

Blood Under Water

By

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It was hard to see the sun in the jungle, let alone to guess the time of day. Father Coraldo could have been walking for an hour, or all morning. He would not have been surprised if the weak light suddenly dimmed and they were obliged to make camp on the forest floor again. Frightened, but not surprised.

A root snagged his robe, and he slipped. His pack swung against him as if a child had leaped onto his back. Coraldo staggered, bit his lip and lurched upright again, fresh sweat itching on his brow.

“Can we stop for a while?”

The guide watched him nervously. “Holy Father, we need go fast. Zupai says you come today. If he says so, we must.”

Coraldo shrugged his pack back into place. He looked at the guide, and saw that the native was afraid. *You're afraid, I'm afraid – that's what this godless place does to you.* He glanced back between the close-packed trees, at what the guide had called a path, and imagined evil festering between the leaves like plague.

“Let's go, then,” he said.

They walked on. Coraldo had no-one to talk to but himself, nothing to think about but his own discomfort. A toad the size of a pie glared at him from the roots where it nestled. It looked like a turd given life. *This is the Devil's own land. These poor savages are all the humanity that he lets exist.*

Something thundered overhead. Coraldo ducked, his pack nearly overbalancing him, and saw a scaled body rush past as if he lay beneath an immense snake. He heard the thump, thump of wings against air, and then the monster was gone.

His fist was in front of his chest, holding out the holy sign that hung around his neck. The guide looked at him. “*Couatl*,” he said. “Is blessing us, Holy Father. Good.”

Coraldo heard hissing up ahead and saw water between the trunks. Without warning the forest ended and they were out beside a stream. Sand like fine sawdust stretched to a little river. The water was impossibly blue. Pretty fish danced in the shallows. *Like a dream*, Coraldo thought, and he remembered the beauty of the place when he had first seen the New World from the ship that had brought him here: all green and shimmering, steaming like hot meat.

On the far side of the stream was a clearing and, in the clearing, a multitude of strange plants: black-red balls on leafless stems as high as Coraldo's waist. He stepped forward, and the sun hit his neck. In the jungle he had felt as if he were being boiled in a pot; suddenly he was exposed to the flame.

"Is safe," the guide said. "I go now. Is safe."

Coraldo walked towards the water.

"Safe to go cross, Holy Father. I go. Please."

Coraldo began to wade across. Halfway there, he cried out.

They were not plants, but hundreds of rotting heads, each one driven onto a stake.

"Savages!" He stumbled on, disbelieving, and was hit by the stink of it. He stood at the edge of the stream and retched.

When he looked up, there was a man among the heads. The man approached, and light glinted on his helmet and breastplate. He carried a mace. His free hand waved.

"Father Coraldo!"

The soldier stopped at the edge of the clearing. He took his helmet off and tucked it under his arm. He had a hard jawline and light-brown hair, and in the sunshine he looked almost angelic. "Father."

"Thank God. It's so good to see an Alexian face," Coraldo said.

“I am Ignazio Arrighetti, commander here.” The soldier grinned. “The natives call me Zupai. I’m glad you were able to visit us, Father.”

Coraldo could taste bile. He tried not to look around. “God in Heaven, what a place,” he said. “These heads, there must be a thousand.... What happened here?”

Arrighetti nodded grimly. “It’s these whoreson savages,” he said. “They’re a spiteful, godless, ignorant bunch. You can reason with them all you want, but sometimes – well, you just have to show them who’s in charge.” He smiled. “But it will be easier with you here. They won’t fight back so much, now we have a priest to bless our work.” He gestured behind him. “Come: let me show you your quarters.”

Arrighetti turned and walked into the clearing, into the smell of death.

Eight Days before the Hanging

1

Winter did not freeze Averrio so much as slow it down. Only the narrowest canals were frozen over, but the cold seemed to get into the city's veins. Men lingered for longer in taverns, boats crept from one landing-point to another, and on the network of bridges and walkways that stood in place of normal streets, people moved stiff-legged and slow.

The clerks of the Bank of Fiorenti were required to work with their sleeves rolled up, so they wore fingerless gloves that reached almost to their elbows. As he peered at Giulia's pay-book, the clerk at archway four rubbed his hands together, as if to polish the palms.

"I'm sorry, madam, but I can't do that. Only men can take out accounts. The Bank of Fiorenti does not lend to children, fey folk, women—"

"And dogs, I know. But I don't want to take out an account." Giulia leaned forward to address the cashier through the thin iron bars. "The money's already there. It's listed in the book."

"Yes, but it doesn't belong to you, madam. It belongs to the holder of the account, who is—"

"I *know* that. I can read." Giulia glanced around the hall; apart from a worried-looking fellow two arches down, the place was deserted. "But the letter I've just given you, here, is from the man whose account it is. See? Sir Hugh of Kenton, there. That's his signature, to say I can discuss it with you."

"Is he your husband, madam?"

Do I look that bad? Hugh's old enough to be my father. Maybe my grandfather. “God, no. I work with him. In business. Look, if you really have to talk to someone with a— someone male, I can bring him in here...”

The clerk managed a caring look, as if informed of the death of someone he didn't know. “I'm terribly sorry, but I really can't help.”

“Dammit, I only want to pay some money in! It can't be that hard, can it?”

“You want to pay money *in*? Oh, I see! Well, then.” The clerk leaned forward. “How much money would madam like to add to the account?”

Giulia slid the little bags between the bars and watched as the clerk counted out the coins. He dipped his pen and scratched at her bank-book. Giulia heard boots just behind her; she turned and saw Hugh there, looking around the room with a kind of bemused optimism.

“Everything all right, Giulia?”

“Wonderful,” she replied. “If there's one thing better than earning money, it's watching someone else get rich by sitting on it. Did you find the place?”

“Yes. It's called Horseman Square.”

“Well, lead on. I'm finished here. I don't like being so close to money that I can't touch.”

The street outside was narrow and cold. Giulia had taken to wearing her britches under her skirt: it was still freezing. They walked quickly. As they crossed the fifth short, high-backed bridge, a long boat slid beneath them as sleek and quiet as an eel. A man stood at the stern, punting it along with a pole.

“Damn, it's cold,” Giulia said. She rubbed at the scars on her left cheek. They seemed unusually tender today. “I can feel my face going numb.”

“It's often like this in Albion, especially in the north. When I was fighting the reaver-knights...” Hugh blinked. “Anyway, how much money have we got?”

Giulia pulled her hood up. “We’ve got one thousand two hundred put away, and about three hundred in loose coin. Not bad, for a couple of thief-takers.”

“That’s good. Once we know how much it’ll take to hire a couple of fellows to help out...”

Giulia tugged her scarf tight around her neck. “More than a couple, Hugh. If we’re serious about this wyvern business, I’d say four or five, at least.”

“That sounds costly to me. We’d have to feed them, too. Perhaps we ought to try to get more wyvern scales. We’d make a much better profit that way.”

Easier said than done. “Shall we steal them off the same bird, or two different ones?”

Hugh did not notice her sarcasm. “They’re not birds, Giulia. They’re more like lizards – like small dragons, to be honest. I don’t know why you’re so worried. The scales just fall off them. It’s not as if we’ll be doing battle with it.”

“Small dragons. You’re really encouraging me. We need to hire some good people for this.” *A real-life wyvern. Shit. Well, you wanted adventure, and here it is. Where do they nest, anyhow? Probably at the top of a bloody mountain.* Giulia remembered something Hugh had said, just before they had left Pagalia: “*It’s not an easy path, the Quest.*” *Well, no doubt about that.* She pulled her sleeves down over her fingers.

Horseman Square was small, and the tenement buildings that rose around it made Giulia feel like a mouse in the bottom of a box. A little crowd stood in front of a doorway at the far end of the square, where a herald on a platform was calling out names.

The horseman himself was a bronze statue on a plinth in the centre, in old-fashioned armour and a crusader’s tabard. His shield bore the Sign of the Sword; his lance, cocked over his shoulder, acted as the pole for a limp flag. It showed the griffon rampant, the emblem of Averrio, rearing up over two crossed spears.

Hugh gazed up at the statue. Giulia nudged his arm. “Over there,” she said, looking at the crowd. “That’s our place.”

They approached. The men wore breastplates and swords. Some carried bows and guns in wrapped parcels. Several had darker skin: she reckoned they would have come from Dalagar, Averrio’s province to the far south. All of them wore feathered hats and sleeves slashed to show bright colours underneath.

Mercenary fashion.

“Six men needed to join a marine crew to Orromano,” the herald called out. “Must be skilled with gun or crossbow, and willing to assist on the oars.”

A couple of men had stepped forward; as the oars were mentioned, they grumbled and looked away.

“Lazy buggers,” Hugh muttered, slightly too loudly. “Typical hirelings.”

“Come on.” Giulia slipped through the crowd and into the building behind.

Like many city tenements, the lower floor was open as a shop. Unusually, there was only one business here: scribes worked at half a dozen desks, while customers chatted to company officials on armchairs in the back. Engravings on the walls showed soldiers brandishing pikes at one another.

A slim man in red velvet came forward to meet them. “The work’s outside, sir,” he said cheerily, blocking their way. “If you want to sign up, you can take the oath—”

“We want to hire some soldiers,” Giulia said.

“Oh, I see. Well, I’m happy to discuss that. Your armour suggests that you’re a captain-of-arms, sir—”

“I’m a knight,” said Hugh.

I’m over here, you idiots. “We’re hunters,” Giulia put in. “We’re getting a crew together to hunt beasts up in the mountains. We need to hire several men—”

“A couple,” Hugh said.

“Quite a few men with experience of this sort of work. We’d pay on success.”

“A few good fighters, eh?” The contractor gestured to the rear of the room. “Well, we don’t get much call for hunting. Most of the mercenaries we use end up helping train the city levy, supporting the city guard and the like. May I ask what sort of beasts you’ll be hunting, sir?”

“Wyverns,” Hugh replied. “We’re going to get some wyvern scales. To sell to apothecaries.”

At the back of the room, a large, smartly-dressed man turned to look at them.

“They’ll need to be good scouts,” Giulia explained. “And good fighters, if it comes to it.”

“I’m sure we can find just the men for the job.” The contractor looked oddly pleased. Giulia wondered if he relished the challenge of finding suitable men – or if he was amused by the folly of stealing wyvern scales. “I need to have a word with a colleague of mine, but I’m pretty sure I know some people who might be able to help. May I take your name, sir knight?”

“Sir Hugh of Kenton.”

“Excellent.”

Giulia added, “And I’m Giulia Degarno.”

“One moment,” said the official, and he stepped away. Giulia had the feeling that he had gone to laugh about them with his friends.

She said, “He’d better not try to foist rubbish onto us.”

Hugh frowned. “I don’t rate most hired men, myself. What we need are knights errant, eager for glory, like in the books—”

“Wait,” Giulia said. The big man was approaching from the back of the room, a little faster than seemed quite right. “Someone’s coming over. Do you know that man?”

“Good lord,” said Hugh.

The man walked straight up to them. “Hugh of Kenton? Is that you?”

“And none other,” Hugh said. He was beginning to smile.

“Hugh!” The man thrust out a hand and Hugh shook it hard. “Good lord, fancy meeting you here!”

“Edwin! Good to see you, man!” Hugh stopped shaking Edwin’s hand and they briefly embraced. Even for an Anglian, Hugh did not much like physical contact: this had to be a very great friend.

Giulia looked the man over. He was quite like Hugh – built for the same purpose, but from a slightly different mould. Edwin was big and bulky where Hugh tended towards wiriness: if Edwin stopped taking exercise, he would go to fat. He was slightly shorter than Hugh, and there was less grey in his moustache and hair. Edwin wore newer clothes and no armour: Giulia had almost never seen Hugh without some kind of breastplate.

“So,” said Edwin, “who’s this?”

“This is Giulia Degarno,” said Hugh. “A friend of mine, a freelancer.”

“Hello,” Giulia said. She put out her hand and Edwin, looking slightly surprised, shook it. His grip was strong. He looked straight into her eyes, which meant that he was trying not to look at her scars. “I work with Hugh,” Giulia explained. “I’m a thief-taker by trade.”

“She’s a good sort,” Hugh said.

“Pleased to meet you, Giulia,” Edwin said. “So, what brings you to Averrio, then?”

“We’re looking to hire some fighters,” Hugh explained. “We’ve got a job planned, but we need men.”

Edwin nodded. “Likewise. I need some fellows to help guard my ship. It’s not cheap staying safe, I can tell you!” He had a broad, honest-looking smile. “Here, that contractor fellow’s staring at us. Let’s go outside.”

“So, a boat, eh?” Hugh declared as they stepped into the cold. “I never saw you as a seaman, you know.”

They pushed through the crowd of mercenaries. The herald shouted out jobs over their heads as if he hoped that the statue on its plinth would answer him instead of the crowd. “Two dozen needed to join a company of pike! Lowlanders preferred!”

“Nor did I,” Edwin called back. “It’s hardly a big boat,” he explained as they broke free from the crowd. “Twenty men, two masts – but she’s quick. *Margaret of Cheswick*, she’s called. I got together with a merchant called Gilbert Langton, who ships wool out here. Anyway, we’re waiting to load a new cargo right now, so we’ve got a bit of time to kill before we can head back for home. Dammit,” he added, stamping his feet, “I left Anglia to get *away* from this bloody cold! So, what about you? The last I heard you were guarding the ambassador up at – what’s its name – Pagalia?”

Hugh smoothed down his moustache. “Yes, well, they got this new fellow in to help run the embassy. Marsby, his name was. Absolute idiot. One day he told me I wasn’t friendly enough to his guests. Well, I’d had a few jars that morning, and I told him what I thought of that. And of him. So I left, and to cut a long story short—”

I found you drunk in a pub, and you helped me kill half a dozen men who’d been sent to murder me. Giulia looked left, between two of the high tenements. A serving-girl stood in the alley, beating dust out of a rug with a flat-headed brush. It made Giulia think of the slums of Pagalia.

“Elayne and I are staying at the Old Arms, up in the north,” Edwin was saying. “It’s pretty pleasant, as they go, and not too expensive. Popular with travellers and the like. Where are you?”

Giulia didn’t like giving her location away. It was force of habit. “We’ve only just arrived—”

“Well, why don’t you come and visit, eh? Come over. Bring your horses, too. It’s just inside the city wall, on the land before you get to the lagoon. It’s very pleasant there – good beer, too.”

Hugh smiled.

“Ah, I knew that would make your mind up!”

Giulia said, “We’ll think about it.”

“Excellent. Elayne will be delighted. It’s been ages, Hugh!” Edwin rubbed his hands together as though he had struck a good bargain, and looked towards the canal. “Well, I’d best get back to the stevedores. They’ll do bugger-all unless someone’s watching them. I think this hiring business is a dead loss today. Let’s come back here tomorrow, and then we’ll have a think about finding some men for you. Remember – there’s nothing two knights can’t accomplish, God willing! Am I not right?”

“Damn right,” Hugh replied, and he smiled his deep, fierce smile.

“Then come up and join us, and we’ll try to take the chill off a bit. You too, Giulia.”

“Goodbye,” she said. “See you soon.”

She watched Edwin walk between the buildings: a strong, solid man in the winter sun. “He seems a decent fellow.”

Hugh looked down at her. “Yes, he’s an old friend of mine. We fought at the Bone Cliffs together, back in the war.” The old knight ran a hand through his hair. “Do you think we should visit them?”

“Your friends? Of course. ’Course we should. Maybe Edwin could help us go after this wyvern of yours. Who’s this Elayne, then? Another old friend?”

“Yes,” said Hugh.

“So what’s she like?”

“Skilled in the Art,” the knight replied.

“A wizard, you mean?”

“Yes. She was always very talented. She’s really quite remarkable.”

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The stalls were closing in the Plaza of Wisdom. They were tiny and gaudy compared to the serene public buildings that hemmed them in: the Basilica of St Marietta with its five pale domes, the Palace of Justice and its massive clock tower, and the stern, white bulk of the Senate of the Hundred, where the City Council met.

Giovanni Benevesi watched the stallkeepers from the palace doorway. They were tough men, all older than he was, but the sight of them gave him an almost paternal pride. They were fellow pursuers of commerce, working their way up in life the way he had almost done, perhaps even borrowing money from his own bank.

The clock boomed the hour of five. Someone touched his arm, and Benevesi started: he hoped it didn’t make him look guilty. Georgio Nones, an architect and fellow member of the Council of a Hundred, stood by his side.

“Not going home?” Nones asked. “The meeting’s over, you know. You’re a free man again – until tomorrow.”

“Yes, thank Heaven.” It had been a painfully boring session of the Council. Even the Decimus himself had looked as if he wanted to fall asleep, while his ministers had debated

provisions for additional fire-watchers in the poor quarter. "I've got some business to do. A meeting of the bank elders."

"That sounds daunting," Nones replied. "But not as daunting as being late home to my wife!"

Benevesi made himself laugh, and watched as Nones scurried away. The smile dropped off his face.

A figure appeared in the entrance to the basilica. Tiny under the huge white archway, the man trotted down the steps and turned left.

Benevesi followed him.

The old man made no effort to cover his tracks, but Benevesi did not catch him up. They crossed two small bridges and turned towards the docks. On Four Saints Way, the old man entered an ale-house. Benevesi paused outside. He could see to the far end of the road, straight out of the city and into the bay. The Grand Griffon reared up out of the winter mist like a monster striding out to fight Averrio's enemies. For a moment, Benevesi felt that it was watching him. Then he ducked into the tavern, into the warmth.

The room was busy, full of merchants bracing themselves with drink for the cold walk home. Chatter filled the air like gas.

On the far side of the room, the proprietor put a cup of wine in front of the old man. Benevesi slipped through the clientele until he stood at the old man's side.

"Azul," Benevesi said. "I'd have gone for coffee, myself."

The old man looked around. Behind his spectacles, his eyes were shrewd and hard. His mouth naturally hung open a little, as if it were a small hole cut in a piece of leather. He looked at Benevesi as he always did, as if about to angrily rebut an accusation.

“A fad,” Azul croaked. “It smells better than it tastes.” He pointed at a space by the far wall. He was wearing gloves: Benevesi had never seen him without them. “Over there. It’s too noisy here.”

Benevesi bought a drink of his own. When they stood beside the wall, Azul said, “This wine could be better, too.”

The banker sighed. “Perhaps we should have met elsewhere.”

“This is good enough. You look natural here.”

Too natural, Benevesi thought. *How many of the merchants know my name – and perhaps my face?* “Did you sort that problem out?” he asked.

“Soon,” the old man replied.

“I hope so. I tell you, if this gets out, we’ll both be in the shit.”

Azul looked up from his wine. “I know that,” he replied. “Do you think I’m stupid? I am well aware of what it is to live in danger, thank you. My man will deal with it by the end of today.”

“Good. It needs taking care of.”

Azul smiled. It looked false. “How are the Council of a Hundred these days? Ruling with wisdom?”

Benevesi took a sip of his wine. “Worse than useless,” he said, lowering his cup. “They talk incessantly, but they do nothing. Except architecture, that is. Architecture and warships.”

“That sounds like every council I’ve heard of,” Azul said. “Always bickering. Merchants and politicians, eh?” He looked at the bar, across the smiling, well-fed faces. A group of tubby men burst out laughing. Azul scowled as if he had bitten into a lime. “Look at them, grubbing for coins. Not a soldier among them. You know, one day I think men like this will get a terrible surprise.”

Benevesi wondered if Azul included him in that definition. He felt a slight twinge of fear. Did Azul joke about how soft he was to that weird tall woman who followed him everywhere? Benevesi glanced around the room, knowing that if Azul attacked him, none of these smooth, pampered men would raise a hand in his defence. But of course, Azul wouldn't do that. Not ever.

Azul sipped, and frowned as though the wine had offended him. "So, I assume there will be no change in the import laws."

"None. I tried, believe me, but the Hundred weren't having any of it."

"As I thought. Well, thank you for trying. You can expect more payments at the end of the month."

"I will." They drank in silence, the hubbub of the ale-house surrounding them. Benevesi raised his cup. "Then I propose a toast. To success."

Azul took another sip. His throat twitched as if he'd swallowed a pebble. "Success," he croaked.

A man and woman walked in. They were tall and light-haired, healthier and younger than most of the clientele, and could have been brother and sister. The woman closed the door, and the man scanned the room; he saw Azul and grinned into his beard.

"Your friends are here," Benevesi said.

"They've come to collect me. It's dangerous for an old man to go walking alone," Azul said, and his mouth opened like a hatch in his face. A hard, wheezing laugh came out.

Benevesi made himself smile back. Azul's young friends unnerved him. There was something outdoorsy about them, a fierce heartiness that made him think that they'd roar with laughter one moment and slash your throat the next.

"Ah," the woman said, striding over, "you are drinking away the cold, eh?" Her accent was foreign, slightly lilting. Benevesi reckoned that she was some kind of Teut.

“I couldn’t keep away, Alicia,” Azul said, smiling. He glanced at the man. “Cortaag, is that little matter being dealt with tonight?”

Cortaag was a little more formal: more like a servant than a relation. “It’s being handled right now, sir.”

Azul looked at Benevesi. “Reliable people, these. The best. Always surround yourself with good workers. It’s the key to success, you know. And now,” he declared, “I have to go. You can have the rest of my wine. I’ll arrange a meeting soon.”

As Benevesi took the cup, Azul pulled his cloak tight across his meagre shoulders. His bodyguards parted to let him through. “Until next time,” he said, and he walked towards the doors.

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Giulia waited for Hugh in the north of the city, where the canals met the land and where the merchants swapped their long, low boats for carts. It was just after dark, and the street was empty. Their horses were tied up in an alleyway across the road. In the canal behind the inn, the water lay as quiet and black as tar.

She leaned against the buttress of a church, deep in shadow, not truly hiding but reluctant to stand in full view. She had nothing to hide, but it was best not to give people an excuse to make a nuisance of themselves.

The Old Arms was unusual for Averrio: a long, low, sprawling building, whose stables stuck out from the sides like roots from a stump. The canal ran parallel with the rear of the inn; the front faced onto a road. It looked like something from the countryside. Rustic, perhaps, but not cheap: the road was lit by a succession of glowing alchemical lanterns, which meant that the locals had hired a lamplighter. It looked warm and safe.

Several streets away, a hoarse voice struggled to drum up trade. “Come and see the salacious dances of the forest folk! The dryad dance of fertility! It will entrance even the most —” The man broke into coughs and tailed off. It was too cold to be shouting in the street.

Orange light bloomed on the stones to her left. Two guards turned the corner, one carrying a lantern. The crest on their tunics showed a white griffon against a blue background. The man on the left carried a musket, the other a crossbow.

Watchmen, she thought: no-one else would go strolling around at this time of night, especially dressed like that.

Giulia stepped into view. The Watchmen would soon have seen her anyway, and it would be best not to surprise armed men.

“Everything well, friend?” one asked.

His tone of voice suggested that there was no good reason to be hanging about outdoors. “Just waiting,” she replied.

“Oh yes?” The Watchman had a small, bony head on a long, wrinkled neck, like a vulture, and he pushed it out at her. “Waiting for what?”

For God’s sake. She pulled her hood back. “For my uncle. He’s sorting out lodgings in the inn.” Giulia pointed across the street. “See those horses in the alley there? I’m watching them for him.”

The Watchmen made a show of weighing up the situation. “Is that so?” the older man said, and she wondered if he was about to make trouble for her.

“Come on,” said the other. “If it gets much colder my balls’ll drop off.”

Ah, you can’t beat the Watch. Wherever you go, they’re all the same.

Giulia watched them turn and go. It was only when they were out of sight that she realised she was still being observed.

There was a long dagger in her boot, under her skirt, but she slid her hand onto the little meat-knife on her belt. Quicker to draw, less suspicious to possess.

A man loomed out of the dark. He stood there, just separate from the shadows, carefully looking at nothing.

“Have the Watch gone yet?” He had an unusual accent, hard to pin down.

Giulia said, “They’d hear me if I called.”

“Don’t call them. Please.”

His face should have been handsome, but the hard jaw and dark eyes were meant for a stronger, more arrogant man, a man Giulia would not have much liked. Instead he looked nervous, as if afraid that the tough customer whose face he’d stolen would come to take it back.

He looked enviously at the Old Arms. “Is that place safe?”

“I don’t know. I’d think so.”

“They get a lot of travellers in there?”

He wore black, she saw, a long robe down to his ankles. His boots were tough and battered; there were strips of cloth wrapped round his hands to warm them, like bandages.

“I get the feeling all sorts stay there. It’s probably safe enough for a preacher,” Giulia said.

“I’m not a preacher. I’m just a peddler, that’s all. I just sell things.”

So where’s the stuff you’re peddling, then? She tightened her grip on her knife, willing him to go away. She wondered if he was mad enough to think she was a prostitute, whether he’d start saying crazy sexual stuff. He’d be getting a fist in the mouth if he did. Maybe more than that.

“My name’s Sebastian,” he said.

“Amelia.” *Go away.*

“You ever been in there?” Sebastian kept his eyes on the inn, as if worried that it would sneak away.

“No.”

“I heard there were Anglians there.” Suddenly he seemed agitated, as though the answer mattered a great deal. “Knights and suchlike. Pious men.”

She wondered why he cared. Perhaps he wanted to convert to the New Church. If he somehow thought Hugh could help with that, he was in for a surprise. Hugh believed in what he called the Piety of Noble Deeds, which meant that he rarely bothered with going to church if he could charge about on horseback instead.

“I don’t know,” she said again. *Go away. Can’t you tell that I want you to fuck off?*

Sebastian stared off down the street. He looked ready for something to happen – angry, almost. “I have to go. But thank you.”

“It was nothing,” she said, reflecting that it really had been nothing at all. She was glad to see him go; even if he meant no harm, fear stuck to him like a sickness.

A door opened across the road, and light and noise spilled into the street: voices singing and chattering, and the sudden smell of food. Hugh of Kenton strode out, smiling as he paced across the road.

“Ah, there you are! This is the place, all right.”

“Good,” she said. “Is there space?”

“Yes. Edwin had them keep a couple of rooms back. Elayne’s in there with him now. That’s the good thing about these city places – you can get a room to yourself. None of that sleeping on the floor nonsense.”

“Great,” she said. “I’m freezing to death out here.” She looked down the street. Sebastian had disappeared.

“Everything all right, Giulia?”

She peered into the dark. Nobody. “There was a man just here. Dressed like a priest. He’s gone now.”

“I saw a fellow walk off.” Hugh nodded to the north. “Went that way. You need something from him?”

“God, no. I wanted shot of him. He started talking rubbish at me. I can’t stand it when men think they can just ramble at you.”

“Really? That’s no good. Ought to have given him a piece of my mind.” Hugh looked around as if unsure how he’d got there. “Well, come in. Bloody freezing out here.”

He held the door open for her. Giulia walked from the night to the orange firelight of the inn. A babble of voices hit her ears, and the heat made her skin prickle with sweat.

People huddled in groups around tables, hunched over beer and dice. Iron candelabra hung below the soot-blackened ceiling. A single, massive fire crackled at one end of the room. The air was full of noise and smoke and the smell of soot.

She walked deeper inside and Hugh followed, looming up behind her. At the far end of the inn a fat man in an apron dipped cups into an open barrel and handed them to a little cluster of people around him. Hugh found a couple of cups on the floor, knocked the rushes off them and held them out to be filled with small beer.

“Edwin and Elayne were here,” he said. “Must’ve moved back...”

Giulia followed him, sipping, glancing from man to man. She did not consciously check the customers for weaponry, but her eyes moved there as if magnetised – to belts and sleeves and dagger handles protruding from the tops of boots, to the fresh scabs on a man’s knuckles and the way another set his shoulders as he stood. Even in a decent inn like this, there was always a chance that violence lay waiting under the smiles.

In the rear of the room there was a walled circle, a tiny arena for dogs to fight packs of dockyard rats. Now, though, the pit was empty and half a dozen people leaned against the railing and talked.

A middle-aged woman was peering into the pit. She was tall and flimsy-looking. She wore a green, wide-sleeved dress, well-cut but a little out of fashion. Her features were fine, but her nose was steeply upturned, and had her eyes not been so friendly and so quick, she would have looked aloof. Giulia knew at once that it had to be her: Elayne Brown, the sorceress.

Hugh waved and Elayne smiled, revealing a lot of white teeth. For someone who had to be at least forty-five, Elayne had aged extremely well. *She knows magic*, Giulia thought. *Go carefully.*

“There you are,” Hugh said.

“Here I am indeed,” Elayne replied, grinning.

She looks mad when she smiles. Still, no scars on her face. She’s doing better than some.

“This is my friend Giulia,” Hugh said. He held his arm out towards Giulia as if welcoming a performer on stage.

“Hello,” Giulia said.

“Hello there!” Elayne replied. “I’m most pleased to meet you. Elayne Brown. So, are you an adventurer like Hugh?”

It seemed an odd expression. The usual word was “thief-taker” and, occasionally, “mercenary”. “I suppose so,” Giulia said. “I mean, I’ve had what you might call adventures.”

“Excellent!” Elayne said. “Have you seen any unusual places on your travels? Any good monsters to tell me about?”

Giulia had seen monsters, some of them human, and on bad nights she dreamed of them. She made herself smile and said, “Well, none that I’d call *good*, but I’m not sure if Hugh would agree.”

Elayne laughed. “How did you meet?”

“Well, it was back in Pagalia. There was a riot at the palace – a rebellion, I suppose – and we were on the same side when it all broke out. We kind of helped Princess Leonora take the throne. Anyhow, both of us couldn’t stand the place, so as soon as the chance came we took the road out of there. And, well, for the moment the road’s taken us here.”

“A rebellion? You’ll have to tell me all about it. Goodness, Hugh, I can hardly believe it’s really you! Let’s all sit down – you too, Giulia. We’ve got so much to talk about!”

Edwin suddenly appeared at her side, breaking free of the crowd as if he had been hiding among the customers to spring an attack. “Hello again! Who’d like another drink?”

They sat at a battered table on mismatched stools.

Edwin glanced at Hugh as he passed the jug around. “So, you’ve known each other for a few months, then? You’re not, um...?” he said, nodding at Giulia.

“Oh no,” the knight replied. “We’re friends, that’s all. Brothers in arms, you might say.”

“Siblings, surely,” Elayne corrected.

“So who came up with the wyvern hunting?” Edwin said.

Elayne smiled. “Was it Hugh, by any chance?”

Hugh smiled back. “Well, somewhat. We did some minor hired work on the way here,” he said. “Bits and pieces, really—”

“Which doesn’t matter,” Giulia added. “We thought we’d have a change, and so we came to Averrio. So, er, what brings you here?”

Edwin took out a pipe and knocked the bowl into his palm. “We’re picking up a shipment of glassware to take back home. People want lenses these days, for telescopes and things. Or at least that’s what I’m here for; Elayne’s come with me to visit some magician fellow. Porthoris, was he?” he asked her.

“Portharion,” she replied. “He lives on an island off the coast, but apparently he’s on good terms with the scholars’ clubs here. They say he can call spirits out the air.”

“You’re a wizard too, aren’t you?” Giulia said.

“I certainly am. A specialised one, I should say, but a wizard of sorts indeed.”

Giulia had the feeling that talking to Elayne was always going to be like swimming against a current of words. “Can you do that? Call up spirits to work for you?”

“No, that’s not really my field, I’m afraid. I know – when I meet Portharion, why don’t you come along? We could all go, all four of us.”

Edwin had started to talk to Hugh, but he stopped and looked back at Elayne. “Now, I’m not sure that’s a good idea—” he began.

“Oh, it’ll be fun! If Hugh’s prepared to vouch for Giulia, I’m sure she’s fine.” She glanced at Giulia and gave her the big smile again.

Kind people, I’m sure, Giulia thought, but not my sort.

“So,” Edwin continued, “buying and selling wool and glass: that’s what I do. There’s good money in it, too.”

Giulia finished her drink. She wanted to join the conversation, but could not think of anything to say.

“Still jousting?” Hugh asked.

“No,” Edwin said, “not for a while. You know, about a year ago I was at a militia training ground, and I saw a levy-man put a hole in plate armour with one of those matchlock

guns. It really shook me up. For the first time, a peasant like that could put a knight down before we could ever get close to him.”

Hugh shrugged. “There’s always been bowmen,” he said. “And guns have been around for a while.”

“Not like that. It used to be that you could rely on a gun either blowing up or not going off at all. Not anymore. So here I am – and in clothes that aren’t falling apart, for once.”

“Very dapper.” Hugh looked unconvinced. “How’re the others back home? Tarquin and Lionel and the other fellows?”

Elayne tugged at Giulia’s sleeve; she looked mischievous. “Look at this.” She took a little cloth parcel out of her bag and unwrapped it. Inside was a frame no bigger than four inches square and, in that, a piece of coloured glass.

Elayne passed the frame to Giulia. “Look in the middle,” she said.

Giulia held it up. She could see the warm blur of the fireplace through the frame. As she peered at it, she made out a picture, stained – or maybe painted, somehow – into the glass itself. A translucent sky and, under it, waves. Land rose above the water at the horizon – an island with a single tower.

“There’s a picture there,” she said.

Elayne’s smile was gentler now. “Keep looking.”

Giulia stared into the glass, and saw that the sun really was shining in it, reflecting on the sea. No, surely not: it was the glow of the fireplace behind doing that. But the water – it was rippling. The room was a masculine hum of voices somewhere far away.

A trick of the light. She held the frame steady, and the water shifted.

“It’s moving!” she said.

“Keep watching. It’s just a picture.”

A dark streak threaded through the water. It swayed, as if some tiny snake was crawling beneath the frame.

There's something under the water.

It broke the surface. Dark blue, shining, like a seal's back but much too long. Giulia's chest felt tight. *Just a picture.*

Something rose from the water, glinting in the glass, something she thought was a tail – but no, it was a neck like a swan's but far, far larger, and at the end was a head, shaped like a horse's and draped with seaweed. Slowly, languidly, it looked towards the island, and then swung as the body turned, back towards Giulia—

She thrust the glass back at Elayne. “There's something in there,” she said.

“Did you see it?”

“I saw an animal in the water. It moved. What the hell is that?”

“It's a water-wyrm. Clever, isn't it?”

“That's one word for it. Did you make that?”

“Oh no.” Elayne wrapped the frame up again. “It's an imprint,” she said. “Like a painting. The glass is enchanted to show a moment that happened a long time ago. There's nothing in there really, nothing that could harm you. It just remembers the moment it was enchanted, that's all.”

“Is it safe?”

“Totally. Only the greatest glassmakers can produce something like that, and only here. This piece is just an example, to show people what can be done. You can see why Edwin does business with Averrio.”

“You trade wool for that? Hell of an exchange.” Giulia got to her feet. “Would you excuse me for a moment? I need to get some air.”

In a moment she was outside, standing under the porch at the back of the Old Arms, pulling up her hood against the winter chill. The sounds of the inn washed out behind her. Giulia sighed, watching her breath curl like smoke, and stepped out into the night.

The canal stirred gently by her feet.

Creepy damned thing, that glass.

Giulia walked to the stable, rubbing her hands together. She took her crossbow and her thieving gear from her saddlebag and hid it on a low rafter. She wasn't entirely sure if it was legal to own a crossbow in the city – usually, you could carry a bow so long as it was wrapped up – but the lockpicks wouldn't look good, and it was best not to take any chances.

Leaving the stable, she hesitated. Giulia didn't want to go back inside: for now, she needed to be on her own. Hugh's friends seemed kindly enough, but they lived in a different world. They had grown up on farms and estates, with swordplay and archery instead of fist-fights and the sudden shine of knives. Edwin and Hugh were soldiers, not thieves, and their lives had a kind of brave glamour that Giulia's would always lack.

She strolled along the pavement beside the canal. The water was still, and the light reflected off the occasional ripples was almost white. Across the canal, a solitary figure hurried along in a long cloak like her own, head lowered. Giulia caught a glimpse of a face – long and chiselled with enormous, beautiful, inhuman eyes. A dryad. No wonder it kept its head down: outside the district set aside for unbelievers and heretics, a dryad would draw attention, and as a pagan it could expect little protection from the law.

Giulia thought about another inhuman head, rising from the sea in Elayne's magic glass, and looked at the canal and shuddered. *No*, she thought, *things like that could never swim up here. Surely not.*

She missed being alone. Hugh's friends would be good company for a while, but soon enough Giulia and Hugh would have to earn some money of their own. Most of her reward

from foiling the coup in Pagalia had gone on new thieving equipment, the rest on an expensive dress that she was beginning to regret. Besides, Giulia didn't like the way Hugh looked at Elayne. *He ought to be searching for companionship somewhere else*, she thought. *So should I.*

Somewhere, distantly, a bell was tolling, inviting paupers to a church where they could trade worship for warmth. In the corner where two houses met, a pile of blankets moved as the man underneath shifted in his sleep. She carried on.

Tenements rose up around her. Statues of saints clustered on a church roof, their faces angled down towards the canal as if about to jump in. A servant slept outside one wide-fronted house in an open boat, part-hidden by several cloaks. He opened one eye as Giulia approached, grunted, and went back to sleep.

The bell was still ringing as she turned and walked back towards the inn. She could see the light of the Old Arms, and by now she was cold enough to want to get indoors. Hopefully, the others would have finished swapping stories about people that she didn't know, and there would be a conversation in which she could take part.

There was a narrow wooden bridge almost opposite the inn, arcing across the canal. Nearly a dozen people stood on the bridge, looking at something in the water. A couple of men, probably from the City Watch, were prodding the object with a boat-hook.

Giulia stopped next to them, suddenly uneasy. "What's that?" she said. "What's going on?"

An old woman turned to look at her. "It's some poor bastard drowned himself," she said, and she looked up and made the Sign of the Sword across her chest. "Some children saw him floating. They thought he was an animal come up from the bay."

The Watchmen were arguing over the boat-hook. It caught on the body, and the man turned over lazily, his arm making a loose, drunken gesture that seemed to take in the sky and

the crowd that had come to watch. It was a scene drawn in white, blue and black, as though the death had drained the colour from the air.

The man's empty face stared up at the moon, his mouth a shapeless hole. His throat had been torn out.

The Watchman yanked on the boat-hook and called, "Somebody bring the boat up, for God's sake. People drink out of there. Get the boat, Pietro!"

"Doesn't look like he drowned," Giulia said. People were leaving the Old Arms in a steady flow, eager to see the corpse: the inn was losing a lot of its trade to the dead man. As the hook tugged more of him into view, she saw the marks on his chest, rips in his clothing through which his white body shone as brightly as the moon. She saw his features properly. It was the man she'd spoken to outside the Old Arms, the man who had been afraid.

Giulia ran towards the inn.

She pushed past a thin stream of people going out and ducked inside. She saw Elayne's dress, ran over to the Anglians and said, "Hugh, we've got trouble."

Hugh tipped the contents of his cup down his throat. His Adam's apple twitched like something that had just been killed. "Fighting, eh?" he said, eyes gleaming.

"What's going on?" Edwin asked. Elayne reached out and took his hand.

"They've found a body in the canal that runs behind the inn. They're just fishing him out. Looks like he was stabbed."

"God," Elayne said, "how awful!"

Giulia spoke to Hugh. "Look, I think we ought to go. Maybe all of us should."

"Go?" Edwin said. "That's not going to look good, is it?"

"This doesn't look good anyhow," she replied. "They'll be looking for someone to bring in. You three are foreigners, and I'm – well, we don't look right."

“It’s them who’re the bloody foreigners,” Hugh muttered. He rubbed his chin. “Right then, let’s have a look outside.”

Edwin said, “Perhaps we ought to get our things together, love.”

She shook her head. “I don’t know...”

Giulia thought, *This’ll take all year*. “Elayne, Edwin, you get your stuff ready. Hugh and I’ll fetch the horses.”

“Right,” said Hugh, standing up. “See you round the back.”

The fresh night air sharpened Giulia’s mind.

Watchmen had converged on the bridge as if drawn by a scent. There were half a dozen of them now, all trying to help bring the corpse to land. A boat had been found, and with the help of a couple of rowers they hauled the body out of the canal. Its arms dangled; it reminded Giulia of a hanged man.

“I’ll check the horses,” Hugh said.

“Do it quickly. We need to be going right now.”

Men gathered around the body. Someone slipped and cursed. Voices babbled and overlapped. “It’s not proper, just leaving him out here.” “Put your cloak over him.” “My cloak on a dead man? You think I want to catch plague?”

On the water’s edge, a fat Watch captain dropped into a crouch and began to search the body as his colleagues shoved the onlookers away. Giulia saw him slip a square packet from the dead man’s belt and drop it into a pocket in his cloak.

She clenched her fists; the urge to run was winding her taut inside. *Dammit, Hugh, hurry up!*

She looked at the body, at the crowd, hissed with irritation and ran back into the inn.

The Old Arms was three-quarters empty now. Giulia strode to the stairs and looked up.

“Edwin? Elayne! Are you there? Edwin? We have to go!”

The door banged open behind her and winter air rushed into the room. Giulia whirled around. Five Watchmen stood in the doorway. At their head was the tubby captain that she had seen outside.

“You!” he called. “You with the scars! You know a man called Hugh of Kenton – tall man, from Albion?”

“Yes,” she said, “I know him.”

“Then come out here.”

For a moment she looked them over. There would be no point arguing. She nodded, drew her cloak close around her, and walked to the door. They stepped aside to let her through.

Outside, Hugh stood next to Edwin and Elayne. A young man with a pimpled face covered them with his crossbow. He looked ludicrous next to the three of them, a part-timer signed up for the extra coins and the chance to carry a bow. But the tip of the bolt was pointed at Elayne, and that was enough to secure obedience from the men.

Above them, far off, a hawk shrieked. Giulia glanced up and saw a black spot moving across the sky, silhouetted by the gibbous moon: a mixture of eagle and lion, four-limbed and winged.

The sight of it made her shiver, with awe as much as fear. It seemed miles away.

“Wild griffon,” the fat captain said, looking at her. He gestured towards the heraldry on his tunic, and his mean, podgy face became dreamy and proud. “Symbol of the city.” It hardened again. “All right, let’s go.”

She looked away from the moon, back to the Watch captain. “What d’you mean?” Giulia said. “Go where?”

The captain grinned. “Where do you think, girl? Your friends are going to jail until we’ve decided what to do with them. And guess what?”

“What?”

“You’re going with them.”

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