understand," Conrad said, "no funds can come officially from Regia. Our finance minister will make certain they are untraceable; the king will remain unaware of them. But your associates in Westmark must carry their share of the expenses."

"I need troops more than money," said Cabbarus. "The Westmark officer corps will be loyal to me. But additional soldiers will be required. When the signal is given, I must be absolutely sure of military superiority."

"You shall be," said the duke. What Cabbarus meant was that he had no intention of setting foot in Westmark until it was quite safe for him to do so. "While there can be no Regian presence, I have spoken with Colonel Zouki from the Sultanate of Ankar. He will join us here momentarily. He and many of his brother officers command proprietary regiments. They will be at your disposal."

"Mercenaries? I prefer soldiers with more patriotic fervor."

"Money inspires fervor," said Conrad. "You will be more than satisfied."

"I will not be satisfied," said Cabbarus, "until I am able once again to serve my country with the full measure of my strength and devotion. I will not be satisfied until Westmark is happy and free of these self-styled consuls. They are common criminals and will be dealt with accordingly. I will not be satisfied until they stand before the bar of justice and pay the extreme penalty."

"And Queen Augusta?"

"Her conduct proves her unworthy of the throne. She will be removed, and the nation cleansed of corruption. This is my task; no, my solemn duty. The honor and virtue of a suffering people lie in my hands. It is an awesome responsibility."

Expensive, too, thought Conrad as Cabbarus turned his attention to the tedious business of finance. The duke's head ached. He was relieved when Pankratz interrupted to usher in Colonel Zouki.

The Ankari was a little peacock of a man in a gaudy uniform. He saluted stiffly, then bowed to his host and Cabbarus. Conrad eyed him with distaste. These Ankaris were all of a kind. The duke had reports of their conduct in the field, which he preferred not to think about. Colonel Zouki had reddish hair, curled and pomaded. He reeked of cologne and snuff. Beneath his tailoring and barbering, the fellow was a brute.

As Conrad expected and dreaded, the Ankari began an endless parade of polite formalities: the peacock circling the meat of the matter like a vulture. By the time the Ankari was ready to discuss business, Conrad felt exhausted. Then came the eternal question: money.

"Whatever Your Highness may have heard," Colonel Zouki said, "we do not hold life cheaply."

"Indeed not," said Conrad. "At these prices, you sell it very dearly."

Colonel Zouki spread his hands. "The choice is yours. We offer; you accept what you please. All is available: infantry, cavalry, light cannon, even some heavier fieldpieces. You will choose combinations suitable to your needs and to your advantage. If you agree, say, on a certain number of infantry, we shall include artillery batteries at a lower rate. Or, with each brigade of foot soldiers, a unit of horse. If you wish transport in Ankari vessels, we shall provide it."

Cabbarus began closely questioning Zouki and writing notes on a sheet of paper. Conrad paced back and forth. The two might as well be haggling over carpets in some Ankari bazaar. By the time the questions had been settled and Zouki had taken his

leave, Conrad was sweating. A good portion of the money would have to come out of his own private fortune.

"Shall we walk a little?" Conrad had something else to take up with Cabbarus. Pankratz would have followed, but Cabbarus indicated that they wished to speak privately. The Minister's Mastiff stayed in the cottage to gnaw over his master's papers.

Rooks were cawing. Conrad was sentimental in only one thing: He loved his estate, especially at this hour of the day, when the afternoon sun turned the fields into a golden lake. The view filled him with warmth and joy. The idea of rabble ever fouling his land made his stomach heave. The duke, nevertheless, was uncertain how to raise the question of his nephew. Cabbarus did it for him. The duke had only begun reporting his latest talk with Constantine when Cabbarus broke in.

"Constantine must not continue to occupy the throne. My government will be in every way favorable to you, but Regia must be, in turn, favorable to my directorate."

"That goes without saying," replied Conrad. "I had, at first, considered that Constantine might simply be deposed, but that leads to complications."

"He must be eliminated," said Cabbarus. "All complications will thereby be eliminated with him. Then, you yourself must ascend the throne."

The duke nodded. "And the means of--- elimination?"

"We require an absolutely trustworthy individual. Equally important, afterwards, we shall require silence. Complete and permanent."

"Some junior officer of my staff?"

"No. It must be someone without a circle of acquaintances or relatives to ask questions, whose absence would not cause concern. Also, someone close to us and directly in our control."

Cabbarus glanced toward the cottage.

"Your secretary?" Conrad found it difficult to conceal his surprise. "Ideal, of course. But--- would you be willing?"

"In these times," Cabbarus said, "choices are often painful. We must make sacrifices. Even so, we are strengthened by making them."

"No doubt." Conrad felt unexpectedly sad. An uncle's heart suffered its own special pangs. Having made up his mind, he could now afford the luxury of regret.

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## 2

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**THEO DID** not believe in ghosts. That morning, he saw two.

He glimpsed the first one in The Marsh, the lower part of town that took in the port of Marianstat: a quarter of taverns, ship chandlers, warehouses; of dockers and seamen, Dorians in red stocking caps, Napolitanos with faces burnt the color of roasted chestnuts. Theo had gone to the docks because Mickle--- he could never think of her as Queen Augusta--- had asked him to sketch plans for a new harbor. She proposed to dredge the channel and enlarge the landing stages. His task, he knew, was a waste of time. The treasury had no money for the undertaking. When he frankly pointed this out to Mickle, she answered that somebody would do it someday and be glad the plans had been made.

But his heart was not in his work. Since the end of the war with Regia, he had been one of Mickle's consuls. An unwilling one. For two years, he had written reports, answered petitions, argued in council meetings. With Florian and Justin, he had drafted new statutes, haggled over budgets. Little had come of it. After two failed harvests, there were bare fields in the countryside, bare cupboards in the towns. In Marianstat, there were factions of royalists, constitutionalists, and revolutionaries, all eager to break one another's heads. Only a week before, there had been fighting in the streets and shots fired. Nothing had been as he had hoped; he would have joyfully given up the whole business. He wanted to go on picnics with Mickle. Or paint pictures. Or blow soap bubbles, or fly kites, or make any sort of fool of himself if he felt like it.

Shamefully, what he mainly wanted was to be happy.

He put away his architectural plans and, for himself, tried to draw the port as he saw it; to make his picture reek of tar, brackish water, to catch the autumn fog twining in the shrouds of the vessels. Dissatisfied, he tore up his sheet of paper. Then he caught sight of his first ghost: a figure in a patched greatcoat.

The apparition, at the corner of Fish Market Square, had built a fire in an iron pot and was warming his hands over it. It was not an unusual sight. There were any number of such figures, half-vagrants who scraped a living along the docks: old soldiers, men homeless or tradeless, making the rounds of the warehouses, serving as watchmen, sweepers, running small errands. Theo stopped short. The face was from his boyhood: Constable Pohn.

The man started at hearing his name called. It took him a few moments to recognize Theo.

"Pohn, old friend, what are you doing here?" Theo was delighted to see him, but not to find him in such a state. "This isn't your kind of work. I was sure you'd be chief of police by now."

Pohn's heavy, homely face broke into a rueful smile. "That's not how it went, lad. The fact is: I got sacked."

"After you did me a good turn?" In Dorning, when Theo's master, Anton, had been shot dead in the street and Theo was racing blindly through the town, Pohn could have arrested him. The constable, instead, had let him escape. "That doesn't make sense. If you hadn't let me go--- why, as things happened after that, we'd have had Cabbarus for king."

"Some in Dorning wouldn't have minded," said Pohn. "Oh, there were plenty who were glad for you, and proud that one of our lads did well. You were a real hero in the war, lad. A consul now, and someday even a prince consort. But a lot weren't happy when you took up with Florian. They were glad to see the last of you. And the last of me, too."

"I never thought you'd get into a mess because of me. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"No need. I get along well enough."

"Of course." Theo grinned at him. "Anyone can see you're doing marvelously. Even so, come with me."

He led Pohn into one of the taverns. Despite the meager bill of fare, the tables were crowded with sailors from the merchantmen anchored in the harbor. Pohn wolfed down his food. Theo did not press him for home news until he had finished. The old constable, even then, was not much inclined to talk about Dorning.

"It's been a while," Pohn said. "I don't hear from anyone there."

"What became of Anton's print shop?"

"Last I knew, a cloth merchant took it over."

Theo had not been braced for the sudden twinge of heart. He had never gone back to Dorning, too many things had kept him from it. Now he felt that his home had been snatched away. "I wish you'd let me know you were in trouble. You should have come straight to me. I'd have done something about it."

"Ah, lad, I didn't want to bother you. I doubted that you'd even remember me."

"How could I forget a friend?" Theo tore a sheet from his pad, wrote out a note, and handed it to Pohn. "Take this to the ministry. They'll find better work for you."

Pohn brightened. "Thank you. That's a kindness--- What's the matter, lad?"

Theo, just then, had seen a second ghost: amid the knot of people at the tavern entrance, a short, dumpy figure in canvas slops and a sailor's low-crowned hat.

Theo's heart skipped a beat. For an instant, his blood ran cold. In Dorning, they would have said someone had walked over his grave. He jumped up from the table and shouldered his way through the crowd. By the time he reached the door, the man had

vanished. Theo hurried into the street and looked in all directions. There was no sign of the pudgy sailor, who could have slipped into any of the alleyways.

Pohn had followed. "What's amiss, lad?"

"I thought I recognized someone. I never expected to see him again."

"Ah, well, let it go," Pohn said. "You could have mistaken him for somebody else."

"I doubt it," said Theo. It was not likely he would have mistaken a man who once tried to kill him.

At the tavern door, Pohn and Theo took leave of each other: the one with a recommendation in his pocket, the other with a bramble of questions in his head. While the old constable went to the ministry offices, Theo stayed to press what information he could from the landlord and guests. They had none. Unsatisfied and unsettled, for a time he picked his way through the maze of alleys. A useless hunt. He decided, in any case, that Florian should be told immediately of the encounter.

He walked hurriedly to Great Augustine Square, where Florian had his headquarters in the late Baron Montmollin's town house. Once elegant, the interior had been partitioned into offices, constantly bustling with activity. At a table in what had been the main salon, Theo found Zara, the auburn-haired young woman whom Florian had nicknamed his russet divinity. Zara had been Florian's second-in-command throughout the war. Now she had become Florian's panther more than his divinity. Devoted only to him, she looked ready to spring at anyone else.

"Justin's with him," Zara said when Theo asked if Florian was in the house. "You'd better wait. Justin won't like being interrupted."

"Like it or not, he'll have to be. There's something Florian needs to know."

"Do as you please, then." Zara shrugged. She had always loved Florian--- not happily, but resentfully, as if against her will. It had not improved her disposition.

To give himself what privacy he could, Florian had made a retreat in a large lumber room at the far end of the hall. There he received only those closest to him. There was a camp bed, a table cluttered with papers, a nightstand with pitcher and basin; few necessities, even fewer small luxuries. From a peg in the wall hung a saber and his old army greatcoat. The faded blue coat, a common soldier's garb, had become as famous as its owner. Keller, publisher of the comic journal, *Old Kasperl*, once remarked to Theo that Florian's partisans would have followed the coat even without Florian inside it.

Florian had just finished breakfast from a tray and was leaning back in his chair, his long legs stretched out, bootless, his jacket unbuttoned.

"What brings you, youngster?" Florian seemed glad for Theo's arrival. Justin scowled.

"The council meeting's tomorrow. Since we're all here, why delay? Speak up. What's on your mind?"

"We haven't settled our business, Florian," protested Justin. The scar that puckered his face from brow to cheek turned an angry red. Barring this disfigurement, with his pale

yellow hair and violet-colored eyes, Justin had the look of a young angel. "This is between you and me."

"It's a state matter, Justin, not a private one." Florian, in two years, seemed to have aged more than ten. His fine features appeared chiseled from hard bone. The spray of pockmarks across his cheeks had deepened, as if grapeshot had struck his weathered face. He still wore his hair long and loose, but gray strands had begun to grain it.

"Theo has a voice in this, too."

"He has a voice," Justin said, "but it isn't his own. He speaks for the monarchy."

"I speak for myself," said Theo. "You know that."

"I know you're the queen's man. You can't be expected to act otherwise." He gave Theo a scornful glance and turned back to Florian. "I've worked out the whole plan. The city garrison, the Mariana Regiment, is unreliable. I don't trust its officers. We need our own National Guard, citizen troops we can count on, carefully chosen. They should be under my command."

Justin, Theo realized, was demanding his own private army. The question had come up many times before. Theo had been against it. He was still against it and would have said so if Florian had not broken in first.

"We'll talk about that later. I won't chew that bone with you now." Justin flushed, but Florian, in his stocking feet, had more natural authority than a field marshal in full regalia. "I want to know why Theo's here. Go ahead, youngster. Something's troubling you; I see it in your face."

Theo quickly explained what had happened in the tavern. Florian, listening closely, was silent. Justin spoke first.

"If that's all you have to tell us, I don't see much cause for alarm. What difference does it make if this fellow Skeit is here? What if he did try to kill you? That's a score to settle between you two. It's no concern of mine."

"It is," said Florian. "And mine, too. If Skeit were a common criminal, I'd leave him to the police. But he's a creature of Cabbarus. What does he want? He's not here on his own. If Cabbarus is behind him---"

"Cabbarus hasn't been heard of since the war ended," Justin broke in. "Constantine banished him. He's gone. To the devil, for all I know or care."

"King Constantine has assured me that Cabbarus is no longer in Regia. I have no cause to doubt his word. But, then, where is he? I want Cabbarus found and brought here. He has much to answer for, and he'll do it in a public trial. If Skeit can lead us to him, then I want Skeit in my hands."

"Cabbarus should have been hanged long ago," said Justin. "He wasn't. We can thank the queen's lapdog for that. He should have killed Cabbarus. He had the chance. What he didn't have was the stomach for it."

"I did what I believed was right," answered Theo. "Yes, I pleaded for his life. I wanted no man's death on my conscience. The queen agreed. It was her decision as much as



mine."

"That makes it easier for you to hide behind her skirts," Justin said. "Conscience? Call it what it is: cowardice."

"Call it what you please." Theo's cheeks burned. Justin's words had stung an old memory back to life: the morning at Nierkeeping when they raided the arsenal; Justin screaming, his face a bloody mask. Theo could have shot down the officer attacking Justin. Instead, he hesitated; no more than an instant, but long enough for the man to slash open Justin's face. Since then, Justin's scar had been a constant, silent accusation. How much of what Theo had since done had been to earn Justin's forgiveness? He could not calculate. He only knew that he had never forgiven himself.

"I'd never accuse Theo of cowardice," Florian said. "Nor should you."

"Yes, take his side," Justin burst out. "You're as much a monarchist now as he is. What was it we fought for? To bring down the monarchy. Now you support it. Brotherhood? Equality? And the queen still on the throne? Revolution? There could have been. And should have been. Our people still had their arms. We could have taken the whole country. You held back when you should have struck without mercy. You betrayed every man and woman who died for you. I warn you, Florian---

"Leave us," Florian said quietly. "Leave us, Justin, before you say something you'll regret."

"You and the monarchy are one and the same now. You, the queen, this would-be prince."

For an instant, Theo expected Justin to throw himself at Florian's throat. Florian looked squarely at him, gray eyes unwavering. Justin hesitated, then spun on his heel and strode from the room. Theo started after him.

"Let him be," Florian ordered. "You'll make matters worse. Give him time to himself. I've seen him like this before."

"He's dangerous, Florian. If he thinks he's been betrayed, there's no telling what he'll do."

"At the moment," Florian said, "he'd like nothing better than to shoot me. Someday he may try."

"No. He can't hate you that much."

"Not from hatred. From love. If our young eagle believes me less than he thought, he'd very happily kill me. For my own good. No, youngster, Justin's hatred is for himself.

"After his father was sent to the gallows," Florian went on, "I found Justin wandering the streets. He was little more than a boy, but he'd gotten hold of a knife somewhere. I took him in, I promised he'd have his revenge. He lived on that promise.

"His parents were tenants on a noble estate, turned out when they couldn't pay their rent. His mother died in a ditch and so did the child she was carrying. Later, his father led an uprising against the landed aristocracy. It failed and he went into hiding.

"He was in a safe house, the soldiers would never have found him. But they found Justin. They tortured the boy until he told them where his father was. They caught him within the hour and hanged him then and there. They made Justin watch.

"That was the day I found him. He was half out of his mind, he said that it was his fault, that he'd betrayed his father. No one could have stood that kind of punishment, least of all a child. But he believed he should have been strong enough to hold out.

"I thought, first, he was ready to cut the throat of any aristocrat, soldier, or constable he could find. No. The knife was for himself.

"I trust you to say nothing of this," Florian added. "He'd never forgive me for telling you. He'd never forgive you for knowing."

Theo nodded. He understood, for the first time, why Justin often rearranged his memories. Justin was his own ghost.

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"**GO HOME**,, youngster," Florian said. "I'll do what I can to lay hands on good Master Skeit. Meantime, keep your own eyes open. He's not looking for you. Not now. If he were, you'd have known it before this. He's up to something else. Even so, be careful."

"Florian"--- Theo hesitated at the door--- "tell me this: Was Justin right?"

"That I betrayed him?" Florian gave his old ironic smile. "Yes. As he sees it. And what about you? Do you think I've turned into a monarchist?"

"No. I only wonder why you didn't bring down the monarchy when you had a chance."

Florian raised an eyebrow. "Would you have wanted me to spill more blood to get what Queen Augusta gave us freely?"

"No," said Theo. "There's already been too much bloodshed."

"Justin doesn't think so," said Florian. "And if he believes he has enough people who agree with him---"

"You can't believe he'd fight against you. That could mean civil war. Not even Justin would go that far."

Florian shrugged. "My fledgling has grown. He has his own wings. He wants to try them." Florian put his head on his hands. He suddenly looked intensely weary. "Go home, there's nothing more you can do."

More troubled by Florian's words than by the glimpse of Skeit, Theo left the headquarters. The courtyard and gardens of the town house were already filled with people, men and women: heads of political sections from various quarters of the city; provincial committee members, many still wearing the red armbands of Florian's partisans; petitioners for military commissions or on some other errand of their own.

He did not follow Florian's advice. Not immediately. He walked slowly in a roundabout way in the general direction of The Marsh. He told himself there might be a slim chance of running into Skeit again. He was, in fact, hoping to settle his own thoughts. In the old days at Freyborg, Justin had worshipped Florian. As they all did. "My children," Florian had called them. They had followed him, willing to die for him. Some had already done so: the poet, Stock; Luther; and so many others. For the sake of Florian, Theo had turned himself into the bloody-handed Colonel Kestrel, the monstrous thing that Pohn had called a hero. He would not do it again. He had tried to forget the war. Justin apparently was still fighting it.

At last, he went home. Theo had lodgings in the garret of Keller's house near Fish Market Square. He could have taken better quarters elsewhere. But here, in the old ramshackle house that also served as the offices of *Old Kasperl*, there was room enough for his belongings, his sketchbooks, piles of canvas, an easel, and a good light for painting, which he seldom had time for. Besides, he felt more comfortable among friends. A makeshift family, but a family nevertheless.

At Keller's, he had a happy surprise. In the main room, he found two water rats and an apprentice burglar.

The water rats, as the journalist called them, were a pair of street scavengers that Keller had taken in and reclaimed. The boy, Weasel, had sprung up like a weed. Madam Bertha, the old housekeeper, was constantly letting out his clothes. Weasel had once cherished the golden dream of being a thief. Now he had settled for being a mere journalist. Sparrow, his elder sister, might be in love with Keller, but Weasel outdid her. He worshiped the journalist. Wearing Keller's hand-me-downs, he was an abridged edition of his idol. Weasel's crowning glory was one of Keller's discarded hats, which he seldom took off, indoors or out. Too big for Weasel's head, he had stuffed the inside band with shreds of *Old Kasperl*, pinned the corners together and knotted a kerchief around it. It was a head covering only a lunatic hatter could have imagined and only Weasel could have constructed.

Sparrow had blossomed, thanks to Madam Bertha. Her face had lost much of its close-set, foxy look. Instead of burlap sacking, she now wore dresses. Not through vanity. She believed that Keller preferred them. Since lodging with them, Theo had been teaching the urchins something of the printing trade. Sparrow, like her brother, had already learned to set type and correct proof sheets. On Keller's frequent days of illness, she edited *Old Kasperl* almost single-handedly. The girl had turned out to be a demon at arithmetic, a ramrod with the pressmen and printer's devils, and Keller's affairs had never been in such good order.

The apprentice burglar was now queen of Westmark. She had changed less than Sparrow. Once an impudent street urchin with no inkling of her true identity, Mickle still wore, from time to time, a pair of old breeches belted around her narrow waist: a garb that delighted the city's hucksters and ragpickers, but which the courtiers and town worthies judged infamous. And she was still the Beggar Queen who had commanded the armies of Westmark and held them together with the brain of a chess player and the tongue of a cavalry sergeant. The veterans of her Old Guard adored their monarch. Theo loved the urchin. He was often uncertain which personality he was dealing with. He suspected there were a dozen more he had not yet discovered.

The two young women were sitting on the floor in front of the fire, heads together, laughing and whispering. Their previous professions had been enough alike for them to share a fond sisterhood. Weasel, barred from their conversation, eavesdropped from a corner.

At the sight of Theo, Mickle scrambled to her feet and went to him. Her blue eyes danced, she looked wickedly pleased with herself.

"I stole an hour."

"Only one?" chided Theo. "Not much of a robbery." He always brightened when Mickle escaped the Juliana Palace and came to Fish Market Square: secret excursions which the Marianstat worthies would have judged more scandalous than the breeches.

"The most I could manage today. Any longer and the palace will be in an uproar. Besides, my mother's still sick. Dr. Torrens said I could see her for a little while this afternoon."

"I was hoping you'd already be here," Mickle went on. "You needn't complain about only an hour. You're the one who's wasted most of it."

"I'll never understand why you can't have Theo living in the palace," Sparrow said to Mickle. For Sparrow, separation from Kelley would have been a monstrous punishment. "You're the queen. You can command it."

"It's against state policy," said Mickle. "Florian would have agreed. Not Justin. He says that the consuls represent the commoners. It wouldn't do for Theo to be that close to royalty. That's why he wouldn't let us marry. Justin thinks monarchy is a contagious disease."

"That's nonsense," said Sparrow.

"As are many things, fortunately," said Kelley, who had come into the room in time to hear this. "Otherwise, how would I earn my bread?" The publisher of *Old Kasperl* was a youngish man with sharp elbows and impudent hair. He had spent most of the morning confined to bed and he still was in his dressing gown. "Come along, water rats. Leave this happy pair to themselves and do something useful."

"I am," said Weasel. "I'm watching." Having observed no fires or worthwhile accidents during his morning news-gathering rounds, he had decided to improve his journalistic experience by studying the peculiar behavior of sweethearts, taking his sister, Theo, and the queen of Westmark for specimens.

"I'm not a water rat," Sparrow protested. "Not anymore."

"On the contrary," said Kelley. "Whatever else you are, you remain a water rat at heart. Therein lies the essence of your charm."

Sparrow understood that Kelley had paid her some sort of compliment. She was delighted, but she blushed and pretended to be annoyed. Weasel shook his head. Sparrow, he had grown to realize, could be very silly.

"Out," said Kelley. "Both of you."

"They'd better stay and hear this," said Theo. "It concerns all of us." As with Florian, he gave his account of the morning.

Mickle's face had paled, but she recovered herself in an instant. "Skeit--- that murderous little snake! Are you absolutely sure you saw him? It couldn't have been someone else?"

"That's what Pohn asked," said Theo. "No, there's no mistake. I'd never forget that

pudgy face and those pink-rimmed eyes. He can change his costume as often as he likes, I'd know him anywhere."

Mickle paced in front of the hearth. "Very well. At least we know he's in Marianstat. That's better than not knowing where he is at all. You saw him. That's one thing. The other: Did he see you?"

"I doubt it, but I can't be sure."

"Florian will find him if anyone can," said Mickle. "Leave it to him. My royal investigators are worthless; they only tell me what they think I should hear."

Weasel had come out of his corner and gone to Theo's side. He confidently puffed out his chest until he looked as if he had swallowed a birdcage. If Weasel worshiped Keller, he adored Theo only a little less.

"This fellow you're looking for--- if you want to lay hands on him, I'll keep an eye out. I'll catch him for you."

Theo grinned fondly at the earnest water rat. "Here's an official consular directive: You, Citizen Weasel, will stay clear of this whole business."

Weasel made an impolite noise expressing disappointment. He shrugged his skin-and-bone shoulders. "If you say so."

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## 4

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**CITIZEN WEASEL** began his news-gathering rounds each morning, rain or shine. From the offices of *Old Kasperl*, he made his way to whatever quarter of Marianstat struck his fancy. He did not choose his field of operations ahead of time. An artist in his work, he relied on the inspiration of the moment.

Theo had given him formal, official orders to stay out of the matter of Skeit. The forbidden always attracted Weasel, but in this case his disobedience was a token of affection. He wanted to do Theo a service. Besides, he was already basking in the glory of finding the man before anyone else did.

That morning, his logic and instinct led his feet in the direction of the port. Calm, cheerful, confident, Weasel did not hurry. What he hoped to learn would be there when he arrived. Crossing Fish Market Square, he lingered a moment. On a wall, some unknown hand had scrawled *Long live Cabbarus!*

"That won't do," said Weasel. He took a stub of charcoal from his pocket.

Weasel had never seen Cabbarus in his life. But he knew that the former chief minister had once thrown Keller into the Carolia Prison, with a view to hanging him. The scribbled message, thus, was unacceptable to Weasel.

With his charcoal, he scratched out some of the letters and changed the shape of others. The result produced an altogether different meaning, expressed in language even Keller would not have allowed in the house. Weasel smiled, satisfied with his handiwork. Keller had taught him to read and write. Weasel was happy to put these skills to good use.

At last, he reached the place he had chosen to begin his search: the tavern where Theo had seen the pudgy assassin. Weasel struck up a conversation with the tavern keeper, who did not appear to be in a mood for small talk. The man, in fact, suggested a number of other things Weasel should do instead of loitering around the premises.

Weasel's feelings were not easily hurt. He persisted in his conversation, which spiraled around and around like a snail shell. Only in bits and pieces did he raise the question of a certain seafaring gentleman. The tavern keeper answered impatiently and finally thrust Weasel out the door.

Weasel was highly gratified. He had learned one fact: The tavern keeper was lying. A lie, for Weasel, was a mirror. It reflected truth turned the other way round. Perceiving what was false, he was in a position to discover what was true. He would keep an eye on the tavern and make sure no one kept an eye on him.

Meanwhile, he had other steps to take. Weasel's method for finding a needle in a

haystack was practical and direct. By discarding the hay, what remained would be the needle. By learning who the genuine sailors were, he would finally come to the impostor. The task, to anyone but Weasel, would have been daunting. But, since working for Keller, Weasel had spun himself a spiderweb: not of gossamer threads but of dockers, longshoremen, and port loungers. He was also on good terms with a number of the shipmasters.

He came upon one of them sitting on a pile of sacks at the open front of a warehouse and delicately picking his teeth with the point of a clasp knife, an operation Weasel found fascinating to watch.

The man's name was Jacob. He called himself Captain Jacob, although his title seemed grander than his ship, one of the smallest in the port. The name of the vessel recommended it for nothing more than slow, tedious haulage: the *Tortoise*.

This was a deliberate deception. The *Tortoise* was not only seaworthy, it could outrun any ship in port. By necessity. Jacob, with his black, long-skirted coat buttoned up to a clean-shaven chin, with his pepper-and-salt hair neatly twisted into a pigtail, looked prim as a notary. He was, in fact, a notorious smuggler.

Captain Jacob finished his dental treatment, snapped his knife and his jaws shut, and turned his glance on Weasel.

"Hello, young Weasel," said Jacob. "You're up to no good." This was not a reproach, only a friendly observation.

"Neither are you," said Weasel. Since he and Captain Jacob shared the same disdain for the law, Weasel felt that he could deal honestly with him. Weasel explained his problem and his goal.

Jacob shook his head. He could not recall such a person--- which meant little, since he had been away on business and had just come into port.

"Even so," Jacob went on, "your man isn't likely to be aboard any of the ships here. There's no new vessel in harbor, no passenger trade for weeks. We did sight a couple of Ankari ships--- ugly devils, with those black sails they carry. You don't often see them in these waters. We gave them a wide berth and they gave us the same. So that's no help to you. No, what I think is: The fellow's come by land. He may not even be here anymore."

"But you'll keep an eye out for him?"

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't. There has to be a little something in this for me, eh?"

"I did the government a favor once," said Weasel. "They gave me a gold watch. They're bound to do as much for you." He added casually, "I'll talk to the queen about it."

"Gold watch?" Jacob snorted. "I have a chest full. Besides, it's against my principles to help the government. But--- all right, never mind that. You're not a bad sort, you'd have made a decent smuggler if you hadn't gone in for scrivenering. For you, I'll do what I can. If that lubber's anywhere portside, I'll know it sooner or later."



"Sooner," said Weasel.

Having inspected his web of other informants and taken another look at the tavern customers, Weasel congratulated himself. He had made an excellent start; he was sure that Skeit would be within his grasp momentarily. He went home whistling. When Keller asked what news he had gathered, Weasel shrugged and held up a pair of grubby but empty hands: a dull day.

WEASEL HAD begun confidently. As the week passed, his mood changed to impatience, then to disappointment which, in anyone but Weasel, would have given way to despair. Jacob had nothing to report, nor did any of Weasel's other cronies. The lying tavern keeper went about his business like an honest man.

Weasel considered an unhappy possibility. He was looking for a sailor. But Skeit might simply have changed costume. Jacob might be right: The man could have left the city. The haystack might not even contain a needle.

The needle did exist. Weasel himself found it. Not through Jacob or any of the other watchers, not by cunning, not by cleverness, but by accident.

All his other schemes having proved unprofitable, Weasel clung to the hope that the tavern would give him an answer. He spent most of his days lurking around it. He left the vicinity only briefly to keep in touch with his network. Late one afternoon, hurrying back to his observation post, Weasel nearly collided with a dumpy little man in a gray cloak and broad-brimmed hat. The man carried a parcel under one arm.

Weasel felt the hairs rise on the back of his neck. He saw, in a glance, the pudgy face, the pink-rimmed eyelids. His nerves shouted at him that he had stumbled on Theo's would-be assassin. Skeit had indeed changed costume. He had taken the disguise hardest to penetrate: the disguise of drabness.

A constable came into sight at the corner. It would have been the simplest matter to hail the officer and demand Skeit's arrest. Weighing his opinion of the law against his opinion of his own abilities, Weasel chose the only course: He followed Skeit.

The man was heading for the wharves. Weasel kept as close as he dared. The afternoon was fading. For a few moments, Weasel lost sight of his quarry, then glimpsed him again scuttling along the embankment. Skeit clambered down a flight of stone steps leading to the river, hopped into one of the rowboats bobbing at the water's edge, and shoved off into the current.

Weasel scrambled down the steps. Among the other boats moored there, only one was unchained: a splintery old scow, listing in the water. A frayed rope kept it from drifting; what kept it from sinking was a mystery. There was, at least, a pair of mismatched oars.

Weasel climbed aboard, cast off, and rowed into the tide. Some distance ahead, Skeit, with steady strokes, was bearing toward the mouth of the Vespera. The man's destination puzzled Weasel. There was nothing of interest among the reeds and

cattails, the spits of land called The Fingers. Weasel knew this, he had grown up there. Skeit shifted his course a little and made for the estuary. Then Weasel understood.

The ruins of a lighthouse rose from an islet that was barely more than a mound of gravel girded with rocks. The structure had been abandoned, unused, for as long as Weasel could remember. Skeit was heading directly for it.

Weasel heaved a sigh of relief. The waterlogged scow could make way only slowly and laboriously, but Weasel was no longer concerned about speed. He knew where Skeit intended to land, and there was only one practical place to moor a boat.

Weasel had calculated exactly. By the time he maneuvered the scow between the tumble of rocks, Skeit had already tied up his craft and disembarked. Weasel shipped his oars and jumped nimbly onto the gravel. Skeit, by now, was inside the lighthouse.

Without a specific plan, trusting to the inspiration of the moment, Weasel scuttled across the stretch of gravel, keeping a tight grip on the oar he had brought with him.

Under the rising moon, the broken tower looked as if some giant eagle had built a nest of driftwood on top of it. On one side of the lighthouse, the stones had fallen away, leaving a breach for Weasel to peer inside. Skeit had lit a candle and set it on the ground, untied his parcel, and stripped away the wrapping.

Weasel's jaw dropped. He had expected daggers, pistols, perhaps a disembodied head. The open parcel held a hunch of bread, half a chicken, and a bottle. It had never occurred to Weasel: Even assassins go on picnics.

Skeit refreshed himself from his little stock of provisions. With a certain daintiness, he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, then leaned back against the wall, filled a clay pipe, and contentedly puffed away.

Weasel stayed motionless. It was taking Skeit forever to finish his pipe. Weasel grew a little bored and impatient. The contents of the parcel had disappointed him, but, he told himself, Skeit had not gone to such pains for the pleasure of an evening snack. Weasel's curiosity got the better of him. Before taking matters into his own hands, he wanted to see what Skeit was up to. And so he waited.

After some while, Skeit pulled a watch from his pocket. He looked at the time as if he had an important engagement. He stood, stretched, walked out of the circle of candlelight. And vanished.

It took Weasel a moment to understand that Skeit had not performed some conjuring trick but had simply clambered up the spiral staircase to the top of the tower. Weasel stayed in the shadows and peered up. He saw the squat figure appear beside the pile of twigs and branches.

Skeit held an object that Weasel had not noticed before: a spyglass, which he extended to scan the seaward horizon. Weasel could not make out whatever Skeit was so patiently observing. Without benefit of the glass, Weasel squinted into the darkness. He rubbed his eyes. He believed he had caught sight of a glimmer offshore. It appeared again: a clear, bright pinpoint, flashing.

Skeit disappeared from the tower. An instant later, flames burst skyward. The pinnacle of the lighthouse blazed. For such a fire, Weasel realized, the wood must have been soaked with oil or pitch. The flames mounted, lighting up the whole islet. Skeit, Weasel guessed, had made many trips to prepare his nest only to set a match to it: a signal fire, an enormous candle, visible for miles around.

The little man came walking out of the door at the foot of the tower and headed briskly for the water's edge. Weasel sprang from the shadows and ran shouting after him. Skeit stopped in his tracks and spun about.

"Halt!" Weasel leveled his oar as if it were a pike. "Halt! You're under arrest!"

Skeit's pink-rimmed eyes stared. He looked Weasel up and down, scanning the ill-fitting attire, the ridiculous hat, and the oar that Weasel was brandishing under Skeit's nose.

Skeit did something he rarely did even in private, which few people had ever seen--- and those who had were no longer alive: He burst out laughing.

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## 5

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**THEO WAITED** near an open shed by the dockside. Sparrow was late; so was Keller. He stamped his numbing feet on the cobbles. Beside him, Keller's mare whinnied, impatient to be in her stable. A little while before, someone had set fire to the old lighthouse. Most of the neighborhood people were in bed, but a number had gotten up to join the night loiterers and sailors running to gawk at the fire. Sparrow was probably among them. He had no idea what could have delayed Keller.

That evening, Weasel had done something unthinkable: He had not come home for supper. Alarmed, Keller, Theo, and Sparrow had decided to search for the missing water rat. They separated---- Keller to look in the taverns in the student quarter; Sparrow to roam The Marsh. To cover the long stretches of the docks and quays faster, Theo had borrowed the journalist's horse. They had agreed to meet two hours later. It was long past the time, and there was no sign of them. Theo did not leave his post, afraid they might come and find him gone, in which case they could well spend the rest of the night looking for each other instead of Weasel.

Then he heard the bells. The first, from the Old Juliana tower, burst out in peal after peal: the tocsin, the warning of danger. Other bells took up the iron-throated shout, the echoes hanging frozen in the air. The snapping of musketry came from Great Augustine Square.

Theo leaped astride the horse. He rode a little way down the quay in a last hope of sighting Sparrow. Daring to wait no longer, he wheeled his mount and started toward the square. A rider galloped up, nearly colliding with him. He recognized Beck, who had been his second-in-command during the war and was now one of the political section leaders. He could hear little of what Beck was shouting at him over the clatter. Keller's mare shied away. Beck plunged closer until they were knee to knee, their two animals lurching against each other, the frightened mare biting at the neck of the other steed.

"The Mariana regiment's attacking the palace," Beck shouted. "I don't know where Justin is. I couldn't get to Florian. The square's cut off."

Theo made no sense of Beck's words. He only understood that Mickle was in danger. After the first shock, a part of his mind had begun working again, coldly, separate from himself. He heard his voice ordering Beck to set up a command post in The Marsh, to share out whatever weapons he could find. As soon as he rallied any kind of strength, he was to join Theo at Great Augustine Square.

"You can't get there. It's a hornet's nest---"

"Do it. Now."

Beck wheeled and galloped away. Theo was aware, suddenly, of a rising tide of voices. The people who had gone to watch the fire at the old lighthouse were streaming back along the quay. Others had joined them, staring and pointing at the curious sight in the middle of the Vespera. To Theo, it looked like a huge bird of prey, winging silently through the harbor fog. Then he made out the long black hull, the black sails.

He froze in the saddle. He could not take his eyes from the looming vessel. Even as he watched, the side of the ship burst into flames. The frigate had run out her guns and was cannonading the buildings along the quay.

The crowd began to scream with one voice. The mare whinnied and reared. The cannons had loaded their guns with red-hot shot. Some of the warehouses were already blazing. The crowd broke and raced from the portside, fleeing the barrage, sweeping Theo along.

The gunners reloaded. The next salvo tore through roofs and shattered windows. The crowd, Theo in their midst, streamed into Fish Market Square. Struggling to get clear, Theo tried to force the mare through the press of people, but was only pushed closer against the wall of a house. Above the din, he thought he heard a voice calling his name.

A cannonball crashed into the eaves of the building, showering down bricks and shattered masonry. Theo flung up his arms to shield his head. As he pitched from the saddle, he heard the voice again; then, nothing.

MICKLE WAS awake when they came to arrest her.

She had, until then, spent much of the evening in the palace archives. She was looking for buried treasure. She hoped, at least, it would be a treasure. She was sure it was buried. If it existed.

There were times, over these past months, when she had thought it would be simpler to find a real treasure chest, easier to dig up the palace grounds with a spoon, than to delve through so many old documents filling cabinet after cabinet. The archivist would have been overjoyed to help, but Mickle's quest was her secret. She had said nothing of it even to Theo.

That night, the treasure fell into her hands.

It was not an accident. She had merely been looking in the wrong places. She had not searched far enough or near enough. It had been there all the time, overlooked; so clear and obvious that she burst out laughing.

Then she burst out frowning.

Perhaps it was a treasure, perhaps not. Mickle's sharp intelligence told her that the consequences would not be as simple as the discovery. She bit her lips. Her success elated and troubled her. She was uncertain what to do about it, if anything.

She half wished it away. But she had learned something and could not unlearn it. For the moment, the only practical thing was to go to bed. Which she did.

Restless, thoughtful, she was still awake when she heard shouts in the courtyard. Shots were fired. Someone was bawling orders. The Juliana Bells broke into a frantic peal. Mickle scrambled out of bed and pulled aside the draperies at the casement. She could not see what was happening. Bells had begun ringing throughout the city. From the antechamber came the sound of wood splintering.

She started toward her bedroom door. It flung open before she reached it. An officer of the Mariana infantry halted in front of her. Behind him, soldiers held muskets at the ready. The Juliana guards, always on duty in the corridor, had vanished.

"What the devil's going on?" Mickle planted her feet in the doorway. She pushed the hair out of her eyes and looked squarely at the officer. "You're Colonel Zeller, aren't you? Well, Colonel, I can't say much for your manners."

Zeller stiffened, for a moment taken aback by Mickle's bearing. "Citizen Augusta, you are under arrest in accordance with orders of the directorate."

"Arrest? Directorate? Zeller, what are you talking about?"

"Until disposition of your case, you are to be confined in the Carolia Prison. You will accompany me."

"I certainly won't," retorted Mickle. "You can accompany yourself to blazes, along with your directorate, whatever that is."

"Citizen, do not make my duty more difficult. If you resist arrest, I am empowered to take any measures necessary."

"On whose authority? Your own?"

"On the authority of Director Cabbarus."

Until now, Mickle had been angered more than frightened. The officer corps had always itched for power. Conspiracy was the pastime of courtiers, as much an amusement as their charades and costume balls. But--- Cabbarus? This was more than an attempt by a handful of disgruntled officers and aristocrats. She clenched her hands to keep them from shaking.

"Cabbarus is banished," snapped Mickle. "He has no authority."

"Director Cabbarus will arrive presently," Zeller said. "You and your consuls can discuss the legality then. Their arrest has been ordered, they will join you in the Carolia."

Mickle flinched in spite of herself. Theo taken, Florian and Justin as well--- She could not bring herself to believe this. She needed time to collect her thoughts. "Where is Queen Caroline?"

"Citizen Caroline is being conducted to the fortress."

"Have her brought back to the palace immediately. She is unwell."

"Her physician is attending her. Your only concern is to obey the directorate's orders."

"I assume," said Mickle, "the directorate will allow me to put my clothes on."

"You may do so." Zeller hesitated. "Under guard."

"That's ridiculous." Mickle slammed the door in Zeller's face and turned the key. Leaving him protesting in the antechamber, she ran to snatch up her breeches and shirt. The colonel rattled the lock and warned her to hurry.

"Indeed I will," Mickle said under her breath. Tumbling into her clothes, she flung open the window. She knew the palace rooftops as well as she knew its corridors and council rooms. She had used the ledges and gutters many times before, when it suited her convenience to slip away from the Juliana.

This time, she held back an instant while her thoughts raced ahead. If Theo was in the Carolia, she wanted to be with him. Yet, for all she knew, they would likely keep her locked apart. A prisoner herself, she could be no help to him.

Zeller had begun pounding on the door. Mickle gritted her teeth and climbed from the window ledge to the roof. The sharp exchange of musketry came from the arcades between the old and new palace buildings. She picked her way skillfully and quickly along the gutters in the direction of the firing.

The palace guards, taken by surprise, had fallen back, hard pressed by the Mariana troops. Mickle chose a spot as close as possible to the defenders' position, slid down the nearest drain, and raced over the flagstones.

Musket balls whistled past her. She reached an angle of wall and skidded to a halt as she collided with a sandy-haired young man with a curling, cavalry-style moustache. His uniform was unbuttoned and unbelted, and General Witz was still in his stocking feet. She had never, even in the midst of the war, seen her chief of staff so unmilitarily disheveled.

"Your Majesty--- safe!" Witz's face lit up in astonishment and joy. "No--- that is, you're not safe at all. Majesty, take cover. Somewhere, anywhere."

"Get your men out," Mickle ordered. "Don't make a stand. Take them into the streets, it's our best chance."

"Beg to report, that's impossible," blurted Witz. "We're cut off. We'll soon be out of powder and shot, and the armory's taken. We can hold long enough to get you free of the palace."

"You'll do as I tell you," commanded Mickle. "Break through the gate behind the stables."

"No time, Your Majesty, I regretfully beg to report."

The firing had grown brisker. The first lines of the attackers had moved forward, joined by a platoon which had made its way through the royal gardens. Witz shouted for his sergeant-major.

The next thing Mickle knew, she was seized under the arms by Witz on one side and

the sergeant on the other. By the time she realized what they were doing, she was already being half dragged, half carried to the wall at the rear of the Old Juliana. She kicked and struggled. Witz hung on doggedly.

"Up you go, Your Majesty," panted Witz. "Up, over, and run for it."

"Put me down, I order you---" Mickle had full command of barracks language, and she applied it fluently. Witz and his accomplice paid no heed and calmly continued hoisting her toward the top of the wall.

General Witz had never before disobeyed his queen. From the time when he was only a captain, he had been desperately, silently, magnificently in love with her, above and beyond the requirements of military regulations. He had wished nothing better than to give his life for his sovereign. He had tried to do so on many occasions; he refused to be deprived of another opportunity.

Witz allowed himself an unmilitary smile of relief when at last he succeeded in heaving Mickle over the wall. He was not aware, then, of being jolted off his feet. He heard nothing of the musket fire behind him.

Only as he toppled back did it occur to him that he was dying. The fact did not interest him. He felt only a marvelous lightheadedness. It was the happiest day of his life.

Mickle had seen Witz falter, his eyes filled with death. She cried out, trying to regain her balance. By then, she was tumbling downward to land heavily on the cobbles.

She scrambled to her feet. Pain stabbed her arm, she had twisted it trying to break her fall. Blinded by tears, still seeing the face of the devoted Witz, she ran straight on, heedless of direction.

In the darkness, she stumbled against the side of a building, spun away, and plunged through the nearest alley. She burst into a winding street and followed it. At one of its turnings, she pitched headlong against a solid shadow. It grunted and cursed.

Mickle staggered back. A hand gripped her throat. She tried to scream. There was only a muffled gasp. Another hand was clapped firmly over her mouth.

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## **PART TWO**The Shambles

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## 6

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**CABBARUS**, IN the good care of Colonel Zouki, had sailed for Westmark. Rid of an exasperating guest, Duke Conrad set about ridding himself of a disastrous king. An odd reluctance filled him, nevertheless. He did not wish to involve himself in the details. Yet, he must. At his country estate, he went over the plan again with Pankratz. All was arranged, he had only to put it in action.

Still, Conrad lingered. He inspected his livestock, visited the barns and byres. He did something he had never done before: He milked a cow. These occupations calmed him and gave him pleasure. Had he not been obliged to become a king, he thought he could have been happy in the quiet life of a gentleman farmer. He promised himself, once the affair was settled and he had put the kingdom on its proper course, he would spend more time on his estate. He envisioned new breeding methods, new buildings, perhaps an artificial lake or a pond with a miniature waterwheel.

On this note of hope and cheer, he returned to Breslin Palace. Time pressed. By now Cabbarus would be arriving in Marianstat. Conrad did not want this news to reach his nephew. The duke was confident that Cabbarus would succeed. Even if he failed, it would change nothing of Conrad's own plan. The deed must be done for the sake of the kingdom. It was nothing less than a sacred duty. Conrad also realized that sacred duties could be messy and painful.

In the royal apartments, Constantine did not look happy to see him. Conrad usually would have disregarded this. Now it hurt his feelings.

"Connie," said the duke, "I have a few additions in mind for my country place. They will, I think, interest you."

"If you mean cows and chickens," said Constantine, "I'm not really fond of them. Chickens least of all. They look at you slantwise and make disagreeable noises."

"You will be spared the hen yard," said Conrad. "I simply propose a few days in the country. We have both been working too hard, our nerves are on edge. Fresh air will do wonders."

"I know what you have in mind."

Conrad started. The color left his face.

"Yes," Constantine went on, "once we're there, you'll start in again about an embargo on Westmark. You know my mind on that."

Conrad hid a sigh of relief. "No talk of politics. You have my word."

Constantine pondered a while, looking at the pile of state papers on his table. "I would

enjoy a breather. Very well. It's a fine idea. Come on, then, uncle. Let's go right away."

Only a few aides and retainers made up the traveling party. They were, as Conrad said, going to rough it: a pair of carefree peasants doing as they pleased. No couriers from the palace, no affairs of state would intrude. Constantine felt he was playing truant, which added zest to his outing.

The king still had his doubts. The duke had never kept his word on anything.

Constantine fully expected his uncle to bring up some political problem.

Astonishingly, Conrad did not. Uncle and nephew went on long rambles over the autumn countryside. They spent a day hunting, without much luck. They fished in the mountain streams above the estate and caught nothing. The duke did not raise the question of Westmark but went on at length about drainage and manure. The holiday began weighing on Constantine. He grew bored. He soon had enough of being a happy peasant; he wanted to go home and be a happy king.

"As you please," the duke said. "You can see those rocks another time."

Constantine pricked up his ears. Along with butterflies and stuffed birds, he was a keen collector of minerals. "What rocks?"

"Didn't I mention them? One of the locals was babbling about an outcrop of crystals. Pale yellow, I believe, with red streaks."

"But--- that's marvelous," exclaimed the king. "It sounds like a deposit of gelbarite. Very rare. How remarkable to find it in these parts. Where is it?"

"Near the falls, along the gorge."

"Excellent. I'll go have a look."

"Take a couple of grooms, then," said Conrad. "I do not like the notion of you scrambling up and down cliffs alone. Better yet, send someone."

"I'm quite capable of doing my own collecting, that's the fun of it. I'll be back by the end of the afternoon."

Conrad protested, repeating his warning, which only made the king more determined. Outfitted with a hammer, a small crowbar, and a sack, Constantine ordered a horse saddled and eagerly set off.

After a time, the king wondered if his uncle might have had a good point. The rising ground grew difficult and harsh, the approach so steep that he had to tether his mount and make the rest of his way on foot. Past a screen of brush, he finally came onto a level apron of gravel near the rim of the gorge. Below, the torrent swept toward the cataract. According to Conrad's directions, the outcrop was along the rim. Constantine went over the ground carefully. He found nothing of interest.

The king was disappointed. Also, for some while, he had been aware of being followed. His uncle, no doubt, had sent a forester to keep an eye on him. Constantine, ordinarily, would have resented being watched and treated like a child. In this case, he was glad. The fellow would know the lay of the land and save hours of searching.

Constantine turned back toward the screen of brush. "Come out. I know you're there. Where's this outcrop of gelbarite? Yellow and red crystals, whatever you fellows call it locally."

A man stepped from the brush. He carried an iron-tipped staff and wore a traveling cloak. A wide-brimmed hat shadowed his face. There was something familiar about the thickset, bandy-legged figure. Constantine racked his memory to no avail. The fellow, in any case, was no mountaineer.

"Who are you? What do you want?"

The man halted. "Your Majesty---"

"Yes, well, I know who I am," said Constantine. "That's not what I asked you."

The man gripped his staff in both hands, swung it up, and struck with all his might at the king's head.

Constantine was taken altogether by surprise at the sudden attack. His mind made no sense of it, but his body responded instinctively. So drilled by his fencing master, Constantine parried the blow instantly, not with a foil but with his arm. Shocked by the pain, he sprang back, groping for the hammer or crowbar in his belt.

The man swung again. Constantine dodged the sweeping staff and grappled his assailant, bending all his strength to throw him off balance. The staff clattered to the gravel. The king and his would-be assassin wrestled across the broken ground, their struggles bringing them closer to the cliff edge. Constantine found solid footing, thrust out one leg, and sent his attacker tumbling.

But the man did not loosen his grasp. Heavier and burlier than the slender Constantine, he clung fiercely to the king. Kicking and clawing at each other, the two spun over the edge and hurtled to the rocks below.

DUKE CONRAD was uncomfortable. Past nightfall, alone in the cottage, the waiting unsettled him more than anything else. He sat for a while, stood by the fire, paced the room. He sat down again. He wanted his supper. Pankratz should have come by now to claim his money and the documents that would get him safely and secretly out of Regia.

This was the part which Conrad liked least: There were neither gold nor documents. What awaited the Minister's Mastiff was a bullet. Conrad had primed and loaded a pistol and left it ready on a side table. The duke and Cabbarus had, long before, decided that the faithful Pankratz must be sacrificed. Constantine would be found the victim of a deplorable accident. Pankratz would never say otherwise: A quiet niche had been prepared for him in the cellar. Since no officer or servant could attend to this unhappy detail without adding a further link in the chain, the task had fallen to Conrad. He found it distasteful in the extreme. He half wished that Connie had followed his advice.

The fire burned low. The room was chilly. The duke went and stirred the embers. He

heard steps outside the door, then a knock. He stationed himself in front of the table, the pistol in easy reach.

"Come." Conrad's hands trembled a little.

The door opened. Conrad caught his breath. He stared at the face mottled with bruises, one side badly swollen. The clothing was ripped and dirty, splotted with blood.

"Hello, uncle," said Constantine. "I've had a nasty fall."

The duke made small noises. He was too stunned to think of the pistol.

"Actually, someone tried to kill me," said Constantine. "Bankwitz--- Pankratz, or whatever his name is."

"But--- but, Connie," the duke managed to say, "that is terrible."

"Yes, isn't it." There was a hard edge in the king's voice. "The odd thing is the fellow saved my life. He certainly didn't mean to. You see, we both fell into the gorge. I landed on top of him. Otherwise, I'd be as dead as he is."

"Pankratz--- dead?" Conrad said hopefully.

"He didn't die right away," said Constantine. "He was rather badly broken up inside. He didn't realize he was already half gone. He wanted me to forgive him, he was only obeying orders. He begged me to haul him out of the ravine. Not that I was able to, and it wouldn't have saved him anyway. He confessed the whole business about Cabbarus. And you."

Conrad's mind had begun working a little better. He reached for the pistol.

Constantine was there in one stride and seized the weapon. "What, uncle, you wouldn't shoot me after all I've been through? Or was this for Pankratz? Yes, of course. He didn't know that part of it. Poor devil, he was a dead man no matter what."

Constantine unloaded the pistol and flung it away. The duke, for the first time in his life, was frightened of his nephew. He had never seen such a look on Connie's face. The eyes had a terrible blaze, beyond rage or vengeance. His whole bearing was different.

"Connie--- Your Majesty." This, too, was the first time Conrad had addressed his nephew by the title.

"I've sent the steward to fetch a company from the local garrison," Constantine said. "The gamekeeper and the rest are outside, armed. I've ordered them to stay there unless I call."

"I thought we'd take a little time to settle things between us," Constantine went on. "I can't simply exile you, you know. Even if you didn't go to Westmark and stay with Cabbarus, I couldn't trust you anywhere. You've always wanted to be rid of me. I can understand why if I look at it from your point of view. I can even forgive you for it. But I can't let you stay alive."

Conrad's florid face went ashen. "You wouldn't---!"

"I don't mean a trial and public execution," said Constantine. "That's a disgusting

business. Still, it must be an official act. By my command. Witnessed, reported, the reasons thoroughly explained. I'm sorry. It has nothing to do with you personally. It's a matter of policy. You see that, don't you?"

"Yes. It is correct."

"I can't let you just shoot yourself," said Constantine, "but I'll give you this much: a quick, expert military firing squad here on the estate."

Conrad had always been terrified of death. Hearing his nephew's words, he expected to disgrace himself by being sick. Instead, he felt enormously relieved, as if all his burdens and cares had vanished.

"That is only proper," said Conrad. "I ask one favor. I wish to be buried in my garden."

"Granted, of course."

"I thank Your Majesty."

"Sit down," said Constantine. "Rest, compose yourself. You have a while yet. Is there anything you want?"

"I shall be fine." On a sudden impulse, Conrad took his nephew's hand and kissed it: the formal gesture of a subject toward a monarch. He wondered if Constantine's reign would be as disastrous as he had feared. Constantine might even come to see that his uncle had been right. Or perhaps not. In which case, Constantine would pay dearly. Either way, whether he was a fool or not, Constantine had truly become a king.

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## 7

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**THE LAST** thing he remembered was Fish Market Square. When he opened his eyes, he was lying on someone's bed. It took Theo a few moments to realize it was his own. As the room stopped spinning, he caught blurred glimpses of familiar objects: his easel in the corner, the stack of canvases. Another familiar object loomed into sight: a luxurious black moustache.

"So, my boy, you've decided to rejoin us."

The same voice had called out to him in the square. The plump, ruddy face attached to the moustache belonged to Count Las Bombas. Beside it, another face peered anxiously. The explosion of ginger-colored hair could only be Musket's.

Theo had a choice of two impossible possibilities: that he had only imagined the attack on the port or that he was now only imagining the count and his dwarf companion.

"A bad crack on the head," Las Bombas was saying. "Some spectacular bruises, but nothing that won't mend. Lucky you didn't get trampled underfoot by the mob. After we sighted you, it was all we could do to get you out of the square.

"Of all moments for us to arrive in Marianstat," the count went on. "Musket and I were looking forward to a quiet visit, a few days among friends after our somewhat unsatisfactory tour of the provinces. Instead, we find a madhouse. I was afraid Musket would never get our coach free of the crowd. But Friska, that magnificent creature, let nothing stand in her way. She's at present enjoying the hospitality of Keller's stable, and we've hidden the coach in the shed."

Theo finally decided that both impossibilities were facts. Las Bombas indeed was there in all his generous girth. The attack had not been a nightmare. He was really in Keller's house. As further proof, he saw the journalist standing in the doorway.

Theo sat up. "I sent Beck to Great Augustine Square. I have to join him---"

"None of us is going anywhere," said Keller. "They have a warrant for your arrest. And a cell waiting for Old Kasperl, which I have no inclination to occupy."

"They?" pressed Theo. "Who? Keller, can you tell me what's going on?"

"Two Ankari frigates landed with detachments of mercenaries. At the same time, the Mariana regiment captured the palace. The whole thing was very neatly planned. The officer corps, for once, proved itself quite efficient. And you, citizen, are out of a job. Be glad for that much, since you never liked being a consul in the first place."

"Where's Mickle, then?" cried Theo. "Justin? Florian? Couldn't they put up any kind

of defense?"

"I'll find out as soon as I can," said Keller. "You're safe here for the moment. Our new masters came to arrest both of us last night. I was warned not to go home. So naturally I went home immediately. I thought you might be there ahead of me and I'd have time to get you away.

"They'd already searched the house before I got here. Not finding us, they assumed we had decamped for parts unknown--- an assumption which the admirable Madam Bertha encouraged. The officers, applying typically convoluted military reasoning, never expected us to be foolish enough to come back. Therefore, this is the last place they'll look for us, which is exactly why we shall hole up here."

"I can't stay," said Theo. "I have to get out somehow."

"To go where?" countered the journalist. "Wait until the situation is clearer. Madam Bertha's out trying to glean some news. I already have a report from highly reliable sources: my water rats."

Only then did Theo realize that Sparrow and Weasel had been trying to push their way past Keller. Weasel sprang into the room and nearly bowled over the stubby-legged Musket.

"I told you so! I said I'd find him!" Weasel crowed with self-congratulations. "I followed him to the lighthouse. I couldn't keep him from signaling to the Ankari ships but--- I arrested him!"

"You?" Theo stared at him. "You captured Skeit?"

"Of course. He didn't like it much. He pulled out a pistol. There were just the two of us, face to face. The lighthouse blazing away behind us, the master criminal against his unarmed avenger---"

"You're disgusting," said Sparrow. "Get on with it."

Weasel gave his sister a pitying glance. Sparrow had no sense of journalistic style. He would have expanded his account and made it even better. One thing changed his mind: Sparrow looked ready to throttle him. He decided to be brief.

"So I hit him on the head with an oar."

"That wasn't very bright of you," said Sparrow. "You told me yourself you couldn't haul him into the boat while he was unconscious."

"That's true," admitted Weasel. "But what else could I have done? He'd have shot me, wouldn't he? I thought of waiting till he woke up, but I didn't want to waste time."

"You mean you wanted to get away as fast as you could."

"Did not," Weasel retorted. "I wanted to notify the proper authorities. I'm a journalist, not a constable. It's not my job to get mixed up in small details.

"So I tied him up and left him there. I took his boat and rowed ashore. Even if he gets loose, he'll still be stuck. It won't help him if he tries to use my boat. Because I threw away the oars. The villain's marooned," Weasel triumphantly added. "His bones will



bleach---"

"If I know Skeit, as I know him all too well," put in Las Bombas, "he's already found a way to get back. That miserable worm is capable of anything. He's paddled himself ashore with his hands, I shouldn't wonder."

"We all admire your derring-do," Keller told Weasel. "Now apply that reckless spirit of adventure to finding something for Theo to eat."

Weasel reluctantly obeyed. Sparrow went to Theo. "He's telling the truth, mostly. What he didn't tell you is: He was terrified. I found him after he rowed ashore. He was wandering in The Marsh after the bombardment started. He was shaking so he could hardly stand. He's all right now, but if he wants to try any more of his schemes, don't let him."

Theo, meantime, had been pulling on his jacket. As he started for the door, Kelley held him back.

"You're not going anywhere. Not right now. You still don't seem to understand what's happened."

"I understand all I need to. I'm going to find out what's become of Mickle."

"We'll do that as soon as we can," said Kelley. "Are you impatient to be arrested? The monarchy's abolished, can't you get that into your head? You're a wanted man; the directorate will have you shot if they lay hands on you."

"Directorate?"

"So they call themselves. Army officers, the nobility--- they're running the government now. They have support from a good many landowners and merchants who are simply overjoyed to see the last of the Beggar Queen."

"Someone must be at the head," said Theo. "Who?"

"Cabbarus."

"Why didn't you tell me that straight off?" Theo burst out. "You've been wasting time talking about saving our own skins. Cabbarus tried to kill Mickle when he was chief minister. Do you think he'll miss another chance?"

"We don't know what he'll try," answered Kelley. "We don't even know if he's in Marianstat. He might have come on one of the frigates, he might still be on his way. For a publisher of news, I admit I haven't many facts."

"Then get them," ordered Theo. "If you can't, I will. If I have to go straight to the Juliana---"

"You're talking like a fool," the count put in sharply. "If you try that kind of harebrained scheme, you'll put us all in the soup." Las Bombas softened his tone. "All I mean to say, my boy, is that Mickle's not the only one you have to think about. As far as we're concerned, you're still a consul, an officer of the government--- the legal government, that is."

"And, for all we know, the only officer we have," added Kelley. "I agree with the

count. It's commendably noble and romantic to go dashing off to find your sweetheart. But you've also got some hard facts to face and plans to make. Mickle, alas, isn't the only one at risk. There's Florian, Zara, Justin. And how many others in as much danger?"

Theo slumped back on the cot. His head pounded, his first surge of strength had drained out of him. Las Bombas and Kelley had begun talking urgently about immediate and practical questions. Theo made an effort to listen, but at the moment he wanted the answer to only one question: Was Mickle alive?

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**MICKLE COULD** easily have answered the question so tormenting Theo. She was alive and kicking. She was alive because General Witz had died. She was kicking--- and scratching and pummeling--- because she disliked being choked. She was not screaming. The hand over her mouth kept her from using her voice. Instead, she used her teeth.

The man yelped and flung Mickle away from him. She had damaged the tools of his trade. He was a pickpocket. His name, as far as anyone, including himself, had ever known it, was Little Hands. A small man, he had earned his excellent reputation by quickness, not brute strength. He had simply made an honest mistake.

The sight of a lone youth was too much to resist. Little Hands assumed that the slight-framed lad was a servant or apprentice who had likely robbed the household and was making off with the family valuables: an amateur and thus fair game. Little Hands was paying dearly for his miscalculation. His pigeon had turned into an eagle; the minnow, a crocodile. As he rapidly discovered, the young man was a young woman, and she was belaboring the wits out of him.

Little Hands was ready to negotiate.

Mickle's demand was direct and simple. "Get me out of here."

The pickpocket mumbled an incomprehensible reply. His mouth was full of his fingers, which he was sucking to soothe the wounds from Mickle's teeth.

"Find me a place to stay. A safe one." Mickle seized him by the scruff of the neck. In case her assailant, now her prisoner, did not fully understand, she repeated her requirement in fluent thieves' jargon.

Little Hands motioned for her to follow.

"No tricks." Mickle explained what Little Hands could expect if he tried any.

The pickpocket nodded, thoroughly persuaded. Nursing his fingers, he set off limping down the street, with Mickle close beside him. She soon realized where he was going: The Shambles.

This quarter of Marianstat, at the northern edge of the city, was a world of cheap wine shops, dicing dens, flea markets. Its winding streets were crowded with tables of oddments displayed on tarpaulins or along duckboard walkways, actual pavements being few and in disrepair.

The Shambles generated its own smell: a mixture of greasy cooking, dirty laundry, and midden heaps. Mickle could sniff and identify all these aromas long before she

reached the fringe of the quarter. During the years she had spent as a guttersnipe, she had lived in many such places in many other towns. Mickle had, in sum, passed more time in those haunts than in the Juliana Palace. She felt like a fish thrown back into water.

Little Hands continued along a muddy lane toward a section of the old wall that once marked the northern limit of the city and had formed a part of the Old Juliana's defense works. What had been guard rooms, armories, and covered ways had been taken over as dwellings, houses that were ramshackle from the moment they were occupied.

It was to one such house that Little Hands led Mickle. She stepped inside what appeared to be a junk shop, a pawnshop, or both. Unidentifiable objects filled the sagging shelves or hung from the ceiling. In the light of a candle stub, three figures sat around a table covered with the remains of what could have been breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Little Hands muttered a few words to one of the men, then vanished, eager to be free of his captor.

Mickle stepped forward boldly as the man beckoned to her. He was heavily muscled, his neck lost between his shoulders and his head, which had slightly more hair than an egg. He rose unhurriedly and held the candle up to Mickle's face. Beyond the flame, Mickle saw a massive brow and a pair of needle-sharp blue eyes.

He did not speak first to her but to a lean, longheaded imitation of a gentleman whose jacket was cut very narrow and who wore an oversized spray of lace at his throat. "Get out."

"Anything to oblige you, Ingo." The jauntily dressed ferret of a man--- called Ace of Hearts, as Mickle was to learn--- tucked away the cards he had been shuffling and strolled out of the shop.

The man addressed as Ingo turned to his companion.

"Mumchance, what do you make of her?"

Mumchance, tall and lanky, unfolded himself from the chair. He cupped his bony jaw in one hand and squinted at Mickle.

"Our Beggar Oueen herself."

Ingo nodded. "What else?"

"Hanno's little girl."

Hearing this name, Mickle felt a sudden pang. Hanno had been her friend, protector, and teacher during most of her years in the streets, long before she knew her true identity. He had fed her, nursed her through sickness; there were still times when his loss made her heart ache.

"Not so little anymore." Ingo put down the candle and laid a pair of huge hands on Mickle's shoulder. "You don't remember me. You were too young when we first met. Hanno and I did a few pieces of work together. Good days, then. He was the best burglar in Westmark. What a shame---" Ingo made a quick gesture of a noose being

tightened around his neck.

"I'm too old for that game now," he added. "Pawnbroking suits me better. But Mumchance here, he's as good as Hanno ever was. We recognized you when you came back to Marianstat, when you were still a princess. We've kept an eye on you."

Mickle at last felt she was among friends. Given the manner of Little Hands and the obedience of Ace of Hearts, she also suspected that Ingo was more than a simple pawnbroker. She put away this idea for later study and quickly told him how she came to be in The Shambles.

"I've already had word about that business," Ingo said. "You're well out of it. If you want my opinion, I'd say: Be glad you're done with all that."

"Be glad that Cabbarus has taken over the government?" Mickle retorted. "I don't care about being queen, but I won't see that villain running the country."

Ingo grimaced. "As far as we're concerned, I don't figure a pennyworth of difference. We've been thieves under the monarchy, thieves under the consulate, and we'll be thieves under the directorate. What's one government or another to us? They'll hang us just as high, and we'll be just as dead. Whatever the law, we'll always be on the wrong side of it. You know that."

"I do know it," said Mickle. "That's not the point now. Ingo, I need your help."

"You'll have it. For your own sake, lassie, not your throne." Ingo gestured toward the back of the shop. "We can put you up here. There's plenty of room below stairs. Old guard quarters or a mess hall, it used to be. When things quiet down, we'll see what's best to do. Meantime, you can be sure nobody will find you."

"I want somebody to find me," said Mickle. "That is, I have to find somebody--- or know what's happened to him."

"Your consul?" Ingo grinned. "I'd forgotten you're betrothed to him."

"Yes, but I have to find out what's become of all the others. My mother, Dr. Torrens, Florian--- they could all be in the Carolia. Or they could all be--- dead." Mickle, for the first time, felt suddenly exhausted. She turned away and put her face in her hands.

"Or they could all be safe and sound," said Ingo. "You got away, didn't you? So they might have done. We'll find out. Let Mumchance try for some news before you start thinking the worst. Give us a little something to go on. Your mother was in the palace. Where was Theo? The rest of them?"

"Home, I suppose. Hauled out of bed, as I was."

"You don't know that for a fact. All right. We'll start with your sweetheart."

"If he's alive"--- Mickle turned to Mumchance--- "can you get a message to him?"

"Depends on where he is."

"Even if you can't speak with him," continued Mickle, "if you can see him, if he can see you, there's something I want you to do."

"With Mumchance on his trail," said Ingo, "it's good as done."

MADAM BERTHA had turned herself into a scout. The good woman had taken the danger to her household as a personal affront. Although the house was still being watched, she went out that morning and boldly hobbled through the streets, pretending to go about her daily errands. But for all her efforts, she learned little that Theo urgently needed to know. Apart from his desperation to discover what happened to Mickle, he wanted cold facts: the number of troops holding the Juliana, the disposition of artillery, the strength of the Ankari mercenaries.

Madam Bertha could tell him nothing of that. Only her last pretense of an errand, which kept her out until curfew at nightfall, yielded two items.

The first was an edition of a journal published by Webling, one of Keller's colleagues, and the only one to appear. Keller scanned it rapidly.

"Here, this is marvelous," the journalist announced. "Webling's come out in favor of Cabbarus. Magnificent statesman... past accusations proved to be lies. Director Cabbarus, sure of the heartfelt welcome of all right-minded citizens, will set the country on the proper path---" Keller snorted. "I knew Webling had an appetite for eating toads, but he's swallowed this one without even chewing it."

The second item concerned Justin. What bits of gossip the housekeeper had gleaned indicated that Justin had escaped from the city.

"Escaped?" Theo burst out. "Is that what they say? I'd call it something else. He didn't even put up a fight, he did nothing to help. Justin's betrayed us and cost Florian his life, for all we know."

"Don't jump to conclusions," said Las Bombas. "Justin might have his own plan in mind. He could still turn up."

"If he does," Theo flung back, "if I set eyes on Justin---" He broke off. His anger was useless. Justin did not matter.

"You'll do nothing until tomorrow, in any case," Keller put in. "Meantime, get a night's sleep."

Las Bombas recommended the same. It was sensible advice which Theo could not follow. He lay on his cot, trying to force himself to sleep, thereby making it impossible to do so. He had failed, he thought bitterly. He should have suspected the officers' plot long before. He should have followed Skeit. He should have found a way to reach Mickle when she most needed him. He had done none of those things. No one had blamed him. He wished they had. It would have lightened the burden of blaming himself.

He shut his eyes, drowsing a little. He opened them suddenly. He did not move. Someone had come into the room. A presence, soundless but there. He had not heard the door open. He felt a draft from the window that he had left closed.

Theo braced himself to spring up. But the shadow was suddenly upon him. A pair of thumbs on his windpipe kept him from crying out.

"From the queen," whispered a hoarse voice. "Quiet, eh?"

Theo nodded. The grasp loosened. He rolled out of his cot and lit a candle. A tall, gaunt man was watching him. Theo saw a grappling iron hooked into the window frame.

"She's well. Get your friends. Quick."

That was all Theo cared to hear at the moment. He ran downstairs to rouse Las Bombas, Musket, and Keller, and brought them to the garret. Las Bombas, in a tentlike nightshirt, eyed the intruder suspiciously.

Mumchance motioned toward the window. "Climb down."

"No, thank you," said Las Bombas. "Not in my present costume and certainly not at my present weight."

"Him." Mumchance pointed at Theo. "We'll see to the rest of you later."

"Hold on a minute." Las Bombas pulled back Theo, who was eager to follow Mumchance's orders. "We don't know this fellow or anything about him, except that he's a first-rate housebreaker. Who's he working for? Why believe him? It could be a trap. The streets are patrolled, it's after curfew, but here he is."

"For us, it's always after curfew," said Mumchance. "Don't worry. I know my trade."

The count's questions made Theo hesitate. "How did you know to come here?"

"I didn't know," said Mumchance. "I guessed. I nosed around a little. I found out you weren't in prison, you hadn't been arrested. This was your last address. I started with that. If you hadn't been here, someone in the house might have known where you were."

"You say Mickle sent you. How can I be sure?"

In reply, Mumchance only made a few motions with his hands.

Theo's heart lifted. He turned to Las Bombas. "It's all right. I'm going with him."

"Risk your neck because a burglar twiddles his fingers?" Las Bombas frowned. "I should like better proof than that."

"Mickle and I have a secret way of speaking to each other," answered Theo. "We made it up between us long ago, when we were on the road with you. Nobody else knows our signals. Mickle's the only one who could have taught him."

"What did she tell you, then?"

"Enough. All I wanted to know."

Though Mumchance had shaped the signals awkwardly, without the speed and deftness which Theo and Mickle had gained from long practice, there was no mistaking them. Theo had immediately understood Mickle's silent message:

"I love you. Come to me."

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## 9

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**DR. TORRENS** was free. His freedom meant little to him. He could easily have thrown it away. He kept it because he had made a promise.

The night when Colonel Zeller came to arrest Mickle, officers had already broken into the chambers of the Royal Physician and hauled him roughly out of bed. Torrens had spent many years at the Juliana Palace, not only as a doctor but as chief minister. For all that, he was no elegant courtier. Born a commoner, Torrens came from sturdy peasant stock. Despite his mane of white hair, he was still muscular and vigorous. His hands were gentle and skillful. They were also large. His first impulse was to turn them into fists and fling himself against his captors.

Torrens began to do just that. The officers had orders to take him alive, but it was all they could do to hold their own against the struggling doctor. They had expected an old man. They found an old lion. There was a delicate moment when they feared they would have to disobey their orders and shoot him.

As it turned out, a few words were enough to subdue him.

The captain who had seized one of the doctor's arms made Torrens understand that Queen Caroline awaited him.

Torrens immediately gave up struggling. Caroline's fever had dropped a little. She had been sleeping quietly when he left her an hour before. He feared that she had suddenly taken a turn for the worse. This possibility was all that kept him from fighting.

He pulled on what clothing came to hand. He was not listening to the officer who had begun reading the formal arrest warrant. He heard only enough to know that Queen Augusta was to be detained by the new directorate. Torrens had no inclination to question legalities at this point. His thoughts were on one fact: Caroline needed him.

It did not occur to him that she, too, would be arrested. He believed that she was still in her apartments. When the officer informed him that she had already been taken down into the courtyard, the physician's anger burst out again.

"That, sir, is outrageous. The Queen Mother is ill. She is to be brought back this instant."

The officers said nothing. One motioned for Torrens to go with them. The physician did not move.

"I require my medical chest. I demand it."

Torrens did not wait for permission. However, when he came back with the small case, which he kept stocked and ready for emergencies, the officer pulled it away from

him.

"This must be inspected."

"Keep your hands off," retorted Torrens. "I am a physician. Do you think I carry a brace of pistols?"

"What about these?"

The officer searching the case had pulled out a set of lancets, which he threw aside.

"If I wished to kill, sir, I would not need those."

Taking back what remained of his kit, Torrens was hustled through the corridors and down the steps of the New Juliana.

The great courtyard was in turmoil, with squads of troops forming up, cavalymen clattering through the broken gates, supply carts being hauled in. The steaming flanks of horses and the white breath of the men made a thin mist hanging in the night air. Torrens heard firing from the old wing of the palace. He paid little heed to it. He was looking for Caroline.

It took some moments before he saw her in the crowd. Two soldiers in gaudy Ankari uniforms held her upright between them. She wore a dressing gown, with a blanket over her shoulders. Bareheaded, her hair hung loose. She looked hardly able to stand.

Torrens broke away from his escort. One of the Ankaris warned him off. Torrens pushed him aside, dropped the medical kit, and tried to take the queen in his arms.

The soldiers jabbered furiously. An officer wearing a white sash ran up. He seemed to be an adjutant of some kind.

Torrens rounded on him. "How dare you! Return the queen to her chambers. This is despicable conduct."

The officer appeared to recognize him. "You are the former chief minister, are you not?"

"I am the queen's physician."

"Then, doctor, she is in capable hands. You will be permitted to attend her in the Carolia Fortress."

"Where are her serving women?" demanded Torrens. "I must have assistance."

"I sent them away." Caroline's voice could scarcely be heard over the commotion. "I did not wish them troubled by this."

They were ordered to wait. Torrens held the queen close to him, trying to shield her from the cold and the jostling. She kept asking for news of her daughter; she had been told that Augusta would be taken with them to the Carolia. However, from what Torrens could gather amid the confusion, Queen Augusta had escaped from the palace grounds. True or not, he assured Caroline that it was so.

Torrens, finally, came to believe that Augusta had indeed escaped. He saw a colonel and some aides storm out of the palace and detail a company to search the streets.

After some while, the adjutant returned and ordered Torrens and Caroline to climb into one of the horse carts. Half a dozen infantrymen escorted them through the gate. Caroline lay shuddering in the open cart. Torrens crouched beside her. The prison fortress was a short distance away; it was only because of the adjutant's generosity or his reluctance to deal with the doctor's rage that he did not force them to go there on foot.

Torrens did not intend to go there at all.

He had thought, first, that even the shelter of a prison was better than none. Then the idea of Caroline at the mercy of Cabbarus grew more than he could bear. Caroline, too, understood that. When Torrens whispered to her, she nodded.

Torrens stood up. He wished that he could choose a better moment, but soon he would have no choice at all. The Carolia was close by. He leaned over and put his hands on the driver's neck. Surprised, the driver half turned. He was young, in an ill-fitting uniform. Torrens gave a murmur of pity, but his strong fingers had already found the fragile bones and nerves. The soldier struggled only an instant.

Before the escort realized what he had done, Torrens heaved the body from the seat and snatched the reins. He lashed the horse to a gallop. The cart racketed over the cobbles, past the dark bulk of the Carolia. The soldiers had begun firing. He urged the horse on, lurching through the streets and narrow lanes until he was clear of Marianstat. Past the outskirts of the city, he swerved down unpaved roads that soon became no more than rutted tracks.

Once in the countryside, he let the winded horse go at its own pace. It was nearly dawn. Torrens turned onto a path and halted in the yard of the nearest farm. Light showed from a window. He lifted Caroline from the cart and carried her to the house. A dog began barking somewhere behind the outbuildings.

Torrens kicked at the door until it was finally opened. The farm couple and three youngsters had been eating breakfast in the common room. The yard dog would have bounded in had not Torrens kicked the door shut.

"I want a bed. Quilts. A hot drink. I am a doctor. This woman is my patient."

The farm couple was terrified. The look on the face of Torrens cut short any questions. They did as he ordered. One of the children ran to fetch his medical kit from the cart. The woman motioned for Torrens to set Caroline on a straw pallet. The farmer kept his distance, but his wife, shyly, fearfully, ventured closer. She glanced at Torrens, as if requesting his permission to help. Between them, they made Caroline as comfortable as they could.

Torrens knelt by the pallet. Caroline reached for his hand. "Leave while you can. Do not burden yourself with me."

"A light burden."

"I wish you to find Augusta."

"You have my promise."

"Take this." Caroline had slipped off a gold ring set with diamonds. "It was a wedding gift from the king. It has not left my finger since then. I give it to you now"--- Torrens protested, but Caroline went on--- "not as a keepsake. You and I have better keepsakes in our hearts. I wish you to sell it. You will need money, perhaps even more than this will bring. But you must stay alive and find my child. Help her as you have always helped me."

"We shall talk of this later, when you are better. We shall find her together."

"You have never lied to me." Caroline's smile was suddenly flirtatious. "Sir, if you begin now, I shall take you to task for it."

Her face seemed to grow youthful and girlish for an instant. Torrens realized she held life only by strength of will.

"I am thinking of the Juliana gardens," Caroline said. "How lovely they were. The orangerie. And you, my loving friend. Tell me, could we have been happy?"

"Yes." Torrens raised her hand to his lips. "Yes. I am certain of it."

Caroline did not speak again. Torrens stayed at her side. She died later that morning. Torrens buried her in the shelter of a hedgerow at the far edge of the field. The farmer offered to help, but Torrens refused and dug the grave himself. Later, in the farmhouse, he slept heavily for the first time since his escape. Mercifully, he did not dream.

Next day, he gave the farmer his clothing in trade for peasant garb. He hitched up the cart and drove back to the road. He could have pressed on, lost himself beyond search in the provinces. He was free. Except for his promise.

He turned the cart toward Marianstat.

Soldiers had been posted at the entries to the city. They were stricter with those trying to leave than with those coming in. Torrens was questioned only briefly. He answered in the broad provincial dialect of his childhood and passed without difficulty.

He drove toward a quarter he had not visited since his days as a medical student. There, he asked an idler where to find a reliable, discreet place to sell certain belongings. He was directed to one of the shops by the old wall.

Inside, a bull-necked man sat behind a counter. Torrens approached and unwrapped the ring from his handkerchief. The man squinted a long time at the object, turning it around and around in his fingers.

"How did you come by this?"

"That is my business."

"Not in this case. Wait here."

A gaunt man who had been watching and listening went and stationed himself at the door. Before Torrens could protest, the pawnbroker disappeared into a back room, taking the ring with him.

Torrens realized he had no weapon. He had expected the pawnbroker to try to cheat

him, not rob him. He was about to follow when the pawnbroker reappeared.

With him came a ragamuffin who halted, stared, then threw herself into the astonished physician's arms.

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## 10

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**MICKLE DID** not weep at the news which Torrens brought. She hoarded her tears in a private chamber of her mind; she could not afford to waste them. From the moment that Theo joined her in The Shambles, she had set about reorganizing her government. Ingo's cellar was her council chamber, hall of state, and royal apartments all in one. It was not a government-in-exile, it was a government-in-pawnshop. Ingo and Mumchance were her ministers of information, commanders of street fiddlers, washerwomen, beggars, and match girls who had been commissioned to bring her whatever news they could gather.

Las Bombas was her minister of forgery. He and Musket had arrived soon after Theo, and Mickle lost no time putting the count's ability to use. Little Hands had been given the task of stealing some of the newly issued military passes and identification papers for expert copying by Las Bombas.

The Beggar Queen had also formed an alliance with the nation of Fish Market Square. Keller, invited to live in the pawnshop palace, had politely declined. His house had not been searched again, the officers were convinced he had left for good and would not be so foolish as to come back. The journalist preferred to be an independent state but offered to send ambassadors: Weasel and Sparrow.

She was therefore able to show the amazed Torrens a miniature kingdom, grim but determined, of diligent subjects and allies, busy at all manner of illegal activities which could have cost them their lives had Cabbarus and the directorate found them out.

"We're still trying to get word of Florian," Mickle said. "But at least we've found you. That is, you found us. It's a good thing that Ingo saw the royal monogram on my mother's ring and recognized what it was."

"I promised your mother I would help you," said Torrens. "I fear it will be a promise ill kept. There is little I can do."

"You can do a great deal," put in Theo. "You were Mickle's best adviser; you still are."

"If you want my advice, you shall have it," replied Torrens. "Augusta does not dare stay in Westmark. She must leave the country, go as far and as fast as possible. To Regia. King Constantine is well disposed toward her; he will not turn her away."

"I agree," said Theo. "As long as she's here, her life's at risk every moment."

"It's a sensible idea," said Mickle. "Connie and I get on well. He'll protect me, I'm sure. There's only one difficulty."

"None that I see," said Las Bombas. "We'll get you to Regia one way or another. It may take some doing, but it's possible."

"I'm afraid it isn't possible," said Mickle.

"Dear girl," returned Las Bombas, "you underestimate my abilities. In the course of my career, I've had vast experience in--- well, shall we say, changing my residence."

"I don't mean that," said Mickle. "I only mean I won't go."

Theo could do nothing to change her mind, nor could Torrens. Las Bombas at his most eloquent failed to move her. Theo pleaded, pressed, and reasoned. Mickle simply smiled at them. Only Las Bombas kept Theo from quarreling angrily with her.

"Let her be, for the moment," Las Bombas urged Theo. "Give her time to think it over. Only one of two things can happen. Either she'll end up agreeing with you"--- Las Bombas looked ruefully at him--- "or you'll end up agreeing with her."

THE SEARCH for Florian, cautiously carried out by Ingo's network, brought another stray to the pawnshop cellar: the russet divinity, Zara.

She carried a housewife's market basket. A shawl covered her head, shadowing her face and hiding a bandage tied around her brow. She did not ask Theo and Mickle how they had escaped. Her only concern, as always, was Florian.

"When they tried to arrest us, we fired on them," Zara said. "We fought our way out through the garden. They'd have taken Florian dead or alive, but I got him to a house in the student quarter. I can take you there. He wants to see you."

"He's safe, then," cried Theo. "Zara, you're truly a divinity. You saved his life."

"Yes." Zara's mouth set in a bitter line. "Yes, I saved his life. What's left of it."

WITH ZARA guiding them, they rode in the doctor's cart from the pawnshop to an old house near the university. Torrens had come without being asked; it was taken for granted that he would treat the wounded man. Mickle had come, also without being asked. Theo had urged her to stay with Ingo, but she only looked puzzled that he would even suggest it.

"Florian's one of my consuls, isn't he?"

Theo's heart, nevertheless, was in his mouth at every moment. He broke into a cold sweat when a troop of Ankari cavalry trotted by. Mickle, in her ragamuffin's garb, merely observed them with an urchin's impudent curiosity. When they reached the student quarter, she grinned at Theo and shrugged. He was grateful that she did not tell him how easy it had been.

Zara led them upstairs to an attic room. Florian lay on a cot against the wall. Theo barely recognized him. His handsome features were pinched, clay-colored; rough stubble covered his cheeks. The room was cold. Zara had spread blankets over him and, on top of them, the blue greatcoat. Theo went to the cot. Florian's eyes were

open.

"Hello, youngster." Florian turned his head toward Mickle. "It seems, Your Majesty, most of your government is here. As good a place as any for a council meeting. There's much to do."

"You, sir, will do no more than keep quiet." Torrens stripped away the blankets to examine Florian closely, and frowned at what he saw. "Do you know that you have a bullet in your chest?"

"It went in easily enough," said Florian. "It should come out as easily."

"Be assured it will not," said Torrens. "I shall do what I can. It will be a difficult procedure at best."

"And at worst?"

Torrens did not reply. Zara drew Theo aside to whisper that she had tried to find a doctor among Florian's supporters. Torrens overheard and rounded on her.

"I take your meaning, young woman, and find it despicable. Question my political beliefs, if you choose, not my medicine."

"We are old enemies, Torrens and I," said Florian. "Those are the best kind. He'll keep me alive for the pleasure of arguing with me."

Torrens had brought his medical kit, but it was little use. He sent Zara to find a student from the medical school who could give him the probes and lancets he needed. Florian indicated that he wanted to talk again with Theo. The effort was too great. He dropped his head back onto the bolster; his look turned vague, his eyes drifted.

Torrens beckoned to Theo: "I promise nothing. You must understand that. I cannot tell yet if the lung has been damaged or how badly, or if it is even possible to remove the musket ball. If he lives, if he is to recover, he cannot stay long in this wretched room. He must be taken elsewhere as soon as he can be moved."

Torrens went about his preparations.

Theo spoke apart with Mickle: "We could bring him to Ingo. Or Zara could find another safe house. Best of all: Get him out of Marianstat."

"Get him out of the country altogether," said Mickle. "You and the count have been at me about Regia. Well, you have it all backwards. If anyone goes there, it must be Florian. I won't risk losing him to Cabbarus. He's too valuable."

"And you?" Theo took her hand. "Are you saying that you're not?"

"Dear Theo, you're talking like my sweetheart, not my consul. I'm glad, and if you ever stop doing that, you'll hear from me about it"--- Mickle looked squarely at him--- "but this has nothing to do with us. Not with us, don't you see? The queen of Westmark stays in Westmark, as simple as that. I won't do otherwise.

"I'll fight Cabbarus every way I can," Mickle went on, "but it's the kind of fight that Florian understands better than any of us; he's been doing it for years. Have I an army I can trust? Florian does. That is, he has friends everywhere. He'll know how to use



them. They'll fight for him no matter where he is: Florian is Florian, in Westmark or in Regia. I belong here, he belongs there, and that's the cold fact of the matter."

"He'll never agree."

"He will. He'll see the sense of it"--- Mickle smiled--- "quicker than some I could mention."

Theo said no more. Neither he nor Mickle had faced another cold fact. They were talking as if they were certain Florian would live.

Zara came back with all that Torrens had asked. The physician let her stay in the room, which Zara would have done with or without his permission. He did not give Mickle and Theo the same leave, but ordered them to wait in the hall.

They stood by the closed door. As time passed, they gave in to weariness and sat huddled together on the floor. Mickle, half drowsing, dropped her head on Theo's shoulder. He held her, trying to keep himself awake. He did not dare shut his eyes. Each time he did, his mind drifted along a path he was unwilling to follow. He tried not to wish that he and Mickle could simply vanish and be somewhere far away. What he had fought for and believed in had failed, it had come to nothing but wreckage. He wondered if it really mattered, if anything mattered to him except Mickle.

In his arms, she stirred and made muted sounds. Her hair was entangled in his own. He would gladly have taken her anyplace else in the world. How easy it would be to live happily with her, he thought. He only wondered if he could bear to live with himself.

He almost believed that he could.

Torrens opened the door. Theo clambered to his feet. The physician motioned toward the room.

"He is out of danger--- if that can be said for any of us."

FLORIAN DID not recover as quickly as Torrens hoped. In the following days, he turned feverish, slipping in and out of consciousness. Torrens and Zara stayed constantly with him; as did Mickle and Theo, despite the physician's urging them to go back to the pawnshop. They took turns venturing out for food, of which they ate little and Florian practically none at all.

During the worst night, Florian tossed and muttered to himself. He suddenly sat bolt upright, eyes blazing, shouting commands, calling to Luther, Stock, and Justin. From his words, Theo understood that Florian was not in Marianstat; he was attacking the arsenal at Nierkeeping.

It was the first time that Theo realized Nierkeeping haunted Florian as much as it haunted himself.

Toward the end of the week, the wounded man's fever broke. He slept heavily. When he woke, his mind was clear. Weak though he was, he demanded details about the

return of Cabbarus, the names of the officers who supported the directorate, and the number of Ankari mercenaries. He asked for news of Justin, of Beck, of the section leaders arrested or still free. With his blue greatcoat over his shoulders, he was General Florian once again.

Mickle spoke about Regia with Torrens.

The physician shook his head. "I would rather see you there than Florian. You must understand the risk. He can be dangerous to you out of the country, more so than here, where you can have some control over him. His absence will be stronger than his presence. It is easier to worship a distant god. His people will fight, yes--- for him. For revolution. Not for queen and monarchy. I fear that you shall weaken your own cause."

"My cause is getting rid of Cabbarus," Mickle said. "You've given me the opinion of a state minister. I want the opinion of a doctor."

"He is far from recovered," said Torrens, "and will not be in health for many weeks. He could not stand the journey. A badly wounded man carried through the mountains to cross the Regian border? Impossible."

"Not overland. By sea. He can sail from here, around the coast, then up to Breslin harbor."

"The port of Marianstat is closed. Even if it were not, you have no ship."

"Your medical judgment, Doctor," Mickle reminded him.

Torrens thought for several moments. "It would be easier. But he would still need medical care. Someone capable must be with him."

"Zara," said Mickle. "And you."

She continued quickly before Torrens could answer. "You've made the best case for choosing yourself. Are you worried that no one will keep an eye on him? I leave that to you. Did you promise to help me? So you shall. By doing what I ask."

Torrens protested, but Mickle cut him short. "Thank you, doctor, you've told me all I wanted."

"Yes," put in Theo, who had been listening to them, "except what Florian will say to it."

"I know what he'll say."

"You're a marvelous ventriloquist," Theo said, "but I never knew you were a mind reader."

"Sometimes. Not this time. It was simpler than that," she said cheerfully. "I asked him straight out. He agrees. I knew he would."

It always puzzled Theo that she could surprise, delight, and exasperate him at the same instant. "Yes, well, you've only overlooked one detail: We don't have a ship."

"Would I have said anything about it in the first place if I hadn't known how to get one?"

Theo had no answer. Before he could think of one, he heard Florian calling him and went to the cot. With some effort, the wounded man sat up amid the rumpled blankets.

"You look as if you've been outflanked and outmaneuvered." Florian's gray eyes flashed a little of their ironic amusement. "I take it the queen's told you our plan. So, an old rebel must ask a young king for a place to hide. Constantine will give me that, I'm sure. He's no friend of Cabbarus. But there's another question. Whether I go to Regia or not depends on the answer."

Theo sensed that Florian was not as completely persuaded as Mickle had led him to believe. "What, then?"

"If I go, I'll stay no longer than I must," Florian said. "Zara will be my courier, she's an old hand at it. She'll make sure that we have word of each other.

"When I come back--- as I will, I promise you--- I'll come back with an army ready. I still have an organization of people I can trust from the days when there was a price on my head. There are people all over the countryside: partisans, irregulars, the ones who fought with us in the war. They'll be alerted to start gathering weapons, equipment. But I need one thing more."

"Whatever you need, you'll have."

"I need Marianstat," said Florian. "The city is the key. Without it, all the rest will fail. When I'm close enough to attack it, the city itself must rise up. It must be taken from within, whatever the cost. And held, whatever the cost, until I reach it."

"Armed insurrection? Can it be done?"

"It must be done. And more. From now until the day I come back, there must be constant resistance. Cabbarus must not have a moment's peace. Let him live in terror of every day and night. Sap his strength and his will. The people will see that he can be beaten. Then, when the signal is given, Marianstat will be ready to support me."

"It will," said Theo.

"Only if the city has a leader. One it can trust, and that I can trust. A leader who is also acceptable to the queen. The clear choice is you."

Theo stiffened and drew away.

Florian gripped his arm. "Give me Marianstat."

The words plunged Theo into nightmare. The old ghosts began to stir, Florian was bringing them to life again, and one ghost, above all, he had tried to forget: the ghost of himself as he once had been. "Don't ask that of me, Florian. No. I will not."

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"**DON'T ASK** that of me," Theo said again. "It's not my work. You know that."

"I'm not asking you," said Florian. "I'm asking Colonel Kestrel."

"Kestrel's dead," Theo flung back. "He died in the war, from the stink of too much blood. Yes, I was as much a butcher as Justin. Worse. Because Justin never pretended he was anything else. I won't do it again. You want Marianstat. I'll help you take it, but not as a leader."

"Do you want to see Cabbarus in power?"

"No. Of course not."

Florian gave him a half-smile. "Then I don't see that you have any choice."

"Why not Zara? Beck? Or any of a dozen others?"

"If I knew anyone better, I wouldn't have chosen you."

Theo said nothing. He knew what his answer would be, but he could not bring himself to give it. Florian loosened his grip on Theo's arm and lay back on the bolster. He looked ill and old. Behind the pitted face, Theo still saw the man who had put a pair of constables to flight without even raising his voice; and Florian in the tavern at Freyborg, with his "children" hanging on his every word. Or at Nierkeeping: Florian on horseback, hair matted, face blackened by gunpowder. Theo knew he was still spellbound by the man's bearing and presence. Florian's work, Zara once told Theo, was simply to be Florian. Theo's work was to follow him.

"Yes," Theo said. "This time. No more."

Florian only nodded, unsurprised.

"I'll tell Mickle what I've decided." Theo left the cot. He had broken a solemn promise to himself. That was not what disturbed him; he had done that all too often before. But he had made a promise he would keep and hate himself for keeping.

He had no choice. Which only made it worse.

MICKLE HAD not been absolutely forthright. She had told the truth when she said she knew how to get a ship. She had, however, stretched that truth until it was rather finely drawn. What she meant was that she knew how to begin to go about thinking of ways to find a vessel and a willing captain. Actually doing it might be a little more difficult.

Mickle's memory held more odds and ends than Ingo's pawnshop and was better

ordered. She could usually rummage into it and pull out what she needed. Leaving Torrens and Zara to watch over Florian, she rode back to The Shambles with Theo. By then, she knew where to start. She sent Mumchance to Fish Market Square with a message: She required the presence of Weasel.

The boy was there within the hour, delighted that the queen had asked for him.

"Didn't you once tell me about a friend of yours?" Mickle said. "A sea captain. Jacob, wasn't it?"

"He's a smuggler," Weasel said proudly. "A fine fellow."

"Will he take a cargo to Regia?"

"He'll take anything anywhere," said Weasel. "But I haven't seen his ship in port. I think he hid it somewhere."

"Can you find him? Talk to him?"

"I suppose." Weasel grinned. Mickle might as well have asked if he knew how to tie his shoes. "There's one trouble. He might expect to be paid."

"He will be. And very well." Mickle knew that Ingo had arranged to have the jewels from her mother's ring cut into smaller stones and had been quietly finding buyers for them. "Half now. The rest only if the cargo's delivered safely."

"He'll want to know what cargo."

"Three passengers."

Weasel frowned, suddenly disturbed. He was afraid, for an instant, that the passengers might include Sparrow and himself, that Keller might be sending them away. His idol sometimes had peculiar notions. "Who?"

"Dr. Torrens. Zara. One other."

Weasel was relieved. He cocked his head and looked shrewdly at Mickle. "The other one--- it's Florian, isn't it?"

"Three passengers," Mickle repeated. "Your friend doesn't need to know more than that. As for you, you already know more than you should."

Weasel swelled his birdcage chest. This, he felt, was a serious occasion, requiring a properly ceremonious answer. "It will be my distinguished privilege to engage the services--- enter into the negotiabilities--- I'll strike a good bargain with him."

"Citizen Weasel," said Mickle, "see that you do."

NEAR MIDNIGHT, some days after that, a peasant's cart rattled into the village of Salgate, a few miles from the capital. Here, wind and tide had gnawed out a ragged cove and a coarse fringe of beach. The fishermen's cottages close by the water's edge had a landward list, flinching from the buffeting of the sea. The larger houses and the two or three small shops clustered near the single pier. The driver of the cart hauled up at one of these buildings: a tavern, so called out of courtesy; for it was no more than a

downstairs room in a private house, made public by a pair of trestle tables and some stools by the fireplace.

The driver, his face half hidden by a thick muffler, went through the low doorway. The room was hot and smelled of burning peat and smoked herring. He glanced around. He did not see the man that Weasel had described. He hesitated, uncertain what to do. A sour taste filled his mouth; he could not swallow. He had been afraid many times before, but this was unlike anything else he had known. He had, until now, been able to purge himself of fear by taking action. This he could not throw off. It was a poison in his blood: Suspicion, fear of betrayal ate away at him. His only relief was that Mickle, this time, had stayed behind. Not because he had convinced her but because, finally, Florian himself had so ordered.

He stood another moment. He was already drawing too many eyes. A man in a stocking cap came up beside him and leaned an arm on the doorpost.

"Goods for Regia? Three pieces of cargo?" He motioned for Theo to follow. "Jacob's waiting."

"Where?"

"Offshore. We'll row you out."

Theo held back. "That was not agreed."

"Can't be helped. Officers were nosing around. Jacob had to put out to sea. The ship's at anchor, past the breakwater." The man grinned at him. "We've handled cargo this way before. We know our business."

They went outside. Another man had drifted quietly out of the public room to join them. Torrens and Zara helped a blue-coated figure up from a pile of sacks. Until clear of the city, Florian had been covered with them while Zara, close by, pretended to drowse. Torrens, in his peasant garb, had stretched out beside her. They were simply a tired farm family going home at the end of market day.

Jacob's men led them across the beach. Zara strode after. Torrens and Theo supported Florian between them. Theo was trembling, his teeth clenched.

"What's the trouble, youngster?"

"This isn't my work, Florian. I told you that."

"It will be. You'll get used to it after a time."

Theo bent his head against the sea wind. He had expected the promised boat to be at the water's edge. He saw none. The sailors pressed on past a tumble of rocks. The shoreline curved to form a sheltered backwater. The ground had turned spongy; Theo felt that he was wading through quicksand.

The craft lay ahead in a nest of tall grass that crackled as they pasted through. The men ordered them to board. Theo and Torrens helped Florian into the stern, where he sat with his coat collar drawn up. Zara climbed over the side.

The boat hissed through the water as Jacob's men shoved off and jumped aboard. They

rowed steadily, veering from the cove toward open water. The shoreline vanished. There was no horizon. Theo felt only the heaving seas beneath him. Florian sat silently. They had already said everything to each other.

In the days of waiting, Florian had talked with Theo by the hour, giving him certain names, the location of certain houses, the whereabouts of people who had been with him when Florian had first become a revolutionary. They had sheltered him then, they were ready to help him again. Theo was surprised that this network still existed, that it could be called into action so quickly.

Florian had also taught him signals and ciphers. Some pieces of information he was to share later with Mickle; others, only in an emergency.

"What isn't known can't be told," Florian said, "even under torture. You'll be the one to carry most of this in your head. So, youngster, see to it that you stay alive. Even if no one else does. Do you understand?"

"Make your peace with Justin," Florian added. "What peace you can. Find him. You'll need him, and he'll need you."

One of the men had put up his oars and raised a lantern. Theo could see nothing. Then, a little distance ahead, a black bulk rose on the sea swell. An answering signal glimmered. The sailors grunted with satisfaction and pulled harder.

Jacob's ship loomed above. Theo glimpsed faces at the rail as another lantern flared. Someone had thrown a rope ladder over the side. Zara seized it and clambered up. Torrens followed.

A line was flung down. Florian tied it around his waist and under his arms. Half climbing, half hoisted, he made his way up the swaying ladder. It was done quickly. Theo had not even time to say farewell. The oarsmen pulled for shore.

It had begun snowing gently, great soft flakes. Theo looked back, straining his eyes for a last sight of the ship. It had disappeared in the swirl. The sailors, seeing an end to their work, had begun joking between themselves. Hunched in the stern, Theo scarcely heard them.

What echoed in his mind were the last words that Florian called to him before the ladder was hauled up. The wind had caught and carried them away, but Theo heard them as they melted like the snowflakes on the waves:

"Give me Marianstat."

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## **PART THREE Marianstat**

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# 12

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**IT HAD** always been the good pleasure of the kings of Westmark to ornament their capital city and immortalize themselves at the same time. Some put up statues of themselves on horseback. Others preferred works of less equestrian and more civic interest: promenades, public walks, and gardens. Augustine the Great enlarged the Juliana and installed its famous bells. Mickle's father, in the earlier, happier days of his reign, built the fountain in the great square.

Cabbarus followed the example of previous rulers. With a difference. He had not yet raised a statue of himself, though he looked forward confidently to one day doing so. He had not yet proposed any monument or memorial. Instead, in the first months of his directorate, he offered Marianstat something of immediate, practical use: not a token of his own immortality, but a demonstration of the mortality of others.

He built a gallows.

It was an excellent piece of work. Unlike other scaffolds, often dismantled after serving their purpose, this durable structure was built of heavy timbers, snugly joined and braced. Wooden steps led up to a deck of wide planking. A low railing enclosed it. The uprights and crosspieces had been painted black. It was mercilessly simple.

The scaffold had been set up in front of the Carolia, the old military fortress. On a morning at the ragged end of winter, a number of onlookers began to gather. A cordon of Ankari infantry, with fixed bayonets, kept them from pressing too close. Though public executions were hardly a novelty, none had been held since Queen Augusta had taken the throne. This was the first time the populace had been granted the opportunity to observe the new instrument of law at work; also, according to rumor, the condemned was not the usual wretch. It promised to be an occasion of some interest.

Among the spectators was a carpenter, with his tool bag, wearing a canvas jacket over his apron. He appeared to be not much impressed by the event, as if he were there only out of idle curiosity. Nevertheless, little by little he drifted through the crowd until he reached the front rank.

The gates of the Carolia had opened. The prisoner was led out under escort. He was a robust man of middle age, in shirt sleeves, and barefoot. His face was mottled with bruises, he had difficulty walking. The executioner and his assistant received him at the top of the steps. From the scaffold, he looked around at the faces below until his glance fell at last on the carpenter, who was intently watching him.

This particular carpenter had never worked at his trade. Theo had, as well, moved unnoticed about the city as a dock hand, a huckster, a seller of old clothes. The man

awaiting punishment was a section commandant known to Theo only as Red Cockade.

An officer began reading out the accusation.

Theo already knew what it would be. He himself had ordered Red Cockade to deliver a cartload of wine bottles to a certain house in The Marsh. The bottles were carefully nested in a layer of straw.

Under the straw were a dozen muskets.

Red Cockade had nearly reached his destination when three Ankaris halted him. They were off duty, looking for amusement. They demanded some of the bottles. Red Cockade, grumbling, handed them over.

The Ankaris, laughing at such good fortune come by so easily, derided to take the cartload.

Red Cockade could have given up cart and contents, and taken to his heels. But he would have sacrificed his precious muskets. He chose to brazen it out. He refused.

The soldiers grew angry. There were hard words and rough hands on both sides. Red Cockade was a big man with a big fury inside him and he made a fatal error:

He lost his temper.

The Ankaris shouted for help from a passing street patrol. The bottles were seized, the muskets discovered.

Red Cockade was the first of Theo's people to be taken.

The man saw Theo and recognized him. Unknown to anyone else in the crowd, these two--- one whose life hung on a rope; the other, whose life hung on a thread--- were conversing in midair.

As if to himself, the man on the scaffold mouthed a silent word:

"Nine."

Theo understood him and the flicker of pride on his face. Theo had asked his people for a priceless gift: time.

Should one be arrested, tortured past the will to keep silent, the others needed time to change their methods, their meeting places, to hide, to escape,, to regroup. For this, they needed eight hours.

Red Cockade was saying that he had given an extra hour.

Theo nodded. It was a slight motion, hardly a motion at all.

What, in fact, he said was:

"We know. The others are safe. You did well."

Red Cockade lifted his eyebrows. The unspoken question:

"Is there a chance of rescue?"

The other section leaders, meeting secretly, had wrestled with that question from the moment they learned of the capture. How many lives might it cost to save one life?

Could they accept such losses? It was a matter of arithmetic.

Theo bowed his head. The meaning was plain:

"We wished to try. We cannot afford the risk."

The man slightly shrugged his shoulders:

"Understood. The right decision. Good-bye, then."

All this had taken only a moment or two. They had finished their conversation before the officer finished reading. Red Cockade stepped closer to the railing. He was pulled back. Drummers from the Mariana regiment beat the long roll.

Red Cockade was not to be allowed the usual privilege of addressing the crowd. He refused to be denied. Struggling in his bonds, with a voice that rang above the racket of the drums, he shouted for what did not exist and had never existed:

"Long live the republic!"

Sentence was carried out. The executioners were professionals, but they did not make a quick end of it. Clearly, they were following official instructions. Murmurs of indignation rippled through the crowd. There were some outcries of anger against this deliberate final cruelty. There were even more silences of reproach. The officer ordered the crowd to disperse. The Ankaris pointed their bayonets. The onlookers fell back sullenly. The square began to empty.

Theo, in passing, overheard one well-dressed townsman mutter to another:

"Yes, yes, the directorate must take a firm hand, I agree. "Troublemakers bring it on themselves." He hesitated, then blurted out: "But, even so--- this? This is dishonorable."

By spring, this man would join Theo's army of shadows.

THEO MADE his way to The Shambles. These days, he went there only irregularly. Sometimes he stayed; more often he did not. He seldom slept two nights under the same roof. Unless urgent business demanded, he avoided the pawnshop. Now, without knowing why, he felt that he must see Mickle.

Ingo and Mumchance were playing cards. Las Bombas and Musket had gone on an errand to Fish Market Square. These two had enough stolen documents and convincing forgeries to carry them nearly anywhere. Musket, in addition, had grown amazingly in height. His short stature would have been too easily identified. Unable to change his person, Musket merely changed his size.

Las Bombas had managed to retrieve Friska and the coach from Keller's stable; and from his stock-in-trade as a conjuror, he produced two hollow legs. He and Musket fashioned them into something like a pair of small stilts and put boots on the feet. With longer breeches and a cloak covering the whole deception, the dwarf grew instantly taller by several heads and was almost as nimble on the false limbs as on his natural ones.

Mickle was in her quarters. Ingo had provided maps of the city and she was studying them. She was surprised and happy to see Theo, but the look on his face troubled her. There was food on the table. He did not eat. He paced the chamber. He told her what he had done, what he had seen.

"You shouldn't have gone, you know," Mickle said quietly.

"You'd have done the same."

"You weren't listening. I said 'shouldn't,' not what I would have done. Still, it was a risk you didn't have to take. But I can understand why you did."

"Can you? I can't." He put his hands on her shoulders. "To be with him when he died? It was more than that." He could not explain to her what he could not altogether explain to himself. It was not only that he had abandoned one of his people. For that, there was a plausible reason, cold but comprehensible. Florian would have done likewise. Instead, Theo had gone to do the impossible, trying to do it nevertheless. Somehow to take the man's death upon himself, to absorb it and make it part of his own being. He was not seeking forgiveness; he was the only one able to grant himself that, and he refused. It was not forgiveness he needed, but something like grace. Finally, he said: "I owe him a death."

"You owe him a life."

"It comes to the same in the end."

"It may. Think about beginnings, not endings."

Theo did not answer. The chamber was silent. The massive walls kept out the sounds of the street above. If he owed a life, he did not know what kind he could offer: only vengeance, terror, more death. In the Domitians with Justin, he had been Colonel Kestrel. A butcher mistaken for a hero. He had not made a monster of himself. The monster had always been there.

"I will not be what I was," he said. "I will not be what I was."

"No." Mickle took him in her arms. "Be what you are."

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## 13

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**IN EARLY** spring, he saw Justin.

Theo had been trying to reach him since Florian sailed to Regia. There had been no word of him all winter. With spring came reports of partisan bands in the countryside: some army deserters, some survivors of Mickle's Old Guard, some who had fled into the hills to escape arrest. Theo felt certain that Justin was among them, but received no answer to his urgent messages.

Around this time, Zara came briefly to Marianstat. Captain Jacob brought her. The smuggler had fallen into a profitable traffic in running cargo secretly between Westmark and Regia and had no objection to including a courier among his contraband.

Florian was still under the care of Torrens, Zara told Theo and Mickle at a midnight meeting in the pawnshop, but was regaining strength.

"Constantine's hiding him on one of the royal estates," Zara said. "Cabbarus knows nothing about it. What happens if and when he finds out, I can't guess. The king could be forced to send Florian back, or he could tell Cabbarus to go to the devil. Constantine likes Florian, but I don't know how far he'll go to protect him."

Mickle was first to ask the question that had been constantly in Theo's own mind:

"When will Florian come back?"

"It depends on the work you do here. It could also depend on whether Constantine agrees to lend Florian weapons and transport."

"Duke Conrad certainly won't agree."

"Conrad's dead. You didn't know that here?"

"The directorate must have hushed it up," said Mickle. "I suppose he died of overeating."

"No. In front of a firing squad. He tried to have Constantine assassinated."

"Connie had his uncle shot?" said Mickle. "It doesn't sound like him. He's a good-hearted boy, I wouldn't have expected---"

"A boy?" Zara broke in. "Not anymore. He's grown past that."

"I shouldn't wonder," said Las Bombas. "Assassination attempts can age one rapidly."

"Make no mistake, he's turned very hardheaded where his own interest is concerned," said Zara. "Like all monarchs."

"Speaking as a monarch"--- Mickle smiled charmingly---- "if his interest is for his

people, I can't say much against that. With or without Connie, when Florian is ready, he can count on us."

"Except for Justin," Theo said. "I don't know what he'll do. I can't even find him."

"One place he might be," Zara said, "the most likely, is the old farmhouse we used when we were in Freyborg."

"I thought of it," answered Theo. "I sent word through that part of the countryside. I've heard nothing from him."

"Did you expect to? If Justin's playing his own hand, he won't answer. He'll want no part of us."

"I don't care what he wants," Theo said. "We need him. I'll go to the farm myself. If he's there, I'll talk to him face to face."

"That's up to you," Zara said. "Be wary of him, though. He won't be filled with joy to see you."

THE SAFEST transportation that Theo could find was the coach of Las Bombas. The count circulated as freely as he pleased, armed with certificates, travel passes, and letters of recommendation issued by the directorate, all of excellent quality since he had forged them with his own hands. Las Bombas, therefore, proposed taking Theo to the farmhouse. Musket insisted on driving. The Demon Coachman's memory was longer than his legs, and his unflinching sense of direction let him choose little traveled roads and byways.

They made their way unchallenged, skirting Belvitsa, sleeping overnight in the coach, then turning toward the rolling hills. The countryside appeared deserted. Las Bombas drowsed. Theo sat silently, filled with his own recollections. They had followed this same road after the attack on the Nierkeeping arsenal. He had been an outlaw then, he was an outlaw now. He felt that some wheel of time had brought him back to where he had begun. The battles which he believed won had settled nothing, they had not been won at all; he was fighting them over again. He hoped he could find strength to do it. He was not sure he could find strength to fight his memories.

His thoughts wandered, his caution slackened. Then it was too late.

A party of roughly dressed men sprang from the hedges on either side of the sunken road. Musket had no chance to turn Friska, rearing in alarm. One of the men seized her bridle. The coach doors were flung open. Within the instant, Las Bombas and Theo were hauled out and thrown against the side of the vehicle, pistols at their head. The count's coat was torn open and his pockets turned out.

"Papers from the directorate," said one of the men.

"Good. They'll be useful," said another, who wore a goatskin jacket, with a musket slung over his shoulder. "See what else they have, then get rid of them."

Theo pulled away from the man who had been searching him. "We're looking for



Consul Justin."

"So are a lot of people." The man in the goatskin laughed. "We'll make sure you don't find him."

"If you know where he is, take us there. I'm Florian's commander in Marianstat."

"Are you, now? How do we know that?"

"Tell Justin: Kestrel wants to talk."

The captor of Las Bombas overheard this. He came to face Theo and peered closer.

"What's this one say? Kestrel?" He nodded at Theo. "Yes, I know you, Colonel."

"You should." Theo studied the man for a moment. "You were with us in the Domitians. In Shrike's troop. This is Count Las Bombas, he was the queen's military adviser then. I vouch for him."

The partisans drew aside and talked among themselves. Theo was aware of some disagreement. Finally, the man in the goatskin motioned Theo and Las Bombas into the coach and climbed up on the box beside Musket.

"You'll come with us. After that, it's whatever General Justin orders."

"General, is it?" muttered Las Bombas. "He's modest, at any rate. I thought he'd make himself a field marshal."

They soon reached the farm. It was as Theo remembered it, but at the same time strangely unfamiliar. The main house seemed run down and in some disrepair. The woods and undergrowth straggled closer to the outbuildings. He saw the old well. There, he had asked Mickle to come to Freyborg with him. The farmyard--- here they had carried Justin, his face torn and bleeding. The yard showed signs of much activity, the ground broken by wagon wheels and horses' hooves. Partisans lounged near the well or cleaned their weapons. He guessed that there would be other detachments nearby.

Ordering them to wait in the coach, the man in the goatskin jacket disappeared into the farmhouse. Musket cajoled a sack of oats for Friska from one of the troopers. Las Bombas grumbled impatiently. Another half hour passed before Theo and the count were escorted into the large common room.

Justin sat behind a long trestle table. He was absorbed in studying a map. He wore an officer's tunic without insignia. His face had lost its city pallor, the weather had chapped and roughened it. After a time, he glanced up. The violet hue of his eyes was more intense than ever. He looked at Theo for a long moment. Then, in a casual tone, he said: "You took a chance, coming here. You could have been shot, you know."

"By accident?"

"Of course." Justin motioned for his guards at the door to leave. "Or did you think I'd have you shot?"

"I thought of it."

"So did I. If you'd sided with me, we'd have had a National Guard long ago. We could

have defended ourselves. But no, you held with Florian. You deserve to be shot."

"But you won't do it," Theo said. "If you were going to, you'd have done it already."

Justin shrugged. "What do you want?"

"Florian's in Regia."

"I've heard that."

"He was badly wounded, but he's getting ready to come back. He's ordered me to take Marianstat. You and I must set our plans. He'll need your support when he attacks."

"I support Florian? It should be the other way round, wouldn't you say? I have my own people. Do you know who they are? They're the people who wanted a republic when we had the chance to get one and never forgave Florian for denying it to them. They still want it and they'll fight for it. Here, in the countryside, in the provinces."

"Florian has his friends, too."

"Yes, and they'd be wiser to join me. If they don't, if they interfere with my operations, they'll find out who's master."

Theo stared at him. "You'd set your people against his?"

"Why shouldn't I?" Justin looked coldly at Theo. "He betrayed everything we believed in."

"Cabbarus could ask nothing better," Theo burst out. "We kill each other and save him the trouble. I don't care what grudge you have against Florian. Or me. That doesn't matter now. If you try holding out on your own, if we divide our forces, the directorate will smash all of us. Do that, Justin, and you'll have to answer for it."

"*You'll* have to answer for it," Justin said. "The consulate was your doing. Your idea. Florian accepted it. He counted on taking power into his own hands; he was willing to betray the revolution to do it. Your consulate brought us to this. It must be destroyed."

Justin stood up. "What I want is what we should have had in the first place. A republic. The absolute power of the people to rule themselves. I'll give them that, whatever the cost. Freedom is paid for only in blood."

"Yes," Las Bombas muttered, "but whose?"

"Mine," Justin said. "Yours. All our blood, if need be."

The scar on Justin's forehead blazed, his face was radiant. Behind the shining violet eyes, Theo still saw a trace of the boy tortured, shamed into wishing to kill himself; of Justin screaming, sprawled on the cobbles at Nierkeeping; the young man who had loved Rina, killed at Eschbach. As Justin went on, his eyes fixed on some dazzling vision that he alone could see. A lover's look. But Justin's passion was for no human being.

"You believe in freedom. So do I," Theo said. "Do you believe in people?"

"People die. Freedom, never. What you believe or claim to believe makes no difference to me."

"You won't help us, then?"

Justin went back to his map. "That depends. In a military sense, there might be good reason not to divide our forces. But I must have something in return."

"What do you ask?"

"I don't ask. I demand," Justin said. "When Cabbarus is overthrown, as he must and will be, you're to have no part in my government. Florian and I will settle accounts. You'll keep out of it. You must give your word on that."

"I'll give it," Theo said. "But knowing what you think of me, how can you trust me to keep it?"

Justin gave him his boyish smile. "You're not altogether dishonorable."

"It's good of you to say that."

"One thing more. You're to lead the uprising in Marianstat. Can you do it? I'll tell you straight out: I'm not joining forces with someone who could lose his nerve at the last moment."

"I said I'll take Marianstat. I will."

"I must have assurance that you can."

"We're storing weapons and ammunition, building our strength."

"Building? Yes, but what are you destroying? Have you taken any action? How do you know you can count on your people? Have you tested them? They should be blooded, you know, and well blooded before you can trust them."

"This isn't the moment. It's too soon. If we take open action now, we can be sure of reprisals. Terror against terror. There will be losses I can't afford. The townspeople will suffer; Cabbarus will take his revenge on them as well as on us."

"So much the better," Justin said. "Let the wolf kill a few sheep. That's the best way to enrage the rest of the flock. Naturally, the directorate will take reprisals. It will bring more people to you. What if it does cost some of your own? You'll gain more than you lose. A little terror is a fine tonic."

"You're asking me to set loose a whirlwind. It could get out of hand and destroy us."

"Not a whirlwind. Only simple proof. And a marvelous opportunity to test your strength. Show me what your people can do. Then I'll support you."

"My section commandants must have a say in this. I'll get word to you."

"I'll know. I have friends in Marianstat, too." Justin sat back in his chair. "I think that's all we have to say to each other."

Justin would have let them stay the night, but Theo chose to start back without delay. Troubled, he could not be sure whether he had gained something or lost it. He envied Justin and the terrible strength of his single-heartedness, while his own heart was so divided.

"He's right, you know," he told Las Bombas, as Musket turned the coach toward the

city.

"About what? Getting your head blown off to satisfy him?"

"The cause is what matters. Not us."

"A noble cause is admirable, no doubt," said Las Bombas. "I'm all for it. Victory over Cabbarus--- I'll be the first to cry 'Bravo.' But if no one's on hand to enjoy it---"

"Some will live to see it."

"Of course," said Las Bombas. "I only mean that I prefer to be among them."

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# 14

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**ACE OF** Hearts was enjoying his morning. It promised to be a lovely spring day. The dapper ferret sat in his customary place at a table in one of the Fish Market Square taverns. Though it was only the first stop on his daily tour, he had already totted up most of his expected earnings. Ace of Hearts, therefore, could indulge himself in a few modest pleasures before setting out again. He ordered a cold fowl and something to wash it down.

The sun had an agreeable warmth as it streamed through the window at his back. The coins in his pocket had an equally agreeable weightiness. He would make better use of the money than the three Ankaris who had just ventured to play cards with him. They had plenty, they would only waste it. As a thoroughly professional cardsharp and confidence man, Ace of Hearts believed in justice: It struck him as only right for him to have his share.

If the Ankaris were stupid enough to be bilked, it was their own fault. They were, however, capable of great sudden rages, like large and dangerous infants. Dealing with them required patience and delicacy.

Ace of Hearts, naturally, let them win a little. Then, when the stakes mounted, he settled down to serious work. He fleeced them nicely. At a certain point, he stopped. Ace of Hearts was able to temper greed with prudence.

"Cards all finished. You understand?" Ace of Hearts raised his voice. The Ankaris could barely speak the language, but they comprehended loudness. "No more game." His announcement did not please his clients. They clearly wanted to win back what they had lost. One of them looked slantwise at Ace of Hearts:

"Play again." He smacked his fist down on the pack of cards.

"No. All done." Ace of Hearts smiled pleasantly. These Ankaris were ugly devils, bad-tempered into the bargain. He had seen one, the day before, take his musket butt to a townsman and club him senseless on the street. "You lose too much. Bad luck for you today. Friends, yes? I'm your friend. I do you a good turn. I say no more cards."

The Ankari shook his head and motioned for Ace of Hearts to deal. The others shifted restlessly. The confidence man sensed trouble in the wind. He avoided it by calling for a bottle of cheap wine--- a small expense he could easily afford--- and presenting it to them as a handsome gift. "Here. You win this."

Easily distracted, the Ankaris forgot the game, jabbering among themselves and grinning widely. They left, finally, with their prize.

Ace of Hearts, relieved, watched them straggle out. He was no patriot. That was a profitless occupation and, these days, an unhealthy one. The only government he cared about was himself. Nevertheless, the mercenaries that Cabbarus had brought in disgusted him. There were rumors of nasty doings in the Carolia cellars; the Ankaris, expert at dealing with stubborn prisoners, had taken charge of that. Ace of Hearts resented it. He considered the intrusion of foreigners improper, it offended his sensibilities. If the hired troops had not been such a windfall, Ace of Hearts would have been glad to see them all go to the devil.

"Hang the bloody lot of them," said Ace of Hearts.

As if out of thin air, a pudgy little man appeared at the cardsharp's elbow. This alarmed Ace of Hearts. He always kept an eye on those around him, he was never taken unawares. But this fellow had popped up out of nowhere. Ace of Hearts had not noticed him. He reproached his own carelessness, but admired the man's skill. Ace of Hearts had a keen nose for the law, no matter how disguised. This one was dressed as a laborer, but he stank of police.

"Hang?" The little man slid onto one of the empty chairs. "Hang which lot?"

Taken aback, Ace of Hearts realized he must have spoken to himself aloud. He recovered quickly and stared back at his questioner. "Why, the whole pack of troublemakers, of course. Those fellows always talking against the directorate, complaining about everything." He grinned. "Who did you think I meant?"

"The same, naturally." The pudgy man grinned back. He winked a moist eye. "I take it you know who those troublemakers are."

Ace of Hearts gave him an innocent smile. "Florian's crew and all such."

"Of course. I hear that some of them are still lurking around, still trying to cause trouble. You look like a man about town, you must run into them once in a while. I suppose you could even point out a few."

Ace of Hearts shook his head. "No. That's not in my line."

"Ah. Too bad." Skeit--- for it was, in fact, Skeit garbed as a common workman--- shrugged in disappointment. "It would be a great service--- a valuable service, if you take my meaning--- to some people I know, if they had a little word now and then about those fellows."

"I always like to be of service, but I can't help you. You've come to the wrong shop."

Skeit looked intently at Ace of Hearts. The man was lying. Everyone lied, Skeit expected it. He only wondered to what degree. If the man could give him any information at all, Skeit wanted it. For the first time in his career, Skeit had been thoroughly balked and baffled. He knew there was an armed resistance to the directorate; some had already been arrested and hanged. But he could not put his finger on the heart of it. He felt as if he were trying to climb a mountain of glass. The queen and her consuls were involved, beyond question, but they had disappeared without a trace.

Skeit had first assumed they had escaped into the countryside, and he had put all his efforts into tracking them there. Now he wondered if he had made a rare but profound error. In the city again, after months of fruitless search, he now speculated that they might not have left Marianstat at all. Cabbarus was furious, demanding results. The police and military had combed the city without success, finding only a wall of silence. There must be, Skeit knew, a chink in that wall. A loose stone, however small. The cardsharp might be such a loose stone. Or he might not. Skeit could not neglect any possibility. He put out a hand and gripped the confidence man's wrist. "You were clever at that. game. I saw you."

Ace of Hearts winced at the surprising strength of the stubby fingers. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"I think you do. A nice job of diddling those poor soldiers: guests of the city, as you might say. That's not hospitable. The directorate frowns on that sort of business, you know. In fact, it's a criminal offense. You could be locked up for it, laddie."

The confidence man's face tightened, his pinched nostrils flared. The man had hit a nerve. Ace of Hearts did not like prison; he did not even like to hear of it, the very word struck him like a sickness. Ace of Hearts had nightmares about cells, dark closets, windowless rooms: a secret torment, admitted to no one. Once, he had been obliged to spend a few hours in a basement, and he had come out a quaking jelly.

"What, put away for a harmless bit of fun?" Ace of Hearts smiled and sweated. "Who cares? Who'd bother?"

"I would," said Skeit. "I could have you taken off this instant. Locked up. Hanged, if I ordered it."

The stock-in-trade of Ace of Hearts was dishonesty. This gave him skill in recognizing the truth when he sometimes came across it. The little man was not making an idle threat, and he was more than a crude plainclothes police agent.

"But I'm not one to interfere with anyone's livelihood," Skeit added. "Indeed, I'm glad we met. We might do each other some good.

"Let's speak confidentially, heart to heart," Skeit went on. "We're really after the big fish, not the minnows. The former queen. The consul chappie she's engaged to. Those most of all. A gentleman whose name begins with a C has a personal interest in finding them. For reasons that go back a long way. The police and the army could turn the city upside down; but they're such bumlbers, they couldn't find their noses in the dark. What's needed is a quiet word from a knowledgeable, civic-minded private citizen. He'd be well thanked for doing his duty--- pure golden gratitude."

Skeit fished out a scrap of paper. He jotted a few lines and put it into the wet palm of Ace of Hearts. "You keep your eyes open. If you turn up any little something of interest, send me word at this address. I'm never there, of course. But the one who is, he'll pass along the message." He stood up. "Remember, I've got a string on you, laddie. I can turn it into a noose."

Skeit gave a cordial bob of his head and sauntered out. Ace of Hearts stared at the

paper. He finally jammed it into his pocket.

"You little swine," the confidence man muttered between his teeth. "Don't hold your breath until you hear from me."

Ace of Hearts waited awhile, then left the tavern. The morning had been spoiled. He wandered unhappily in the direction of Great Augustine Square. When sure he was not being followed, he bent his steps toward The Shambles. It was important for Ingo to know immediately what had happened. The pawnbroker had instructed Ace of Hearts to advise him of any brush with the authorities. Thus alerted, Ingo could take proper defensive measures.

Ace of Hearts had long known that Ingo was playing a dangerous game involving high affairs of state. The confidence man had suspected from the first night that the girl was the Beggar Queen. As time passed, observing odd goings-on at the pawnshop in his dealings with Ingo, the confidence man grew certain. Neither he nor the pawnbroker spoke her name, but each was quite aware that the other knew her identity.

It was knowledge which Ace of Hearts fervently wished he did not have. It made him vulnerable to pressure. If the directorate's horrifying little agent ever came to suspect or tried to squeeze information out of him, Ace of Hearts would need protection. But Ingo's idea of protection could be to get rid of Ace of Hearts altogether.

Drawing closer to The Shambles, Ace of Hearts felt the crumpled paper in his pocket. It dawned on him that he had been dealt a trump card. It was not a bad thing to have in reserve. If worse came to worst, he could claim he had been working for the directorate all along. If need be, he could throw the terrible little man a few crumbs of useless information: an easy way to build credit.

Almost at the pawnshop door, Ace of Hearts halted. Ingo should, nevertheless, be warned. On the other hand, it might be wiser to tell him nothing at all. It was a private matter, best kept so. The confidence man was no informer, he had no intention of becoming one. He saw no harm, therefore, in guarding his secret. Revealing it would lead only to needless confusion.

He stood a moment. He caught sight of the two figures rapidly approaching from the other end of the street: the young man, whom Ace of Hearts had learned was as much wanted by the police as the queen herself, and the fat idiot who was his companion. Ace of Hearts knew that they had been away for several days. The ginger-haired coachman was no doubt hiding the vehicle. Ace of Hearts had no wish to have any conversation with them or Ingo.

Ace of Hearts turned abruptly away. Whistling, he headed for Green Market Square and his next client.

It had not been so bad a morning after all.

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## 15

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**MICKLE LOVED** her city. She now spent half of her time calculating how to destroy it. She spent the other half calculating how to spare it.

She had gone over the plans again and again: with Theo and the section commandants, with Las Bombas, and in her own mind. As soon as Florian landed in Westmark, the uprising would begin. A strong force would attack the Mariana Caserna and engage the city regiment.

"Dear girl," said Las Bombas, who had appointed himself to his old role as the queen's military adviser, "you realize that attacking the Marianas will be like wrestling a wild bear."

"Yes," Mickle said, "unless we find a way to muzzle it. I'll try to think of something. Otherwise, I'm afraid we'll just have to wrestle our bear."

At the same time, other sections would attack the Juliana. "The Ankaris will be too busy defending the palace to do much else," Mickle said. "Don't tell me that's another wild bear," she added to Las Bombas. "I know it. But if we do well, and I think we can, we'll keep the fighting from spreading all over the city. I don't see much sense in holding Marianstat if there's nothing left of it to hold."

Even so, she tried to take other possibilities into account, to make allowances for whatever might happen. She needed Witz. She now missed him and his passion for details more than ever. She continued to pore over her maps to make certain that nothing had been overlooked.

Ingo, by ways known only to himself, had provided her with architectural drawings of the Mariana Caserna. She studied them, looking for weak points that could be attacked most sharply. She was still searching when Theo and Las Bombas came back from the old farm.

From Theo's face she could tell that he had found Justin. She could also tell it had gone badly. She listened carefully while Theo reported Justin's demands.

"You agreed?" She looked uneasily at Theo.

"I had no choice. If that's his price for supporting Florian, it has to be paid."

"Perhaps." Mickle frowned. Something was setting her teeth on edge. "You know there will be reprisals. Against the townspeople. Against us."

"There will always be reprisals, whatever we do."

"Too many losses and all our other plans are going to be blown sky-high. We've worked them out too carefully. I can't see ruining them."

"Justin only wants a show of strength. He wants proof of what we can do. I'll give him that."

"Yes," Mickle said. "You'll give it. You. Are you trying to show him what your people can do? Or what you yourself can do? Is it Justin's good opinion of the Marianstat resistance? Or of you?"

"It makes no difference what Justin thinks of me."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I am."

Mickle saw his face flush. She said no more, sensing it would only lead to a quarrel. It was the first time he had lied to her.

SOON AFTER that, Cabbarus became a schoolmaster.

He gave lessons in arithmetic.

A night patrol was attacked and stripped of their weapons. The director ordered the governor of the Carolia to hang ten prisoners.

In broad daylight, a woman fired a pistol at Colonel Zeller riding past in his carriage. He was unhurt; the would-be assassin was killed on the spot. A dozen bystanders were hauled at random out of the crowd and shot that same afternoon. When a makeshift bomb exploded in an Ankari command post, a physician, a grain merchant, and a bricklayer were arrested, along with twenty other townfolk; of these, ten were executed, the rest kept as hostages.

Cabbarus wished to demonstrate that one equaled ten, or twelve, or whatever number he chose.

Mickle made her own calculations. During that spring, as Theo ordered still more attacks, their people suffered heavy losses. There were replacements, others came to join; but she could not be certain if the movement was being strengthened or dangerously weakened, whether it was gaining fresh blood or bleeding to death.

When she talked about this to Theo, he did not seem to be listening. The weather had turned warm, he had turned to ice. Since his meeting with Justin, she had seen his face harden, his eyes were always looking somewhere else. He was concerned with numbers, doing his own exercises in addition and subtraction. He had told her, once, that he would not become Kestrel again. He had kept that promise. He had become something worse.

She knew, also, that he was hiding something from her. Exactly what it was eluded her, but she glimpsed the shadow of it behind his eyes. There was no way that Mickle could have known his secret; he locked it away from her and even from his section leaders.

From the winter, from the first death, he had tried to take, all deaths on himself, as if that burden could lighten the burden of others. He had failed, it was an impossible

task. He owed too many deaths. He could pay with only one.

His arithmetic, however, had taught him to bargain closely. He would not be wasteful, he wanted the most in exchange. He was not yet clear as to how he could do it, only certain that he would find a way. He saw the necessity. The rest was detail.

Once, he had saved the life of Cabbarus. Now, Theo decided, he must be the one to take it.

It was, after all, only fair.

IN THE port, a little before dusk, a dock idler lounged near one of the sheds, passing the time of day with an oyster-woman. There was, in this, nothing remarkable. The Ankaris, passing by on their regular patrol, did not give them as much as a glance.

Neither the idler nor the oyster-woman had any business there. But they had a great deal of business there. They were total strangers, but they could not have been closer: Their lives were in each other's hands.

One of them, as far as Theo had been concerned, should not have been there in the first place. They had even argued sharply over it. Until Mickle put an end to the matter. She was, as she reminded Theo, the queen of Westmark, not the queen bee. She had no intention of spending her life in Ingo's cellar while Theo risked his every day in the streets.

She also pointed out that the idea had been hers and she wanted a hand in it.

"You've been giving Justin proof after proof of what we can do," she added. "If things go as they should, this will convince him once and for all. And there's an end to it. Keep on and you'll destroy all we've built. You can order your people to get themselves killed. But they're my people, too, and I want to keep them alive."

Theo had no answer to this line of reasoning, not one, in any case, that Mickle would accept. Therefore, she found herself in idle conversation with an oysterwoman.

This harmless, commonplace vendor was full-featured, rosy-cheeked, her hair streaked with gray. She was no different from any of the fishwives who thronged the square and the harbor. Except that she carried a pistol under her apron and a knife strapped to the side of her leg. Her profession, on this occasion, was merely a matter of convenience. She knew Mickle only as Oracle. Mickle knew her only as Red Cockade.

The first Red Cockade had been hanged in Carolia Square. This woman had taken his place as a section commandant. She had kept the name: The man had been her husband.

"I can't bring him back," Red Cockade said. "No amount of killing can do that; the dead can't bring back the dead. But I won't see my children in prison or worse.

"Yes, they tried to arrest all of us," Red Cockade went on. "I got the boy and girl out of the city. My cousin's keeping them." She smiled bitterly. "They've no idea what

their mother's doing. That may be just as well."

The woman looked closely at Mickle, who could not be sure whether or not Red Cockade knew who she was. "I'm not doing this for the monarchy," she said abruptly. "There's been enough of that. If we make an end of Cabbarus, we want a say in whatever comes after. I'm not risking my neck for the sake of the throne."

"As a matter of fact," said Mickle, "neither am I."

"We understand each other, then." Red Cockade's expression softened. Mickle no longer doubted that the woman recognized her, but it was not the look of subject to ruler, only that of two people who, for different reasons, were putting themselves into the same danger.

"Justitia." Red Cockade made a quick movement of her head. A young man, slightly built, wearing a thick pair of spectacles, had sauntered to the quayside. He stood peering with curiosity at the vessels tied along the wharf.

Of Justitia, Mickle knew only that he was the commandant of a section in the university quarter and that Theo counted him among the best. Justitia, turning from his inspection of the ships, drifted toward Red Cockade and made a show of examining the wares on her tray.

"Ready?" Justitia's face was shining with excitement. As Mickle later learned, he had come from the provinces to Marianstat, where his parents happily believed he was studying law. They expected he would, someday, become a judge. He had not been to his classes for months. "If the others aren't here," he added impatiently, "I say we should go ahead without them."

"You'll follow orders this time," said Red Cockade. "Oracle will decide that."

Mickle was as impatient as the student. She had also begun to grow concerned. Theo had warned her. The rule was to wait no more than ten minutes. Beyond that, she was to assume something had gone wrong and all plans would be set aside.

Mickle gritted her teeth. She could not bear the idea of losing a chance that might never come again. Through Weasel and Captain Jacob, she had learned that an Ankari cargo vessel bringing a shipment of weapons and ammunition would be in port. The longshoremen hired to off-load the cargo would not be the usual dockhands. They would, instead, be a work party of Theo's people. In the confusion of off-loading, they were to haul away the crates and barrels to a hiding place in The Marsh, and replace them with containers of dirt and rubble.

A tall man had come up beside her. He had iron eyes in a face burnt the color of bronze. He was, Mickle knew, the one calling himself Liberation. She had seen him before. He had been an officer of Florian's partisans during the war. Revolution was his trade; Florian's cause had been his life. He glanced at Mickle. "The shipmaster's pressing us. We've delayed as long as we can, given him every excuse. We don't want to begin until dusk, but I can't put him off much longer. Alma's ready," he added, using the name which Theo had chosen for himself: a fond reminder to Mickle of her first stand against the Regians, a victory of sorts.

Liberation looked around. "Where the devil is Clarion?"

"Late, as to be expected," said Red Cockade. "He probably stopped to buy a pair of gloves or have his boots polished." From the woman's tone, Mickle guessed that Clarion's habits were a sore point of long standing with Red Cockade.

In a few moments, Mickle understood the oysterwoman's remark. Striding toward them was the most elegant sailor Mickle had ever seen. His canvas slops fit him as if they had been tailor-made; the brass buttons of his jacket gleamed even in the gathering twilight.

"Clarion, you imbecile," muttered Red Cockade, "will you go and put some dirt on yourself?"

"Even though we shall have to deal with Ankaris," Clarion answered, "I see no reason to be grubby about it."

What astonished Mickle was not his costume but Clarion himself. She had seen him more times than she could count. He had been a courtier at the Juliana.

Clarion recognized her immediately and gave the faintest suggestion of a bow. Liberation was urging them to follow him down the quay.

"Forgive me for not observing the formalities, Your Majesty--- Oracle, I should say," Clarion whispered as they hurried after Liberation. "These are hardly the proper circumstances. Etiquette must be sacrificed. In any case, neither of us is at court.

"I've left the Juliana," Clarion went on, "presumably to rusticate on my country estate. Perhaps I should have stayed at the palace; I might have been more useful to you. But there are limits to what a reasonable person can tolerate. The prospect of bowing and scraping to our Director Cabbarus---" Clarion looked at her with amusement. "Does that surprise you? Because I had the good fortune to be born noble hardly implies that I was born brainless. I assure you, I remain a loyal monarchist--- I refuse to see the kingdom in the hands of Cabbarus. The charming Red Cockade and I have our differences, but we at least agree on that."

A gangplank had been run out from the Ankari vessel. In the torchlight, Mickle caught sight of Theo, garbed like the rest of Liberation's longshoremen. Some had already begun to haul the crates and barrels to the dockside, to be hastily trundled away.

"We'll be off with most of it before the captain and his crew have time to wonder where it went," Theo told her as she went to his side. "This will be more guns and ammunition than we've ever taken all at once."

"I'm glad you appreciate it," Mickle said. "I hope Justin will."

Red Cockade had taken a position in front of the tavern, where most of the Ankari crew had gone to carouse, ready to alert the dockers in case of trouble.

The off-loading went faster than Mickle had calculated. Liberation came up to her and Theo. "Half a dozen sailors are aboard, on watch. We can manage that."

"Come on, then," Mickle said. She signaled to Justitia and Clarion, who sped up the

gangplank. Liberation and Theo followed them a moment later. Mickle seized a torch from its iron bracket and ran aboard.

Liberation and Clarion had already silently flung themselves on the two men of the watch. The rest of the crew were below decks; before they realized their ship had been overrun, Alma and Justitia had battened the hatches and were working to disengage the anchor chain. Mickle cast off the mooring lines. Lightened of its cargo, the vessel lifted in the water and drifted slowly from the landing stage.

By then, the imprisoned crew were pounding on the hatches. Mickle had staked everything on the Vespera current. She believed that she knew the river; she must count on it to help her before the shipmaster and the rest of his crew could recapture their vessel.

The Vespera did not disappoint her. The ship answered the pull of the current, spun slowly about, drifting toward the estuary.

"The sailors below---" Mickle called to Theo and Liberation. "Disarm them, get them on deck." She turned to Justitia. "Take the wheel. Hold it steady. Don't try to steer. The river will do it."

Liberation had freed the crew, who were more bewildered than dangerous, and more terrified than threatening. Theo, a pistol in either hand, motioned them to the rail.

"Can you swim?" Mickle demanded. The Ankaris stared at her. She gestured. The sailors, to their disbelief, grasped that their lives were being spared. They plunged over the side and struck out for the nearest islet.

The vessel continued to drift. Mickle set a pile of canvas ablaze. Theo and the others flung lanterns into the hold, smashed wooden fittings and used them to feed the mounting flames.

"It's our turn," Mickle ordered. She had gone to the rail. In another moment, she saw what she had hoped to see. Justitia, who had taken off his spectacles, groped his way to the side. "Over you go."

Liberation and Clarion had plunged into the current. Mickle saw Theo poised on the rail. Then he vanished. She dove after him. Even as the water closed over her head, she was fighting her way to the surface. Theo was only a few feet away. Justitia, Clarion, and Liberation had already swum to the shape bobbing in front of her.

By the time she reached it, Theo and the others had clambered over the side of the rowboat. Hands reached out to help her aboard. The oarsman, satisfied that all his passengers were accounted for, put down his lantern and began pulling for shore.

Mickle could not see the huge grin on the face of the oarsman but she could hear it in his voice.

"You were right on time," said Weasel. "So was I."

Behind them, the Ankari vessel was burning to the waterline.

WEASEL PUT them ashore at the far end of The Marsh, then pushed off again to return Captain Jacob's boat to its hiding place. Liberation, Clarion, and Justitia separated and disappeared into the alleys. Mickle and Theo, clinging to the shadows, made their way, stealthily and dripping, through the outskirts of The Marsh. At the end of one street, Mickle heaved a sigh of relief.

Las Bombas was waving at them from the window of the coach. "Safe? All of you? Get in, get in! No time to lose."

"We're not in a hurry," said Mickle. "We've done our work. I should think we're entitled to catch our breath. The police, not to mention an embarrassed Ankari sea captain, will be busy for a while trying to figure out what happened."

"It's not that," said Las Bombas. "Zara's waiting. She has word for you. Florian's sailing from Regia."

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## 16

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**LAS BOMBAS**, Theo believed, had misunderstood. Florian could not have moved so quickly. When Theo and Mickle found her at the pawnshop, Zara repeated all she knew.

"He must be under way by now. Where he's going to land and when"--- Zara handed Theo a thin slip of paper, closely written in the code only he and Florian could understand--- "he told me no details. That's information for you to deal with."

Theo read and reread the coded message. There was no mistake. He had expected some sense of relief or excitement, even joy. But he felt only as if the marrow of his bones had turned to ice. The haul of weapons, the burning ship were suddenly in the past. His mind raced over all that must be set in motion now. And the one thing he must do himself.

He told them part of Florian's message. Mickle's eyes were on him, watching intently. He could not read her expression. He turned to Zara.

"This is much sooner than I thought."

"Constantine changed his mind," Zara said. "Officially, he still has no hand in it. Unofficially, he's lending ships and supplies to Florian. Also unofficially, he's letting Regian volunteers join. I suppose the king wants to get some of his own troublemakers out of the country. With luck, he probably hopes they won't live to come back."

"I don't believe that of Connie," Mickle said.

"He'd do it if it suited him," Zara said. "Does it matter why? He's helping us, that's all that counts."

"How much time do we have?" asked Las Bombas. "When will Florian land?"

"I'll tell you when you need to know," said Theo. "Right now, Florian must have an answer. He wants us ready within three weeks."

Las Bombas blinked. "Dear boy, I hardly think that's possible."

"It's possible," said Mickle. "We'll be ready."

"I'll send word to Justin," Theo said. "I'll tell him about the Ankari ship, too. Zara, you start back to Regia. I'll give you a message for Florian."

"No," Zara said. "If you can do what he asks, I'm to stay here. I'm your second-in-command. That's Florian's order."

Theo nodded. There had never been much love lost between himself and Zara, but he

could not have asked for a better officer. "One of my people will take the message to him, then. You'll have your headquarters in a tavern in The Marsh. It's a safe house. We use it often. You'll work with the section leaders. Count on them for anything you want. I'll stay here."

He asked Mickle to come alone with him to the other chamber. Except for Justin, Mickle was the only one to know in advance when and where Florian would land, and his plan of attack. Theo told her this and could see that she was making the same calculations he had made.

Finally, she said: "Even if it all goes exactly as Florian plans, I don't see any other answer. We'll have to hold the city for at least three days."

"I think we can. For three days, but no more. Even that will press us. If we have to hold out longer--- I don't know."

"It will depend on Justin," said Mickle, "and how well he can help Florian. Much as I hate to admit it, what Justin does could be the key to the whole thing."

"Zara will be in command of the street fighting," Theo said. "Her people will attack the Juliana. We'll have to decide on the best moment to put up barricades."

"We'll set the time with Zara." Mickle took his hand. "I'm glad you're staying here for a while." She looked curiously at him. "Aren't you?"

"Yes. Of course I am."

"What's wrong, then?"

"Nothing. Everything is right." There was no reason for her to know; not yet, in any case.

When Zara's people stormed the Juliana, he would be with them.

He had told Mickle a part of the truth: Everything was right. It was right for him to take the life of Cabbarus. He could not leave it to chance or accident. He could not tolerate the idea that the man might escape. It was Theo's last obligation, he hoped he would not be cheated out of it. If it cost his own life, that, too, was as it should be.

He did not dare tell Mickle this. It saddened him, for he wanted her to know and to understand that it was a debt which he alone could pay. But he feared she would disagree. He knew how persuasive she could be and he did not trust himself. He was well aware of how little persuasion it would take.

Satisfied in his own mind, he became almost lighthearted. He was grateful to have so much time with Mickle. He felt happier and more at peace than he had for a long while. He even took up sketching again.

He made a truce with the past. The future did not exist.

THERE HAD been no word from Justin. Theo had sent one of his most reliable couriers, a harness maker named Varick. The man might have been arrested. Theo would have to send another. Time was running out. He needed to be sure of Justin.

"He'll support us. He has to," Theo told Mickle. "He can't deny it: I've kept my part of the bargain."

Varick came back only at the end of the week. He had found Justin, but not at the farm.

"He's moved all his people out," the harness maker said. "He made me stay with them. He'd have shot me if I'd tried to leave. All his units are moving in small groups at night. They're gathering near Marianstat."

"They can't be. They should be heading toward the coast."

"I don't know what his plan is," Varick said. "If you ask me, it looks like he's going to send all his troops here in force. If that's what he has in mind, they'll be here in a matter of days."

"When he let me go, he gave me two messages. One was written; the other I'm to tell you just as he said it: 'Not acceptable.' "

Theo caught his breath. He felt as if Justin had struck him in the face. The two words were telling him that his work had counted for nothing, the bargain was broken.

Varick, meantime, had pulled a slip of paper from his boot. It was blank, as Theo had expected. He snatched it and hurriedly passed it back and forth over the flame of a candle. He was sure Justin was giving a fuller explanation. In the heat of the flame, the words appeared little by little. He stared at them:

You are relieved of your command. You will put yourself and your people under my direct orders. Report to me when I enter Marianstat.

Theo read the lines over again, dumbstruck.

Mickle took the paper from his hand: "What the devil is he up to? He can't give us orders, he can't tell us what we do or don't do. Enter Marianstat? He's out of his wits---"

"I can tell you what he's up to," Zara burst out. "He's trying to overreach Florian." She turned and faced Theo, her panther eyes blazing. "He knows when Florian will land. You fool, you told him. If Justin attacks first, if he sets off an uprising here--- yes, we'll have to support him. What else can we do? He means to force our hand. Our people will take the worst of it. The more of us killed, the better as far as he's concerned. He'll have it all his own way--- his people against Florian's, and he's sure he can win."

"He's a better officer than that," Mickle said. "What if he fails? He won't take that kind of gamble."

"He will if the stakes are high enough," Zara retorted. "I know him better than you do. He's not out of his wits; he knows very well what he's doing. This is his best chance. He wants to take over the government; he'll risk everything to do it."

Theo hardly listened to her. The old rage that he had always feared in himself, that once had turned him into something unrecognizable, had begun welling up into his

throat and choking him. Justin's ambitions meant nothing. He thought of the men and women who had died because Alma had commanded it. Justin had wanted blood; Theo had given him enough to drown in. Unwillingly. But he had done it nevertheless. The horror was not only the lives lost, he had let Justin make an accomplice of him. Theo had set loose the whirlwind not for the sake of what he believed, not even for the sake of Florian, but for his own: to settle once and for all the debt he owed to Justin. He had given a last payment. It had been refused.

He went to the chest of weapons and took out a brace of pistols. "I'm going to Justin. We'll have this out between us."

Mickle, following, caught his arm. "There's no time."

Theo pulled roughly away from her. "Time enough."

"You won't make Justin change his mind. Then what?"

He looked at Mickle as if she had asked the most childish question in the world.

Zara snatched one of the pistols from him. "Not you. It's clear you can't deal with him, you never could. I can."

"Do nothing of the sort, either of you," Mickle ordered. "You're both acting like fools. Talk to your section leaders first. It concerns them as much as you. They have a right to know."

She took Theo by the shoulders and made him face her. "Florian put you in command of Marianstat. That's where you should be. If anybody's to see Justin, it will be Zara. I don't care what Justin thinks of you or any of us. He can't give me orders; I'm going to ignore them. I have my work here and so have you."

"She's right," Zara grudgingly admitted. "Do as she says."

Theo flung down the pistol. Varick was waiting, listening uneasily.

"The section commandants will meet me at the tavern," Theo told him. "Get word to them. Now."

VARICK HAD gone. Theo left the pawnshop, Zara striding to keep up with him. He followed the streets which he knew to be busiest at this time of day; it was easier to avoid notice. He slowed his pace. Ankari soldiers were at the crossing; he did not want to risk passing so close by them. He whispered to Zara to turn back casually and take another street.

That instant, a second patrol appeared behind them. They had begun herding the passersby toward the walls of the houses. At the crossing, their comrades unslung their weapons and stood blocking the other end of the street.

It was no real cause for alarm, it had happened to Theo before. Though his heart had been in his mouth each time, it was no more than a routine check of identity papers. Any sort of paper would do; the Ankaris only made a show of reading them. Thanks to Las Bombas, Theo and Zara had excellent documents.

The color had gone out of Zara's face. It surprised him that she, of all people, would be so shaken by a commonplace happening.

"The pistol," Zara murmured. "It's under my shawl."

"Drop it," Theo muttered between his teeth. "Kick it into the gutter---"

She had no chance. Two Ankaris had come up to them. Theo fumbled for his papers. One of the mercenaries flung him against the wall. The passersby were all being searched. The other Ankari had begun patting at Zara's garments.

"Take your hands off my girl," Theo ordered indignantly, hoping desperately his anger would be a distraction. "We're honest citizens, we won't be treated like criminals. Here--- we have papers."

The Ankari only grinned at him. Zara struggled against the man searching her. It was too late: He had found the pistol and triumphantly showed it to his comrade. He jerked his head at Zara.

"Carolia for you."

Before Theo could spring at him, Zara snatched away the pistol and fired it point blank at the Ankari's face.

"Get out!" she cried to Theo. "Run!"

It happened so quickly after that. At the sound of the shot, the second patrol had raced to surround Theo and Zara. Suddenly Zara was on the ground, a mercenary driving his boot into her ribs. Theo sprang to help her. Someone grappled him from behind. He wrestled to break free. A musket butt struck him on the side of the head. He dropped to one knee as the street whirled in front of him.

Zara was doubled up on the cobblestones, holding her side. She was lost and knew it. She had clearly chosen not to be taken alive. The russet divinity lifted her head, spat at the soldiers, cursed them and dared them to kill her. She kept on until one, exasperated, silenced her with his bayonet.

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## **PART FOUR Florian's Child**

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**KELLER HAD** fallen between the cracks.

The officers who first came to arrest him were convinced that he had not yet come home. With that error firmly in mind, they watched his house for a few days, patiently waiting for a man to come back to a place he had not left. At last, believing that he had fled the city, they gave up and found better uses for their time. The military assumed the police would continue investigating the case. The police assumed it was an affair for the military. The Ankari mercenaries had no interest whatever in it. Amid the confusion of the early days of the directorate, reports were lost or never sent. A clerk finally put Keller's dossier into a box along with a dozen others for future scrutiny and never examined it again.

Only the Bureau of State Property paid any attention; its concern, however, was not to lay hands on his person but on his press. After a few weeks, workmen arrived to confiscate this equipment and cart it off to a government warehouse, to be stored there until sold.

"I really must protest emphatically," Keller declared. "They have taken a completely innocent printing press into custody, a humble drudge that only does what it's told, that turns out the sublime or the ridiculous with utter impartiality--- and have chosen to ignore its animating spirit. I find that insulting, demeaning to the entire profession. Perhaps I should write them a scathing letter."

Sparrow believed he was fool enough to do it, as did Madam Bertha. They urged him, for once in his life, to be prudent.

Keller shrugged: "What need? Here is a monumental example of governmental incompetence. Once, I complained of it. Now I enjoy its benefits."

The two women persuaded him, nevertheless, to stay in the house. Also, with the help of Weasel, who had equally escaped notice and came and went as he pleased, they built a partition, a sort of false wall in Theo's old room. Should the house be searched, Keller was to hide behind it.

The journalist complained that they were acting like scared rabbits, but he allowed them to do as they pleased. He had little choice; his fever had come back with a vengeance and for many days he did not have strength enough to leave his bed.

Before, during such bouts of illness, Sparrow never left his side. Now there were long stretches when he saw little of her. Keller teased the young woman, accusing her of having a rendezvous with a secret sweetheart. Sparrow blushed flaming red--- the journalist was the only one who could produce this effect in her--- and bit her lips.

Keller pretended to be heartbroken.

He was. Not because of the invented sweetheart. He was heartbroken because Old Kasperl had been silenced.

The journalist had made it a principle to love nothing. "Love," he maintained, "is the most pernicious of ailments. It blurs the vision. It should be avoided at all cost."

He did not follow his own advice. He allowed himself one exception: his newspaper. Without it, he felt bereft, as grief-stricken over the loss of Old Kasperl and his talking bear as if they had been his own flesh and blood. The war had spoiled his lungs; he counted that a minor annoyance. Cabbarus had pulled his teeth.

Keller did not admit this to any of his household. Madam Bertha blamed his low spirits, which he could not always hide, on two things: his past years of careless living and his present lack of proper nutrition. Since the old housekeeper could do nothing about the former, she doubled her efforts regarding the latter.

Only Sparrow and Weasel knew the true cause. They understood because they felt the same way.

Keller was sitting up in bed one afternoon, shaving--- an obligation he refused to let Sparrow or Madam Bertha undertake for him. This was the only time he looked into a mirror. He asserted that he had never lived a healthier life, taking regular meals, going to sleep early, waking late, hardly touching the wine bottle; and he had never looked worse.

Sparrow and Weasel came into his room. Keller glanced up. "A deputation? Water rats, you have something to announce. I know what it is. Weasel has been chosen to replace our beloved Director Cabbarus. Sparrow and her secret admirer are getting married. From your faces, your news can't be anything less momentous."

Sparrow had been standing with her hands behind her back. She brought them into view. She was holding the impossible: the latest edition of *Old Kasperl*.

Keller had seen enough in his life to believe anything. In this instance, he could not believe his own eyes. He upset his shaving basin in his haste to seize a copy and scan it.

"Where did you get this? It was bad enough when those vultures swooped down and carried off my press. Now some wretch has kidnapped my brainchild." He read further. "The impostor's clever, I'll admit. He's copied my style--- this even sounds as if I'd written it myself. What do you know of this? Who did it?"

"I did," said Weasel.

"I did," said Sparrow at the same instant. "We both did. Weasel wrote some---"

"A lot," put in Weasel.

"And I did the rest," Sparrow went on. "Do you like it?"

"No," declared Keller. "I love it. Water rats, you are gems beyond compare. I'm astounded! Why--- it seems only yesterday you were a pair of ragamuffins. Now



you've become a pair of scriveners. I don't know if that's an improvement, but you've done it."

Keller flung his arms around them. He drew back, in a moment, and cocked an eye at the delighted conspirators. "Hold on. Writing *Old Kasperl* is one thing, printing it another. We have no press."

Weasel would have rather let that remain a trade secret.

Sparrow was too happy, she could not resist telling; besides, there was only one secret she had ever kept from Keller: "When your printers left, one of them found another job, with a publisher, and I talked him into doing this on the sly. As long as we can write *Old Kasperl*, he'll print it for us."

"Yes, and it will go hard with him if he's caught," Keller warned.

"Don't worry," Sparrow said. "They'll never suspect. I've rigged the inventories and accounts; the publisher won't have any idea what's going on. The police wouldn't dream of bothering him."

"Who owns the press?"

"Webling."

Keller roared with laughter until a fit of coughing made him stop. "The official newspaper? The directorate's hired journal is printing *Old Kasperl*? Water rats, you are sublime."

"Yes," Weasel said, "I think so, too."

DURING THE next few months, thanks to Sparrow and Weasel, the journal appeared without fail. Sparrow made sure the paper circulated throughout the city and the provinces. Keller could not have had a better tonic. By late spring, he was spending more time out of his bed than in it. Madam Bertha credited her cooking. Sparrow knew otherwise.

Still weak, Keller left most of the work to her. Sparrow asked nothing better. He thought that she was publishing a newspaper. She was not. Sparrow was making him a love-gift.

Weasel, in addition to certain private business of his own, constantly brought news. He seemed to have grown extra pairs of ears, for he managed to hear all the city gossip. The directorate, Weasel reported, was enraged by the very existence of *Old Kasperl*. They were making every effort to track down the printer responsible. On the old assumption that Keller had fled Marianstat, the officers were certain that the illegal journal was being published somewhere in the provinces. The harder they looked, the less they found, which, by their standards of logic, meant that some obscure upcountry printer was to blame. Webling never suspected, and his pressman went about his work undisturbed. *Old Kasperl* had never enjoyed so many readers.

"The world is absurd," Keller told Sparrow. "Thank heaven for that. Otherwise, I---

we, that is--- would have no occupation."

Sparrow blushed. She heard the word *we* more clearly than the others.

FROM TIME to time, Theo came to sleep there, only to vanish after a few hours. Keller thought he was looking terrible; his face was haggard, his eyes had the same feverish glint the journalist had observed when Theo first came to the house after the war. Small noises startled him; his nerves were on a hair trigger. His thoughts seemed always to be somewhere else.

Theo was usually too exhausted to do more than fling himself on the mattress. Once, though, Keller found him sorting through the paints and brushes he had left behind, and the stack of canvases, most empty, a few begun but never finished. He sprang up when Keller approached, as if he were a thief stealing from another life. When Keller asked if he had kept up with his sketching, Theo shook his head and gave every sign that he did not want to discuss it.

They had few occasions for long talks, but Theo did tell the journalist as much as he dared about the insurrection. Keller offered to do whatever was asked. Theo, grateful, refused. They needed *Old Kasperl* as much as powder and shot.

"Our business is to kill people," Theo told him. "Your business is to stay alive. You're the best voice we have."

"My water rats do most of the work," answered Keller. "Indeed, I find myself rather at loose ends. I would welcome a little mischief to spice things up. Staying alive is a mere formality. Dying doesn't trouble me, it's the rubbish you have to wade through before you reach it. We all have to swallow a great many toads along the way. Luckily, I've avoided eating any more than absolutely necessary."

"Yes," Theo said. "The hard part, though, is deciding what's absolutely necessary."

Keller saw even less of him after that. Something was brewing. Keller could smell it on the summer air floating through his window. He had no details but was journalist enough to piece together what he did know and could guess. It would be something large. Weasel was involved, too. The boy usually confided his secrets in his idol. This time he did not. Keller, admittedly a little hurt and even more uneasy over Weasel, did not ask him, sure he would not answer.

One morning, Sparrow went out on Old Kasperl's business. Keller took a stroll through the city--- which he did without leaving the house. It was one of his amusements: He put on his hat, picked up his walking stick, and promenaded from one room to the next. He imagined himself ambling along the streets, crossing the square, pausing to observe the tree-lined avenues. Madam Bertha always flapped at him, telling him to leave off his nonsense, that he would be better advised to take a nap instead of playing the fool.

Keller, in his mind's eye, had been loitering near the fountain. Weasel burst into the room. It took the journalist a moment to come back to Fish Market Square. At sight of

Weasel, Keller forgot his game. The boy's face was dead white, his lips trembled; it was taking all his strength to keep from bursting into tears.

"Theo's caught," blurted Weasel. "With Zara. She's killed."

Keller tried to absorb the shock and keep to his feet. He began hastily questioning Weasel. The best he could learn was that it had been a single incident; there had been no widespread arrests. A commonplace happening: one death in the street, a few unlucky passersby taken into custody. From what Weasel had found out, Theo had been put in the Carolia.

"Mickle knows about it. I went there first. The count's with her. And Musket and a couple others. They have to get Theo out."

Keller nodded. "Take me to her."

The journalist, with his hat and stick, was out of the house before Madam Bertha could miss him. It was all he could do to keep up with Weasel threading his way through a maze of alleys. It was a marvelously bright blue day, but the gentle air set his chest on fire. His legs came close to buckling, he was in a heaving sweat by the time they reached The Shambles.

Weasel led him to the pawnshop cellar. Mickle gave a cry of glad surprise and ran to embrace him. Las Bombas and Musket, along with a burly man and a tall, gaunt one, were at a table. Their faces all showed the same grim cast.

"Weasel's told me," said Keller, before Mickle could ask an explanation. "I find myself in a position to help you. Theo's in the Carolia? You're certain?"

"Yes," Mickle said. "Someone saw him taken. We can't leave him there. That's decided and agreed. We'll have him back. Whatever it costs."

The girl began speaking rapidly and precisely, clearly going over point by point what she had been discussing with the others. Keller, impressed by few things and overawed by none, found himself close to both of those states. The queen of Westmark was as dispassionate as a blade of cold steel. Her mind moved at top speed. Whatever she privately feared was hidden. Only once, when she faltered a moment, did he glimpse a sudden anguish. Until then, she had been talking as a military commander explaining a problem in tactics. The moment vanished, but Keller understood that she was intent on saving the man she loved and willing to move heaven and earth to do it.

The lanky fellow, called Mumchance, who seemed wise in the ways of breaking and entering, had concluded that they would need several people, one of them an insider.

"Exactly so," said Keller. "Though I'm a journalist, I'm not all that familiar with the tricks of your trade. But it's clear to me: It would be simpler indeed if you had a friend in the Carolia.

"Let me remind Your Majesty," he continued, "I was an unwilling guest there some while ago. A number of us even managed to escape. I can tell you how we did it. I warn you, it's chancy and far from easy. The drainage system--- some of the pipes,

you see, run above the floor level in certain places---" Keller broke off and shook his head. "It's difficult to explain without being there. Now, do you know exactly where they put Theo? That's important. Some cells are easier to open than others."

"We can find out," said Ingo. "It may take a little time. That's what troubles the lassie."

"Because we don't have any time," said Mickle.

"What you need," said Keller, "is someone who already knows the routines, the lay of the land, the weak spots."

"There's the rub," said Ingo. "I can get hold of plenty of jailbirds, but they only know the local lockups, not the Carolia."

"I suggest someone who does know it." The journalist tipped his hat and bowed unsteadily. "Myself."

"My dear fellow, that's absurd," said Las Bombas. "You can't be serious."

"One of the rare occasions when I am," Keller answered.

"Hear him out," said Mickle. "I'll listen to any plan."

"Who better than I?" Keller went on. "Once there on the spot, I can find out where Theo is, I can see exactly what's what, and do it quicker than anyone. I'll get word to you--- that's not hard--- and you can help us if need be. Or, if it goes well, I'll rescue the lad on my own."

Las Bombas shook his head. "I don't like it."

"Neither do I," said Mickle, "but we have nothing better. If Keller's willing, let him try it."

"Two caught instead of one," Las Bombas replied. "Very well, how does he get in?"

"Easily," said Keller. "I propose to get myself arrested."

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**WHAT KELLER** proposed, Ace of Hearts had accomplished. With a certain difference: The journalist had offered of his own free will; the confidence man only willed to be free. However, on the morning that Keller was outlining his plan, Ace of Hearts was in the firm grip of two constables, Wilgus and Bracken, who were hustling him along to the Green Market Square Police Post. They were carrying out their duty while Ace of Hearts was making every effort to keep them from doing so: cursing, struggling, dragging his feet, and above all, threatening them with calamity.

Ace of Hearts could not believe he was actually being arrested. Since meeting the pudgy little man in the tavern, Ace of Hearts had considered himself immune. He looked on Skeit's slip of paper, which he had guarded, as a key to any door, including that of a cell. It was his protection, his link with high and powerful authority. With it, he could do as he pleased; and he did. Once prudent, Ace of Hearts became audacious. He bilked his clients flagrantly and prospered enormously. He led a charmed life.

That morning, he overstepped himself.

In Green Market Square, he had lightheartedly fleeced a visiting bumpkin of every penny. The shorn lamb refused to stay shorn. Instead of meekly accepting his loss, the stupid yokel bawled for the police, attracting a crowd, accusing Ace of Hearts of cheating him.

Wilgus and Bracken were on duty in the quarter. Whenever possible, they avoided unpleasant scenes. Enforcing the law could only spoil their day. The law was best left to take care of itself and did very well without their help. They both fervently wished that Ace of Hearts had been more discreet or that the rustic had kept his mouth shut. Since the rustic insisted on pressing charges, they had no choice. The confidence man had even offered to return the ill-gotten money. The bumpkin would be satisfied with nothing less than justice.

With greatest reluctance, Wilgus and Bracken collared Ace of Hearts, who began his defense the moment they laid hands on him.

"You can't do this to me! I have friends--- very influential they are, too. They'll break you; they'll have the skin off you."

"That's what all you villains say," remarked Wilgus. "Those influential friends must be on the best of terms with every rascal in Marianstat."

Ace of Hearts pulled out his magical slip of paper. "You send word there. You'll find out soon enough."

Bracken, after a glance, put it in his pocket. "That means nothing to us. Sorry, but

you're for the lockup."

That last word sent Ace of Hearts into near convulsions. By the time Wilgus and Bracken dragged him to the Green Market Post, Ace of Hearts had lost his usual dapper appearance. Clothes disheveled, eyes wide, mouth even wider, he kept up a storm of threats and protest, unsettling the precinct captain, who had been looking forward to a quiet morning.

Faced with a superior and presumably more intelligent officer, Ace of Hearts was sure of being heeded: "These two idiots--- they'll hang for this. You listen to me, Captain. I'm a secret agent of the directorate."

The precinct captain eyed Ace of Hearts calmly. Then he expressed his professional opinion: "That's rot."

"You'll see if it is," cried Ace of Hearts. "You send to that address. You say that I've got information they want. No, I demand to see Cabbarus himself. I know a thing or two--- plots, conspiracies, rebellion. I could mention a few names and places--- You don't believe me? Take me to the Juliana."

The constables glanced uneasily at each other. The captain frowned. His experience told him this was not the ordinary bluster of a captured criminal. He turned to the officers: "Lock him up. Then report back to me."

The constables dragged Ace of Hearts to the precinct cell: a basement room with a barred door, more a makeshift pen than a prison, since the occupants were kept there only long enough to be charged, then transferred to other accommodations. They could still hear Ace of Hearts shouting his demands.

The captain beckoned his men to draw closer. He gave them his most thoughtful judgment: "This is a hot potato."

The constables heartily agreed.

Their superior went on: "We assume one of two things. First, suppose he's lying. If he is, there's no harm in keeping him locked up. Second, suppose he's telling the truth. If he knows half what he claims--- this is serious business, we're duty bound to do something about it. We'd be doing the directorate a service, we might even get a few medals out of it."

The constables nodded unhappily. The captain understood. It was in all their minds: They were not fond of Cabbarus, the directorate, or the Ankaris. They could have asked nothing better than to be rid of them. They were, however, fond of their necks, and asked nothing better than to keep them undamaged.

"We don't meddle in politics," the captain said at last. "This is a political case. So, we don't meddle in it. For the moment. Let's see that paper he was yelling about."

Bracken handed it over.

The captain studied it a moment, then put it at the bottom of the pile of documents on his desk. "Leave him where he is. I'll think about what's best to do. Get back on the streets."

The constables gladly obliged. Ace of Hearts, below, was howling. The captain paid no attention. He had learned, in his career, that justice, blind, was occasionally deaf.

WILGUS AND Bracken went back on their beat. They assured each other that there would, at least, be no more such incidents; one for the day was enough. Continuing their stroll, they were approached by a man with a hat on the side of his head, supporting himself with a walking stick.

The constables' jaws dropped. There was no justice in the world. Having more or less dealt with one hot potato, they were confronted with another. The constables, like nearly everyone else, were devoted readers of *Old Kasperl*. They knew the journalist on sight, they had seen him often on his news-gathering rounds. Wilgus groaned, he did not wish to believe his eyes. Bracken was the first to regain his voice.

"What the devil---" Bracken stared at him. "You've been wanted for months."

"Now I'm found," said Keller. "Gentleman, do your duty. Conduct me, if you please, to the Carolia."

"What?" cried Bracken. "You're out of your wits! Get off the street. Do you want the law on you?"

"I thought I had, accomplished that," said Keller. "Come, sir, don't waste my time or yours."

"He's drunk," Wilgus whispered to his comrade. "Just look at him."

Bracken agreed, adding, "We can't leave him wandering around. He'll get himself in trouble." He glanced at Wilgus, who nodded back. The two men thoroughly understood each other. The idea of arresting Old Kasperl was beyond consideration; they would sooner have thrown their grandmothers into a dungeon.

"We'll let him sleep it off in the station house," Bracken said. "It's the safest place. Then we'll put him back wherever he's been holed up."

For the second time that day, the constables hauled a protesting prisoner to the lockup. Their captain, still wrestling with the problem of Ace of Hearts, agreed that his men had shown wisdom.

"Turn him over to the hangman?" he said. "I'd never sleep again. Didn't he have a couple of youngsters living with him? You've seen them around town, you know the ones I mean. Try to get hold of them. Let them know he's had a few too many and we've got him in--- well, yes, as you might say: protective custody."

KELLER WAS no happier to be in the cell than the distraught figure already there. The journalist sank down in a corner and held his head, which had grown disagreeably light. It was a joke worthy of Old Kasperl. He had gone out to deliver himself into the clutches of his enemies. He had blundered into the hands of friends.

He was beginning to feel horribly ill. The outing had not refreshed but exhausted him.

Keller tried to collect his strength and concentrate on getting himself out of one prison and into another. It was difficult, for his fellow inmate had practically thrown himself on Keller and was babbling his head off.

For a while, Keller paid no attention. The fellow was raving. The poor devil obviously had a terror of confinement and was willing to sell body and soul to be out of it. But he also had something else to sell.

With the man bleating in his ear, Keller could not avoid listening: first with uninterest, then with horror. This maniac was claiming that he could reveal what any number of people had given their lives to keep secret.

"And more--- and more," Ace of Hearts blurted. He had not recognized Keller in the dimness of the cell: Even if he had, in his present state it would have made no difference; he would have thrown himself on anyone's mercy. Ace of Hearts was a cheat, but he was not an evil man; some part of him hated what he was doing. But he had been dealt a bad hand, his life and sanity hung on playing a last trump card: "The queen of Westmark--- I know where she's hiding. These fools won't listen, they won't believe me. You speak up, get me out of here. There's a fortune for us both."

Keller's head spun. He was afraid he might faint. He did not know why the police had not instantly taken their prize to some higher-up. Sooner or later, they would have to. For Mickle, Theo, and all the rest, this man was a walking bomb. He had to be defused. Keller had never contemplated murder in all his life. He contemplated it now. And could not bring himself to do it. Yet the fellow had to be silenced one way or another. If the man was terrified enough to betray his secrets, Keller wondered if he could be terrified into keeping them.

"What fortune?" Keller demanded. "Who from? The directorate?"

"They'll pay--- pay high. We'll go halves."

"Half of nothing?" said Keller. "My dear friend, do you think for a minute the directorate will give you money? Why should they? Once you've told them all this nonsense--- you've delivered your merchandise, you might say--- there's nothing more to be had from you. Pay? It would be cheaper to get rid of you. You understand that, don't you? If you were in their boots, wouldn't you do the same?"

Ace of Hearts did not close his mouth, but no words came out of it. The confidence man had never imagined that possibility. The world had turned upside down. It was his business to cheat others, not theirs to cheat him.

"They'll simply cut your throat," Keller said casually. "Or, if they're in a good frame of mind, toss you into some hole and let you spend your life there--- as long as it lasts."

Ace of Hearts gave a dreadful cry. He clapped his hands to his head. He had been bilked as neatly as any of his clients.

"You're in a fine mess, no matter how you turn," Keller said. "All I can see for you here is to confess it's a cock-and-bull story. The worst they'll do is keep you in jail for



lying to them."

"They have an address," whimpered Ace of Hearts. "If they go there, they'll soon find out I was telling the truth."

"In that case, my friend," said Keller, "you're a bug on a pin. My advice, then: Whatever happens, say nothing at all. Don't breathe a word. Starting now."

Keller let his head drop against the wall. A wave of sickness flooded over him; he hung on, waiting for it to pass. His cellmate had apparently decided to take his advice. At least, the man was quiet. Keller shut his eyes. He put his thoughts on getting from here to the Carolia, but he could not take hold of them.

The cell was freezing cold when he opened his eyes again. He could not guess how much time he had lost by sleeping. He called to his fellow prisoner. The man did not answer. After a few moments, Keller lurched over to the bars and called for the officers.

The captain soon arrived. "Sober at last? You look worse than ever. Here--- what's wrong with you?"

"A passing indisposition," said Keller. "But this gentleman appears to have hanged himself."

Bracken at last found Sparrow. She was on her way home, having left the next issue of *Old Kasperl* with the printer. Seeing the officer, she first thought she was being arrested. Bracken suffered a number of scratches and contusions from the ferocious water rat. She nearly tore out of his grasp before he could make her understand.

They hurried to the Green Market Post. By the time they reached it, Keller had been moved from his cell. He lay on the floor of the precinct room. The captain had rolled up Keller's jacket and put it under the journalist's head.

Sparrow plunged past the officer and threw herself on Keller. His eyes were open, he was able to recognize her.

"What have you done?" Sparrow burst out. "Keller, you're a fool."

"So it would seem." He smiled at her. "My dear water rat---" He raised a hand to her cheek. "My dearest water rat."

He was quiet. Bracken tried to draw her away. Sparrow gave an animal cry.

"Keller! Keller, you can't do this." She clenched her fists as if she meant to pound life back into him. "I love you."

It was the first time Sparrow had ever said that.

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# 19

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**WEASEL HAD** vanished, without a word or a whimper.

One of Ingo's people brought news of Keller within the hour. Mickle barely grasped what the man was saying, and in the moments it took her to recover, the boy was gone. She would have tried to comfort him, though she had no comfort for herself. Her heart was torn as much for Sparrow as for Weasel. One had lost a love she had never admitted; the other, one of his two idols. She stored away her own grief over Keller; tears were commonplace these days, but a luxury for a queen. She did not even dare to let herself rage. It led to mistakes in judgment, and she needed her thoughts clear and cold: ice, not fire. She was uneasy about what might happen to the water rats cut adrift, and sent Mumchance to look for them.

Musket hunched in a corner, his dismay bigger than his body. Count Las Bombas blamed himself: "It was ridiculous. A useless, pointless waste. I should never have let him talk us into it."

"You didn't," Mickle said gently. The count was making a gallant attempt to shift the burden onto himself: a gift she could not accept. "I did. I'll answer for it. That still doesn't help Theo."

"Keller might have been onto something, even so," said Las Bombas after a few moments. "Someone inside the Carolia can do more than anyone outside."

"I'll get in," Mickle said.

"You'll stay out," returned Las Bombas. "All due respect to your genius, dear girl, but your place is here. Someone must be in command in case Theo..." His words trailed off and he spread his empty hands. "I don't have an answer. Except that your getting into the Carolia isn't the right one. Sneak your way in, yes, and you'll end up having to fight your way out."

"Neither sneaking nor fighting," said Mickle. "We do it by law--- or let it seem so."

"Legal rights? Under Cabbarus? They're long gone."

"I mean papers for Theo's release. Forged, of course."

"It's not impossible." Las Bombas frowned. "A simple forgery. But who would deliver them?"

"No, no, that won't answer," Las Bombas hurried on, as Mickle looked at him. "I'm not afraid to try, you understand, if I thought it would work. But don't you see, those papers would have to show his name. We don't know what name he's given--- certainly not his real one. As for tricking me out in officer's uniform, I've been through

that before and lucky to survive."

"We'll find someone else," Mickle said, "from one of Theo's sections. As fast as we can. The longer he's in, the harder it will be to get him out. Forge any name you like. We'll deal with that on the spot. If we get that far, it will be the least of our worries."

"I don't like this 'we' and 'our,' " said Las Bombas. "You said you'd find someone else."

"I will. Whoever it is, I'm still going. There must be some of Theo's people close at hand, too, in case something goes wrong at the last moment."

Las Bombas groaned. "You expect me to sit by while you go off on still another harebrained scheme? Theo would never forgive me."

"It isn't harebrained," insisted Mickle. "As for your sitting by, that's exactly what I expect. Those are my orders to you."

"Well, I can't obey them," Las Bombas cried. "You're asking too much of me. Let one of Theo's men try it? And likely botch the job? I'll forge the papers and deliver them myself."

"Since you volunteer," Mickle said, "I wouldn't think of forbidding you. Start making up the documents, then. You'd better hurry."

"Forgery is an art," Las Bombas answered indignantly. "It can't be rushed."

"In this case, it will have to be. There's something you don't know and aren't supposed to know until the last moment. We attack as soon as we hear that Florian's landed---"

"I'm aware of it," Las Bombas interrupted. "Time's short. But I understand a thing or two about military operations, I've worked it out for myself: We have a week or so."

"The 'or so' is right. Only you'd better change 'week' to 'days.' Two of them."

With that, Mickle left Las Bombas to his work and talked closely to Ingo, relying on him for all the help he could give. Theo had confided the procedures she must use in an emergency, and she set them in motion. The sections were warned; half a dozen of Red Cockade's people were alerted to watch for Las Bombas and follow as he made his way to the Carolia. They would be armed, ready to fight if need be.

Las Bombas had decided against a document of release. He foresaw difficulty from the prison authorities in letting a man go absolutely free. He chose, instead, an order of transfer to the custody of the Ministry of Justice. The count would not try to pass himself off as a military officer. He proposed taking the role of a secret police agent in civilian clothes.

"I think it's best," he told Mickle. "Those devils are expected to be mysterious and closemouthed. The fewer answers I have to give, the better. No matter how they bluster, the military like to steer clear of such fellows, afraid they'll end up on a list. There's your magic word: *list*. It conveys all manner of nastiness. Yes, I should be able to terrify them adequately."

Mickle had given in on one point: She would not enter the Carolia with Las Bombas.

Ingo had reminded her that there were usually knots of people outside, waiting for news of relatives or friends. Mickle reluctantly agreed that she and Red Cockade's force would loiter among them. When Las Bombas came out with his prisoner in charge--- and she would not accept the idea of his failing to do so--- they would have an unobtrusive guard as escort to the pawnshop.

By the time Las Bombas was ready, the afternoon had turned hot and close. The air hung heavily; there could well be a thunderstorm by nightfall. Mickle followed a little distance behind the count, who stepped out as briskly as his bulk allowed. Despite his fears and objections, Las Bombas had begun to relish his new guise: a professional challenge he could not resist. He strode along, looking neither left nor right, with such a bearing that passersby gave way or crossed to the other side.

As they drew nearer to the Carolia, Mickle became aware of a number of idlers who, one after the other, as if by accident, drifted in the same direction. Her eyes briefly met those of a woman trundling a cart. There would be, Mickle suspected, muskets under the mounds of vegetables.

They were a few streets away from the Carolia when the firing began.

IF THE streets and alleys were the city's veins and arteries, the taverns, wine shops, and eating houses were its nerve centers. Together, they made one large nerve. If The Marsh had its toes stepped on, The Shambles winced.

The city had more eyes than a fly, ears sharper than a wolf's. It was a body with a hundred mouths that whispered to each other. Marianstat could inhale news and breathe it from the port to Green Market Square. It was not remarkable that word of Keller's death went through the city like a gasp.

Doing so, however, it changed considerably. The journalist had been shot down in the street, a dozen people had been there to see. He had been arrested by the military and killed while trying to escape. The Ankaris had done it. The police had done it, after finding him hiding in a barrel in a warehouse. All these things happened at different places at the same time. They were all sworn to be true. This allowed great freedom of choice; the tale was adjusted to suit every taste and disposition. Old Kasperl could not have invented anything better.

NO ONE, later, could be certain how it had begun. For there were as many accounts as narrators. Some claimed it really started when a few men in a tavern, talking bitterly of the directorate's latest brutality, took their discussion into the street, where they roundly cursed a couple of passing soldiers. The soldiers, having no idea why they should be abused any more than usual, resented it. A scuffle began: fists, then knives, then muskets.

Others, with as much assurance, told of a handful of townsfolk gathered around one of the notices plastered daily on the walls, grumbling over something which had nothing to do with Keller. People in groups made the Ankaris nervous; they ordered them to

move on. When these orders were met with hard words, and when some of the bystanders made movements which appeared threatening, the Ankaris opened fire.

These accounts had two things in common. They were all wrong. But they were, in another sense, all right. The city had shuddered and heaved its belly. The months of careful planning, the cautious work of the sections, the secrets stifled on the gallows, the lives lost--- these were swept away in the course of an afternoon.

The city had made its own decision.

The city could have been rubbed too raw. It could have choked down too much blood. It could have been the anger of a few hotheads or the blind fury of an animal goaded past bearing. Or it could have been the weather.

Near the Carolia, a wagon had broken down at one of the intersections. A wheel had come off. The driver was at a loss, his load of timber had spilled into the street, blocking the passage of other vehicles.

An officer, leading his platoon back to the Mariana Caserna, halted and ordered the street cleared. A few passersby had come forward to lighten the load by hauling down the rest of the timbers, while the driver unhitched his horse. The urchins, who apparently had lodgings in the crevices between the cobbles, were already scrambling over the disabled wagon as if it had been provided for their amusement. The patrol went on without incident. Some of the ragamuffins felt safe enough to throw stones and jeers after it. A couple perched on the wagon and pointed imaginary muskets, accompanying this with properly warlike noises.

Someone, struck by this sight, jokingly cried out the word *Barricade!*

Most of the crowd laughed. One took it seriously: Weasel.

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## 20

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**FOR SEVERAL** moments after he opened his eyes, Theo could not be certain where he was. A dazzlingly bright blue square floated above and across from him. He understood, concentrating with effort, that it was a window; the dark vertical lines, iron bars. He lay propped in the corner of what could have been a horse stall. It once had been. The Carolia, before its conversion to a prison, had housed a cavalry unit. The ground-level stalls had been made into cells: the doors fitted with grilles, the partitions reinforced. This cell confined about a dozen occupants. Some sat against the wall; others stretched on the floor. A man groaned, a raspy, irritating sound. Theo wished he would stop. It dawned on him that he was doing it.

One of his cellmates squatted beside him. "They gave you a going over, eh?" He spat into the straw on the floor.

It astonished Theo that he felt no pain. When he tried to move, it astonished him how much he hurt. For a while, he was sick at his stomach. His fellow prisoner did not appear concerned; it was expected.

Afterwards, Theo felt a little better. Until his thoughts cleared and he saw Zara on the cobblestones. Then, in another wave of anguish, Mickle. He could not reach her; he was in a separate world the size of a horse stall. They had foreseen the possibility, taken it into account, planned accordingly, each secretly convinced it would never happen. Since it had, he clung to his own certainty: Mickle knew what must be done.

"How long have I been here?"

"What's the difference?" The man shrugged. "Couple of hours, I'd guess."

It had seemed, to Theo, long ago when they singled him out from the handful of others arrested. This alarmed him; he was afraid he might have been recognized. Then he understood that it was only reasonable. The woman he was with carried a pistol and had shot a soldier with it. As her companion, he drew special interest. The questioning had been intense. The prisoner was stubborn and had to be revived. Theo felt that it had lasted for days. It had only been a matter of hours.

He had, at the end, confessed everything.

The papers: false. He grudgingly admitted his name and the girl's. They had been going to meet a friend. At this, he stopped. His interrogators wanted the name, description, the place. He refused. The questioners sighed and began again.

Before losing consciousness, he finally told them all they wanted. They were pleased. They had worked hard; the results were worth the trouble. They ordered him carried to a cell.

They would want him back. Theo knew that. The question was: When? How long before they realized it?

Everything he had told them was a lie.

Next time, he would have to hold out longer to convince them they had reached the core of the truth. They did not trust confessions that came too quickly. He would lie again, they would find that out and start all over. It would delay them and put off the moment when his body must surrender. He had asked his people for eight hours. He remembered the first Red Cockade's pride at having given nine. Theo understood for himself the cost of those added minutes. He would have to give more, for the simple reason that he knew more. He felt that he had only set foot on the first steps of an enormous staircase.

He drowsed a little. When he opened his eyes, he felt that some of his strength had come back. He heard a clatter at the end of the hall. The guard shift was changing. The officers had still not come for him. He was glad. He was also very thirsty. The water bucket was empty. His fellow prisoner told him that the new shift would eventually come to fill it. Theo stood up to ease his cramped legs and aching back.

He looked down the corridor as far as the bars would let him. After a while, he glimpsed a guard trundling a barrow holding a large cask, a dipper hanging on the side. Theo narrowed his eyes and tried to press more of his head through the space between the bars. He forgot his thirst and the clamoring of his body.

The guard halted at the cell. He had picked up the dipper, then let it fall from his hand. Theo, arms stretched through the bars, beckoned to him. The guard stared for a long moment, his mouth agape.

It was Pohn.

The old Dorning constable was at the cell, clasping Theo's hand as if to assure himself it was real.

"Love of heaven, lad--- What's happened?"

Theo motioned for him to be cautious. Pohn kept on stammering. "You? Taken? I didn't know. I just came on duty--- Lad, it's the work they gave me when you sent me to the ministry."

"Thank heaven they did. Pohn, listen---"

"I'd have tried to reach you, I didn't think you'd stayed in the city. Now, here? How long? Do they know who you are?"

"Not yet. I can't let them know, either. Will you help? Can you get me out? Get all of us out?"

"Yes, yes, lad, I'll do my best. But there's not only me"--- Pohn gave him a despairing look--- "there's the guard post to deal with. The yard, the gates--- Yes, I'll work out something. Tonight. Then's your best chance."

"Now," said Theo. "Before they question me again. Unlock the cell. This one, all of



them if there's time. Where can we get weapons? Is there an arms rack? How many on duty outside?"

While Pohn tried to answer Theo's questions, for an instant Theo's mind turned back to a night in Dorning. Pohn had let him escape then. He was doing it once more. They had both followed a long path. Theo wondered if it had been only a great circle.

"Be careful, old friend," Theo warned. "If they find out what you're doing, you know what will happen. I'll lock you in the cell. You can swear we tricked you and you had no hand in this."

"No, lad. I'm too near the end of my road, I won't go the rest of it under Cabbarus." Pohn fumbled with his keys. "I know my way around here better than you do. This time, I stay with you."

Some of the prisoners had begun demanding their water, shouting at Theo to make an end of his jawing with the guard. "Move aside," one of them ordered. "You'll get your share when the rest of us get ours."

Theo turned to them. Pohn flung open the door of the cell.

"Take your choice," Theo said. "Water--- or muskets."

THE FIRING had grown sharper. Las Bombas, forgetting his role as an agent of the secret police, turned around in alarm and hurried to Mickle.

"Bad business of some sort. Stay out of it. Go back."

Mickle, instead, strode past him, pulling the protesting count after her. The vegetable woman made a hasty signal. The supposed idlers, who had deliberately kept a little distance from Mickle, hurried to catch up with her. Some of the passersby began to run.

She could, at first, make no sense of what she saw. A dozen things were happening at once. Some of the prison guards were firing recklessly into the crowd; she heard screams above the shots. The frame of the gallows was aswarm with people hacking at the crosspieces, tearing up the planks. The vegetable seller tipped over her cart and spilled her wares across the cobbles. As Mickle suspected, the cart had been loaded with muskets and sacks of powder and shot. Her escort snatched them up.

"Go there!" Mickle cried, pointing to the angle of the Carolia wall. "Fire on the guards!"

She cast about for a weapon. They had all been taken. The count, bewildered for some moments, suddenly realized what Mickle had already understood. The rioting in the square had only added confusion to the matter. The heart of the action was a band of armed men in the Carolia courtyard, fighting to break free and gain the square.

One of them was Theo.

Mickle's escort poured fire against the company of guards. With this newfound support, the prisoners forced open the gates and ran into the square. Calling Theo's

name, Mickle darted through the crowd, Las Bombas close behind. Theo caught sight of them and ran to join them. Las Bombas was shouting, urging them toward one of the side streets. The crowd had grown larger, swirling around them. The scaffold was in flames.

WEASEL HAD the soul of an artist. His own creations fascinated him.

Having conceived the idea of the barricade, he left the manual labor to others and was content to issue orders and instructions. Since he had been the first to spring forward, and since he gave an impression of confidence and skill, the people in the street accepted his authority and fell to work with a will.

He had become an architect by accident. Only a short while before, Weasel had been looking for a place to hide and weep his heart out.

At word of Keller's death, the ground had opened under Weasel's feet. He ran blindly, trying to outrace his despair. He could not. He carried it with him.

Keller was dead, but it was Keller who saved him at last.

When Weasel's breath gave out and he flung himself into an alley, crouching there, sobbing into his fists, the first reasonable thought came into his mind. Keller would not have approved. Weasel pictured the journalist finding him blubbering. Keller, he could well imagine, would have had a few tart words on the subject. Weasel lifted his head and stopped crying for himself.

His own anguish had driven away every thought of Sparrow, who would be as pained as he was. When he also turned his mind to Theo, his grief turned to rage. They had killed one of his idols, he would not permit them another. Weasel climbed to his feet. He had duties and responsibilities.

The barricade had been a passing interruption.

Weasel had never designed such a structure, but he quickly grasped the essential nature of it. Under his scrutiny and guidance, it rose rapidly. It was almost a conjuring trick. Things that were added to the broken wagon and load of timber appeared out of nowhere: mattresses, chairs and tables, barrels, pieces of old iron. More material lay beneath his feet. What could be a street could also be a wall. He gave orders to pry up the cobblestones.

After a certain point, the barricade had its own life: an enormous creeping plant springing up from a garden bed of cobbles. Weasel merely had to tend it, supervising its growth, allowing it to advance in one place, trimming it back in another.

Weasel recognized that this was only his apprenticeship. He believed he could do still better. He order another barricade started at an angle to the first an running to the opposite street corner.

The sound of volleys from the direction of the Carolia made Weasel prick up his ears. Black smoke drifted over the rooftops. Satisfied that his work would be properly continued, Weasel decided that his presence was required elsewhere.

He set off to take up his next occupation.

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## **ALMA! ALMA!"**

The vegetable seller was shouting at them. She had slung her musket over her shoulder and was pushing her way through the crowd. It was Red Cockade. The woman strode ahead of Mickle and Las Bombas, gesturing for them to follow.

"Get off the streets!" Red Cockade headed for an alley. She glanced back at the crowd. "Fools! What have they done to themselves?"

There was still firing in the streets behind them. Mickle clasped an arm around Theo to keep him from stumbling. He had not yet understood what had happened. They had broken out of the Carolia, fighting their way past the guard post and through the yard. Pohn had fallen under the first volley. Clear of the gates, the other prisoners had scattered. Theo found himself in the midst of a tempest. Mickle answered none of his stammered questions, hurrying to keep up with Red Cockade.

The alley opened onto a wider street. Once away from the Carolia, they stepped suddenly into a different, quieter world. While some of the passersby scurried to reach their houses, others loitered on the pavement or wandered along unconcerned about or unaware of the rioting a few blocks away.

"What's that, for heaven's sake?" Las Bombas, puffing, halted to catch his wind. "Have all the junk dealers set up shop in the middle of the street?"

They had come to Weasel's barricade.

Red Cockade ran to the breastwork and clambered up. Between them, Las Bombas and Mickle hauled Theo over the heap and down the other side.

The barricade had kept growing even after Weasel left. Rows of cobblestones had been laid across the top, with gaps to serve as firing ports. The cart, tipped on its side, had been reinforced with timbers to make a low-ceilinged shelter. Within were several stacks of muskets and a table holding pistols and sabers.

Red Cockade was furious. "Who ordered this?" she called to a man trundling a barrel. He grinned at her. "We follow our own orders here."

Las Bombas glanced around. "Whoever set this up was rather clever about it. Very snug. I couldn't have arranged it better. I see only three fatal errors. They've done it too soon, for one thing."

"That's disaster enough in itself," snapped Red Cockade. "We're not ready, our people can't help them. The fools have taken the bit in their teeth. They should have waited for us to signal the uprising. The directorate won't let a thing like this stand. They'll

send troops to smash it."

"They'll smash it sooner or later," Las Bombas agreed. "But it still could be a nasty aggravation for them. It could block off a good many troops if it were in the right place. Here, it's a waste. That's the other error. If only they'd put it up where it could do some good---"

"It can," Mickle broke in. "We planned to attack the Caserna, didn't we? This is even better. It will keep the city regiment from joining the troops at the palace--- or delay them awhile, at least. Wrong place? I'd say it's just right. The only question is: How long can we hold out?"

"Not long enough," Las Bombas answered gloomily. "That's the third fatal error."

The street had been torn up for a long stretch behind the barricade. Red Cockade picked her way over the broken ground. The door of a wine shop stood open. She motioned for Mickle and Las Bombas to bring Theo inside. The ground floor had been gutted, the counter and most of the tables and chairs hauled to the breastwork. On one of the few remaining benches, two men and a woman sat calmly sharing a bottle. Red Cockade exchanged hasty words with the shop owner. She came back to Theo.

"He'll send word to our section leaders and find out what's happening in the rest of the city. Then we'll get you to a safer place."

While Las Bombas set about dressing Theo's wounds as best he could, Mickle gave him a quick account of what Keller had tried, and failed, to do, and of her own rescue plan.

"That didn't work, either," Mickle said. "It doesn't matter. You're out of the Carolia, that's all I care about."

"None of our plans have worked." Theo smiled bitterly. "We're not leading, we're following."

"In that case," Mickle said, "all we can do is follow as best we can."

More townspeople had gathered at the barricade: some out of idle curiosity, others eager to fight. Mickle pressed them into service. Under her direction, they started another breastwork behind them at the far end of the street, to hinder any attack from the rear. Theo had decided to use the wine shop as a command post until the situation in the rest of Marianstat grew clearer. From what the proprietor had learned, the whole city was on the boil. Other barricades were rising. Theo understood only one thing: He had failed to keep his promise to Florian.

Justin's order, whether he accepted it or not, was meaningless. Beyond anyone's control, the city had risen of its own will. And done it too soon. Marianstat had been impatient. Its impatience would destroy it. By the time Florian attacked, the insurrection would be shattered.

The thunderstorm, brewing since afternoon, suddenly broke. Sheets of rain lashed the city, flooding the gutters. The unpaved ground behind the barricade became a mire. The downpour rattled like musketry, below the cannonade of thunderclaps. This

storm, Theo knew, would pass, but not the one that would follow.

Marianstat had set loose its own whirlwind.

A LITTLE before dawn, the rain slackened and finally stopped. Mickle and her laborers had worked all night, breaking through the walls of the adjoining houses, extending and reinforcing the barricade. On the upper floors, where the windows overlooked the street, she stationed marksmen ready to fire down on any approaching forces.

Red Cockade had been right, as Theo and the others knew. The directorate would not tolerate such an obstacle. The storm had only given the barricade a few hours of respite. At first light, one of the sharpshooters gave a warning whistle.

Mickle ran to join Theo and Las Bombas, already at the breastwork. She made out a party of mounted officers reined up a little distance away. One of them--- she thought it might be Colonel Zeller himself--- appeared annoyed, pointing repeatedly at the ungainly structure. The officers conferred among themselves, then wheeled their horses.

The barricade, now that its defenders were awake, had begun to look like a busy marketplace. Instead of hawking merchandise, some of the townspeople gave out weapons: sabers, axes, knives tied to the end of poles. Firearms, too few to go around, had already been distributed. What remained were some old fowling pieces, several antique pistols, a bell-mouthed musket. The gutted wine shop had been turned into a dressing station, where a half dozen youngsters of the neighborhood tore strips of cloth into bandages.

Red Cockade had sent word to her sections, urging them to join her and bring weapons and ammunition. So far, there had been no sign of them. The townspeople who had managed to arm themselves leaned their musket barrels along the top of the breastwork. Others stood in the clear space behind it, or sat in the doorways of the houses which had become the side walls of the fortress. A few slept or played cards.

The first attack came within the hour. Mickle's judgment had been correct. The barricade was well placed. No one realized it better than Colonel Zeller--- he was, in fact, the officer she had glimpsed a while before. Zeller was furious. The impudent pile of junk could be a serious obstacle to his troops, and he wanted it cleared. Like a splinter under a fingernail, it was to be removed before it caused infection.

A company of infantry came in sight at the end of the street. Their officer ordered the leading ranks to advance and open fire. The musket balls rattled amid the timbers and scraps of old iron. The barricade remained silent.

Having teased the barricade and found it docile, the troops grew scornful. They believed they could simply tear it down or, at worst, carry it at bayonet point. They ventured closer, joking among themselves when they saw the old mattresses and bales of hay. A number of infantrymen ran forward to scale the breastwork.

The barricade roared.

The attackers reeled back. At the blast of fire, the front ranks broke and retreated, dragging their wounded with them. One of the townsmen laughed:

"This barricade has teeth."

A few muskets, flung aside, lay in the street. A couple of the defenders scrambled over the breastwork and seized them. The barricade cheered. The officer cursed at his men and ordered them to another assault.

The Mariana troops showed more respect: They advanced cautiously, firing rapidly as they went. The defenders tried to return the volleys, but this new hail of musketry was killing; three men were struck, those beside them crouched below the ledge of cobblestones.

Only then did Mickle notice that Count Las Bombas had two wine bottles under his arm and that he had wrapped strips of cloth around them. The count struck a match to these makeshift wicks and tossed the bottles over the ledge. At the same instant that Mickle realized what they held, the gunpowder-charged bottles exploded amid the Mariana troops. Theo and a few of the other defenders hurled similar missiles. The shock of the bursting bombs, the sharp fragments of shattered glass that sprayed among the attackers halted them long enough for the barricade to renew its firing. Smoke drifted over the street.

There was a lull in the firing. The Mariana troops had withdrawn out of range, standing to arms along the walls of the further buildings.

Mickle had taken a musket from the hands of a dead townsman. She clambered up beside Theo, who had crawled to the rim of the breastwork and was intently watching the activity at the end of the street. Her eyes followed his gaze. Then he turned, glancing at her and at Red Cockade. They had all seen the same thing: a death warrant for the barricade.

A cannon had arrived.

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**THE GUN** crew had already unhitched the cannon from its horse-drawn limber and were manhandling the piece into position. Mickle's sharpshooters at the windows fired rapidly, trying to keep the gunners at a distance. Despite this, the cannon was hauled forward little by little.

The eye of the cannon studied the barricade with an unhurried, appraising glance. The gunnery sergeant gave the order to fire. There was a shattering explosion, the eye burst suddenly into flame. The cannonball plowed into the mattresses and hay bales. The barricade gasped and shuddered. Some of the cobblestones were jarred loose, but the breastwork held.

The gunners, like physicians, were merely probing and palpating. Finding the belly in good health, they sighted a little higher. The next shot struck the crest. Cobbles and bits of iron flew in all directions, leaving a jagged breach.

The defenders hastily piled rubble into the gap. The firing from the windows had slackened, the marksmen being forced to hoard their ammunition. The cannon had found a weak point and would return to it. Meantime, it wished to probe another. The gunners now aimed at the corners of the building, as if to smash the upright posts of a door, to break it from its hinges before assaulting the door itself. The barricade would thus be cut adrift. It could be taken almost at leisure.

After each salvo, the cannon moved a little closer. Behind it, Zeller's infantrymen formed, ready to make their charge.

Theo scrambled down from the breastwork, pulling Mickle with him. "Go back to Ingo while you can. Take the count with you." He turned to Red Cockade, ordering her to gather those who had muskets and ammunition to fall back on The Shambles. With its maze of streets and rabbit warren of buildings, the quarter could be defended house by house.

"Do you think they'll listen to me?" Red Cockade answered. "Or you?"

"They seem determined to get their heads blown off," said Las Bombas. "I see no reason for us to do likewise. Noble effort, highly praiseworthy. The fact is, my boy, we're not only outnumbered, we're outgunned. Discussions end when artillery appears. Which it has done, as you may have noticed."

"There's one chance."

"Exactly," said Las Bombas. "A hasty, undignified retreat."

"No," said Theo. "We can put the cannon out of action. Spike it. Blow it up. Do you



have any more of those bottles of gunpowder?"

"All gone," said Las Bombas. "Well, yes, this one's left. I kept it in case we needed it."

"We need it now." Theo snatched the makeshift bomb. With Mickle and the count shouting at him to come back, he ran to the smaller breastwork at the rear, scrambled over, and raced to the street corner. He picked his way through an alley, circling around one block and down another, to find a passage that would lead him to the Mariana position.

The stench of gunpowder was in his nostrils. The cannon fired again, he heard an answering volley from the barricade. Legs pumping, he set all his mind and strength on reaching the gun before it could give the barricade its death blow. He had put everything else out of his thoughts: Florian, the section leaders, the failed plans; even Mickle was only vaguely remembered, as if they had been together in some other, distant place long ago.

Nerves drawn, all his senses sharp as an animal's, he was flooded half with terror, half with a grotesque joy: the one, choking him; the other, spurring him on. In those moments, he became the one thing he had tried to escape. He was Kestrel again, and insanely happy. He was going to kill a cannon.

There was some kind of commotion. He first heard it only dimly. The musket fire had sharpened suddenly. Shouts came from the direction of the Mariana position. He doubled his pace, afraid the troops were storming the barricade. He swung around another corner and burst into the street. The gunners were struggling to haul their cannon around. The directorate troops had fallen back from the barricade. Mounted men plunged their horses into the infantry ranks. The riders, screaming like maniacs, fired from their saddles or, sabers drawn, slashed at the Mariana troops.

Justin's partisans were in Marianstat.

The attackers had become the defenders, fighting to disengage from this ferocious onslaught. They broke ranks and fell back. Theo ran on, through the knots of hard-pressed troops, still seeking out the cannon. A horse reared in front of him.

The rider was Justin.

Theo cried out to him. Justin sprang from the saddle. His violet eyes blazed. For the instant, at sight of Theo, he seemed to choke on his own fury.

"You had my message." Justin seized him by the shirtfront. "You were ordered to turn over your command."

Theo stared. Justin was beside himself with rage, the scar had turned livid, twitching with a life of its own. Justin looked ready to throttle him. Theo burst out laughing.

"Bloody fool!" Justin flung him aside. "Bloody traitor! You'll be shot for this."

"You're not in command, Justin. Neither am I. Don't you see? It's out of our hands. A marvelous joke. Not you. Not Florian. The people are in command. They've decided to get themselves killed. They won't obey your orders, mine, or anyone's." He found the look of bewilderment on Justin's face inexpressibly comic. He laughed until tears

came to his eyes.

"You've gone mad. Get out. Go to the devil." Justin spun away. The Mariana troops, after the first shock of the partisans' assault, had regrouped, their officer shouting and beating them into some semblance of a formation. Colonel Zeller himself had ridden up with his aides.

Theo had lost sight of the cannon during the fray. The gunners had hauled it back and turned it not against the barricade, but the charging partisans. The directorate troops had gathered strength to counterattack.

The first wave of Justin's cavalry, which had ridden recklessly against the Mariana troops, sabers drawn, cutting down the stragglers, now found themselves hedged about by directorate soldiers, their mounts rearing frantically to escape the thrust of bayonets.

The defenders of the barricade streamed over the breastwork, racing to the aid of the partisans, who had begun to waver under the assault. Justin had remounted, but his horse had been shot from under him. Theo caught sight of him in the press of the counterattack. Justin had drawn his saber, slashing wildly at soldiers, giving ground under the onslaught of their bayonets. The cannoneers fired again, the ball tore a path through the crowd pouring from the barricade. Theo glimpsed Red Cockade, still on her feet. The people of the barricade swarmed around the gun, clubbing musket butts against the gunners.

Through the smoke, Theo saw Justin free of his attackers. Saber shattered, he threw it aside and cast about for another weapon. Justin stumbled, sprawled on the cobbles. He heaved himself up to one knee, turned, and sighted Theo, the violet eyes burning with rage. He was bleeding heavily, the pale yellow hair matted, streaked with red.

Theo's head reeled. The street lurched before his eyes. For that instant, he was in the square at Nierkeeping with Justin screaming at him. This time he did not hesitate. His body seemed no longer his own. His hands--- did they belong to him or another?--- had already set the match to the object they carried. The makeshift fuse was alight. He flung the bottle and its flaming rags with all his strength to the cobbles at the feet of Justin's assailants.

The flash blinded him. He was not aware of the explosion. The soldiers tumbled back. He ran to Justin and seized him under the arms. Suns were still bursting in Theo's eyes as he tried to lift Justin to his feet.

Someone had run up beside him. Theo turned and stared dumbly. It was Mickle.

"Get him away," Mickle cried. "Into the alley. Hurry. Zeller has reinforcements."

Justin looked at them like a puzzled child. His jacket front, Theo realized, was sopping wet, soaked through with blood. Mickle was furiously ordering Theo to move. Between them, they dragged Justin to the alley. He had not taken his eyes off Theo and still stared at him even as Mickle propped him against the side of the building.

"Not you. Not Florian," Justin whispered. "I'd have given them a republic."

"They'll have one." Theo knelt beside him. "Believe that."

"Yes." He gave Theo his familiar, boyish grin. "I'm right, you know."

"Stay quiet, Justin. There's no time for any of that." Mickle had torn open his shirt and was trying to staunch the blood. She turned to Theo. "Can we take him to Ingo?"

"Let him be." Theo stood up. "He's dead. We saved his life once. I would have done it again. It doesn't matter now."

For how long, he thought, had he been haunted by Justin but never forgiven by him? How much of what he had done, in the war, after it, even today, had been because of Justin? It was over, ended once and for all. He knew that and suddenly knew something else:

Justin had died, and he still was not free of him.

There was firing from the direction of the barricade. Mickle was pulling him away. He stumbled after her. Horsemen had clattered into the mouth of the alley. They were not Justin's people. He saw Zeller, two other officers, and some of the Mariana infantry.

The soldiers were upon them before they could turn back. They seized Theo and flung him against a wall. Zeller had dismounted. He strode up to Mickle, whose arms had been pinned by the troopers.

"This one's a woman, Colonel."

"Those tiger cats are worse than the men." Zeller gripped Mickle's face in his fingers and forced her head up.

"Shoot them, sir?"

"Any that you find." Zeller had his standing orders, issued by Cabbarus himself. He had never expected to be in the position of carrying them out. "But not these two. Take them to the Juliana."

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## 23

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**SKEIT HAD** a nose. Although lumpy and pudgy, like the little man himself, it was extremely sensitive. It seldom failed him. These past few months, it was Skeit who had failed his nose. He had lost time by assuming the queen and her consuls had fled the city: Cold reason told him this would have been their most logical course. He should have paid more attention to his nose, which told him never to accept the obvious. He had made a mistake by not heeding his finely tuned appendage. Skeit believed in burying his mistakes or, at least, in not dwelling on them. Making up for lost time, he began sniffing his way through Marianstat. He believed he was at last on the right trail.

He was, nevertheless, more uncomfortable than satisfied. Cabbarus had been furious at him for producing such little results over so long a time. If it turned out that the queen had never left Marianstat, and Skeit had not discovered this until now, he would be in an embarrassing predicament. His competence could be brought into question and so could his neck. Of course, he could protect himself if worse came to worst.

Worse had come to worst--- or soon would, according to his nose.

It had begun detecting two unpleasant aromas. He was familiar with both of them. The combination alarmed him.

He smelled gunpowder and blood.

These disagreeable scents reached him in The Marsh. Skeit was sitting in the corner of a tavern, pondering how best to follow his new line of investigation. In his pocket was an edition of *Old Kasperl*. He had no difficulty finding it; copies floated all over the city, passed from hand to hand. The journal set him on a new train of thought.

He decided that if anyone could lead him through this impassable thicket of conspiracy, it would be Old Kasperl himself. Until now, he had not concerned himself with the journalist's whereabouts; the impudent scrivener had seemed of no consequence. But Keller, Skeit's nose advised him, might well be the key. Skeit would lay hands on that key, and turn and twist it until something opened.

Skeit called for a glass of wine and congratulated himself with it. He had barely finished when the news spread through the tavern: Keller was dead.

Skeit was indignant. He cursed the scrivener as if the wretch had done it to spite him. He stamped out of the tavern and started making his way to the Juliana. He would report this event to Cabbarus. Skeit could claim that he had maneuvered it himself and gain some kind of credit.

As he went briskly through the streets, he heard more and more gossip about some

sort of riot in Carolia Square.

He reconsidered and headed in the opposite direction, deciding to keep well away from the Juliana.

Whatever trouble was brewing, he did not wish to be in the palace when the director found out. Cabbarus had a habit of blaming upsetting news on whomever was closest to hand.

In any case, Skeit was certainly not going to the Carolia. A mob was a dangerous beast: uncontrollable, unpredictable. Amateurs always caused the worst messes.

He went, instead, to a lodging house deep in The Marsh. Only his most trusted informants knew of it. He climbed the rickety stairs to his small, tidy chambers. There, he flung himself into a chair, put up his feet, and waited patiently to receive the messages that would surely arrive.

By nightfall, as the reports accumulated, he pieced together what was happening throughout the city. By then, his nerves had begun quivering as alarmingly as his nostrils. He detected serious trouble.

It was only in the early morning, after a sleepless night, that one of his hirelings brought a message which made Skeit jump to his feet, pull on his cloak and hat, and set out for the Juliana as fast as he could.

He cursed the rain of the night before. Skeit had devised his own private signal system of lanterns, beacons, and flashing mirrors. It brought him news much more quickly than the directorate's methods. Had it not been for the storm, he would have received word long before. He was, even so, a few hours ahead of the directorate, and he would make the most of them.

People were already milling around Great Augustine Square. He passed through the palace gates unchallenged. Skeit was one of the few who were granted immediate audience with Cabbarus, who customarily received his employee in a chamber of the Old Juliana. Skeit had written a note to be taken instantly to Cabbarus. That morning, despite his privilege and the nature of his message, the little man was kept waiting for what seemed an eternity, fuming all the while over the delay.

At the moment, Skeit was the only one in the Juliana who knew: Florian and his troops were in Westmark.

Skeit had no intention of telling Cabbarus.

CABBARUS WAS hungry. It was a hunger no food could satisfy. In the hard-set mouth of the director was the taste of old ashes. It was, Cabbarus realized, the taste of ingratitude.

He had asked nothing more than to serve his country to the fullest measure of his strength and will. During the first months of his directorate, he had been forced, regrettably, to dispose of certain officers and state ministers who sapped that strength and will. He was appalled at how many, but he had set about it with a resolute though

heavy heart.

Even now he suspected weakness and selfishness among members of his highest councils. He was keeping his eye on them; and the eye of Cabbarus was penetrating, steady, and righteously implacable.

This eye was now turned on the note which the duty officer personally carried to the director in his apartments. Cabbarus studied it for many long moments, then issued instructions. When the door closed behind the officer, Cabbarus put a corner of the paper into the flame of the candle on his writing desk. As the note flared, he dropped it into an empty cup, waited until the paper entirely burned, then stirred the ashes with the tip of a letter opener. Soon after, the officer returned to hand over the item which Cabbarus required.

The director's escort of Ankaris conducted him to the Old Juliana. They halted before a door in the cellar of this ancient wing of the palace buildings and stationed themselves in the corridor after Cabbarus entered.

The room had, long ago, been a torture chamber. Cabbarus felt comfortable there, although the room had not been furnished with an eye to comfort. The director had used it on many occasions in the days when he had been chief minister to King Augustine. He continued to receive certain individuals there, who came willingly or otherwise. The room offered the benefit of privacy for all concerned.

The director sat behind his table, composing his thoughts. He had, of late, felt as if he were pacing through long and empty corridors. He had made every sacrifice for the sake of his country and his people; he had offered wisdom, guidance, and, when necessary, firm correction. If they had not accepted it in the spirit of devotion in which it was given, he could nevertheless forgive them. They had been kept from it by a handful of malicious troublemakers. He also understood that even those closest to him could not comprehend the breadth of his vision. He was alone, bearing an awesome responsibility. He accepted it humbly. It was the nature of power to demand both sacrifice and solitude: That was its burden and its grandeur.

A guard ushered in his visitor. Cabbarus fixed an eye on the little man. Skeit, in turn, gave back a glance which Cabbarus found nothing short of insolent.

"Your message," Cabbarus said icily, "is not comprehensible to me. What do you mean by it?"

"All respect, sir, but I think you must have comprehended it well enough. I'm here. You're here. And it"--- Skeit nodded toward the leather bag on the table"--- why, it's here too. Yes, we understand each other, sir, as we've always done."

Customarily, Skeit remained on his feet during these meetings with his employer. Now he pulled up a chair and, uninvited, sat down and crossed one stubby leg over the other.

"Now, sir," he went on briskly, "if it's all the same to you, let's have done with our business and I'll be on my way."

"Your decision comes suddenly."

"These are troubled times, sir," replied Skeit. "We have to take our opportunities as they come. Seize the day, as the saying goes. We all need a little breather, a little holiday as the occasion presents itself. We're much the better for it afterward."

"You ask a great deal of money for, as you call it, a little holiday."

"Not really, sir. Not when you study it out. Look on it as cash in advance, credit on account."

Cabbarus glared at him. "You expect still more."

"That's as may be." Skeit shrugged. Though he could not be certain that the ship of Cabbarus was sinking, his nose told him that the vessel had sprung serious leaks. If Cabbarus managed to keep his power, Skeit would be able to demand further sums. If not, Skeit would have lined his pockets enough to keep himself handsomely until he found others who needed his services. "The future, sir--- it's something none of us can tell."

There was a knock on the door. Cabbarus started angrily. He had forbidden any interruption. He strode over, unbolted the door, and opened it partway. The duty officer murmured hastily. Cabbarus gave an equally hasty answer. He returned to his visitor. He did not sit down.

"Leave here at once," Cabbarus ordered. His mind was already moving quickly over new possibilities. He sensed them instantly, he would analyze them later. Once, he had believed it was a gift, this ability to make excellent use of unforeseen circumstances. He had since come to understand what it truly was: destiny. "A matter of utmost importance."

"So is mine, sir. All the more reason to have done with it."

"Get out," said Cabbarus. "What makes you think I shall give you so much as a penny?"

"For one thing, you've brought it," said Skeit. "For another, I think you trust me to keep my mouth shut. Indeed, sir, you'll have to trust me, won't you? For still another, you won't have me arrested or dispatched out of hand. I'll have my say before that if you try.

"And for yet another"--- Skeit counted on his plump fingers--- "you know I'm not bluffing. If I were dealing with someone else, I'd turn them in for--- you'll forgive the term, sir--- for common thievery."

"You are beneath contempt. A vile accusation---"

"But we're not dealing with common thievery. Indeed, sir, uncommon and very neatly done. A brilliant job of work. You've covered your tracks marvelously. I'd defy anyone to sniff them out. Anyone, that is, but me. It's the nose, you see.

"As your personal investigator, I've had the run of the palace. The state offices. I've had the privilege of following my nose into all manner of holes and corners. Treasury

records, forged receipts, falsified accounts, secret funds. I made my own private investigation, sir. In my profession, we all do it. For our own protection. We must, you understand that. Otherwise, we'd be at anyone's mercy, to be tossed aside, cut adrift once we'd served our purpose. It's a hard life, sir, pitifully hard.

"This is my nest egg, sir. You have your own--- indeed, larger than mine. As I reckon it, you've been storing up a tidy sum with the Ankar Sultanate. Drained from state funds, naturally. You've borrowed a bit of money from the Sultanate, as well, in the name of the directorate. Why, sir, you've piled up such a debt, with one thing and another, the Sultanate might as well own the whole country, lock, stock, and barrel. I daresay the Sultan of Ankar has more voice in your council than any of your ministers: Who pays the piper calls the tune.

"If your military found out, they'd shoot you for high treason. If your merchant friends found out, they'd hang you for barefaced robbery.

"But that's your concern, not mine. I don't judge one way or another. Now, sir, I'd like to be on my way. If that's agreeable to you, the money---"

Cabbarus, whose face had gone livid, seized the bag from the table and threw it on the floor. Gold coins spilled across the flagstones.

"Take it," said Cabbarus in a terrible whisper. "Grovel for it."

"I'm not proud, sir." Skeit shrugged and knelt to retrieve the coins. "We're none of us above a little groveling, if that's what's called for."

Cabbarus did not reply. He stepped to his table, picked up one of the heavy candlesticks and, unhesitating, brought it down with all his strength on Skeit's head. The pudgy man gave a whimper that was half a sigh and sprawled over the coins.

Hearing a rap at the door, Cabbarus flung the sack into a corner and kicked the loose gold pieces out of sight. He dragged the dumpy body to a side table and rolled it under. The Ankaris would deal with it later. They would not question, but accept it as a necessity of state.

Cabbarus went back to his table. He clasped his hands and composed his features. He had, he knew, acted decisively and properly. He felt no satisfaction, only a deep sense of disappointment. He was a victim of ingratitude.

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## 24

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**THE LAST** of Theo's ghosts had come back. The wheel had turned full circle and, in its final turn, would crush him and Mickle. They had both, long ago, stood in this same room, facing this same man who sat silently watching them.

The sight of Cabbarus had terrified him then. Now Theo studied him coldly, even with curiosity. The man had changed, at least in appearance: The features had coarsened; the lean face had gained flesh. Only his eyes were the same; and as Cabbarus turned these first on Mickle and then on him, Theo felt, for an instant, the old terror like a lump of ice in his throat. It passed. To come face to face with the man whose life he had sworn to take and to find himself instead at the end of his own life only filled him with a vague and distant regret. The only grief he felt was at being parted from Mickle; and at somehow having caught her up in his own fate. He could accept his own death, but not hers.

Zeller's men had tied his hands in front of him and had done likewise to Mickle. Theo calculated the chances of throwing himself at the throat of Cabbarus and killing him before the Ankaris intervened. It would still not help Mickle. As for Cabbarus, the man's life or death was a detail. The wheel would turn for Cabbarus, too. He would be destroyed: if not now, one day. If not by Theo, by another. Theo believed this past any doubt. Nevertheless, he determined that, when they came to kill him, he would not let them do it easily.

He glanced at Mickle, hoping to signal his thoughts to her. She, too, had once been terrified; her memories of Cabbarus had nearly shattered her mind. He saw, now, that she stood calm and self-contained, looking squarely at the man who styled himself director of Westmark.

"You have blood on your hands, Cabbarus."

Theo took a moment to realize that she was coldly stating a fact. There was a splash of red across the director's fingers. Cabbarus took a handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed at the stain.

"A small accident." Cabbarus threw the handkerchief aside. "Of no consequence, Your Majesty."

"Majesty?" Mickle half smiled. "I had the impression that the monarchy no longer exists."

"That is correct," replied Cabbarus, "but only in a narrow sense. The monarchy shall exist as long as it is embodied in you. I have been honored to serve Westmark as its director. But you, Your Majesty, remain its queen."

Theo frowned. He could not understand the purpose behind the words. This attitude of Cabbarus surprised him even more than finding himself and Mickle still alive. That morning, when Zeller's men had taken them, Theo expected to be shot out of hand. Even when he and Mickle had been led to the Juliana and held some while in the guardroom, Theo assumed that it had been only to give Cabbarus the satisfaction of personally pronouncing their death sentence.

"Queen of Westmark?" Mickle said. "If that's the case, the queen commands Director Cabbarus to go to the devil."

Cabbarus gave her a wounded look. "Your Majesty, we are not enemies."

"I know you're a murderer," Mickle said. "I never believed you were an imbecile. If you call yourself a friend---"

"No, we are not friends," said Cabbarus. "I will not insult your intelligence by suggesting it. I tell you frankly that since I was chosen to be director it has been my resolve fo make you and your consuls pay the extreme penalty for the harm done to this unhappy country.

"And this I will do. I will not hesitate if I judge it to be in the best interests of Westmark. But I will do it regretfully. We are not friends, but our goals are the same."

Theo was about to give a furious reply. Mickle signaled him to let Cabbarus go on. She herself was surprised and puzzled.

"We both desire peace," Cabbarus went on. "Is this not true? We both desire an end to this terrible bloodshed. You and your consuls have been responsible for it, not I. You chose to resist, to breed dissension, to set yourselves against the order I worked unselfishly to establish. You began this frightful bloodletting, not I. The directorate merely protected itself, as was its duty. Would you not have done the same? But I am willing to put that aside. We can attain our goals, but we can only attain them together.

"Our country is being torn apart. I am quite aware that our city is in turmoil. I am quite aware, too, that a few reckless individuals--- you included--- have conspired against their government. They will not succeed."

Cabbarus turned his eyes on Theo. "I know that one of your fellow consuls and a small band of cutthroats are attempting to enter the city. They shall be dealt with, and so shall every other traitor. If that is what must be done.

"However, it need not follow that course. The dissensions and hatred that have brought only grief to the country are not necessary. They can be ended."

"Yes," Theo flung back, "when the directorate is brought down, and you along with it."

"You misunderstand your position." Cabbarus smiled faintly. "You forget which of us is the prisoner here. In any case, it is not up to you to accept or refuse what I offer. The choice is the queen's."

"Is it?" said Mickle. "I don't see that you've given me any choice at all."

"On the one hand, your death and that of your consort, and the destruction of your followers. On the other, an opportunity to bring the peace we both so greatly desire."

"If you're asking us to surrender---" Mickle began.

"No," said Cabbarus. "I ask you to return to the throne of Westmark.

"Call upon your people to join with you in restoring order. As queen, you are above all factions. You alone can bring unity to this troubled country. If uprisings continue, the directorate shall put them down mercilessly. We shall crush them, no matter what the cost in blood, no matter what the cost in civil war. Your Majesty can spare your people this suffering."

"Don't listen to him," cried Theo. "It's a trap."

"No," said Cabbarus, "it is simple statesmanship."

Theo had expected Mickle to be as outraged as he was. Instead, she was silent and thoughtful.

"I will not offer this opportunity again," said Cabbarus. "You must decide now."

"If I'm to be queen," said Mickle, "what about the directorate? And you?"

"The directorate, under my leadership, will continue to exercise power. If it suits you to call the directorate by some other name, I have no objection. Your life shall be your own, you shall be permitted to marry"--- he glanced at Theo--- "and your consort shall occupy the throne with you. As for the treason of your accomplices, I am prepared to overlook it. Those are my conditions. Accept them now or not at all."

"I have conditions of my own," said Mickle. "First, Theo is to be released. Immediately. I'll stay here, but you'll set him free this moment---"

There was an explosion from somewhere in the direction of the New Juliana. Cabbarus blanched, but not at the sound.

His eyes were fixed on a corner of the chamber, his face was horror stricken.

Theo spun around. A short, dumpy figure had staggered from the shadows. Theo could barely recognize Skeit. The man's face was a crimson mask.

Cabbarus jumped to his feet. Skeit, hands outstretched, had stumbled forward. Cabbarus stood frozen. The little man dropped to one knee. His eyes had begun to glaze. In one last motion, at the end of his strength, he pulled a dagger from his boot.

The blade sped through the air. Cabbarus shrieked and fell back into his chair, his eyes open wide, staring at the hilt of the dagger in his breast. Skeit toppled and lay motionless.

The Ankaris, hearing the death-cry of Cabbarus, pounded at the door. Theo sprang to the body. Despite the cords at his wrists, he gripped the dagger and pulled it out. He slashed Mickle's bonds. She, in turn, severed Theo's. The pounding rose to a battering.

Theo cast about for any means of barricading the door. "We must keep them out as long as we can. They'll kill us on the spot if they get through."

"Not if we aren't here." Mickle ran to a corner of the chamber. "Come. Help me."

She had knelt on the flagstones. Theo hurried to her side. Mickle was struggling with a heavy wooden slab. She looked up at him. "You couldn't have forgotten. I certainly haven't."

Theo suddenly understood what she was doing, what he had been too stunned to realize before. With her, he bent all his strength to heave up the planking. Behind him, the door had begun to splinter.

Mickle grimaced. "I ordered this covered up long ago. I never wanted to see it again. They've done it--- and done it too well. Here, try to move this side."

Theo heaved with all his might. The boards broke free. Below was the gaping mouth of a deep well. Mickle's face paled. Her own nightmares, Theo knew, had begun to stir. Here, Cabbarus once tried to send a child princess to her death.

"It leads to the river," Mickle said, "as I have good cause to remember. I lived through it before. Now"--- she glanced at the chamber door lurching open--- "I'll take my chances again with the Vespera--- if you'll be with me."

"Yes. Always."

Mickle turned and lowered herself into the mouth of the well. She clung for an instant to the rim, then let herself drop into the darkness below. Theo plunged after her.

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**NEWS OF** the barricade, like news of Old Kasperl's death, had spread quickly and changed at every telling. It was as if the cannon fire had rung some huge bell; but the echoes, instead of fading, grew louder and the barricade grew bigger. By morning, gossip had it stretching for three blocks. Within the hour, as word passed along, it became six blocks, twenty feet high.

Weasel was one of the few people in Marianstat who had not heard of the huge barricade. He had learned of Theo's escape from the Carolia and that was all he cared about. He was too busy to listen to rumors.

When the thunderstorm broke, he was hurrying across Fish Market Square. He caught sight of Sparrow, clothes soaked, hair a mess. Sparrow had put her grief in storage. She was in a cold rage. Sparrow wanted a pistol.

"You come with me," said Weasel. "We'll find you something."

"Who's 'we'?"

"My Irregulars. I'm captain." Until now, he had said nothing of this to Sparrow: a military secret he preferred keeping to himself. "I'll let you join--- if you promise to follow my orders."

"What are you going to do?"

As a field commander, Weasel was not inclined to share his strategy with subordinates. He only answered, "Make trouble."

During the night, Weasel rallied his army. By morning, several dozen ragamuffins had gathered in an empty warehouse near the port. There, Weasel held his council of war and issued weapons. For some months, he had been stocking his arsenal. It now held a store of crowbars, rakes, scythes, and other homely objects that could be made to look as ferocious as possible. He also had, at latest count, approximately two pistols. He distributed one to his lieutenant, a redheaded scarecrow of a youth, training to be a robber and with all the ingenuity of an alley cat. The other he gave to Sparrow. Weasel could afford to be generous. He had his own weapon, covered with a tarpaulin and cradled in a wheelbarrow.

Weasel dispatched some of his units to various quarters of the city. With Sparrow and his elite corps of three bodyguards, he trundled his wheelbarrow to Great Augustine Square. A loose crowd had already gathered near the Juliana, angry but uncertain and still keeping a good distance from the Ankaris on duty at the gates. Weasel had not foreseen this. It troubled him. If the crowd grew larger, troops would be sent to break it up. He must act immediately.

"Get those guards out of the way," he ordered Sparrow and his corps of urchins.

Sparrow nodded and felt for the pistol under her shawl. "I'll deal with them. Give me the powder and shot."

Weasel looked at her as if Sparrow had asked for the moon. "What powder and shot? There isn't any. That is, none to spare."

"You nit! You fool!" Sparrow shook him furiously. "What do you expect me to do, then?"

"That's up to you." Weasel had discovered the secret of high military command: Give orders and let the junior officers try to make sense of them.

Suggesting that her brother was a certifiable idiot, Sparrow and the urchins trotted along the far side of the square, conferring as they went. Weasel trundled his barrow toward the palace from the other side. Sparrow by now had reached the gates. Weasel smiled with satisfaction. She had taken out the pistol and was showing it to the guards. From Sparrow's gestures and the alarmed faces of the Ankaris, Weasel guessed that his sister was offering some sort of plausibly urgent cock-and-bull story: that she had found a cache of weapons; that a furious mob, armed to the teeth, was on its way around the corner. Sparrow pointed and beckoned frantically. Whatever tale she had told, or whatever the Ankaris had understood, they hesitated a moment, then started to follow her.

Weasel seized his chance. Having practiced and experimented, he knew nearly to the second how long it would take the fuse to reach the keg of nails and gunpowder in the wheelbarrow.

Pushing the barrow as fast as he could, Weasel halted only when he was practically at the gates. He lit his fuse, gave the barrow a last shove, and scurried away.

One of the Ankaris, turning back a moment to keep an eye on his guard post, saw the sputtering fuse and the fleeing Weasel all in a glance. He leveled his musket and fired instantly, then raced to pull the fuse from the keg. He reached it too late. Keg and barrow went up with a roar. Fragments of masonry showered from the Juliana wall, the gates lurched free of their hinges.

Weasel did not know this. He was lying, a ragged heap, on the cobblestones.

THE BARRICADE, meanwhile, had turned into a magnet.

It drew people from all quarters of the city. Since its location shifted with each account, many never reached it. It was reported as being at the university at the same time it was reported at Great Augustine Square, in The Marsh, or across the Vespera Bridge. The ungainly structure had the ability to set itself up wherever the teller wanted it to be.

A tailor was being shaved that morning. The barber, proud of being well informed, even if he had to invent the details himself, was briskly scraping away at his client's

chin, lathering him with soap and gossip. The tailor listened for a few minutes. He had never dared join any of the armed sections, although he had heard whispers of them. In fact, he disapproved. He was privately outraged by Cabbarus and the directorate, but he constantly told his wife that sooner or later it would come right; it was not their business to meddle.

The more the barber rattled on, however, the more the tailor itched, turned restless, and all manner of bold notions churned in his head. Finally, at risk of having his nose shortened, he jumped out of the chair, his face half-lathered, the cloth still tied around his neck, and started into the street.

The astonished barber, basin in one hand, razor in the other, flapped after him, calling for him to come back. The tailor halted and turned. He went and seized the razor, the only weapon he could think of, and left the barber sputtering in the doorway. Later, to his own amazement and confusion, he found himself at the head of a band of townsmen on the way to Great Augustine Square, brandishing his razor as if it were a saber.

ABOUT THE same time, a dockhand, sleeping late, was roused by his wife. The news woke him up and stunned him at the same time. He belonged to a section called Equality, but no call to arms had reached him. He pulled on his clothes, rummaged out the pistol from the straw of the mattress, his wife urging him all the while to at least eat his breakfast. He did not take the time, but ran through The Marsh, rallying his comrades. They were part of the force that had been assigned to attack the Juliana. Lacking orders to the contrary, in fact having no orders at all, they headed for the palace. They did not reach it. They came upon a hastily raised junk pile, a poor imitation of Weasel's now legendary structure. The defenders were desperately hard pressed, getting themselves rapidly killed by a detachment of Ankaris. The dockhand and his friends threw themselves into the fray. It was afternoon by the time they got to the square, the dockhand still without breakfast.

JUSTITIA, LIBERATION, and Clarion never saw each other again.

Justitia was fighting for his life, and he had lost his spectacles. He had been overjoyed when Red Cockade's message came. He understood that all their careful planning had been blown to bits. It made no difference to Justitia, he had been chewing on the gristle of his impatience for months; he was eager for action, whatever the circumstances. He stuck a pistol in his belt and clattered down from his attic rooms. He sent orders for his section to arm themselves and join him at the barricade. Justitia was in a great state of excitement. He felt as if he had been invited to a party.

Face flushed, brow glistening, Justitia was halted by a street patrol before he was out of the university quarter. By good luck, he had never been stopped and asked for papers. By ill luck, this time he was questioned closely; the soldiers were edgy over the riots which had been breaking out in the city. Justitia, in a fury of impatience at

being delayed, flung himself free of his questioners. Two seized him; in the scuffle, Justitia's spectacles shattered. He fought loose of his opponents and drew his pistol. His shot missed; he plunged half-blind down the street, groping his way along the sides of the houses. The patrol had ample time to aim and fire.

LIBERATION WAS alarmed by the word from Red Cockade. He understood immediately that the uprisings had begun too soon; it would be impossible to hold the city until Florian arrived. For a moment, he hesitated. If he sent in his people now, it would be a waste; he wondered whether he should hold back, keep his force intact to support Florian. Then he shrugged. Events had gone beyond him. He decided to join Red Cockade.

He called his section together, and they set off at a run. Almost at the barricade, they were beset by some of Zeller's troops. The two sides blazed away at each other in the narrow street. Liberation, his bronze face impassive, tried to break through the line of soldiers when some paused to reload. The big man fought like a tiger, throwing off his attackers until they finally swarmed over him with bayonets and musket butts.

ONLY A few blocks away, the streets were empty, calm in the summer morning. Clarion and his people had commandeered horses from a livery stable. The call to arms had not reached him until shortly after dawn and he was trying to make up for lost time. But the horses were poor mounts; Clarion and his section moved at a sedate, dignified, swaybacked pace. Unhindered, unchallenged, Clarion abruptly found himself at the barricade. He saw Red Cockade, disheveled, her face begrimed with gunpowder and sweat. Clarion ran up to her.

Red Cockade looked him up and down. Clarion was unruffled, immaculate; he carried his watch and chain in his waistcoat. "What kept you? Choosing the right cravat?" "If I'm going to be killed," said Clarion, "I thought I should dress for the occasion." The old adversaries burst out laughing and threw their arms around each other.

MUSKET SHORTENED his legs.

The dwarf was already alarmed at hearing nothing from Las Bombas and Mickle. News of the outbreak did not reach the pawnshop until the rainstorm had passed. As soon as he understood that the count and his friends were at a barricade somewhere between the Carolia and the Mariana Caserna, Musket flung aside the pair of stilts; there was no longer any point in concealing his size, and he did not intend to fight balanced precariously on wooden limbs.

As Musket loaded himself with sacks of powder and shot from the pawnshop's arsenal, Ingo ordered Mumchance to rouse Little Hands and as many thieves and burglars as he could find. "Tell them if they know what's good for them, they'll report to me at this barricade some fool has started. Armed robbers, cutthroats, the whole



crew of them: They'll have work to do."

Musket and Ingo left the pawnshop in all haste. The dwarf had difficulty keeping pace with the taller man. Finally, Ingo set Musket on his burly shoulders, the dwarf brandishing a cutlass and urging his mount to greater speed.

They came to the barricade at the worst of the fighting. Musket sprang down. He could not see Las Bombas anywhere. Shouting for his master, Musket plunged into the thick of the fray, wielding his cutlass in both hands, to the terror of Zeller's troops who found themselves attacked at knee level by a furious, ginger-haired whirlwind.

Musket had shortened his legs; he had become a giant.

LAS BOMBAS had seen Theo and Mickle haul away the wounded Justin. By the time the count was able to fight his way clear and run after them, they were gone. He gave a cry at the sight of Justin, afraid that Theo and Mickle had been killed along with him. There was no trace of them. If they had been captured by Zeller's men, he had no idea where they might be: the Carolia, possibly; more likely, Cabbarus would want them at the Juliana.

With no plan in mind, the puffing count set off, hoping to discover what had become of them. Near Great Augustine Square, he came face to face with the front rank of what looked like a brigade of fishwives armed with oyster knives, cleavers, boat hooks, and whatever other implements had come to hand. They were heading implacably for the palace.

Las Bombas stared in consternation. Before he could be trampled flat as a flounder, he sprang ahead of the advancing throng, not daring to turn back.

Las Bombas had only one suggestion. "Ladies," he said, "follow me."

They streamed after him.

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## 26

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**THEO GRIPPED** Mickle's hand. He opened his eyes to find that he was only clutching sand. His legs were spraddled in the water. Surf shattered into spray against an outcropping of rocks.

He hauled himself to his feet. The sky was a faded gray, without sun or moon. He called Mickle's name. The rush of the tide drowned his voice.

He scrambled up the rocks and sighted in both directions along the beach. The meager light played tricks on his eyes. What he took for a human shape turned into a mass of seaweed as he stumbled toward it.

He ran on, still shouting for her. She could have been washed ashore anywhere further up or down the beach, if she had been washed ashore at all. He halted, lungs laboring.

From the moment he plunged down the well and the water closed over his head, he had tried to keep close to her. Once he found her, and they had clung together until the current seized and tore them apart. Flailing arms and legs, he had been swept along, sun-blinded each time he fought his way to the surface, choking in the roaring darkness as the river spun him back into its depths. He dimly remembered being borne into open water, thrashing his way toward land, then being dashed against jutting rocks.

His head pounded like the surf. He tried to regain his bearings. The current had swept him well beyond The Fingers. He calculated he had lain unconscious through the night until dawn. He could not guess how many dawns. Cabbarus was an eternity ago.

A cluster of rocks lay some distance ahead. One of them moved, or so he thought. He started toward them, quickening his pace as he drew closer.

Mickle was on her feet. She saw him. Within another moment, she was in his arms. He paid no attention to what they were saying to each other. They both began laughing like a pair of joyous fools.

The sun had broken a little through the haze. Mickle guessed that they were well beyond the estuary, on the west coast. Neither of them cared about geography. They were desperately thirsty.

They headed a short distance inland. There would be no troops in this desolate fringe of countryside, but they went cautiously nevertheless. After a while, Mickle found a small stream and flung herself down beside it.

"I thought I had enough water to last a lifetime." She drank, splashed her face gratefully, then sat with her arms around her knees. "I can't be sure if Cabbarus is dead

or if I dreamed it all."

"He is and you didn't," Theo said. "It may not make any difference. The directorate will keep fighting, with or without Cabbarus. For all we know, they could have beaten us. Do they hold the city? Or do we? Or Justin's people? If Justin had lived---"

"You still don't know what might have happened," Mickle said. "You did all you could; there's no way you could have saved him."

"He died. I lived. I still owe him a debt. If I don't pay it, he's died to no purpose. And I've lived to no purpose."

"What more can you do?"

"What he wanted, what he tried to do." He stopped and looked curiously at Mickle.

"Would you have done what Cabbarus wanted?"

"Of course. It would have gotten you out of the palace. Then I'd have told him to go to the devil. Trust his word? I'm not such a fool."

He felt they were talking of some distant world. They had been swept into a place that was neither past nor future. He would gladly have stayed exactly where they were. He knew he could not. He gestured back toward the coast.

"Florian must have landed by now. Whatever's happened, we should be in Marianstat."

"Yes," Mickle said. "As soon as we can. We'd better start right now."

She was asleep before the words were out of her mouth. And so was Theo.

IT WAS dusk when they woke again. Theo's sleep had done little to refresh him; he felt sick with hunger. Mickle was already on her feet. It took all his strength to stand up and set off with her. They had decided to take their chances going across country and avoiding the swamps near the channel.

They trudged throughout most of the night, resting only when fatigue forced them. Near dawn, they came within sight of Marianstat.

Mickle halted and stood listening. Theo heard no sounds of gunfire. The city was dark and silent. Mickle took his hand and drew him along with her. The Vespera Bridge appeared to be unguarded.

"Take our chances and cross it," she whispered. "We'll cause more stir if we try hunting for a boat, and I'm certainly not going to swim."

They sped over the bridge, crouching, clinging to the shadows, heading for the protection of the nearest shed. They had almost reached it when a figure loomed in front of them. A musket was jammed into Theo's ribs.

It took Theo a moment to realize that the musket was a hoe; its owner, one of the most ragged urchins he had ever seen.

"Who goes there?" the ragamuffin demanded ferociously, as half a dozen others

joined him. "You're under arrest."

"Are we?" Mickle put her hands on her hips. "I've been told that before. Who's arresting me this time?"

"Captain Weasel's Irregulars."

"As irregular as any I've seen," said Mickle. "Weasel and I are good friends. Where is he?"

"I'm not to give out military information." The boy gestured with his hoe. "You'd better come with us."

Their ragged escort hustled them through the streets. Great Augustine Square was an armed encampment. Theo recognized some of Justin's people. He could not find out if the city was under their control, for the urchins pressed him and Mickle toward the Juliana.

The palace gates had been shattered. The guards seemed to be a mixture of townspeople and partisans. One, evidently on familiar terms with the band of youngsters, called them over.

"Friends of Captain Weasel," said the boy with the hoe. "That's what they say."

"We'll see to them." The guard's jaw dropped when he recognized Mickle. "The Beggar--- The queen of Westmark? You--- you were captured. Killed---"

"That's half-right," said Mickle.

"Your Majesty---"

"Don't bother with that," Mickle said. "I want to know what's happened. We're alive. Who else is?"

By way of answer, the guard hurried them along to the New Juliana. The ground level of the palace was a wreckage of gutted, fire-blackened chambers and corridors choked with debris. Armed townspeople crowded the hallways.

Before they had a chance to ask further, Theo heard a voice bellowing their names. Count Las Bombas pushed through the mass of people.

"Can I believe my eyes?" The count flung his arms around them. "Where did you---? How---? Dear friends, you can't imagine what's happened. You'll never know---"

"I won't," said Mickle. "Not until you stop hugging and start telling."

"Yes, well, it was touch and go here for a while. Justin's fellows helped turn the tide. But we'd never have taken Marianstat without the fishwives, dockers, and all such--- including Ingo's thieves. And then--- But come along with me, Musket and Sparrow are tending Weasel. He's young enough to mend quickly."

"What about the others?" Theo asked. "My section leaders?"

The count's face fell. "I'm sorry, lad. Heavy losses. Red Cockade's alive. And Clarion. The rest---" He shook his head.

"But we're managing," Las Bombas hurried on. "The Ankaris, what's left of them, are

locked in the Carolia. So are some of the military, the ones who were wise enough to surrender.

"The provisional government's ordered a cease-fire. Florian should be here soon; the message must have reached him by now. For the moment, I admit there's a certain element of confusion---"

"I can see that," Mickle broke in. "But what's this provisional government?"

"The only one we have, for the time being," said the count. "At one point, it was such a mess we had to set up something. Red Cockade and Clarion are on the governing council. So are Sparrow and Weasel, they surely deserved a place. And Ingo and Mumchance. They're not fond of any sort of government, but Ingo decided that even thieves and pickpockets need someone to speak up for them."

"Yes, but who's the head of it?"

"Well, you see, they've already started disagreeing with each other. Red Cockade and Clarion have been going at it hammer and tongs--- I don't see how they have the strength for it. They had their own opinions and so did everyone else. Finally, we settled the matter. By unanimous compromise.

"The head of the provisional government--- ah, in fact, I am."

Las Bombas tried to force his features into an expression he had never before assumed: solemn modesty. "Naturally"--- he bowed ceremoniously to Mickle----"now that you're safe and sound, I'm happily prepared to resign."

"Not before you give us lunch, dinner, and a good bed," said Mickle. "Meantime, the government couldn't be in better hands."

THEO DID not sleep as long as he expected. It was the fault of Sparrow and Weasel. The two came to rouse him in what he thought was the middle of the night. When Sparrow opened the curtains to the sunlight, he thought it was the middle of the day: which it was. He had only slept the clock around. He had hoped to sleep for a week.

Weasel was tugging him out of bed: a difficult task which would have been a little easier had Weasel enjoyed the use of both arms. One hung in a sling.

"It's only a scratch. What happened was this," began Weasel before Theo had time to ask. "First, when I stormed the palace---"

"Pay no attention to him," said Sparrow. "It's a different tale every time he tells it, which he hasn't stopped doing. We'll talk later. You'd better hurry. Florian's coming. We're all going to meet him."

The water rats would have been happy to dress Theo and feed him at the same time. What kept them from performing these services was the noise of cheering from the streets. They could not resist dashing away to add their own voices to it.

Someone had laid out fresh clothing. Theo dressed slowly. He stepped through the open casement to the balcony. Great Augustine Square was dense with people. The

sunlight dazzled him, he could barely make out the cavalcade entering the square, the horses picking their way with difficulty through the crowd.

He felt a hand on his arm. Mickle had come beside him.

"Las Bombas and Musket are in the audience chamber. They're waiting for us."

"I'll see Florian later. Not now." He took her hand for a moment. "I failed him. At the end, I did nothing that he counted on me to do. But the queen of Westmark should be there. That's your place more than mine."

"Las Bombas can greet him for both of us," Mickle said. "I won't deprive him of that pleasure. My place"--- she smiled at him--- "I think it's exactly where I am now."

IT WAS Florian, at last, who found them quietly together in the royal apartments. He seemed a little less tall than Theo remembered, his fine features hardened, the scatter of pockmarks pale against the sun-blackened face. Despite the weather, Florian had flung his old blue coat over his shoulders, but let it drop as he strode to embrace Mickle and Theo. Torrens followed, with Las Bombas and Musket, Sparrow and Weasel pressing through the doorway.

Florian put his hands on Theo's shoulders. "When I didn't see either of you, I feared the worst. But I've heard some of the story, and I'll hear the rest when you want to tell it. For now, I know all I need: You gave me Marianstat."

"No, Florian," said Theo. "The people gave it to you. The question is what to do with it."

"Before we start any of that," put in Mickle, "I have some things of my own to say."

She went to her table and took a packet from the drawer.

"I had Mumchance bring me this a little while ago. I wrote it as soon as I knew Theo had been captured. I--- well, I was afraid I might not have another chance to do it; and for all I knew, none of us might live long enough to read it.

"Still, it was something I wanted set down in writing, officially, all in order. Ingo's had it in safekeeping."

Mickle unfolded a sheet of paper. "This is a proclamation, the happiest I've ever written, declaring marriage between Theo and the queen of Westmark."

"You can't!" cried Las Bombas. "Dear girl, that's out of the question."

"Not at all," said Mickle. "Since I never considered the directorate a legal government, I was still queen. What higher official could certify a marriage? So I signed it myself."

"I didn't mean--- that is, what I meant," stammered Las Bombas, "was that Musket and I had always counted on taking charge of the ceremonies, the celebration, the wedding feast."

"You wretch!" Theo burst out laughing despite his astonishment. "We were married and you never said a word about it."

"Considering that we were being shot at, on the verge of execution, and being half drowned, I couldn't find the proper occasion to mention it."

Las Bombas clapped Theo on the back. "Marvelous news, no matter when it's told. Congratulations, dear boy. I should say: Prince Theo."

Mickle raised a hand. "One thing more. I promised Theo, long ago, that I'd give up the throne if I found someone who had a rightful claim to it."

"There isn't anyone," said Theo. "You searched all the royal line."

"On the day they tried to arrest me," said Mickle, "I'd been digging through the archives. I realized I hadn't gone back far enough. Or sideways, if you want to call it that: collateral branches, royal cousins who married, names changed, lost in the tangle. A royal family tree is a confusing thing to climb around in."

"But there's one related line still in existence, and one person still alive at the end of it: Florian."

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**FLORIAN STOOD.** "Leave us," he told Las Bombas, Torrens, and the others. "The queen has raised a matter of state. But also a private one."

"It's true, isn't it." Mickle's words were not a question. "Your family name is Montmollin. That's a very ancient one, Florian. A noble line. More than that: a royal line."

"Only two people knew my real name," said Florian. "Zara. And Theo."

"You said nothing about royalty," Theo replied. "You only told me that Baron Montmollin was your father. You asked me to keep it a secret."

"And so he did," Mickle assured Florian. "I found out for myself. Theo kept it a secret from me, and I kept it a secret from him. I knew, but I wasn't sure what to do about it. I couldn't decide whether to tell it or not. But you're in the royal line, Florian. You're my legitimate successor."

Mickle unfolded another sheet of paper. "This is the other document I've always wanted to write: the instrument of my abdication."

"No!" Theo jumped to his feet and strode to face Florian. "No! You can't accept the crown. There has to be an end of kings and queens. Justin died for that, and how many others along with him. They lost their lives. Are you going to waste their deaths?"

He rounded on Mickle. "How can you let him or anyone else take the throne? Start a monarchy all over again? King Florian? Justin would have fought against that. And he'd have been right to do it. I'll fight against it, too. In the council chamber--- or in the streets, if I have to."

"Dear Theo," Mickle said, smiling wickedly, "much as I love you, you do have a habit of not quite listening to what I say. I've abdicated; and, yes, Florian's in the royal line. But I didn't offer him the crown and I don't intend to."

"Then--- who?" Theo turned, bewildered, from Mickle to Florian and back again.

"What will you do?"

"The people didn't give Marianstat to Florian or anyone else," Mickle said. "They took it. They took it for themselves. They'll keep it for themselves. And all of Westmark, too. I've abdicated in their favor. The country belongs to them. They'll decide what to do with it."

"Rightly so," Florian said. He looked at Theo. "As for you, youngster: Did you think I'd have accepted the crown if Mickle had offered it?"

"I didn't--- no, that is---"



"What you mean," said Florian, "is: You weren't quite sure. No, I wouldn't have accepted it. If I had, you'd have every good reason to fight. I'd have expected any of my children to do the same. The others are gone, you're the last of them. It would have been up to you."

"Am I truly one of your children? I hoped so, once. Now, I don't know if I can--- or want to be."

"I think you are," Florian answered. "In your own way. Very likely the best of them."

"It's well settled, then," said Mickle. "The country will decide how it's to be governed and who's going to do it."

"Florian surely will have a part in it," said Theo. "He believes in a republic, fought for one, he must have some say in running it."

"I hope so," replied Mickle. "But that's going to be up to the people. I've made provisions for holding an election as soon as possible. Anyone's free to come forward as a candidate--- and that includes Florian. Win or lose, he'll have to take his chances with everyone else."

"Agreed," said Florian. "But there's one thing, youngster, that you and Queen Augusta--- Citizen Mickle--- must understand. She may change her mind and destroy that document. Otherwise, if she confirms her abdication, she must go into exile."

"Exile?" cried Theo. "Why? After all she's done?"

"The hard facts of statecraft," said Florian. "A former queen living in Westmark? She'd do more harm than good. Every disgruntled monarchist would claim her, whether she liked it or not. They'd make the queen's name a rallying cry for their own purposes."

"As for those who want a republic: Not everyone who fights on the side of the angels is an angel. There are some who prefer even abdicated monarchs to be dead and buried. Her life would be in constant danger. I'm sorry, but she must leave Westmark. For the good of the country and her own safety."

Mickle went to the casement and stood looking over the square. "Dr. Torrens taught me how to be a queen. He never taught me how to stop being one. Giving up a throne's as complicated as keeping it. Florian's right. I hadn't thought of exile, but it must be that way. I'm willing to go. Still, the choice has to be Theo's as, much as mine."

"Exile?" Theo said to her. "There's no such thing. Not as long as we're together."

HE WENT, for the last time, to Fish Market Square. Las Bombas came with him to help collect his few belongings. The count could not have been more delighted.

"I've resigned, too," said Las Bombas, "I've had my fill, they can all take turns being head of the provisional government and I wish them the joy of it. You come along with Musket and me. Captain Jacob's setting out in a few days, he can drop us off

wherever we please. Think of it, lad. Just like the old days. Stay with us. You and Mickle will have your fortune made in no time."

"I'm sure we will," said Theo. "And lose it as fast."

Las Bombas shrugged. "Well, there's always that risk. You'll get used to it. I have. Why, my boy, think of the places you'll see. You can draw and paint away to your heart's content, or do anything else that suits you. Leave fellows like Florian to their own sort of work; you tend to yours."

"To mine?" said Theo. "I don't know what it is."

"How better to find out? Come with us, my boy. For a while, at any rate. As long as you like. That's my best advice."

"I've never taken your advice before," Theo answered fondly. "This time, if Mickle wants to--- yes, I will."

THEY STOOD, arms around each other, at the rail of Jacob's ship. Las Bombas and Musket had gone below to make sure that Friska was comfortably installed. Theo and Mickle had privately taken leave of all dear friends; there had been few formalities or ceremonies.

Mickle had asked only for her Old Guard to reassemble. She reviewed them for the last time, walking through the ranks, speaking to each one. Their battle flags had been embroidered with the names: Alma, Carlsbruch, Altus-Birkenfeld, La Jolie. At the end, she gently touched her lips to the lowered banners. Theo saw her falter then, but only for a moment.

"Are you sorry?" Mickle asked him quietly. "I am. But I wouldn't have done anything differently."

"The people have Westmark," said Theo, "I only wonder what they'll do with it."

"Are you afraid they'll make a mess of things? If they do, at least it will be their own mess. They'll straighten it out for themselves. Besides, there's always Sparrow. There's always Weasel. And others like them to help set things right."

"They have a country. We've lost ours."

"Have we? We'll see it again one day, I'm sure of that," said Mickle. "Meantime," she added, "we have all the rest of the world."

Next to The End

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**The End**

**Lloyd Alexander's THE BEGGAR QUEEN**

This Ends the Westmark Trilogy

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