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A heavy key clattered in the lock, then the door swung open and the sergeant said, "Here's your breakfast, Manfred my boy. Enjoy your last meal!" With this he emptied the contents of the night bucket over me and stood there laughing heartily, while I choked and gagged at the rancid stench.

"You hear that?" he said, jerking a callused thumb toward the barred window. I'd been listening to the sawing and hammering since dawn. "You're going to swing soon, m'lad. Rest assured, I'll be in the front row, cheering as you gasp and kick your way to Hell."

I wiped filth off my face with my sleeve and glared at him. There really wasn't much else I could do, sitting there chained to the wall. He laughed again, turned away, and made to step into the corridor—then snapped to attention, his expression changing from amusement to outright fear in the space of a single heartbeat.

I'd heard the footsteps approaching and assumed it must be one of my gaolers, but apparently not. An oil lantern came into view, held by a tall, well-dressed noble with dark eyes, a hooked nose, and lips that looked as though they'd never smiled. He wore his arrogance like an impenetrable cloak. His cold, unblinking gaze studied every inch of the cell before coming to settle upon me. A shiver ran up my spine unbidden, though I'd no idea why.

"So, this is the swordsman," he said. "You have him in chains, I see."

"Yes, sir," the sergeant said. "Extremely dangerous, sir. Killed six of the Duke's Wardens single-handed, he did, and put another three in the infirmary. The doctor says they'll be out of action for weeks. Duke Wilhelm is—"

"I know what Duke Wilhelm is," my visitor said softly, and the chill in his voice did not go unnoticed. He nudged my foot with the polished toe of his boot. "So, what have you to say for yourself, you scoundrel?"

I had nothing to say, to him or any other passing aristo who thought it might be amusing to drop in and taunt me before I died, so I kept my mouth shut.

"Cat got your tongue, mmm? Sergeant, I want to talk to this rogue in private. Close the door on your way out."

"But, sir—"

"He's chained to the wall, Sergeant," the tall man said wearily. "I think I'll be safe enough, don't you?"

The sergeant frowned, but did as he was told. The door clicked shut behind him. At that moment the hammering stopped, as if the two events were somehow related.

"It sounds like they're ready for you," my nameless visitor said. "In which case I'd best make this short, lest we're interrupted before we conclude our business."

Curiosity made me ask, "What business? Who are you, and what do you want of me?"

Ignoring my questions, he said, "It isn't every day I get to meet a swordsman of your caliber. Six Wardens dead and another three wounded, eh? Remarkable." He took a silk handkerchief from his sleeve and dropped it onto my lap. I hesitated to touch it, but he nodded, so I picked it up and used it to wipe my face. When I offered to return it he shook his head. "Why don't you tell me what happened last night?" he said.

"I think you already know."

"They say you picked a fight with the Duke's men."

"The Duke's ruffians, you mean." I couldn't keep the anger and resentment from my voice. "They're the ones who swaggered into the tavern and picked a fight, not me."

"They picked on you?"

I hesitated before answering. "No. A young lad, sitting quietly in a corner with his girl, doing noone any harm."

"A friend of yours, was he? Your brother? A cousin?"

I shook my head again, and my visitor chuckled darkly. "Let me guess what happened," he said. "The Duke's Wardens decided they wanted the girl for themselves, and pretended to take insult at something"

the boy said or did. Am I right?"

"Close enough," I said, wondering how he knew so much.

"And so you decided to interfere, decided to help a stranger you didn't even know." He gave another humorless chuckle. "I shouldn't imagine the Wardens took kindly to your interfering in their business?"

They most certainly hadn't. They'd overpowered me through sheer weight of numbers and forced me outside, into the dark alleyway behind the tavern. Instead of arresting me, as I'd expected, their drunken fool of a corporal had drawn his sword and tried to cut me in two. I'd avoided his clumsy attack and run him headlong into the wall, relieving him of his blade in the process. His men came at me then, roaring with blood-lust, demanding vengeance. I'd wounded when I could, killed only when they gave me no other choice. But, outnumbered as I was, they would have butchered me for certain if a squad of Noseys hadn't chanced by and dragged me to safety. Before I'd a chance to thank them for saving my life, they'd beaten me unconscious with their wooden clubs. The lumps on the back of my head still throbbed painfully.

"The Duke's Wardens are indeed ruffians," the noble said. "But they are also excellent swordsmen. They are trained by the Duke's swordmaster, Schwertkämpfer, who is no slouch with the blade. Yet you managed to kill six of them. You're either very good, or you're the luckiest man alive. Which is it?"

"Perhaps a little of both," I suggested modestly.

"A good answer. It may be that I have a use for someone who possesses such luck, and knows how to use a sword."

"I don't quite follow you," I said, but a tiny flame of hope sparked within my breast.

"Tomorrow, as you may know, is the Kaiserine's birthday. It's a very special occasion, and special entertainment is arranged. I'm looking for someone to put into the Arena. You may be that man."

The Arena! Professional fighters battled in the Arena for the entertainment of the Kaiserine and the Empire's aristos. If they won, they received riches and anything else they might desire. Losing, on the other hand, often earned mutilation or worse.

"What exactly are you offering?" I asked.

"Your freedom, a large bag of silver and a fast horse to take you out of the city. Assuming, of course..."

He left the rest unsaid. Assuming, of course, that I lived. The Arena was far different from the crowded alley behind the tavern where drunken soldiers had tripped over each other and botched their attacks. I'd be matched against the toughest killers in the Empire. Then again, what was the alternative? A rope, a trapdoor and a quick end, if I was lucky. If I wasn't lucky, I might dangle there for hours, dying a very unpleasant death. My bowels turned liquid at the very thought.

"I'm your man, if you can get me out of this," I said, not bothering to mention that I'd be running for the hills at the first opportunity.

"Very sensible. I like that." He rapped on the door. The sergeant opened it at once and examined me closely, as if making sure I hadn't escaped. I rattled my chains to set his mind at rest.

"Sergeant, release this man," my visitor said. "I'm going to send someone up to collect him. Make sure he's ready by the time they arrive."

The sergeant protested. "With respect, sir, he's the Duke's prisoner. He killed the Duke's Wardens."

The nobleman shook his head. "You're wrong, Sergeant, he is my prisoner. He was arrested and brought here by my Constables, not the Duke's Wardens, who displayed remarkable incompetence by failing to kill him, wouldn't you agree?"

Realization struck me like a lightning bolt. *The Noseys were his men.* I'd been talking to none other than Otto Thenck, Head of the Ministry of State Security and the most feared man in the Empire.

The tired old joke about the Secret Police sprang to mind unbidden. A man limps into his local tavern and collapses over the bar. His face is swollen and his teeth have been kicked out, but he buys drinks for everyone and tells them he's celebrating. Why? they ask. "The Secret Police paid me a visit tonight," he explains, "but they got the wrong address. They wanted the fellow who lives next door." And everyone gets drunk, because they all know it's better to have your teeth kicked out by mistake than taken down into the dark cellars beneath Ministry headquarters, never to be seen again.

Only it wasn't really a joke, it was a true story, and the man responsible for such casual, fear-inspiring brutality stood before me.

"But what will I tell the Duke, sir?" the sergeant said, a pleading note in his voice. "He's bound to ask."

"You have prisoners in the other cells, haven't you?"

The sergeant scratched his head, plainly puzzled. "Yes, sir. Petty thieves for the most part. A pair of smugglers, a husband who cut off his unfaithful wife's ears, a forger—"

"A forger!" Thenck's scowl made the sergeant flinch. "When was he arrested?"

"Yesterday, sir. Caught passing wooden coins painted silver. Not too clever, sir. It's fifty lashes for him, then a lengthy spell in prison."

"I disagree. Inept as he is, his is the worst crime of all, for he was attempting to undermine the economy of the Empire. I'll respect assassins and even spies, but never forgers. Let me tell you what you will do, Sergeant. You will go to the forger's cell. There, you will bind his arms and legs securely, then gag him and put a hood over his head. When the Duke's men come looking for this prisoner"—he pointed at me—"you will give them the forger instead. Do you understand?"

His tone carried a distinct element of threat, hinting that failure to comply would bring swift and unwelcome retribution. The sergeant swallowed hard. So did I. "Yes, sir," he said weakly.

Thenck nodded, satisfied, and without another word he left the cell and went back down the corridor.

The sergeant sighed with relief. "It seems you have friends in high places, lad," he said quietly. "You know who that was? Otto Thenck! The Magician! You know why they call him that? Because he makes people disappear." He laughed. "Maybe you've escaped the noose, but there are worse deaths than hanging, mark my words. That's something else for you to think about, eh?" He found the key on his ring that unlocked the iron manacles around my wrists and ankles, thus releasing me.

"Thanks," I said, driving my fist into his face as I rose, sending him sprawling. He cried out and rolled onto his back, trying to get up, but my boot quickly put paid to that idea. He howled and rolled in the night soil, clutching his crotch with both hands.

Having extracted some measure of revenge for my ill-treatment, I turned to the doorway. All thoughts of fleeing the prison and losing myself in the alleyways and backstreets of High Sazburg dissipated abruptly as I discovered two men standing there, watching me. They wore long black cloaks, tricorne hats, and scarves that covered their faces so that only their eyes were visible. Both carried flintlock pistols, cocked and pointed at my belly. They looked more like highwaymen than anything else, but I didn't need a soothsayer to tell me they were Otto Thenck's Noseys in civilian garb, come to fetch me for their master's pleasure.

I felt no great need to say fond farewell to the sergeant. Without a word spoken, the two men escorted me upstairs, along a narrow corridor and outside into a high-walled courtyard. We'd passed no one else en route. A coach drawn by matching black stallions waited in the courtyard. The highwaymen gestured with their pistols, and I reluctantly climbed inside. The door slammed shut behind me and the coach immediately set off. There were no handles on the inside of the door, and no windows, either—the coach was a miniature prison on wheels.

The coach slowly made its way through the winding city streets, shaking and rattling over cobblestones and brickwork. Several times during the journey, the driver opened his peep hole and looked down at me, as if satisfying himself that I wasn't up to any mischief. Like the highwaymen, he wore a scarf over his face so I could only see his eyes. I wondered at this need for disguise, but I had other things to worry about, not the least of which was Otto Thenck, the Magician; so I thought no more of the driver, trying instead to imagine what must lie ahead.

A short time later, the coach stopped. The door clicked open and I surmised that the driver possessed a mechanism which allowed him to control the door locks from above. Very clever. I climbed out and looked up at him, expecting to receive further instructions, but he said nothing. Instead he jiggled his reins and the coach moved off again, leaving me behind.

I found myself standing alone before a dark, gloomy building made of plain brick. Steps led up to the front door and the tall windows on either side were closed and shuttered. It occurred to me that my path to freedom now lay open—all I had to do was run. And I might have, but at that moment a group of Wardens turned the corner at the end of the street and began walking in my direction. Their appearance made my mind up for me. I climbed the steps, rapped on the wood and waited for an answer. Distant footsteps came closer, then a spy-hole opened and a suspicious eyeball peered out at me.

"What do you want?" a muffled voice demanded.

"Otto Thenck sent me," I said, watching the Wardens, who were bound to question my appearance if not my smell. Or would they? After all, I was outside the headquarters of the Ministry of State Security and might have authorized business there, for all they knew. But I didn't dare take that chance. If any of them recognized me...

Heavy bolts were drawn back at last and the door swung open. A dwarf who'd had to stand on a wooden stool to reach the spy-hole scowled up at me. He wore a black uniform with silver buttons and epaulettes, high riding boots and a curved cavalry sword that trailed on the stained wood floor because of his lack of altitude. His squashed face was wrinkled and lined, and his dark curly hair had turned white around the edges.

"And who might you be?" he asked.

"I said, Thenck sent me. Let me inside, quickly."

"He didn't tell me to expect any visitors. Go away."

He tried to shut the door but I stopped it with my foot and grabbed him by the front of his jacket, pulling him up so his boots kicked air. The Wardens were less than a hundred paces away. I wanted to be safely inside before they reached the doorway.

"Listen, Stumpy, I told you, Thenck sent me. This is where he lives, isn't it? So you'll let me inside, unless you want me to bash your face in."

The dwarf rolled his eyes, inviting me to look behind him. I did, and saw two soldiers armed with muskets at the other end of the entrance hall. They had me in their sights. The Tirpitz musket is the deadliest piece of weaponry ever developed by the Kaiserine's clever scientists, and rarely misses at ranges under two hundred paces. I put the dwarf down gently and brushed the front of his jacket to iron out the creases.

"Thank you," he said, grinning.

"Don't mention it," I said through clenched teeth.

Then he looked me up and down, his nose wrinkling in distaste at my sweet bouquet. He snapped his fingers in sudden realization. "You wouldn't be from the prison, would you?"

"How astute of you," I said. "Indeed I am."

He turned his head and said to the soldiers, "Easy, lads. This one's expected, after all." To my relief they lowered their muskets, carefully thumbing the hammers forward.

The dwarf said, "Come inside. I'm Ludwig. What should I call you?"

"The name's Manfred." Thenck hadn't asked. Perhaps he'd already known. He seemed to know everything else.

A distant cheer suddenly reached us from the direction of the city square, as a thousand throats cried their appreciation of a fine morning's entertainment. My hand rose involuntarily to my throat. I didn't have to be told the forger's neck had just been stretched. I hoped he'd died quickly and without pain, for he'd suffered the fate that should have been mine.

Ludwig slapped the small of my back, being unable to reach my shoulders. "Cheer up! You look as if someone's just walked over your grave. Come with me, I'll take you upstairs to the laboratory. You're very fortunate, you know. Not everybody gets to meet the great Doctor Schmidt."

The dwarf slammed the door shut behind me just as the Duke's Wardens came into view. It had been too close for comfort. Relief swept my guilt away and left me feeling light-headed and weak-kneed.

Ludwig waddled down the corridor, trailing his sword behind him. I followed meekly, until I drew level with the two sentries. The sight of their faces shocked me so much that I nearly recoiled in horror. They were so scarred and mutilated that it was difficult to imagine they might be human at all. Their flesh had

been sewn together with rough stitches, and some of the pieces of skin didn't seem to match. As a result, their bloodshot eyes were hooded, their mouths were lop-sided and their noses were shapeless lumps of flesh with oddly-matched holes. I'd never seen anything quite so hideous, yet they seemed unaware of my attention—either that, or they simply didn't care what I thought of their skewed features. I recalled the scarves the highwaymen and the coach driver had worn, and guessed they must all be veterans of The War. Evidently they'd received horrendous injuries, and equally horrendous repair surgery.

"Didn't your mother ever tell you it's rude to stare?" Ludwig said, sounding more amused than irritated. We continued along the hallway until we reached a flight of stairs. Ludwig began climbing with all the grace of a waddling duck. For some reason I couldn't fathom, I experienced a wave of sympathy for Thenck's servant, trapped in his tiny body.

We stepped into a laboratory. Several tables contained complex scientific apparatus—glass bottles connected by winding rubber tubes, unfamiliar machinery of unknown function that whirred and clicked and popped. A queer metallic smell filled the air but I couldn't quite place its origin. Amber light streamed into the room through several high, narrow windows illuminating the far wall, which, oddly enough, was fitted with sets of chains and manacles like those I'd left behind in the city gaol. The plaster was broken and stained, suggesting that whoever had been kept here had clawed at the wall in agony. Was this a laboratory, a prison or a torture chamber? Perhaps all three. None of what I saw placed me at ease.

A rotund, cheerfully smiling gentleman came into the room through another door. He wore a black uniform with an officer's scarlet sash about his portly waist. The twin sawblades of the Imperial Medical Corps adorned his collar. His pale blue eyes peered at me through the thick lenses of his spectacles. He said, "Pray tell, who is this fine specimen, Ludwig?"

"Herr Thenck sent him, Doctor Schmidt," Ludwig said. "He's from the prison." He waved his little hand in front of his nose. "Which explains the smell."

Schmidt came to stand before me, apparently unaffected by how I looked or smelled. He studied me closely for a while and then, without asking permission, he prised my left eye wide open with his thumb and forefinger. I stood silently through this odd procedure, too surprised to object.

"Please unbutton your shirt," Schmidt said. I did so. He lifted a shuttered storm lantern from one of the tables and opened it. Its heat burned my neck. "Good, very good," he muttered under his breath. He closed the lantern and returned it to the table. I was about to button my shirt again when he said, "You were wounded in The War?"

He'd noticed the scar on my chest. "Yes. A Moskovian musket ball."

"It penetrated the lung?"

"Yes."

"You are very fortunate to be alive. A fraction to the left and the ball would have struck your heart. Do you have any difficulty in breathing?"

"Not now. Sometimes I have to sit down and rest after strenuous exercise, however."

He nodded, but asked no other questions.

"Well, Herr Doctor? Was I right?" Otto Thenck said. He'd been watching from another doorway. He

entered the laboratory and moved to join Schmidt.

"Indeed you were," Schmidt said. "The wounds show up clearly under the lamplight. But how did you know, Herr Thenck?"

Thenck didn't answer. Instead he asked me, "Do you remember how and when it happened?"

"I was wounded in Moskovia," I said, not at all sure what he was referring to.

Thenck looked at Schmidt, who said, "Once again we find that the victim remembers nothing of the incident. The filth are indeed skillful in masking their activities." He pursed his lips. "The elixir will restore his lost memories. I see no reason why we should not proceed at once."

"Neither do I," Thenck said. "Go ahead, Herr Doctor."

Lost memories? What were they talking about? Schmidt picked up a stoppered glass bottle. He held it up to the light and shook it experimentally. Then he uncorked the bottle and turned to face me again.

"Stick out your tongue," he ordered.

I hesitated, suspicious. Schmidt shook his head in obvious irritation. "There is nothing to fear. This will allow you to recall the memories that were deliberately hidden by the vampyre filth that drank your blood."

"Drank my—? Are you insane?" The absurdity of his statement confused and angered me. Vampyres were mere creatures of legend. Mothers threatened unruly children that they'd be snatched from their beds by vampyres if they were naughty. Did Schmidt really expect me to believe such nonsense?

And yet—

And yet there had been stories. I'd heard soldiers who'd served with General Beethoven's 5th Army in Transylvania speak of what they'd encountered in that dark, remote place. Of undead rising out of the ground. Of flying things in the night.

I shook my head. How could any intelligent man be expected to accept such fiction?

"Do as Doctor Schmidt says, Herr Manfred," Thenck ordered in his soft, infinitely dangerous voice. He reminded me that this had nothing to do with fairy tales. The thought of a noose tightening about my neck made me open my mouth and stick my tongue out.

Slowly, carefully, Schmidt tilted the bottle until a single drop of green liquid left the neck and fell onto my tongue—

An avalanche of memories.

We'd met aboard the overnight coach traveling from Guttzeig to High Sazburg. After the first few stops at various mountain villages, we had the coach all to ourselves. It was a long trip and, as people do, we started talking. She told me her name was Fräulein Ulrike Dornier, and that she was soon to be married to a sea captain who commanded one of the new ironclads of the Kaiserine's Imperial High Seas Fleet. They planned to live in the port of Bremhagen and raise six children. In return, I told her I'd been recently invalidated out of the Army because of the chest wound I'd sustained in Moskovia, and was journeying to

High Sazburg to seek employment. A cousin who lived in the city had written to tell me that merchants were always looking for trustworthy bodyguards, and Army veterans received preferential consideration. I'd been exercising steadily since my release from the military infirmary, fencing twice a day to build up my strength and stamina. My shortness of breath only became a problem if I had to exert myself for prolonged periods.

We were getting along famously until I lifted the curtain to see where we were on the mountain road. A shaft of light from the rising moon struck Fräulein Dornier and she recoiled from the window in shocked surprise. In the space of a single heartbeat she changed from a beautiful young woman to a snarling harpy with cat eyes and fangs as long as my fingers. She lunged at me, pinning me against my seat with fantastic strength. I tried to break free, but couldn't. Her mouth opened wider than it should have been able to; her fangs grazed my neck—

I opened my eyes. Thenck and Schmidt were staring at me dispassionately, as if I were a specimen insect under the lens of a microscope, my wings spread and pinned, my belly ripe for the scalpel. I could only marvel at what Schmidt had done. My attacker had somehow concealed my recollection of her assault, but whatever Schmidt had given me had torn away her deception, revealing the entire disgusting business.

"Now do you remember what happened?" Thenck asked.

"Yes," I said. "I remember only too well. There was—a woman. Or at least, I thought she was a woman..."

"She was vampyre," Schmidt said, matter-of-factly. "She did not drink enough of your blood to kill you, therefore you are still alive, and still human. Had she drained you sufficiently for death to occur, you would now be vampyre yourself." He took off his spectacles and began cleaning the thick lenses with the end of his officer's sash. "Or, if she did not wish you to become vampyre at the moment of your death, you would have become a mindless undead zombie instead, rotting slowly until your body eventually fell apart. A far worse fate, as I'm sure you'll agree?"

I touched my neck, and detected a ridge of healed flesh which I hadn't even noticed before. *She was vampyre*. A shudder ran down my spine as the full implications of Schmidt's words came to me.

"Explain the gift to Herr Manfred," Thenck said.

Schmidt nodded. "When the vampyre bites its victim, not only does it extract blood upon which it feeds—some of its own bodily fluids enter the victim. This exchange prepares the victim for the extraordinary physical changes which will come about if and when said victim dies and becomes vampyre. The victim's strength is increased and his or her senses become sharper, enhanced far beyond normality. This is known as the vampyre's gift. It only lasts for a period of days, and will fade completely if the vampyre does not return to finish its dirty work."

Given what I now knew, I had no reason to suppose he might be lying.

"I believe," Thenck said, "this explains how you were able to fend off the Duke's Wardens in the alley. When my Constables reported the incident to me, I knew there must be something special about you. I'm glad my instincts proved correct. Tell me, when did the vampyre attack you?"

"What? Oh—two nights ago." I shuddered, picturing her hot feral eyes and her extended fangs only too clearly.

"You're certain?"

"I arrived in High Sazburg only yesterday aboard the coach from Guttzeig, so yes, I'm certain. Why?"

Schmidt said, "It is likely that the vampyre's gift still flows in your veins. As I have already intimated, it will fade soon—perhaps tonight, or tomorrow, who can say? Fortunately, Herr Thenck arranged to have you brought here in time. I am unable to initiate the start of the transformation from human to vampyre—only one of *them* can do that—but my elixir will stop the vampyre's gift from fading, and will also permit the change to continue."

I stared at Schmidt blankly, wondering whether I'd heard correctly. "May I ask what you mean when you say 'continue,' Herr Doctor?" I asked.

"Come, Herr Manfred," Thenck said, "you are not a child, and can be trusted to draw logical conclusions. The vampyre's gift allowed you to defeat the Duke's Wardens. Without it, they would have cut you into very small pieces. I instructed Doctor Schmidt to give you his elixir because without it, the vampyre's gift would soon have left you. The elixir is already working, pulsing through your bloodstream, transforming you into a vampyre." He quickly held up a hand, stopping me before I could protest further. "Long before the transformation is complete, you will either have won or lost in the Arena. If you are still alive at the end of the contest, Doctor Schmidt will give you the counter-elixir he has developed. This will halt the change, and return you to your human state. Is this not so, Herr Doctor?"

"I have the counter-elixir ready," Schmidt said, as if waiting for Thenck's cue.

"I want it now," I said.

"Quite impossible," Thenck said. "It is necessary for my plans that the vampyre's gift stays with you until the Arena contest ends."

"Damn you, you should have asked—!"

Thenck shrugged. "To what end? Do you wish to die in the Arena? Of course not. Had we explained everything first then you would eventually have said yes anyway, but we could afford no delay, since we had no idea when the vampyre's gift would leave you. What's done is done, for the good of all. You must accept it, Herr Manfred. The alternative must surely be obvious?"

Rather than make me think rationally and strive to prolong my life, Thenck's unsubtle threat only served to anger me. A low growl began somewhere deep in my throat and I decided there and then to end this charade and take my chances against the guards' muskets. A burning pressure built up within my skull and my teeth throbbed. I took a half-step forward, intending to show Thenck exactly what I thought of him and his damned plans.

A sharp pain on the back of my head made me turn around. Ludwig had climbed up onto a chair behind me and struck me with a wooden club. I only had enough time to say, "You little—!" before the laboratory floor reared up and slapped me hard.

* * * *

I awoke to find myself in another room, lying on a soft bed with clean sheets. An oil lantern cast its soft light upon the face of the girl who sat in the chair beside the bed, reading a book. She was a pretty young thing, with clear blue eyes and plaited blonde hair. She reminded me of the girl I'd left behind when I'd

marched off to The War. By the time I returned from the Moskovian campaign she was happily married to an ex-cavalry officer who owned a medium-sized estate and had plenty of money. My Army pension would have just about taken care of their dogs' food bills. I hadn't even tried to see her again.

My companion glanced up at me and started in surprise, seeing that I was awake.

"Please," I said, holding a finger to my lips, "No noise. My head is killing me." Ludwig had given me another lump to match the ones Thenck's Noseys had imparted the previous night.

She said nothing, so I asked, "Who are you?"

No answer. I would have questioned her further, but the lamplight showed the thin red line around her throat. It occurred to me that perhaps the learned Doctor Schmidt had some connection with this odd scar. She also wore a brown leather glove over her right hand. I could only guess what injury it concealed and wondered whether Schmidt might be responsible for this, too.

"Can you talk?" I asked, slowly and clearly, pointing to my own mouth.

She shook her head, no.

I tried to think why she might be here. To look after me? To inform Schmidt or Thenck when I regained consciousness? Either possibility had merit. I raised my head and examined the room. The first thing I noticed was the door. It had neither handle nor bolts, which meant it must be opened from outside. Another prison cell then, although the bed was comfortable and I had pleasant company. The second thing I noticed was that the only window looked out into a dark alleyway and was fitted with iron bars. Evidently they didn't intend for me to leave that way. A table in the corner supported a water jug, a washing-bowl, a tub of soap, a razor and a shaving mirror. Someone had also laid out new clothing, a uniform such as Corsican mercenaries wear and a pair of boots that looked to be my size.

My head pounded as I weakly pushed myself up and swung my legs off the bed. The girl stood also and waited by the chair, watching me. I rubbed my jaw. I could have struck a Lucifer upon the bristles. The thought made me smile, but only briefly, for I became aware of the gnawing hunger deep in the pit of my stomach, and turned to look at the girl.

Her eyes widened in alarm and she took a half-step away from me, seeing something in me that frightened her. She glanced at the door, as if wishing it would open so she could leave. *Why was she here?* The answer to that fateful question struck me an instant later. The pounding in my head receded and I closed my eyes, listening to the booming of her panicked heartbeat and the stentorian gasps of her breathing from the other side of the room—sounds that magnified and echoed in my skull like the tolling of a cathedral bell. The rush of blood through her veins and arteries called to me, irresistible, delicious—

I leapt the space between us in a single bound. She moaned and struggled against me, as I had struggled against the vampyre demoness who'd attacked me in the Guttzeig-High Sazburg coach. The girl's strength was no match for mine. My incisors extended fully as I forced her head to one side and kissed her exposed neck. They found the soft, warm flesh, piercing her jugular.

The girl instantly became limp in my arms, sedated by the chemical mix I injected into her bloodstream. Her eyes rolled and her lips formed a lazy smile as I stimulated that area of her brain responsible for pleasure. She didn't resist when I lifted her and carried her over to the bed. Crouching over her, I hungrily drank her blood while my hands roamed freely over her trembling body. Finally she arched her spine and shuddered with pleasure, a bestial sigh of relief rasping from her throat.

Her blood revitalized me. New strength flowed through my limbs and every cell in my body cried out in rapture at the sensation of rebirth. Satisfied, at least for the moment, I pulled my incisors free of the girl's neck while injecting a powerful coagulant into the twin wounds to prevent her from bleeding to death, while at the same time stimulating her flesh to regenerate and heal the punctures. In a matter of hours they would be invisible to the naked eye—no one would ever know she had fallen victim to a vampyre, and the wonderful thing was, she would remember none of it, just as I had remembered nothing of what had happened aboard the coach until Doctor Schmidt brought my memories back.

All of this I knew instinctively, with a surety of knowledge that could only have originated from one source—the vampyre who'd done to me as I'd done to the mute girl. She'd given me *an awareness* that made me laugh with unbridled joy as I gazed at the unmoving girl on the bed, relishing our mutually satisfactory transaction. I hadn't taken enough blood to kill her—she would sleep and then awaken some hours later, feeling slightly weak, but that would pass quickly. Then she'd find her senses enhanced far beyond their human limitations. She'd see the world with a clarity she'd never before dreamt might exist. I'd passed the vampyre's gift on to her.

Having completed the feeding process, my incisors retracted into my skull. I began changing back to what I'd been. It was a new and unfamiliar feeling, and one that was not altogether pleasant. My mood changed along with my physical appearance. The girl on the bed lost her attraction; my euphoria turned to revulsion and self-disgust for what I'd just done. I'd been transformed into *an animal* that fed on other human beings.

Just then the door opened and Thenck stood there, framed in light from the outside corridor. The guards I'd met downstairs were behind him, their rebuilt faces hideous. Ludwig waited off to one side, shrunken and afraid. What had he expected to see when the door opened? *A vampyre, obviously*. Perhaps he'd also expected to find the girl dead, but she was still breathing, was still very much alive.

"I see you are awake, Herr Manfred," Thenck said. His voice betrayed no emotion whatsoever.

"Awake and unhappy, Herr Thenck. You have manipulated me with breathtaking arrogance. I am sickened by what has transpired here."

Thenck shrugged. "It was necessary, in order that you are prepared for whatever lies ahead in the Arena. Let that be an end to it. For your information, it is early morning outside. You have slept almost twenty-four hours. Doctor Schmidt tells me this is not unusual when the change begins. However, you should be getting ready to leave for the Arena. It would not do for you to be late."

I looked at the sleeping girl. "What about her?"

"She is none of your concern. We shall take care of her."

He signed to one of the guards, who passed his musket to his comrade and came into the room. With almost reverent care, he slipped his arms under the girl's body and easily lifted her off the bed. He then carried her out into the corridor. Thenck glanced at her as she passed, and I imagined I saw some momentary trace of concern and emotion in him, but this vanished quickly when he returned his attention to me.

"Naturally I do not wish anyone to know you are working for me. To this end I have arranged for you to adopt a false name and identity. You are to be Bruno, the personal bodyguard of the Lady von Klaus. That story will stand up to any scrutiny. All you have to worry about, Herr Manfred, is staying alive. And

winning, of course. Kindly be ready to leave in thirty minutes. Ludwig will come for you."

The door slammed shut and heavy locking bolts were driven home. I stripped off my clothing and went to the basin, washed and shaved, then put on the brown uniform. The jacket, trousers and boots fit me well.

Glancing at the bed, I saw the girl's leather glove. It must have slipped off when the soldier lifted her. Closer examination revealed something else, however. Inside the glove was an artificial hand, carved from wood. There was a thin leather strap to allow its owner to secure the false hand to her forearm; but the strap had parted, perhaps during our brief struggle. A less suspicious soul might have assumed she had lost her hand in some awful accident, but everything I'd seen thus far convinced me that it had something to do with Doctor Schmidt. I left the wooden hand on the bed. Perhaps someone would return it to its unfortunate owner.

When the heavy bolts were drawn again, it was Ludwig who opened the door and peered up at me.

"The coach is waiting," he said. "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I told him.

The dwarf led the way downstairs, to a rear door that gave access to a high-walled courtyard with wrought-iron gates. The coach was the same one that had transported me from the prison, with the same masked driver. I climbed inside.

"Good luck," Ludwig called up to me, before he slammed the door shut in my face. It saved me from having to tell him where he could shove his good luck.

The coach set off again. Judging from the rattle of the wheels on cobblestones and the echoes from nearby walls, we passed through several narrow alleys before emerging onto a main road. The coach had to stop to allow regiments of soldiers to march past, preceded by booming drums and shrieking flutes; it was followed by the unmistakable, bone-shaking rumble of the Junkers war machines, the smoking iron and bronze beasts that had ground the Moskovian armies to dust. I guessed these must be part of a celebration parade for the Kaiserine's birthday. Eventually the coach continued on its way again. The coach turned sharply off the main road and went down what I took to be a ramp. The clattering of the wheels was suddenly much louder, indicating we'd moved inside a building.

At last the driver stopped and operated the mechanism that unlocked the door. I climbed out. We were in an underground chamber, presumably beneath the Arena, as suggested by the huge support pillars with their arched buttresses. Other coaches were coming down the ramp and discharging their occupants before trundling off up another ramp to disappear into the daylight outside. At first I thought the scene chaotic and disorganized, but dozens of uniformed footmen were moving rapidly through the crowd, directing the confused new-arrivals this way and that, imposing a sense of order.

The Arena is an impressive example of Imperial architecture, surrounded by giant heroic statues and elaborate carvings of the epic battles that gave our Kaiserine dominance of all Europa. Within, the famous Hall of the Champions contains bronze busts of those fierce, skillful warriors who survived the previous contests. There is no corresponding Hall of the Losers. Rumor had it that the dead, and quite often the dying, were buried in a mass grave behind the Arena and promptly forgotten about. An exaggeration, of course. Then again, perhaps it was true.

The rewards by far outweighed the dangers. He who won the annual contest and became the Kaiserine's

Champion not only earned a vast sum of gold, but was given a minor title and a private estate by our ever-generous Kaiserine. He'd never have to work, or fight, again. But most of them did come back to test themselves against the fastest, deadliest warriors in the Empire. Fighting and killing were all these men knew. Even with the vampyre's gift pulsing in my veins, I was none too sure of my chances of surviving the contest, let alone winning.

A scarlet-uniformed footman stopped in front of me, holding a portable writing board containing crested note paper and a small brass ink-well.

"And who might you be?" he demanded.

"The name's Bruno," I said. "I serve the Lady von Klaus."

He consulted his list. "Ah, Bruno," he said. His powdered white wig wobbled as he flipped open the ink-well lid, dipped his quill and made a mark upon his list. "Come with me."

I glanced up at the coach driver. Just for a moment, a kind of empathy passed between us, a sympathetic bonding. The driver nodded, and I nodded back. Then he jerked his reins and the coach moved off, circling around to join the queue at the exit ramp.

The footman took me through a door and along a wide corridor. We entered a square chamber with whitewashed stone walls and bare wooden floors. Benches had been set along three of the walls. The fourth wall consisted of a weapons rack, heavy with swords, knives, axes and even wicked-looking pikes, all oiled and gleaming, and no doubt meticulously sharpened.

"This is one of the waiting areas," the footman explained. "You'll remain here with your fellow contestants until your name is called." He consulted his list again. "The first round draw has already been made—you're to fight in the seventh match, immediately after Zargek and Helmut. Remember these names. When they are called, you should make ready to fight. If you fail to report for a match, for whatever reason, your name will be struck from the contest lists and your mistress' entry fee will be forfeited. Is that understood?"

"Yes. Do you know who will I be fighting first?"

"Gunter, the Duke's man."

"The Duke Wilhelm, you mean?" I could hardly believe this remarkable coincidence.

The footman nodded. "None other."

"What's Gunter like?" I asked.

"He's good—very good. Came third last year. Killed two opponents as I recall, before he retired with a shoulder wound in the fifth round."

With this casual but unnerving comment he left me alone, but within moments I was joined by more than a dozen other men of various appearance, most wearing uniforms, and none of friendly persuasion. Forced to congregate before they fought in the Arena, they kept their distance from each other and from me, each picking a vacant spot on one of the benches.

I sat down too and waited, feeling very philosophical about the whole thing. I'd been a soldier and the

thought of dying didn't particularly bother me—I'd learned to live with my fear on the bloody battlefields of Europa, when the blast of a single cannon or an explosive dropped from an airship could decimate an entire company of men. I closed my eyes and considered my strengths and weaknesses. My best weapon was undoubtedly the saber, and I was better on the attack than in defense. So I'd attack, and keep attacking until either I or my opponent lay dead on the Arena floor.

I opened my eyes again and stared at the man who was staring at me. I'd felt the prick of his attention through my closed eyelids. He was a tall, dangerous-looking fellow wearing a plain white shirt and black leather pantaloons with high, knee-length boots. He sat opposite me. His dark hair hung loosely over his face, and through this curtain he watched me with unblinking eyes. A gold ring adorned his left ear-lobe, catching the light from the lantern suspended above his head. His singular interest in me stirred my curiosity.

"Your name wouldn't be Gunter, would it?" I asked.

He grinned, showing white teeth, but didn't offer an answer. The others sat immobile, pretending to ignore us but nonetheless interested in whatever our exchange might reveal about us. I closed my eyes again. Then opened them as he crossed the room and came to stand over me like a menacing shadow.

"You're Bruno," he said. I nodded. He scowled and leaned forward so we were almost nose to nose. "I'm going to fillet you like the ugly fish you are, Bruno. You're going to flop around the Arena floor, begging for mercy."

He suddenly looked down. I'd drawn his own knife from his boot and held the point against his stomach. He took the hint and stepped away quickly. I reversed the knife, offering it to him pommel-first.

"A fish," I said, "can't fight back. The same can't be said for me."

His face assumed a blank expression but his eyes narrowed into dark slits. He snatched the knife out of my hand, returned to his place opposite me and sat down. One or two of the men who'd been watching smiled. Others deliberately avoided looking at Gunter, which I took to be a sign of how much they feared him and respected his fighting skills. Despite my small victory I was still by no means supremely confident of my abilities. Just how much of a gamble was Thenck taking with my life?

A perfumed dandy of a nobleman stepped into the chamber and looked around disdainfully, as if he'd accidentally blundered into the local cattle market on a hot day. Behind him stood two guards, their gleaming muskets held ready.

"My name is Count Laszlo," he introduced himself. "Some of you have fought in the Arena before and already know this, but there are those of you who have not, therefore I am obliged to explain." He opened an expensive silver snuff-box, put a pinch of powder on the back of his left hand, inhaled sharply, then sneezed explosively. "Before the contest begins, you will all be taken upstairs into the Arena to salute the Kaiserine. Anyone who fails to salute the Kaiserine will be taken away and shot. The Kaiserine will then give a short but encouraging speech, which you will all applaud with great enthusiasm." Another sneeze followed a second pinch of snuff. "Anyone who fails to applaud the Kaiserine's speech with great enthusiasm will be taken away and shot." He looked around the room. "Does anyone have any questions?"

We had none. Count Laszlo gestured and we filtered out into the corridor, toward a wide ramp. Fighters from other waiting areas were already on the ramp. We fell in behind them, and climbed up into the Arena.

Above the ten-foot-high wall surrounding the circular Arena floor were tier after tier of spectator benches, already filled to capacity. The Empire's nobles got the best seats, of course. Social rank was defined by how closely the audience sat to the Kaiserine, who had her own private box. She was surrounded by a dozen or so high-ranking officers and aristos dressed in their finest regalia. The men wore dazzling arrays of medals while the women, resplendent in purple and blue silk dresses, were weighed down by gold and jewels. In and around the Kaiserine's box stood Imperial Guardsmen, armed to the teeth and ready to obliterate anyone foolish enough to cause the slightest ripple of trouble. I'd witnessed their kind in action in Moskovia. They were formidable soldiers, the best in the Empire, which meant they were the best in the world.

We formed up in rough lines facing the most powerful monarch Europa had ever known. The Kaiserine, wearing a purple silk dress and a diamond tiara that could have purchased kingdoms, stood. As if on cue, sunlight suddenly struck her box and reflected off her tiara, momentarily dazzling me, but I had enough sense to bow along with everyone else. Or almost everyone else. Someone just behind me didn't bow. He'd either been drinking and his wits were addled, or he was criminally stupid. Or both. Guardsmen moved in fast from all sides, grabbing him and bundling him away. The Kaiserine showed no indication of having seen the scuffle. She smiled down at us, captivating us with her flawless beauty.

"Warriors," she said, "I salute your courage. Fight well today, and victory will be yours."

With this, she sat down again. A short speech, indeed! The Kaiserine was supposedly sixty years old but didn't look a day over twenty. Whatever arcane secrets kept her young were known only to a very small number of people, most of whom were never permitted to venture outside the walls of the Imperial Palace—or so the rumors went. Were they true? I'd no way of knowing, and supposed I never would.

Remembering that we were supposed to applaud her speech, upon pain of death, we applauded. Then Count Laszlo shoed us back down the ramp again.

As I turned away from the Kaiserine's box, I saw Otto Thenck. He sat behind the Kaiserine and slightly to her right, and was watching me closely. I wondered how much he'd bet on my winning the Arena contest? That could be the only reason he'd go to so much trouble to secure the services of a half-vampyre swordsman. A small fortune, probably. I resented being used for such a base purpose, but again the alternative flashed briefly before my mind's eye, and I cleared my throat uncomfortably.

On the Kaiserine's left sat a gentleman with a large white mustache and a dueling scar that marked him as the Duke Wilhelm, one of Her Majesty's senior advisers and commander of the City Guard, otherwise known as the Wardens. He leaned across to speak into the Kaiserine's ear while Thenck looked on, frowning in disapproval. The disturbing thought I'd had earlier returned to niggle at me. With several dozen names in the hat, the chances of mine being drawn out with Gunter's in the very first round were somewhat remote, to say the least. My suspicions were confirmed by the hostile look Thenck gave the unwitting Duke when the Kaiserine laughed at whatever Wilhelm had said. Perhaps Thenck didn't so much care *whowon* the contest as *whodidn't* win? Perhaps he wanted to spike Duke Wilhelm's chances of success, and had deliberately matched me against Gunter just to make Wilhelm look particularly bad?

Conjecture was useless and merely served as a distraction. Survival must be my only concern. We were escorted back to our various waiting areas, and didn't have long to wait before the first match was called.

"Cortez! Von Gump! Step forward!" a voice shouted.

One of the men in our chamber, a short, dark-haired youth with the swarthy looks of an Espanyan,

stood and went to the weapons rack. I assumed this was Cortez. He selected a straight-bladed sword and nothing else. Without looking at any of us he went out into the corridor. Someone from one of the other waiting areas met him there and they climbed the ramp into the Arena together.

Their names were shouted again and the crowd applauded as the two warriors made ready to fight. The applause died away as they got down to business. Steel clashed on steel, almost delicately at first, as each man tested the other. Then a heated exchange brought a concerted gasp from the audience. The fighting went on for a good while and then, suddenly, silence.

Guards marched down the ramp and past our door, dragging a blood-spattered body behind them by the heels. The Espanyan who'd picked the straight sword came in and sat down in the same place as before. His gaze met mine and I grinned at him. He grinned back. His dark orange shirt had been slashed and blood ran from half a dozen minor cuts, but he was alive, and that was all that mattered.

Count Laszlo stuck his head through the doorway. "Well done, lad. The Kaiserine liked that trick of yours. Very nasty. You can rest now, while everyone else has their turn. The doctor will tend to your wounds if you've anything that needs stitching?"

Cortez sensibly went to see the doctor. Another two names were called; another two warriors faced each other in the Arena and in a short while one of them was dragged down the ramp with his adversary's sword sticking out of his body. The winner, limping badly, went to see the doctor.

The same scenario repeated itself, this time with the winner smiling from ear to ear because he hadn't sustained a single wound, while his opponent was virtually slashed to pieces.

As the matches went on, another three of the warriors in our waiting area went out. None of them returned. Finally I heard Zargek and Helmut being called to fight. Gunter and I were next. He'd already gone to the rack and picked his weapons, a sword plus a vicious-looking short axe. The latter was an unusual choice, and one that gave me cause for concern.

Above, Zargek and Helmut drew gasps of admiration and bursts of wild applause from the crowd. Gunter swung the axe in his left hand while his sword, in his right hand, made neat little circles in the air, as if gouging out an imaginary opponent's eyes. Footsteps and harsh breathing echoed down the ramp and along the corridor. Gunter swapped hands, taking the axe in his right and the sword in his left. His weapons blurred as he attacked another imaginary foe. Zargek and Helmut moved away from the ramp, back into the middle of the Arena, locked in a furious exchange which could only have one ending. It came quickly. The crowd roared and spectators stamped their feet in approval.

Count Laszlo stuck his head into the room again.

"Gunter! Ah, there you are. Where's this fellow Bruno?"

I stood. Count Laszlo's gaze rested briefly upon my Corsican mercenary's uniform. "Let's see if you can give as good a performance as those last two. 'Pon my word!" He inhaled snuff and sneezed. "I've never seen such speed and skill."

"Then keep your eyes open," Gunter said. "You're about to witness the fight of the century, if my friend here is as good as he thinks he is."

"I'll try not to disappoint you," I said, standing up and moving to the weapons rack. I selected a saber, then indicated that Gunter should leave the area ahead of me. "Ladies first."

"Fools come last," he said.

Laszlo smiled, his teeth gleaming. "Pon my word!" he said. "Such entertainment, and the day is still young."

He led us out into the corridor and over to the ramp. We arrived in time to see the previous pair coming down. One of them was dead, his eyes and mouth open wide in an almost-comic expression of eternal surprise. The front of his tunic was stained black with blood. The other man wore a jerkin with an unusual pink and green harlequin pattern. He had a spring in his step that made me look at him twice. Our gaze met briefly and he grinned at me, then passed us as we climbed the ramp.

"Friend of yours?" Gunter asked.

"No. What's it to you?"

"I was about to suggest you bid him goodbye, since he won't be seeing you again in this life."

"My word!" Count Laszlo said, and sneezed a moment later.

The unmistakable smell of blood hung heavily in the air. An excited buzz of conversation went around the Arena as the audience discussed the previous match. Count Laszlo pointed to the two large crosses that had been marked on the Arena floor. Gunter walked over to one cross and I occupied the other. The Count remained at the top of the ramp, rubbing his hands in anticipation.

A uniformed, bewigged flunkey consulted the notes on his writing-board, then shouted, "Gunter, for the Duke Wilhelm, and Bruno, for the Lady von Klaus!"

As we bowed to the Kaiserine, I wondered who the Lady von Klaus might be—not that it mattered, for it was unlikely and unnecessary that we ever meet. The idea that this might be Thenck's own pseudonym amused me only briefly. Gunter took his axe in his left hand again and raised his sword. I faced him, dropping into en garde.

My first priority was that damned axe which could do wicked damage at close quarters. Gunter danced forward, leading with his sword; I tapped his blade aside with my own, ducked as the axe came up and around, then scored a shallow cut across the back of his forearm and kicked the axe out of his hand. The weapon spun through the air and landed near the ramp's edge.

Gunter's expression betrayed nothing as he came in very fast, opening my uniform jacket from shoulder to waist. A thousand pairs of lungs sucked in a deep breath but I'd leapt back just in time, otherwise he'd have opened me up, too. We came together, and he quickly proved himself to be a swordsman of no mean skill. His style was predominantly Prussian but there were elements of Corsican, Portugee and even Moskovian too. I watched, fascinated, as he executed a Moskovian fletch followed by a flat Corsican strike that would have taken my sword from my hand if I'd been an instant slower. He pursued me relentlessly around the Arena and I gave ground unwillingly, fighting him all the way.

Just for a moment we drew apart, each studying the other. The crowd, including Count Laszlo, used the moment to applaud our display. Only the Kaiserine didn't clap, and Thenck behind her. Duke Wilhelm was nearly jumping up and down in his chair with excitement.

Gunter's sword blurred as he executed an eight-point attack, one of the most difficult maneuvers a

swordsman can attempt, and the most dangerous. I parried more by accident than design and struck out blindly as he ran past me. I expected him to twist around and come at me again but he staggered, covering his eye with his left hand. I realized at once what had transpired and didn't press home my advantage. Instead I stood motionless, with the bloodied point of my sabre resting upon the Arena floor.

After a moment, Gunter realized I wasn't coming after him. He took his bloodied hand away and looked at me with his one remaining eye. I held up my hand, telling him to stay where he was, then turned and addressed Count Laszlo.

"Count, the doctor, if you please?"

Laszlo didn't know what to do. The doctor, in the middle of an Arena fight? He glanced up at the Kaiserine's box but received no advice from that quarter. Frustrated, he turned and hurried down the ramp, shouting as he ran. In moments he returned with a small gentleman wearing a long black coat and carrying a black leather bag. The doctor looked around the Arena in surprise, as if seeing it for the first time before Laszlo pointed him to Gunter, who'd also grounded his sword and was waiting to see exactly what I was up to.

The crowd remained silent. Curious looks were directed at the Kaiserine's box, as if they expected someone to cry foul or mismatch. Slowly the doctor crossed the Arena floor until he stood before Gunter. He put down his bag, opened it, took out cloth and ointment and began cleaning Gunter's face. At the doctor's request, Gunter went down on one knee and tilted his head back to receive treatment. Time dragged on, and still no one spoke or did anything to stop it. Several puzzled officials gathered at the top of the ramp and tried to question Count Laszlo, but he waved them all to silence.

The doctor placed a pad over Gunter's eye and wrapped a bandage around his head to keep the pad in place. He tied a neat knot, then closed his bag and waddled back to the ramp. As he passed me by he remarked, with a tone of severe disapproval, "A foul stroke, m'sieur."

I already knew as much. I approached Gunter, and bowed from the waist. "I apologize for taking your eye," I said.

"Accepted," he said, grinning despite his injury.

"Are you willing to continue?"

"Yes. I only need one eye to beat you."

"We shall see," I said, stepping back and assuming en garde. Gunter did the same and the crowd roared and stamped its feet and cheered. Duke Wilhelm stood and clapped, and others in the Kaiserine's box did likewise. Then the noise died away to be replaced by an expectant silence. The Duke sat down again, as did the rest, but he leaned forward in anticipation of what was to come.

Our swords clashed and we circled the Arena, each of us seeking an opening, but finding none. Good? He was excellent. If not for a certain bite that had increased my strength and quickened my reflexes, he'd have had me a dozen times.

I deliberately kept away from his blind side, fighting him as fairly as I could, for I reckoned I had enough of an advantage. We fought for longer than all the previous matches put together, and we fought well.

As absurd as it sounds, I found myself avoiding openings that I might easily have taken. The truth of the

matter slowly dawned on me. I had no desire to wound Duke Wilhelm's man further, or to kill him. I was a soldier, not a murderer. Otto Thenck had chosen the wrong man.

Gunter began to sense my hesitation, but could do nothing about it because he was tiring, while I was still fresh and strong.

"Damn you," he hissed, as we came together and strained against each other like two battling stags in the forest. "You're making a fool out of me!"

He was right, of course. Soon everyone watching would know that I wasn't pressing home my attacks. Doubtless it was only be a matter of time before officials noticed also, and stepped in to stop the fight. What then? How would Thenck react if they disqualified me from the contest? I didn't imagine he'd be too pleased. There would be no bag of silver and no fast horse to take me out of the city. Probably the last thing I'd hear was the bang of a discharging musket, an instant before the heavy lead ball blew my head off.

I pushed Gunter away, fainted right, stamped left and disarmed him with a downward stroke that must have numbed his entire arm. His sword clattered across the Arena floor. Before he could do anything I had the point of my weapon at his throat. He bared his teeth, realizing he'd lost, then raised his chin, ready for the death-thrust. His single eye glared at me, insisting I finish him quickly.

The only problem was, I didn't want to.

"On your knees," I said.

He slowly sank down, while I kept my sword at his throat. Again the crowd held its breath. Duke Wilhelm was clutching the rail so tightly that the varnished wood squeaked in protest.

I drew in a deep breath, then said, "Do you swear eternal loyalty to our beloved Kaiserine? Will you serve her always, as a faithful servant, until death takes you?"

It was the oath of the Imperial Armed Forces, which I had taken myself upon joining the Army. Gunter frowned, puzzled, but he looked up at the Kaiserine's box and gave the formal reply: "I do, and I will."

I stepped back, lowering my sword. "Then rise and leave this place with your life, and your honor, intact."

He stared up at me for long seconds, then rose off the Arena floor, evidently stunned by my actions and by the fact he was still alive. He wasn't the only one who was confused. What I'd done had a sense of ritual about it, as if I'd invoked some ancient escape clause. The officials, including the Duke Wilhelm, were looking at each other and trying to decide exactly what to do next.

The Duke waved to Count Laszlo, who hurried forward. Wilhelm met him half-way down the steps to the Kaiserine's box and they conferred in urgent whispers.

Gunter gave me a final speculative look, then turned his back on me, walked to the ramp and left the Arena, accompanied by cheers from the crowd. They liked what I'd done, sparing a brave man his life; but would those in charge of the contest like it equally as well?

Thenck was watching me again, expressionless and apparently unmoved by what he'd just witnessed. But I could sense his cold rage even from this distance.

Then Count Laszlo came down the steps and approached me.

"The Kaiserine wants to speak with you," he said, and his tone and expression suggested this wasn't altogether a good thing.

* * * *

We met in a deserted corridor, far from prying eyes. I'd been relieved of my sword but despite this, several Guardsmen armed with muskets stood at either end of the corridor, watching me closely, while I stood beside Count Laszlo and received a Kaiserine's wrath.

"'Insolence' is too small a word for what you have done," she said, pacing up and down in front of me, radiating her displeasure. She suddenly stopped pacing, turned to face me and placed her hands on her hips. "What the devil were you thinking of, flaunting the rules of the Arena like that?" she demanded, her nostrils flaring.

"Your Majesty—" I began, but she held up a hand, demanding silence. I noticed a thin red scar running around her wrist, but didn't think it significant, not then.

"I will not have anyone *taking over* my tournament and bending it to their own desires. What's done is done, but there will be no more of it, Herr Bruno, otherwise there will be an unfortunate accident. You're good, but your blade is no match for the Tirpitz musket, especially in the hands of one of my Guardsmen. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." She didn't mince words, this young-old woman who ruled Europa with an iron fist. She looked at Count Laszlo and indicated, with a toss of her head, that he should leave us alone. Laszlo retreated, bowing all the way.

She waited until he was out of hearing range, then said, in a low voice, "So, Herr Manfred. Thenck was right—you've proved yourself to be a remarkable swordsman."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," I said, bewildered by the fact she knew my real identity, and evidently also knew that Thenck was responsible for my being there. Now that she'd verbally whipped me with her beautiful voice, I'd expected her to dismiss me so she could return to watching the contest. But she stared at me for a while longer and I had the feeling I was being evaluated.

She said, "You noted the disturbance when I rose to address you in the Arena?" I recalled the arrest of the idiot behind me, who had failed to bow, and nodded. "He was an assassin," the Kaiserine said. "He's dead now, of course, but before he died, he confirmed what we suspected—that my enemies are taking direct action against me."

"Enemies, Your Majesty?" I thought she meant spies working for some foreign power—Moskovia, Turkach or perhaps Ch'nee, none of which had any great love for the Empire.

"Filth," she said. "Vampyres."

She couldn't have shocked me more if she'd slapped me across the face with a wet fish. Vampyres! All I'd heard about since I'd arrived in this damned city was vampyres! But I kept my mouth closed and betrayed none of my surprise.

"The Secret Police have been sniffing out their nests in High Sazburg and destroying them, on my

orders,” the Kaiserine went on. “Now the filth have decided to retaliate by striking back at me. Thenck's agents warned him that three vampyre assassins had been dispatched to kill me today. The Secret Police intercepted and staked one before it even reached the Arena. We've dealt with the second one—you witnessed his arrest. Now we must identify and kill the third vampyre.” She tapped a slim, elegant finger against my chest. “Which is where you come in, my brave swordsman.”

Her sarcasm wasn't lost on me. “How may I serve Your Majesty?” I asked.

“I'm told the filth like to prove their superiority,” she said. “What better way to accomplish this than to defeat all the *human* competitors and become Arena Champion? But we arranged a little surprise for them, Thenck and I. The second vampyre was blinded and stunned when polished mirrors directed sunlight into the Arena's lower levels. He wasn't expecting that, and my Guardsmen overwhelmed him before he could recover. But the third vampyre, who undoubtedly was also present, didn't even flinch—or, if he did, none of the small army of observers watching the assembly saw this. That means he's very old, very experienced, and the most dangerous adversary you're likely to meet in the Arena. Which is why you must put your misplaced sense of honor to one side, Herr Manfred, at least until the contest is over and the third vampyre lies dead at your feet. You have no way of knowing who he is, therefore you must kill everyone who is sent against you.”

I didn't much like the sound of that, and it must have shown on my face because she slapped me, hard enough to make me stagger. Fast, too; I hadn't even sensed the blow coming.

“What is more important to you, swordsman?” she hissed into my face, her eyes blazing with anger. “Your honor, or the life of your Kaiserine? One cannot exist without the other. Consider this on your way back to the Arena.”

She drew back and summoned Count Laszlo. He came running, bringing with him a sword, which he offered to the Kaiserine. With an impatient gesture she indicated that he should give it to me.

I took the sword and, with growing curiosity, pulled the first few inches of glinting steel out of its plain leather scabbard. I dared not draw it fully for fear of prompting a reaction from the Kaiserine's watchful bodyguards. The steel was inlaid with silver, forming intricate swirling patterns down the blade. I doubted whether I'd ever held a more beautiful or more expensive object in my life.

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I said. “Your generosity is boundless.”

“It's not a gift, Herr Bruno,” she said, using my false name again because Laszlo was there. “It's a weapon. I don't expect you to admire it, I expect you to kill people with it.” She waved Laszlo away again. “The filth don't like silver, a fact they have taken great pains to conceal,” she said, lowering her voice. “My scientists are unable to explain why, but it burns their flesh on contact. Thenck assures me that a direct strike to the heart with that sword will destroy a vampyre. Assuming, of course, that the man who wields the blade is as good as I think he is.” A ghost of a smile played about her lips. “Good luck to you, Herr Bruno. If you live to see the end of today, you and I will speak again; you can be sure of it.”

With this, she turned and swept away. Her bodyguards fell in behind her. The small party rounded a corner and vanished from sight. Count Laszlo wiped sweat from his brow with a handkerchief and breathed a long sigh of relief.

“You know,” he said, “I think she actually likes you.”

I rubbed my stinging cheek, remembering the slap. “She has a damned queer way of showing it.”

He grinned and clapped me on the shoulder. "You're still alive, aren't you? That proves it. You see, those who earn the Kaiserine's displeasure usually find themselves developing a medical complaint."

I looked at him curiously. "What's that?"

"They stop breathing," he said, his manner and his expression deadly serious. "I suggest we return to the waiting area. You've had your first fight and probably won't be called upon again for a while. I suggest you put your feet up and relax, while you can."

We made our way along the twisting corridors until we found the waiting area again. Count Laszlo stopped and sucked in a deep breath, for at least fifty uniformed officers and servants were waiting outside the area, all of them waving pieces of paper. They surged forward and would have overwhelmed us had several armed guards not obeyed Laszlo's signal, forming a barrier that stopped the human tide.

"Damnation!" he said.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Something I should have foreseen," he said. He twirled the end of his mustache nervously. Everyone was shouting for attention, demanding Laszlo notice them first. "They're all offering private challenges. From the looks of things, everyone wants to fight you to prove themselves."

"What's their hurry? They'll get their chance."

"You don't understand. The Rules state that one competitor may issue a private challenge to another competitor at any time. The scheduled fights are postponed until the private challenge is satisfied. That's the way of it."

The crowd continued to shout and whistle and wave their papers, and more soldiers had to be brought in to push them back, such was their determination to reach me.

"Do you mean what I think you mean?" I asked.

Laszlo nodded slowly. "Providing the Arena adjudication committee agrees to uphold these challenges, which it surely will, you'll have to fight all challengers, one after the other, without pause."

"What if I refuse?"

Laszlo turned to face me. "Refuse an Arena challenge? It's never happened before, so I don't rightly know, but I suspect there's a nasty penalty clause lurking in the small print."

"That's what I thought you might say."

I walked forward, reached past the line of soldiers and grabbed three sheets of paper from the nearest three hands. I thrust them toward Laszlo.

"Send those three up first," I said, heading for the ramp. "Then pick whatever ones you fancy from the crowd."

If I was going to die then I'd die fighting, not at the end of a rope, or in front of a firing squad, or in some

dark cellar beneath Otto Thenck's headquarters.

"I salute your courage, lad!" Laszlo called after me.

Courage be damned, I was just annoyed with the entire bloody business. I hadn't asked to be bitten by a vampire, nor had I asked to become the Kaiserine's personal butcher.

Once again I stepped into the Arena. The crowd roared as it recognized me. I drew my new sword and threw the leather scabbard away, signifying my intention to meet all challenges with naked steel. They roared louder. I looked up at the Kaiserine's box. She took her seat beside Duke Wilhelm, and the entertainment resumed.

* * * *

My first adversary was a bearded giant of an Artillery corporal who had chosen a pike as his weapon. It looked like a toy in his huge hands. He came up the ramp cautiously as if he expected me to be waiting there in ambush, but I stood at the far side of the Arena, my sword-point resting on the floor.

"Come no further," I shouted. My voice echoed across the Arena, stopping him. "If you do, expect no quarter."

The giant snarled and charged straight for me, sweeping his pike up and around as though it weighed nothing. I ran to meet him half-way, judged the sweep of the pike, leapt, and continued past him, almost all the way to the ramp. I heard his knees and then his body hit the Arena floor like a toppled tree. Without even looking at his headless corpse I jogged back to my former position and waited for the next man. Not a word came from the crowd; not a single whisper.

Servants moved forward to take the body away but I stopped them with an upraised hand and sent them scurrying back to the ramp. I wanted the corpse to stay there, with its head lying upside-down beside it. I wanted whoever came up the ramp next to see what they were getting into.

The second warrior, a white-haired Cavalry lieutenant who carried a duelling scar on his left cheek, appeared. He glanced at the headless giant, wrinkled his nose in distaste, then began to circle the Arena, never taking his eyes off me. I repeated what I'd said to his predecessor, and he pointedly ignored me. No surprise there. I danced forward, tapped his sword aside and took him in the throat with a lunging thrust, so fast he didn't even see it coming. His eyes widened, his sword fell from his hands and he collapsed, unsuccessfully trying to stop his life's blood from leaking over the Arena floor. Sympathy threatened to well in me but I slapped it down, telling myself it had been his choice, not mine. He gargled his final breath and died.

Again the servants started forward to recover the body and again I turned them back. They looked up at Duke Wilhelm but he waved them away as if they were annoying insects. Maybe he understood what I was doing and why I was doing it. Maybe he approved.

A third man came up the ramp, an Imperial Navy captain by the look of him, wearing dark blue instead of Imperial black. I repeated my warning, asking—no, *begging* him to reconsider. His short cutlass faltered for a moment as he weighed the situation, then came up again.

"Shall we fight, sir?" he asked. We assumed *en garde* and probed each other's defenses. He fought fairly, almost decently, damn him, and he died without a murmur of protest as my silver-inlaid blade found his heart.

Again I glanced up at the Kaiserine's box. She sat there, unmoving and aloof. Was she enjoying herself? Did she take pleasure in seeing brave men die? Duke Wilhelm stared down at me. What thoughts were evolving behind those ice-blue eyes of his? Had he an inkling of the self-loathing that coursed through my veins as I waited for the fourth warrior to climb the ramp? I think he did. Any soldier would have felt the same way.

My next adversary didn't climb the ramp, he leapt up it, from the bottom to the top. This was no uniformed soldier—he was a half-naked Romani tribesman with braided hair and a fierce mustache and beard, the latter decorated with animal skulls and what I suspected were human bones. The servants scattered, terrified by the very sight of him, and I couldn't blame them because I wanted to run too. I didn't have the opportunity to repeat my warning and it wouldn't have made the slightest bit of difference anyway because the Romani had come to kill me and to kill me in the shortest time possible. His great curved scimitar rang against my sabre as he slammed me back against the wall with stunning force. My senses reeled and the Arena darkened about me for a terrible moment, but returned in time to allow me to throw myself to one side, avoiding the scimitar as it hacked into the wall where I'd been standing, drawing sparks.

The sheer brute force of the Romani had taken me by surprise and almost cost me my life. As I struggled to my feet he grabbed me by the throat, smashing me against the wall again. Pain lanced through my skull. His scimitar was no use at such close quarters so he dropped it and grabbed my wrist with his freed hand, twisting it until I had no choice but to drop my sword too. I struggled, but to no avail. The Romani was squeezing the life from me, denying the flow of blood to my brain. His face became deformed before my eyes, as if viewed through warped glass. I tried to draw breath, but couldn't.

A low growl rumbled somewhere inside my throbbing head. The Romani grinned as I reached out and grabbed hold of his neck as he'd grabbed hold of mine. He tensed the massive corded muscles of his neck to protect himself, plainly not expecting me to possess enough strength to harm him. But as I continued to exert pressure his grin slowly faded, and something approaching surprise crossed his primitive face. I bared my teeth, snarling at him. His surprise suddenly turned to naked fear and he screamed something into my face, words that made no sense but which were clearly borne of an illogical and unexpected terror.

The Romani lifted me up as if I weighed nothing, and then snapped his head forward in a vicious butt. Bone cracked and crimson pain burst inside my skull. He threw me down and kicked at me, still screaming. I heard and felt my ribs snap. The Arena darkened about me again, but not before my questing fingers found the hilt of my sword lying on the Arena floor. In a kind of reflex action, I thrust the blade deep into the Romani's stomach and twisted the point up into his heart.

It was an inglorious end to what might have been a shining career. I wondered whether the Romani might be the vampyre assassin, but that didn't seem to matter very much as the universe opened up and swallowed me whole.

* * * *

Count Laszlo's voice came to me through the darkness.

"My word! He's still breathing. He's alive."

I opened my eyes and his concerned face came into focus. He suddenly moved away from the table to reveal Thenck, lounging against the wall with his arms folded across his chest, just as he'd stood when he'd spoken to me in my prison cell the previous morning. We were in a small room off one of the corridors. Two Guardsmen stood outside, blocking the doorway.

"If he's alive then it's no thanks to you," Thenck snapped. "What were you and the adjudication committee thinking of, allowing that damned Romani into the Arena?"

"There was nothing in the Rules that said Romanis couldn't fight, Herr Thenck, if they were proposed and sponsored through the usual channels."

Laszlo gestured to a third figure standing in the corner, who waddled forward. It was the doctor who'd attended to Gunter's eye in the Arena. He put down his leather bag and set to examining me. Laszlo passed him a lantern, which he shone into my eyes. Then he prodded my ribs with a finger, watching for my reaction. I winced obligingly.

"You could always just ask me how I feel," I suggested.

The doctor raised an eyebrow, then stepped back from the table as I rose up onto my elbows. "How do you feel?" he asked.

"Terrible," I said, swinging my legs off the table. There were insufficient words in the language to describe the pounding ache inside my skull as I sat up. I abruptly wished I hadn't, but remaining upright seemed easier than lying down again.

Thenck said, "You'll be pleased to know the Romani is dead. You won the fight. You'll also be pleased to know an addendum denying Romanis the opportunity of ever participating in the Arena again has been added to the Rules."

I couldn't have cared less, but didn't want to disillusion him. "What of the contest?" The doctor touched my swollen face and I hissed at the sudden sunburst of pain.

"Scheduled fights are taking place at this moment," Thenck said. "Your private challenges are postponed, until such time as you are fit to continue."

The doctor, his expression betraying his surprise, brought a bucket of water and a cloth, which he placed beside me on the table. I nodded my thanks, then soaked the cloth and squeezed it into a pad which I gingerly pressed to my face. The cool water brought blessed relief.

"The question is," Thenck said, "how quickly will you be able to return to the Arena?"

"That is quite impossible," the doctor said. "You only have to look at this man to realize he has suffered major facial injuries, the extent of which—"

Thenck held up a hand, cutting him off in mid-sentence. "If you will be good enough to wait outside, Herr Doctor, in case we need to call upon your services again? And you too, Count."

The doctor picked up his bag, plainly displeased but hardly able to argue given the circumstances. Laszlo followed him, frowning, and Thenck kicked the door shut behind them.

"He means well," I said, in case Thenck, the Magician, was contemplating making the doctor disappear.

"Exactly how bad are your injuries?" he said.

I indicated my face. "Even talking is painful. There's no doubt that something's broken. My ribs, also.

I've no idea how it would affect me if I were to fight, but I can guess." The slightest movement would incur agony; whoever I happened to be fighting was bound to take advantage of my disability and kill me without mercy.

"You were wounded in The War, Herr Manfred, were you not?"

"Yes."

"I checked your Army records. A Moskovian musket ball entered your right lung and very nearly killed you. Your regimental surgeon managed to save you, but pronounced you unfit for military duty."

I sighed. "What is your point, Herr Thenck?"

"Open your jacket and check the entry wound made by the musket ball." He saw my hesitation and said, "Humor me, Herr Manfred, if you please?"

There was no need to unbutton the jacket—I simply pulled the slashed front apart. I looked down at my chest, expecting to see the puckered wound just above the right nipple—

I stared at Thenck, incredulous. He smiled.

"Exactly," he said. "The vampyre's gift appears to include what Doctor Schmidt terms *rapid regeneration*. I've no idea what he means by this, but it's one of the main reasons vampyres are so hard to kill—they heal very quickly, unless the damage they incur is immediately fatal. A sword-thrust to the heart, for example, or a bullet in the brain, or decapitation."

The ball wound had vanished. The flesh was whole, intact. I brushed the area with my fingertips, expecting to feel some trace of the scar ridge, but it was gone.

"There is no doubt that Doctor Schmidt's elixir has changed you, to the stage where you are enjoying all the benefits of being vampyre, but without any of the undesirable drawbacks," Thenck said. "Your War wound healed after you briefly became a vampyre and drank my—maidservant's blood." I wondered at his momentary hesitation, but didn't ask. Thenck continued, "It is likely your present wounds will also heal at a much faster rate, but they are severe, and we cannot wait. The solution is obvious."

I didn't understand, until someone knocked on the door and Thenck pulled it open. Doctor Schmidt stood there, looking at me through his thick spectacle lenses. Beside him stood a young and pretty blonde-haired woman wearing a plain black dress. I guessed she was someone's personal servant. Judging from her puzzled expression, she hadn't the slightest idea why she had been brought here.

Her blue eyes were wide and innocent as Thenck smiled at her and said, "Please come in, my dear. As Doctor Schmidt told you, we have urgent need of your assistance."

She came into the room. Schmidt followed her in and closed the door behind them.

Thenck said, "What is your name, my dear?"

"Rosemarie, Herr Thenck."

"You are here because your mistress' life is in danger, Rosemarie. There is an assassin at large, you see. We do not know who he is, but he intends to kill the Kaiserine. That is why we are all here. We intend to

stop him, and save the Kaiserine. You can help us."

Rosemarie gasped and her hand flew to her throat. "How, sir? Pray, tell me how I can assist you?" Her reaction was a tad over-dramatic but there was no doubting her sincerity. The very thought that the Kaiserine, her mistress, might be in danger sent Rosemarie into a panic.

"By drinking this," Schmidt said, offering her a dark glass bottle. The girl took it from him and stared at the bottle, her puzzlement obvious.

At that moment I realized what they intended.

"No," I said to Thenck, shaking my head. "I won't do it."

Rosemarie frowned at me, probably wondering who the uncouth, blood-spattered oaf sitting on the table was. Thenck frowned also, but further conversation was made useless by Rosemarie's pulling the stopper from the bottle, lifting it to her lips and tilting her head back so she could swallow the contents. Under other circumstances I believe she might have hesitated to think it over, but she'd been told that her actions might help the Kaiserine, and that was all there was to it. Loyalty dictated the poor girl's actions.

Rosemarie drained the bottle without even pausing to sniff or taste whatever it might contain.

She staggered, her eyelids fluttered, the bottle fell from her hands and shattered on the floor. Schmidt caught her and held her, for she'd fainted dead away. He brought her over and laid her on the table beside me.

"You think I'll drink her blood because she's asleep?" I demanded angrily.

"No, Herr Manfred," Thenck said. "I think you'll drink her blood because she just consumed Doctor Schmidt's only supply of the counter-elixir."

"What?"

"Tell him," Thenck said to Schmidt.

"Because she is not part vampyre herself, the counter-elixir has rendered her unconscious and will, in a very short time, kill her," Schmidt said. "Only one thing can save her. You can guess what that is, I think?"

I stared at Thenck. "You are, without doubt, the most devious swine I've ever had the misfortune to meet, Herr Thenck."

"Your personal feelings on this matter are immaterial," he said, without any change of expression. "The fact remains the only counter-elixir that exists flows in this girl's bloodstream. If you wish to be human again, free of the vampyre's curse and save this girl's life, you have only one option available to you."

"But this is absurd," I said. "If I drink her blood and take the counter-elixir myself, that will exorcise the vampyre from me, won't it? I thought you wanted me to win the Arena contest?"

"The change will not be instantaneous," Schmidt said. "You will find—"

"What matters," Thenck said, interrupting him, "is that you will be able to return to the Arena quickly. Your Kaiserine needs you. I think that fact overrides your own selfish wishes, Herr Manfred, don't you?"

He went to the door and opened it. "We'll leave you alone to think it over." He glanced at the girl then followed Schmidt out, closing the door.

There really wasn't much thinking to do. The pounding in my head was shortly masked by the insistent throbbing of the young girl's pulse. Her vibrant warmth filled the room. *Itouched* her body with my mind and detected the fluctuations of her heart as Schmidt's counter-elixir poisoned her. She was slipping further and further into unconsciousness. By drinking her blood and passing on the vampyre's gift, which would act against the counter-elixir, I'd be saving her life.

I quickly averted my eyes, disgusted with myself for trying to justify the feeding. But not for long. I could not resist the hunger. My upper lip lifted as my incisors extended fully and I leaned over her, pressing down with my head until my incisors punctured her skin and penetrated her jugular. She moaned, but didn't open her eyes. After a few moments her lips curled into a smile. Sweet, hot nectar poured down my throat and the pain in my head receded like an ebbing tide. The broken bones within my skull shifted, repairing themselves, returning to their original pattern. My broken ribs solidified, becoming whole again. All my aches and pains faded. Strength flowed through my limbs and I would have laughed out loud, *but for the fact my teeth were buried in Rosemarie's neck to the hilt, and I was draining her of life!*

I jerked back too quickly, spilling blood. It soaked her collar, her dress. I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand, feeling my incisors retract. Once again I was thoroughly disgusted with myself, and ashamed. I hated Thenck for what he'd done, for what he'd forced *me* to do. Thankfully, Rosemarie's neck-wounds closed and the bleeding stopped. How much of her blood had I taken? I sensed I'd reached the exact point where *decision* had to be made—a decision whether to permit her to live, or allow her to die. If I chose the latter then she would rise again as a mindless undead, subject to my will; if I chose the former, it would spark off the profound metaphysical changes that would transform Rosemarie into a vampyre.

I examined her closely and decided Rosemarie would recover from my feasting, given time. The deadly effects of Doctor Schmidt's counter-elixir on a non-vampyre had been offset by whatever chemicals I'd released into her body. Relief washed over me; I could not have had this girl's death upon my conscience. Too much guilt weighed down upon me already. Death trailed behind me, his breath like an open sewer.

My eyelids grew heavy. Having taken sustenance, my body now demanded rest and I dared not argue with its decree. Taking care not to disturb Rosemarie, I curled up on the table beside her, and slept the sleep of the dead.

* * * *

Rosemarie was gone when I awoke a short time later. I didn't imagine she'd gotten up and walked out by herself. Thenck must have had her taken away. I could only hope she would recover.

I sat up slowly, expecting the pain in my head to return, but no pain came. Somewhere in the distance steel clashed, and voices that had been shouting all afternoon hoarsely cheered the warriors now doing battle in the Arena.

The door opened and a Guardsman peered inside. He stared at me for a moment then shut the door again. I waited, knowing the news would be relayed to the right quarters.

Hardly a minute had passed before Count Laszlo stepped into the room. He left the door open, as if he feared me and wanted the Guardsmen to see and hear everything. "I see you have recovered, Herr Bruno," he said, unable to hide his puzzlement. And small wonder. A short time ago he'd seen me

wounded nearly unto death.

"Apparently," I said.

"Are you fit enough to fight, or do you need—?"

"Where's Thenck?"

"Herr Thenck has returned to the Kaiserine's box. I'm to send him word as regards your condition."

"Let's surprise him," I said, standing up. "What happened to my sword?"

Laszlo snapped his fingers. The Guardsmen brought the sword in and carefully passed it to Laszlo, who gave it to me. "Who's fighting just now?" I asked, swinging the blade experimentally, enjoying its balance and weight.

"A Prussian called Konrad and a Moskovian named Sergey."

"Did they issue a private challenge to me earlier?"

"As a matter of fact, yes, they both did."

"Thank you," I said, moving past him. The Guardsmen shifted warily as I stepped into the corridor but I didn't pay them any attention. The bottom of the ramp was visible at the far end of the corridor. As I approached, various warriors waiting to fight, officials and servants turned and stared at me. Their mouths either hung open in astonishment or their lips were pressed tight with disappointment at finding me still alive. They moved out of my way, perhaps sensing my mood. A wise decision.

I climbed the ramp and entered the Arena. Konrad and Sergey were in the middle of a desperate exchange. Both were wounded and bore several bloody cuts, but they were still game for a fight and giving the crowd the entertainment it sought.

Someone in the audience saw me and stood, shouting his surprise. The shout was taken up by someone else, and the realization went around the Arena like a forest fire. Men and women came to their feet; so did Duke Wilhelm. The Kaiserine and Thenck were the only ones who remained in their seats. They might have been carved from stone.

Konrad and Sergey stopped fighting and drew apart, not sure what was going on. But then they glanced at each other and a look of perfect understanding passed between them. Konrad wore Prussian blue and a short fur cloak over his right shoulder which identified him as an Hussar, one of the swift, elite horsemen whose curved blades had slashed bloody swathes through the Kaiserine's enemies. Sergey, by contrast, wore the light green of a Moskovian Lancer and fought with a straight sword of the type favored by heavy cavalry. As I drew near they lunged together, in perfect unison, as if they'd been rehearsing this joint attack for days. I shifted left, stabbed, leapt around the falling Konrad and slashed at Sergey before he could turn to meet my attack.

Two brave men who'd looked for glory lay side by side on the Arena floor dead, and I, their murderer, felt absolutely nothing for them. Why should I? They'd signed up to kill or be killed, willingly gambling their lives, and they'd lost to a better man.

The audience liked it, none more so than Duke Wilhelm who, red-faced with excitement, clapped loudly

and shouted his appreciation. Count Laszlo, who'd returned to his former position atop the ramp, looked positively pale by comparison. I reached out across the width of the Arena and *touched* him, feeling his surface emotions, sensing his surprise and horror at seeing two expert swordsmen executed in cold blood by no more than two swift strokes.

"I will now deal with the rest of the challenges that were laid at my feet," I said, loud enough for everyone to hear. "Count Laszlo!" He raised his head. "Bring forth the next man, but warn him before he enters that he can expect no quarter." I looked up at the box. "Kaiserine's rules," I added, coining a new phrase. "To the death."

Laszlo nodded, turned and went down the ramp. There were half a dozen warriors gathered there, held in check by soldiers and officials until their turn came. Laszlo selected a man and spoke with him briefly. The warrior pushed past the Count and ran up the ramp, ran across the Arena, ran onto my sword. He was still dying, his chances of swift glory dissipating along with his life when I signaled Laszlo to send the next man. He picked a scarlet-uniformed Franck mercenary with twin swords, who came forward cautiously and tried to trick me with a series of dazzling feints that did him no good at all; he dropped his swords and toppled like a tree when my blade found his heart.

The next man came half-way up the ramp then stopped. He was a tall, good-looking Infantry officer who looked as though he knew his business. He glanced around the Arena, stared at the bodies, then looked at me. And then he turned and went back down the ramp again. The crowd saw his retreat and jeered, but I didn't blame him, nor would I ever call him a coward. He'd exhibited plain common sense and for that I admired him greatly. The other warriors shifted to block him but he shouldered his way through them, ignoring their taunts. It occurred to me that quite possibly he was the only sane man in the entire Arena at that moment. Wilhelm was laughing and pointing, and I thought I detected a faint trace of a smile upon the Kaiserine's ageless lips.

The next man came up the ramp, determined to make a better showing than the one who'd refused to fight. We fought for all of ten seconds before I killed him. I stepped over his body to reach the next man, who died just as easily. As did the next, and the next. The corpses began to pile up around me and I moved back to give myself more room, my sword dripping gore.

Laszlo's expression betrayed his disgust, and hot anger suddenly flared deep within me without warning.

How dare he judge me? This was none of my doing. I glared at him, and to my surprise I felt my incisors pushing forward, threatening to appear from underneath my top lip. The vampyre was emerging! I struggled to fight it, to control the urge before it took over and changed me there and then, in front of the Empire's aristos. That would certainly give them reason to remember this contest! But the Kaiserine's Guardsmen would doubtless shoot first and ask pertinent questions later. The vampyre squeezed my will, and it took every grain of strength I possessed to resist the change and stay human. I was dimly aware of Count Laszlo gesturing for someone to enter the Arena and fight me, aware also that only a handful of warriors now remained at the bottom of the ramp. The others were either already dead, were wounded or had wisely withdrawn from the contest, preferring to bear the brunt of their sponsors' wrath than perish upon my bloody sword.

Reaction leapt ahead of conscious thought and took me out of harm's way as the warrior attacked. I caught a flash of a dark orange shirt and remembered Cortez, the Espanyan who'd returned my grin after he'd won his first fight. What was it Laszlo had said to him? *Well done, lad. The Kaiserine liked that trick of yours. Very nasty.* I fended off his thrusts and backed around the Arena, avoiding the littered corpses by instinct while I concentrated on pushing the emerging vampyre back into its box and closing the lid.

Something gleamed below waist level and then came up fast, aimed at my belly. I twisted away, avoiding the dagger blade that had sprung from Cortez's boot toe. The blade would have disemboweled me had I been a fraction of a second slower. Very nasty, indeed. Cortez was no slouch with the sword, either; I had the edge in speed and strength, but he'd been trained by professional blademasters and knew clever combinations that would have won him the fight, if not for the vampyre's gift.

It was time to end it. I purposely over-extended my left leg as I retreated and he took the bait, kicking savagely, slashing open my thigh with his boot-dagger. Rather my thigh than my stomach. I brought my hand down quickly, trapping his boot, and spun him around. His eyes widened in fear as he foundered, hopelessly off-balance. My sword found his throat and Cortez joined his ancestors, those courageous Espanyan explorers of legend.

My inner struggle was also over. I'd managed to cage the vampyre, at least for the moment, but that didn't stop me from concentrating on my injured thigh, forcing my flesh to close and blood to congeal around the wound. What had Thenck called it? *Rapid regeneration*. I used it to the full, healing myself even as I limped forward to face whoever came up the ramp next.

Laszlo turned his head and called down the ramp, "Helmut! Your turn."

A warrior wearing a pink and green harlequin check jerkin stepped forward and climbed the ramp. His unblinking gaze fixed on me and my breath caught in my throat. I'd noticed him earlier, when Gunter and I had entered the Arena. Something about him had caught my eye then—and now I knew what it was. He smiled at me, totally sure of his abilities, certain beyond doubt that his vampyre strength, speed and cunning would overpower me.

The Arena shifted around me and the sounds of the excited crowd receded until there was only silence. Time slowed for us, then stopped completely. It was *his* doing. He had exerted his inhuman will upon the universe and it had obeyed him. No one breathed or spoke in the Arena except us. The Kaiserine's words came back to me unbidden: *That means he's very old, very experienced and the most dangerous adversary you're likely to meet in the Arena*. Old, indeed. Such was this vampyre's power than even sunlight posed no threat to him. The two vampyres who'd been slain had served as decoys. This one was the Kaiserine's nemesis, her sworn enemy.

"I don't know what you're doing here," he said. "Explanations can wait until later. What matters is that I require your assistance, which I invoke by the authority of the High Coven. After three or four exchanges that will bring the cattle to their feet, I'll wound you. You'll pretend to die, leaving me to continue fighting until I am the sole victor. Any questions?"

"No," I said. That wasn't quite true; I had a few hundred questions to which I needed answers, but I doubted the vampyre would entertain me.

"Good. Then let's get on with it."

The Arena grew bright around me and sound returned as he released his hold upon time. He smiled again, as if to confirm our little secret, and adopted en garde. I did the same. Our swords touched and he leapt forward, launching an attack bewildering in its complexity and ferocity, an attack that spoke of centuries of training and accumulated expertise. He sent me stumbling backward and I tripped over the lifeless bodies of Konrad and Sergey, who reached out from beyond the grave to exact vengeance for their deaths. But I hit the floor, rolled, raised my sword to deflect a stroke aimed at my face then kicked with both feet, taking Helmut's legs out from under him. He landed on all fours like a cat and flipped away before I slashed my sword through the space where his head had been.

He attacked again and I could make no better defense than before—he drove me around the Arena as if I were some bumbling incompetent amateur who'd never held a sword in his life. The point of his blade found my jacket's top button and cut it free, flipping it into the air. I tried to deflect his next thrust but he ignored me and took the second button away. The Kaiserine had been correct when she'd suggested vampyres liked to prove their superiority. This one was certainly putting on a show for the audience—the cattle, as he'd called them—and enjoying himself at my expense. His damned insolence made me angry, so much so that when he lunged to take the third button I smashed his sword aside and drove my fist into his unprotected jaw, sending him sprawling. He was up and had his sword ready in an instant, rubbing his jaw.

"I'm terribly sorry," I said, "but I simply had to wipe that smug smile off your face." My fangs pressed against the inside of my top lip again, but this time I was ready and kept the vampyre within under tight control, using its strength but not allowing it to take over.

"What are you doing?" he hissed, his voice low so that only I could hear him.

"Bringing the cattle to their feet," I told him, springing forward to slash his harlequin jerkin open from shoulder to shoulder, scoring a red line across his chest in the process. His flesh sizzled as the silver inlaid within my blade made contact. What was it the old vampyre legend said? *Wood kills, but silver destroys.*

He snarled and counterattacked with all the speed and skill I'd expected, but I was ready for him now and played him like a fish, pulling him forward until we fought directly beneath the Kaiserine's box. For a good reason. He was here for the explicit purpose of killing the Kaiserine and therefore could only be distracted by her close proximity. As I expected he glanced toward her box, judging the distance to the rail above. All he needed was a split-second to make his leap, but I didn't give him the opportunity. Instead I held off his murderous attacks and kept him there, refusing to give ground. He cut me time and time again, but I cut him too, and he didn't like it, not one little bit, because my silver-inlaid blade was hurting him more than his plain steel hurt me. His rage grew and his *will* beat down upon me like a physical thing, demanding I retreat, that I permit him to wound me so he'd gain the distraction he needed. While all eyes were on me, he'd leap for the Kaiserine and murder her before her Guardsmen could stop him—

"I have the authority of the High Coven!" he said, grunting the words as we fought our private battle, which had indeed brought the cattle to their feet, and almost had Duke Wilhelm choking with excitement.

"Look again," I said, scoring a deep cut down his arm and then slashing his cheek, causing him to wince in pain. "I'm not one of you."

His eyes widened as the truth dawned on him. His plans had suddenly turned to mud. He gathered his strength, preparing to jump, and I slid past his sword and took him through the heart.

I expected him to die instantly, to crumble to dust like vampyres were supposed to, but he had other ideas. He dropped his sword and his hands closed about my neck, gripping me with superhuman strength. He forced me down onto my knees, choking me, ignoring my futile attempts to break free. I looked up at him and would have gasped in surprise had I been able to breath, because flames were consuming his body, destroying him. He screamed and crimson fire burst from his mouth to wash over me. The raw energy of his death cast me into the air and sent me tumbling helplessly across the Arena. The far wall swelled to greet me and I hit it with sufficient force to scatter my senses to the four winds. Again.

I thought about Ludwig the dwarf, the one-handed girl in Thenck's headquarters, the guards with reconstructed faces and the red line across the Kaiserine's wrist—and then, thank Gott, I lost consciousness because it hurt too much.

* * * *

Waking up in strange locations was becoming rather tedious. I didn't recognize the wood-paneled room, nor the pretty maidservant who placed the bottle of water upon the table beside my bed. She glanced down at me and smiled upon discovering I was awake.

"I hope I didn't disturb you?" she said.

"Not at all. May I ask your name?"

"Patrizia." Her dark green dress set off her blue eyes and curly red hair.

"Where am I, Patrizia?"

"Why, you are in the guest quarters of the Duke Wilhelm's house."

"How long have I been here?" I asked. Daylight streamed in through a narrow gap in the curtains and cast a strip of gold up the back of her dark green dress.

"Since yesterday. Would you like a drink of water?"

"Yes, please." There was a strange and unpleasant taste in my mouth which I wanted rid of.

The Arena contest was a one-day affair. The contest must therefore be over. I'd probably been disqualified because I was unfit and unable to continue fighting. I told myself I hadn't particularly wanted to be the Kaiserine's Champion anyway. What *I had* wanted was to be human again. I examined Patrizia as she unstopped the bottle and poured water into a cup, and was pleased to note that I felt no urge to sink my teeth into her neck and partake of her warm blood. In fact, the very thought revolted me, which I took to be a good sign.

She offered me the cup and I propped myself up on one elbow, took it and drank thirstily. When I'd finished, she refilled the cup. I nodded my thanks.

"I'm to let Duke Wilhelm know when you're awake," she said.

"Very well."

She went to the door, smiled and went out. I drained the cup, put it back on the table and sat up, flexing my muscles, wanting to find out how badly injured I was. There were minor aches and pains, but nothing too serious. I judged myself fit to stand and walk, very possibly to fight if circumstances required that I must. The fact was, I didn't know how much the Duke knew. Had Thenck or the Kaiserine told him who I really was? Just because I was lying in a warm, comfortable bed didn't mean Wilhelm had forgiven me for killing and wounding his Wardens. For all I knew, another dozen soldiers might be waiting outside, ready to stick me with their swords.

My clothes lay on a chair in the corner. I rose from the bed and padded silently across the room, keeping one eye on the door. The slashed Corsican mercenary's uniform had been expertly repaired, and

someone had also gone to the trouble of polishing my boots, which were underneath the chair. This suggested the Duke didn't intend to hang me for my past crimes, but one can never be certain of the aristocracy—anything so inbred has to be regarded as unpredictably dangerous. The only sensible course of action was for me to leave the Duke's house as quickly as possible and pass out of the city before Thenck came looking for me. I didn't know where I'd go, but I'd pick up a blade somewhere along the way and start looking for employment as a bodyguard or hiresword. Soldiering was the only trade I knew.

I pulled on the uniform trousers and boots. The door opened just as I was fastening my jacket—which had been given shiny new silver buttons, I noted. The Duke Wilhelm stood there, looking at me curiously.

"I am astounded to see you fit and well," he said. "After what happened—well, none of us expected you to live, let alone make a full recovery."

"I'm a little surprised myself," I said, remembering how my vampyre adversary had burned. I'd learned three things about vampyres: they hated sunlight, feared silver and were liable to take their enemies with them when they died.

"How is the Kaiserine?" I asked.

"Alive, thanks to you, and I suppose, in a lesser degree, to Otto Thenck."

Evidently the Kaiserine had told the Duke something of my role in the scheme she and Thenck had devised to flush the vampyre out, but that still didn't mean my past sins were absolved.

"Her Majesty wanted you taken to the Imperial Palace," he said, "but she agreed to my suggestion you be brought here instead, my house being closer to the Arena. My personal physician attended you while you slept. The fellow has somewhat strange ideas. He refuses to bleed his patients, which is something I've always insisted upon myself, but I have faith in him, even if he does waste time washing his hands and boiling his surgical knives." The Duke chuckled, then clapped me upon the shoulder. "You look as good as new, lad. If you're feeling up to it, we'll go and see Her Majesty now."

I cleared my throat. "May I ask why, m'lord?"

"Because she ordered it, of course. Are you well enough to travel to the Palace?"

"I believe so," I said, knowing I had little choice in the matter.

He led me downstairs, into a front hall where guards stood at attention and servants scurried to fetch cloaks. The Duke ordered his coach brought around to the front of the house. To my surprise, one of the servants brought me my silver-inlaid sword in an engraved leather scabbard and matching belt. The Duke Wilhelm smiled. "The scabbard is a small gift from me, which I hope you'll accept?"

"You're too kind, m'lord."

I lifted my arms while the servant fastened the belt about my waist. Then I noticed Patrizia talking to a handsome, fair-haired fellow who leaned indolently against a door frame, his arms folded across his chest. He pretended to listen to what she was saying, but I sensed his entire attention was focused on me at that particular moment.

"Are you ready?" the Duke asked.

"Yes, m'lord."

We went outside and down the steps as a coach drawn by two matching black stallions appeared around the corner.

"That was damn quick," the Duke remarked, and a dull warning bell began tolling in my head, for no ostler could have harnessed the coach so speedily. The coach driver wore a black cloak and a tricorne hat, so that his features were in shadow; the coach's blinds were drawn so that anyone hiding inside would not be seen. The alarm bell rang louder and I began to pay it the attention it deserved. The Duke's bodyguards came out of the house, looked cautiously left and right then began moving down the steps. None of them even glanced twice at the coach. It had been summoned, and was therefore expected.

As the coach drew level with the steps, the blinds were ripped open and two muskets thrust out. I gave the Duke a hard push and went the other way, leaping the stone balustrade as the muskets flashed and roared. One of the balls struck a guard; the other smashed a flowerpot on the top step. The Duke, winded and confused, fell head-first into thick bushes while the guard, face contorted in pain, collapsed on the steps clutching his stomach.

I reached the coach, wrenched the door open and found myself staring at the two ghastly soldiers I'd met in Thenck's headquarters. Their reconstructed faces were incapable of registering surprise, but their eyes widened fractionally as I pulled myself into the coach. They immediately dropped their discharged muskets and drew bayonets from scabbards on their belts. There was no room for swordplay and no time for finesse; I grabbed one of the fallen muskets and rammed the butt into the face of the man on my left. The second soldier slashed at me and I deflected the stroke, striking him on the side of the head with the barrel. Both men collapsed across the padded leather couches, temporarily relieved of their senses.

The sliding hatch opened above me and the driver—he who had earlier conveyed me to the Arena—aimed his pistol at my head. Our eyes met briefly and I sensed his reluctance to kill me. But, like the two unconscious soldiers, he had his orders. His pistol discharged, the noise deafening in the enclosed space, but the ball missed me as I shifted out of his line of sight. I grabbed his arm and pulled once, twice, three times, smashing his head against the hatch. He groaned and slumped, stunned, while I marvelled at the physical speed and agility that had allowed me to avoid his lead ball.

The Duke's guards swarmed over the coach and dragged the unmoving bodies onto the street. The wounded guard was carried into the house and a messenger ran off to summon the Duke's physician again.

"Who are these men?" Duke Wilhelm demanded, his face scarlet with rage as he brushed flower petals off his hitherto immaculate uniform. "Or should I ask, *what* are they? Their faces—"

"Thenck sent them," I said, cutting short his speculation.

"Thenck! But, why?"

"I can only guess, m'lord, but I don't think he likes to leave loose ends lying about for people to trip over. Which is to say, he prefers his business to remain private and does not wish me to speak of what I have seen and heard."

The Duke stroked his mustache. "And *what* have you seen and heard, exactly?"

"With respect, m'lord, that's between Herr Thenck and myself. I ask that you convey my apologies to the Kaiserine. I've some urgent business that needs attention."

Duke Wilhelm opened his mouth to speak, as if to warn me against my intended course of action, but he saw my determination and nodded reluctant agreement instead. Perhaps the wounding of one of his own men also influenced his decision.

I bent over the driver and stripped off his black cloak and tricorn hat, putting them on myself. Thus attired, I climbed up onto the driver's seat and took the reins. The Duke touched a finger to his forehead in salute as I pulled away, heading for Thenck's headquarters.

A light rain began to fall as I guided the coach through the cobbled streets of High Sazburg. The journey gave me time to think, to ponder again what had just happened. Thenck's highwaymen should have killed me. That they had missed at point-blank range, and had then failed to skewer me with their bayonets, was far too much of a coincidence. The vampyre's gift still pulsed in my veins. Doctor Schmidt's counter-elixir hadn't worked its magic yet. Which begged me to ask the question: *would it ever work?* Did the counter-elixir even exist? Had Thenck lied to me just so I'd drink Rosemarie's blood and repair my injuries, allowing me to return to the Arena? Hopefully answers awaited me at the headquarters of the Ministry of State Security.

The coach approached the rear of the sinister red brick building. I pulled the tricorn hat down to mask my face from anyone who might be watching from the upper windows. I stopped the coach, pulled on the brake handle and slowly dismounted, pretending to be in pain. Hunched over and limping, I climbed the steps and banged my fist upon the door, hoping that whoever was inside would be expecting the coach and its occupants to return.

Bolts were drawn, locks turned, and the door opened. Ludwig scowled at me, then looked at the coach.

"What went wrong?" he demanded.

"This," I said, slamming my fist into his jaw. He collapsed against the wall and slid to the floor, unconscious. I ran to the stairway at the far end of the hall. My senses alert for any signs of trickery, I climbed the steps and cautiously entered Doctor Schmidt's laboratory.

Noone was there, but I heard voices coming from one of the adjoining hallways. I drew my sword and silently approached the source of the sound. Thenck and Schmidt stood in one of the side rooms with their backs to me. The mute, one-handed girl I'd attacked after taking Schmidt's damned vampyre elixir lay upon a bed, asleep or unconscious; I couldn't tell which. She was the subject of their conversation.

"Her vocal chords are intact, Herr Thenck. She can speak again, though her voice may seem odd for a short time."

"What about her hand?"

"See for yourself. It has completely regrown."

After a moment's silence, Thenck said, "Will she be able to play the piano again?"

The question surprised me but Schmidt said, "Indeed she will, Herr Thenck. As well as she ever could."

"It meant a lot to her mother," Thenck said, as if he felt the need to explain, and I detected the emotion

in his voice, sensed his genuine concern for the girl's well-being.

Things had been slowly forming somewhere in the back of my mind, and now my suspicions crystallized.

"Perhaps she'll play us a tune, Herr Thenck, so we can all dance and make merry and pretend this nightmare never happened," I said, and they both turned around, Thenck looking shocked and guilty, Schmidt looking like a surprised fish because of his thick spectacle lenses.

To his credit, Thenck didn't begin his next sentence with, "How did you—?" Instead he said, "You know, I had a feeling you'd turn up sooner or later." He reached beneath his coat and produced a pistol, but I scored a red line across the back of his hand with the point of my sword, forcing him to drop the weapon. He hissed his pain and clutched the wound. Blood leaked between his fingers.

I gestured at the girl. "Would you care to explain?"

"There seems little point," he said. "I'd hardly expect you to understand." He held his injured hand against his chest.

"If you mean you think I'd probably find what you've been doing to this poor girl *disgusting*, then yes, I can appreciate your reluctance to attempt any futile explanation," I said, and he lowered his gaze, no longer able to look me in the eye.

"You have no right to judge me," he said.

"No? I think I have every right. How old is the Kaiserine? Sixty? More? Yet she doesn't even look half that age—thanks to Doctor Schmidt here." I swept an arm about me, indicating the building around us. "How many *experiments* have there been, Doctor Schmidt? The soldiers, Ludwig and who knows what else hidden in your damned cellars? Made from bits and pieces taken from other bodies. How fortunate the Kaiserine is to have her personal carpenter, able to glue on a new hand, give her a new voice or nail on whatever else she needs when her own bits and pieces begin to fail."

Schmidt, suddenly enraged, took a half-step forward, but stopped when I put my sword between us.

"You have no understanding of matters," he said. Red spots of anger darkened his cheeks. "The soldiers you speak of were terribly wounded in battle and would have died, had I not put them back together again. Ludwig also—the physical defects he has suffered from birth would have killed him long ago, had I not performed surgery. It benefited us both. I learned from the experience, and Ludwig still lives."

"And what about her?" I said, indicating the sleeping girl.

Thenck glanced at her, his expression unreadable, but he didn't answer. It was Schmidt who said, "Some months ago, the Kaiserine contracted the wasting disease."

I sucked in a deep breath. The wasting disease had appeared some years ago and no one had yet discovered the cause or the cure. Sailors serving aboard the steam-powered ironclads of the Imperial High Seas Fleet and the crews of the Junkers war engines were most often affected. Some scientists claimed it had something to do with unknown poisons in the oceans or in the air, while others suggested it might be the secret process that powered the Empire's machines that was somehow responsible.

"Without my skills, and without Eva's willingness to donate parts of her own body, our sovereign would now be crippled and unable to function."

The idea that the girl might have *volunteered* to have parts of her own anatomy removed hadn't occurred to me, but it seemed too bizarre not to be true. I remembered how Rosemarie had drunk the counter-elixir without a second thought for her own well-being because she thought it might help her mistress. Such was the loyalty and devotion the Kaiserine inspired in all her subjects.

"Eva has you to thank for her recovery," Schmidt said. "She is proof that the vampyre's gift not only enhances the senses, but also heals and repairs." He indicated the girl. "Her hand, which I had surgically removed and grafted onto the Kaiserine's arm, is regrown. Her vocal chords, which now reside within the Kaiserine's throat, are restored."

Suppressing my revulsion, I shook my head. "This makes little sense, Herr Doctor. If the Kaiserine is unwell then why did you not simply arrange to have someone expose her to the vampyre's gift directly? Why use this unfortunate girl?"

"The Kaiserine has an incurable fear of vampyres," Thenck said. "She will not even permit them entry into the Imperial Palace, which is a maze of mirrors; the filth detest mirrors because they reflect their true image, that of rotted, decayed, worm-ridden corpses. That is why the Kaiserine's Guardsmen carry silver-inlaid swords and load their muskets with lead balls containing silver fragments. Therefore we were forced to seek an alternate solution, for the good of the Empire."

"A solution that had to involve your own daughter?"

His eyes widened, telling me that I'd guessed correctly.

"Tissue compatibility, Herr Manfred," Schmidt said. "Eva has the same skin tissue type as the Kaiserine. She is ideally suited for the task of providing replacement parts."

I dismissed his incomprehensible medical jargon with an angry wave of my hand. "Why me?" I asked.

Thenck frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You already have vampyres in your employ. Why didn't you ask one of them to assist in restoring your daughter to full health?"

"You are altogether too perceptive for your own good, Herr Manfred," he said, his tone carrying the unmistakable promise of violence. "How did you know?"

I shrugged. "The fact you were able to warn the Kaiserine in advance of the vampyre plan to assassinate her suggested you'd received information from an inside source. I realize now that no human could penetrate a vampyre nest and expect to live. Who are they? More of your *volunteers*?"

Thenck's lips twisted into a parody of a smile. "As a matter of fact, yes. They are courageous men and women, willing to give up part of their humanity for their Kaiserine. Most are, unfortunately, no longer working for us."

The full impact of his words struck me. "They've become full vampyres?"

"But of course. As you would have, if not for Doctor Schmidt's counter-elixir."

Schmidt said, "You are my first test case, Herr Manfred. I'm pleased to see the counter-elixir has

worked."

"As am I," Thenck said. "It will make it so much easier for us to kill you."

I sensed another presence and swung round to face a smiling swordsman who wore the Duke Wilhelm's uniform. It was the same handsome fellow Patrizia had spoken to as I'd left the Duke's house. His hawk eyes remained fixed on me as he cut the air with his sword, warming up for the forthcoming fight.

"And who might you be?" I asked.

"My name is Schwertkämpfer." He bowed formally from the waist. "I am the Duke Wilhelm's swordmaster, and the greatest bladesman who ever lived."

It all became apparent. They'd been happy to entertain me, waiting for Schwertkämpfer to arrive.

Thenck said. "I can assure you that Schwertkämpfer's boast is not a boast at all; it is a simple statement of fact. Since Doctor Schmidt's counter-elixir will have taken effect by now, the result is already a foregone conclusion."

"All I ever wanted, Herr Thenck, was to ride out of High Sazburg with my body and soul intact," I said. "I've no wish to oppose you, and I'm unlikely to expose your secrets, given that certain awkward questions might be asked concerning my own role in your scheme."

"Under other circumstances I might have let you go, Herr Manfred," he said. "However, I'm still very irritated by the way you allowed the Duke's man to walk out of the Arena, instead of cutting him to pieces in front of the Kaiserine as I wished. Therefore, you will die."

"I've already said you're the most devious swine I've ever had the misfortune to meet, Herr Thenck. I believe I forgot to include 'petty' and 'childish' as well. Consider my earlier statement modified, will you?"

Swertkämpfer said, "Can we get on with this? The Duke may ask awkward questions if I'm missing for any length of time."

"Sorry to have inconvenienced you," I said, scoring a line down his left cheek with the point of my blade. "Let's hope he doesn't ask how the greatest swordsman who ever lived received that scar."

Swertkämpfer touched his hand to his face and stared, wide-eyed with shock, at the sight of his own blood. I used the moment to kick Schmidt in the face as he bent down to pick up Thenck's fallen pistol. He fell back into the room and sprawled on the floor, unconscious.

"You'll die for that," Schwertkämpfer said, his handsome face now a twisted mask of rage.

"Oh, come now," I said. "You intended to kill me anyway, so delivering death threats at this stage in the game is somewhat redundant, wouldn't you say?"

My words had the desired effect. He screamed his rage and stamped forward, his flashing sword seeking vengeance for the cut. I backed along the hallway, absorbing his attack until I had his measure; then I gave him a scar on his right cheek to match the one on his left. He screamed again and leapt bodily at me, slashing at my face and stabbing at my heart, but his sword only cut air. On his next lunge, I slipped inside his blade and drove the pommel of my sword down upon his exposed neck.

Schwertkämpfer crashed to the floor, senseless.

"So much for the greatest swordmaster in the world," I said to Thenck, stepping over the unmoving body and touching my sword to his breast. "That leaves you for me to deal with." My anger was greater than Schwertkämpfer's by a considerable factor. I didn't intend to leave this place without killing Thenck, because there was no doubt in my mind that he would make it his business to see me dead. Not only did this man have the entire Secret Police at his disposal, he had half-vampyre agents, too. Schmidt could *manufacture* them on demand.

"If you would put down your sword, Herr Manfred, I would be most obliged," a familiar voice said. I turned in surprise as the Kaiserine swept regally down the hallway toward me, followed by the Duke Wilhelm, plus a good number of her Imperial Guardsmen and the Duke's soldiers.

Wilhelm gestured frantically and I obeyed, lowering my blade and stepping away from Thenck, who seemed to be in a kind of shock, no doubt a combination of my defeat of his unbeatable swordsman and the Kaiserine's plainly unexpected arrival.

The Kaiserine stopped and looked down at Schwertkämpfer's body. She must have recognized the uniform, if not the man wearing it, for she said to the Duke, "Kindly remove your rubbish, my dear Duke. I so dislike clutter."

The Duke signed to a corporal, who pushed forward through the Guardsmen and dragged the defeated swordmaster away. I could see by the Duke's face that he was puzzling over Schwertkämpfer's presence here. He looked at Thenck, saw his guilt and it all suddenly came together in his mind. His angry glare did not go unnoticed by the Kaiserine. Her eyes narrowed and she nodded slowly, drawing her own conclusions.

Then she looked at me, and smiled. "I'm pleased to see you alive and well, Herr Manfred," she said. "I would have been very disappointed indeed had you survived the Arena only to be killed in a silly private duel."

Not knowing what to say, I bowed like a courtier, taking care to keep my unsheathed sword behind me.

Her hand—the girl's surgically transplanted hand—touched my shoulder. I straightened, trying not to show my feelings, whatever they were. Disgust? Horror? No. I was realistic enough to realize that were I a victim of the wasting disease, I would very probably do anything I could to prevent it from destroying me.

"You have my thanks for what you did in the Arena," she said. "If any man has earned the title of Kaiserine's Champion, then it is you."

It occurred to me that I didn't know who'd won the contest. Certainly not I—the third vampyre's death had blown me into oblivion.

Her face brightened with amusement. "You don't know, do you? Did you not tell him, m'lord Duke?" she said over her shoulder, and Duke Wilhelm stepped forward.

"No, Your Majesty. Events overtook us before I had the time to explain, and Herr Manfred was too busy saving my life to hear me out in any case."

"Ah, yes. The mysterious assassins in the coach." She glanced at Thenck but didn't pursue the matter

further. Instead she said, "Please wait next door, Herr Thenck. I'll speak with you in a moment, privately." Her voice had an edge of steel to it which could not be argued with. Thenck slowly bowed and did as she commanded. The Kaiserine gave a clever and complex hand signal, and two of her Guardsmen followed him. I guessed she'd ordered them not to let Thenck out of their sight.

Then she looked into the room, saw the girl on the cot and Schmidt lying on the floor and the color drained from her face. Slowly, deliberately, she reached out and closed the door. I didn't know what to make of this. I presumed she knew Schmidt, but did she know the girl too? Did she know that it was Thenck's daughter who had supplied her with body parts to replace those areas of her own body that had succumbed to the wasting disease?

"Do you remember anything of what happened after you killed the vampyre filth, Herr Manfred?" she asked a little too quickly, as if she wished to either distract me or forget what she'd just seen.

"No, Your Majesty. I awoke in the Duke's house. I recall nothing in between."

"Then permit me to be the bearer of the news. The remaining warriors withdrew from the contest when Count Laszlo told them you were still alive and might be able to continue fighting after a suitable rest period. Normally the adjudication committee would have refused to allow them to withdraw, but I requested they bend the Rules on this one occasion. The committee kindly consented to my wishes."

I couldn't imagine the adjudication committee refusing a direct "request" from the Kaiserine, but neither did I see what she was getting at. Duke Wilhelm came to my aid.

"What Her Majesty is telling you," he said, smiling, "is that you *won* the contest. By default, admittedly, but that's beside the point—the adjudication committee has already posted the results so there can be no turning back. You are the new Champion. May I be the first to offer you my heartfelt congratulations, Herr Manfred."

"Thank you, m'lord," I said numbly. I should have been overjoyed at the thought of the fame and wealth that accompanied the title, but all I could see was the sleeping girl lying behind the door and the ghosts of the brave men I'd killed in the Arena. "And to you also, Your Majesty," I added, bowing again.

"You'll have a chance to thank me personally later tonight," she said. "We are having a small celebratory party at the Imperial Palace. Naturally, you are to attend."

I glanced down at my repaired Corsican mercenary's uniform, wondering how suitable it would be for such a grand occasion. Duke Wilhelm, seeing my doubts, chuckled.

"Don't worry, Herr Manfred. I'll see you're properly attired from my own wardrobe."

"You are too generous, m'lord."

"Generosity has nothing to do with it; my motives are purely selfish. I fancy you'll look good in my livery. I also fancy you'll make a rather excellent swordmaster. I'm looking for one, you know. My old swordmaster just resigned."

The Kaiserine smiled and said, "I'll leave you two to discuss your private arrangements. I have some pressing business with Herr Thenck, then I'll return to the Palace."

"Very good, Your Majesty," the Duke said. We bowed as she glided serenely away, followed by her

Guardsmen. I didn't envy Thenck what was coming next, having had a brief dose of the Kaiserine's wrath myself.

"Back to my house, I think," the Duke said, once the Kaiserine had gone. "We'll have a celebration of our own, Herr Manfred. I've been looking for an excuse to open a certain bottle of vintage Espanyan wine, and you have provided it. You'll join me in a glass, I hope?"

"I would be honored, m'lord." He turned to leave. Using my foot, I tapped open the door the Kaiserine had closed. The cot was empty; both the girl and Schmidt were gone, vanished through a side door I hadn't even noticed. They could be anywhere in the building.

Duke Wilhelm stopped at the end of the hallway and looked back. "Is anything wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing, m'lord," I said, moving to join him, dismissing the tingling feeling that ran up and down my spine. "Nothing at all."

* * * *

The "small celebratory party" turned out to be a grand affair attended by the nobility of the Empire. A thousand or more guests filled the great hall and a sixty-piece orchestra provided dancing music. The Kaiserine greeted me when I arrived with Duke Wilhelm and insisted upon personally introducing me to her most important guests.

There were field marshals and generals and admirals everywhere, all eager to make my acquaintance. Their ladies smiled and curtsied as if I were royalty and fanned themselves when I kissed their hands. The Kaiserine saw my embarrassment and laughed. Duke Wilhelm smiled and stroked his mustache, pleased I was wearing his uniform.

Gradually the feeling that I was a fraud who'd only won the contest by default began to fade. When the music struck up, dozens of young ladies who wished the honor of being my dancing partner pressed forward. Things might have turned ugly if an aide hadn't told them to form an orderly queue or else forfeit their turn.

I found myself waltzing around the floor with the Empire's most eligible young women, who were as putty in my hands. Occasional embarrassments occurred when some of them refused to let go of me when the music ended, but the Kaiserine assigned two of her personal ladies-in-waiting to ensure good behavior and things went more smoothly after that. One of the ladies-in-waiting was Rosemarie. She showed no sign of remembering me, or what I'd done to her in that room beneath the Arena.

During one dance I happened to glance up from my charming partner, whose numerous interests, she told me, included growing orchids and horse riding. To my surprise Otto Thenck stood at the edge of the dance floor, a menacing spectre in black, glaring at me. The crowd kept its distance from him, giving him plenty of room.

My first thought was, *What is he doing here?* My second, how naive I'd been in thinking the Kaiserine would get rid of her chief of intelligence. Thenck was too useful to her, most especially in her war against the vampires. Presumably she'd punished him in far more subtle ways. Not too painless, I hoped.

The music ended and I automatically thanked my partner, who had to be helped back to her seat. Someone else took her place while my attention remained on Thenck. When the music started up again and we began moving in step, she said, "I've heard so much about you, Herr Manfred. My father isn't pleased with you at all."

It was Eva. I instinctively tried to draw away from her, surprise guiding my reaction, but she held onto me with considerable strength—a strength which I knew came from the vampyre's gift.

"You need hardly fear me," she said, easing her grip. "I don't share my father's views on everything. I'm grateful for what you did for me, even if you didn't know you were doing it."

"I'm pleased to see you're well," I said, unable to think of anything else to say. Thenck had used my momentary distraction to vanish into the crowd. Rosemarie stood in his place, and I wondered whether she'd spoken with him. She held an empty champagne glass, which she placed upon a passing servant's tray. Had her hand trembled, or was that just my imagination?

"Thank you," Eva said, and I looked at her.

"What for?"

"For healing me—and for this." I knew exactly what she meant. She *was feeling* the room with her enhanced senses, reaching out to touch all those around her.

"It won't last forever," I said.

"I know, my father told me. But it's so wonderful. And you smell so nice."

I laughed, taken by surprise. "What do you mean?"

She leaned closer, closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. "It's what's driving all the young ladies wild tonight. Doctor Schmidt should have told you. The male vampyre exudes certain body odors that attract women. They find it irresistible. Female vampyres give out other odors that attract men, of course."

Which put paid to the idea that my roguish charm and rugged good looks had earned me all those smiles and fluttering eyelashes. I couldn't remember when I'd last felt so stupid.

"That won't last, either," I said, with equal measures of relief and regret. On the one hand I wanted to be human, yet I also wanted to retain the more desirable benefits of being a vampyre. But the matter wasn't for me to decide anymore.

"Oh, I don't know," Eva said, sniffing me again. "It's very strong. How long ago were you bitten? You'd think it would have started to fade by now."

I didn't want to go into details about Schmidt's elixir or his counter-elixir, so I changed the subject. "You smell nice, too," I said. "And you dance beautifully."

She smiled. "Liar, I've stepped on your toes twice already."

"But you do it so well," I said, and then we both looked round as a figure broke away from the crowd and began walking toward the Kaiserine. It was Rosemarie. Eva and I watched her in silence, both of us sensing that something was very wrong indeed.

The Guardsmen allowed the Kaiserine's lady-in-waiting to pass through their ranks without comment. The Kaiserine, talking with Duke Wilhelm, looked up curiously as Rosemarie drew near.

Eva said, "Is it my imagination, or is she—?"

"Great Mother, yes!" I let go of Eva and began running. The Guardsmen saw me coming and two drew their swords, while others who'd been standing over by the windows raised their muskets to their shoulder and thumbed back the hammers. My new-found fame meant nothing to them—I dared approach their mistress without due authorization, which marked me as a target.

Rosemarie, who'd changed from human to vampyre in a space of moments, sensed my bearing down upon her and changed direction to meet my attack. She snarled, her cat eyes blazing with anger, and slashed at me with a slim dagger. I slammed into her, knocking her to the floor. I caught her wrists, deflected her rising knee and pinned her with the weight of my body. Only then did my senses begin to register pain, and only then did I notice the dark red blood that soaked her dress. It was mine. I pulled the dagger out of my shoulder and sent it spinning across the floor, out of harm's reach.

Heavy footsteps clumped around us and hands lifted me off her struggling form. Guardsmen carried me away, while others grappled with the vampyre. But try as they might, they couldn't hold her; Rosemarie broke free and took several halting steps toward Duke Wilhelm before a crash of musketry rang out. A nobleman in the line of fire went down, along with a servant whose yellow uniform jacket blossomed scarlet. But Rosemarie had been struck also and fell to her knees, clutching her wounds. An instant later her death-scream shattered windows and sent the party guests scurrying in confusion. Her corpse burned and I whispered farewell to Rosemarie, my heart aching. Another innocent soul had perished because she'd had the misfortune to cross my path.

My vision came back into focus as the Kaiserine came to stand before me. "This is getting to be something of a habit, Herr Manfred," she said. She looked at my blood-soaked clothing. "Are you all right?"

A mustached colonel of Dragoons offered me a napkin. I nodded my thanks and stuffed it inside my jacket, staunching the wound. "A mere trifle, Your Majesty," I said, grimacing with the pain. "But before I lie me down to rest, I've some business to attend to."

"Does it concern Herr Thenck?"

"Indeed it does," I said. Who else could have engineered Rosemarie's transformation with such precision, placing her within striking range of his arch-rival, Duke Wilhelm, just as the change occurred? I remembered how he'd vanished, and the empty glass in Rosemarie's hand. Doctor Schmidt had only given me a single drop of the vampyre elixir—Thenck must have given Rosemarie a far greater dosage, triggering the full evolution from human to vampyre almost instantly, and compelling her to obey his commands without question. I could not imagine that such a rapid change would have benefited Rosemarie, had she survived.

"He has been a useful servant, but he has ignored my warnings, and now follows his own agenda," the Kaiserine said, and the note of pain in her voice touched me. "Do what you must do, Herr Manfred, with my blessing. He must not be permitted to endanger us again."

* * * *

Thenck ran through the cobblestoned streets of High Sazburg, his footsteps echoing in the night, his long black cloak streaming behind him like a bat's wings.

A hunted man he might be, but he had at his command the entire resources of the Ministry of State Security. Once he went to ground, no one would find him, not even a wrathful Kaiserine. Therefore I had

to catch him and catch him quickly. I'd decided there would be no more deaths, save for Thenck's own.

Permitting him to live was out of the question; he would seek me out for thwarting his plans. His vengeance would be neither pretty nor pleasant ... if I allowed him to set the wheels of that vengeance in motion. Thus I pursued him, not only out of desire for retribution, but also because of the need for self-preservation. If I didn't kill Thenck, he would surely kill me.

He looked back over his shoulder frequently, as if sensing he was being followed, but I kept myself hidden from sight, shifting from shadow to shadow, every step bringing me closer to him. Even at this distance I perceived his harsh breathing, his pounding heart, his steadily increasing terror. At last Thenck understood something of what it felt like to stand in the Arena, with Fear whispering in his ear and Death poised to embrace him at any moment. He stopped, fumbled with something beneath his cloak then dropped it and let out a wail of despair. His injured right hand had made him clumsy. He ran on, stumbling now, his legs trembling with exhaustion. I moved past the fallen flintlock pistol and left it lying there. I needed no weapon to deal with Herr Thenck.

He turned onto a narrow street that led ultimately to the sinister headquarters of his equally sinister organization. There he would find people willing to protect and conceal him. He'd gather servants and guards and monies, and then The Magician would disappear, using his own magic upon himself. But long before he reached the end of the street, I swung down from a rooftop above and landed directly in front of him, as silent as a cat, my teeth bared. Thenck recoiled in alarm and nearly fell over in his haste to scramble away from me. Before he'd gone three steps I grabbed him, spun him around and pushed him up against the brick wall with sufficient force to drive the air from his lungs.

Alone and isolated from his power base, the man who'd terrorized the Empire cowered and whimpered and pleaded for me not to hurt him. The vampyre within me raged, demanding to be freed from its cage, but again I held the creature in check, though this took all my strength and left me shaking with effort. My dark self demanded vengeance for Rosemarie and every decent man who'd died in the Arena.

Thesnick of a released spring mechanism warned me. Thenck went down on one knee and thrust upward, the point of his dagger aimed at my heart. I twisted away so the gleaming blade slashed into my side instead of piercing that vital organ, but the burning pain wrenched a scream from my lips, and that was sufficient for the vampyre to break free. I grasped Thenck's wrist, squeezing his bones until they snapped, and at the same time I took hold of The Magician by the throat and lifted him clear of the ground, slamming him against the wall.

He went limp instantly. Nonetheless I shook him until he dropped the dagger, and I let him down cautiously, prepared for more of his deviousness. Yet my heightened senses told me Thenck no longer posed any danger to me or to anyone else. His head hung to one side and his eyes stared into eternity. His neck was broken. His reign of terror was ended.

The vampyre wanted to drink his cooling blood but my human half would have none of it; the very thought repelled me. I let Thenck's body fall and stepped back from the lifeless heap, taking long, deep breaths. The vampyre retreated into its lair, seemingly content to sleep now that I'd dealt with my—*with our*—nemesis. Yet part of the creature remained active, stopping the bleeding, healing the wound Thenck had inflicted upon me.

I spun, saw Eva standing there perfectly still, her hands by her sides. She looked at me, then at her father's body. Her face might have been chiselled from stone but tears brimmed in her eyes and her hands trembled. Without a single word spoken, she turned and walked away. Within moments she'd vanished into the night and I felt no great desire to pursue her. What could I say? I'd murdered Otto Thenck, and even though the swine had thoroughly deserved his fate, he was still her father.

Footsteps came from the other direction. The Duke's Wardens, or perhaps Thenck's Noseys, came running to investigate the disturbance. I climbed a stairway, jumped onto a window ledge, swung over onto a balcony, pulled myself up onto the roof and was gone before they arrived.

* * * *

The Guardsmen recognized me and admitted me into the Imperial Palace, where the Kaiserine waited for me.

Without a word she led me down the hall, through a door, into a small room with comfortable high-backed chairs and walls covered with bookshelves. A window overlooked a private garden and oil lanterns burned steadily. The availability of the room suggested it was kept ready for those occasions when the Kaiserine felt the need for private conversation. She closed the door behind me and we were alone.

She looked me up and down and raised an eyebrow at my somewhat dishevelled appearance. "May I assume you have concluded your business?" she asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty," I replied.

"Is he—?"

"Herr Thenck is dead, Your Majesty."

Her expression was unreadable but I saw something deep in her eyes, an unfathomable emotion that might, at a pinch, have been regret.

"What do you know of the girl you were dancing with before the disturbance took place?"

"I know she's Thenck's daughter," I said, deciding to tell the truth in stages, and to judge her reaction to each snippet of knowledge.

"Is that all?"

"I believe she was at Ministry headquarters, assisting Herr Thenck with some kind of medical experiment."

The Kaiserine frowned. "Do you seek to deceive me, Herr Manfred?"

She knew, and she knew I knew she knew, so I said, "Herr Thenck let slip of Eva's role in the matter of your continued well-being, Your Majesty. I was loathe to bring up such a delicate matter, lest you thought me insensitive."

"You mean, in case I thought you couldn't keep a secret and ordered your execution?"

"That just about sums it up, Your Majesty."

She smiled, and just for a moment the lamplight caught her face the right way and I saw the resemblance to Eva. I must have betrayed my thoughts, for her smile vanished and she looked at me with an altogether less pleasant expression. Anger threatened to consume her, but somehow she controlled herself. She sat down in one of the chairs and stared at the pattern on the rug, motionless and silent. I dared say nothing.

Time crept by and then at last, she spoke again.

"You must think me heartless," she said.

"I think nothing, Your Majesty. It's not my place."

"There was love involved, you know. Briefly, fleetingly—but it existed. And afterwards, when she was a child, I took an interest in her. She called me Aunt. Once a week I would visit her and she'd show me what she'd learned that week. She played the piano so beautifully, so cleverly, even then."

"Does Eva know she's your daughter?" I asked.

She looked up at me, tears streaking her face, suddenly looking much older than she had before. "No. I told Herr Thenck—I told her father never to tell her. She thinks her mother died in childbirth."

I nodded, wondering whether Eva had ever guessed her "aunt" was really her mother, and that she was the Kaiserine's daughter.

"Now she's lost her father," the Kaiserine said. "He only had so much love to give, and he reserved it all for her." She shook her head, then used a silk handkerchief to wipe away the tears. "What a fool I am today," she muttered to herself.

A knock on the door saved me from having to reply. She gestured impatiently and I opened it. The Duke Wilhelm entered and bowed to her, concern in his eyes.

"We were wondering, Your Majesty—?" he began, but she cut him off, rising quickly from the chair.

"Yes, by all means. Clean up the mess, and tell the orchestra to start playing something jolly. Herr Manfred, you have another urgent matter to attend to—once you tidy yourself up, of course."

"Your Majesty?"

"There are at least fifty young ladies who will surely poison themselves if you do not dance with them tonight. Do you think you're up to it?"

"I dare say I will be."

My answer didn't seem to surprise her, and I wondered how much she knew of my own unusual condition. "Good," she said. "Duke Wilhelm will arrange for a change of clothing. I shall expect at least one dance from you later."

I smiled. "Very good, Your Majesty."

Duke Wilhelm bowed and withdrew from the room, relieved that everything was well. He held the door open for me to come after him, but I indicated I would follow in a moment. The Kaiserine stood at the window, looking out. Her Guardsmen patrolled the gardens, vigilant as always.

"Is there something else you wanted to say, Herr Manfred?" she asked, without turning to look at me.

"Three things have occurred to me, Your Majesty."

"And pray, what might they be?" She feigned disinterest, pretending to fuss with the gold rings she wore.

"If Eva lived with her father, then she'll very likely find the headquarters of the Ministry of State Security a cold and lonely place without him. Perhaps alternate accommodation might be arranged?"

"How kind you are to think of her. Presumably you mean in the Imperial Palace? Very well, I'll see if suitable quarters can be found. What else?"

"Tonight one of your ladies-in-waiting died. An unfortunate business, and I believe she was an innocent party, but it would seem that her passing leaves a vacancy in your service?"

"How insolent you are! I am perfectly capable of finding a replacement for Rosemarie. But I'll give the idea some thought. Perhaps it would be good for Eva." She glanced at me, then made a show of tucking her handkerchief into her sleeve. "You said you had three things on your mind, Herr Manfred? What might the third be?"

"It would doubtless benefit you both, Your Majesty, if you were to reveal your true relationship to your daughter."

With this, I bowed and stepped into the corridor, closing the door behind me. I stood there and held my breath for a count of ten, but there was no verbal explosion from within, and she didn't shout for her Guardsmen—a fact which filled me with vast relief.

A servant waited with a new uniform jacket to replace the bloodstained one I wore. I asked him for directions to one of the bathrooms, that I might wash and change my clothes and make ready to dance the night away, as the Kaiserine's Champion.

About the Author/Artist

Derek writes, "I'm 43 years old and live in Scotland, overlooking some of the loveliest island and mountain scenery you're likely to find anywhere. I'm working on a dozen novels simultaneously, which tells you something about my butterfly attention span. My short fiction has appeared in *Jackhammer E-zine* (Nov 2000), *Strange Horizons* (May 2001) and *This Way Up* (July 2001)." You can find his website at website.lineone.net/~derek_paterson/.

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Duncan Long is a professional illustrator whose fanciful artwork is springing up at numerous Web sites as well as on covers of novels, magazines, and CDs. An online gallery of his illustrations can be explored at DuncanLong.com.

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