

Hungerblade

Part One: A Sword in Its Sheath

The troll Hemwold tightened his grip on his cudgel, tensing the thick tendons and gnarled knuckles of his massive hand. “Here comes an easy mark,” he said to his human companion Berchtold, who crouched below him among the gray, feathery blossoms of a smoketree. The thick foliage concealing their presence crept up to the edges of the Eichestrasse, the broken old road to Lichtstadt.

“Traveling alone, is he? We’ll show him, then.” His grin unveiled a collection of jagged yellow teeth. The shape of Hemwold’s head recalled a slightly flattened cabbage, to which had been added a simian jaw line and a pair of deeply recessed eye sockets. Irregular patches of downy, fox-colored hair tufted across his bony pate. The troll’s garments, from his tunic to his shirt, from his trousers to his boots, were patchwork affairs, crudely cobbled from the stolen outfits of smaller men. “Look at him. Thinks he’s so smart and cocky...”

Berchtold couldn’t see their quarry. His comrade peered easily from a break in the foliage nearly nine feet from the ground. Berchtold was a man of average size, but the troll exceeded his height by more than a yard. Crawling on hands and knees, Berchtold poked his head out from the smoketree’s lowest branches. His square features looked passably handsome by candlelight, but a daylight inspection revealed the crookedness of his flattened nose, a network of broken blood vessels across his cheeks, and purplish folds of skin hanging wearily below his eyes. “Where?” he hissed.

“Cresting that rise. See?”

Berchtold saw that there was indeed a solitary man traveling the ruined road—on foot, no less. Though morning fog partially obscured his silhouette, the cut of his garb suggested no mere wandering peasant, but a person of means. The man picked his methodical way through the old road’s upended paving stones.

“Up against that oak there,” Hemwold commanded. This was Berchtold’s cue to scramble out from their present cover and press himself against the trunk of a larger tree about ten feet ahead. He would wait until their quarry passed by, and then step out behind the man as Hemwold blocked him from the other side.

The traveler continued his nonchalant approach, finally stopping a few yards away from

Berchtold's position. "I can see you there," he said, his voice lilted by the faintest hint of a stutter. He wore the rugged traveling gear of a noble on a hunting expedition, yet without the gewgaws and ornaments the gentry typically favored. A pair comfortably worn boots, clearly the expensive work of a master craftsman, protected his feet. His long, boyish face and softly penetrating blue eyes led Berchtold to read him as the sort of man who looked younger than he was. He seemed slim yet fit; nothing in his calm stance revealed what sort of opponent he might be, should he choose to resist. What held Berchtold's attention most of all was not the unassuming man himself, but the hilt of his blade, protruding from a tooled leather scabbard. It, and its elaborately sweeping hand guard, shone as if lit from within.

The man pointed to a pair of enormous boots poking out from the bottom of the smoketree. "And you, too, there," he added.

Their attempt to surround him foiled, Hemwold crashed out from the foliage, brandishing his cudgel. "You think you're smart. Give over your purse and maybe I won't bash you."

The traveler rubbed thoughtfully at his mouth. "Hmm. Well. I can't say you state your case appealingly, can I?" He shrugged. "My purse has nothing in it except for, well, money and why have a fight over that?" The man reached into his doublet, fished around for a leather purse, untied it from his belt, and tossed it to Hemwold. Sticking to his combative stance, the troll let the purse fall at his feet.

"And now that," the troll demanded, indicating the sword.

A lock of blond-gray hair fell down over the traveler's forehead. He grimaced in annoyance and he brushed it away. "That, I'm afraid, is a different story... You know what the problem is here? We've entered into this without proper introductions. What would your name be, friend? I am Gardien. Jacques Gardien."

Hemwold bared his rotten teeth. "The sword! Now!"

In what was meant to be a soothing gesture, Jacques held up his hands. "Oh dear. Let's talk about this now. I can understand how you'd think it would be good for you, to have this sword. But I'm its custodian, you see, not its owner. So it's not mine to give you. And I certainly wouldn't want to be rude and assume that you're threatening to take it by force..."

Muscles in the troll's neck and shoulders bunched as he smacked the giant club into his hand. "No one mocks me!"

"Not mockery, I promise you. A warning, and a friendly one, at that." He bit pensively at his lip. "Were you to rush me, I'd be duty-bound to protect the blade, by drawing it against you. And when this

sword leaves its scabbard, well... I just don't think you'd like the result."

Angrily wailing, Hemwold bowled toward Gardien, but Berchtold ran to block the troll's path. He threw himself into Hemwold's well-padded midsection, his feet scraping against broken paving stones as he struggled to keep his comrade back.

The troll's face contorted in anger at the unexpected resistance. "I'll bash you too!"

Berchtold spoke through clenched teeth. "Didn't you hear his name?"

"What do I care?"

The traveler remained calmly in place, idly removing a stray thread from the collar of his cloak.

"Gardien!" hissed Berchtold. "*Jacques Gardien*. He is one of the Seven. And that sword you're trying to steal—that's Hungerblade!"

Hemwold stopped pushing as the consequence of an attack began to register in his slow mind. "Hungerblade?"

"Which he would surely use against us!"

The troll thought for a moment, his reddened face taking on a sallow hue. "You are right," he told the traveler. "You were assuming that we meant to take it by force, and that was rude of you. So now we bid you good day." He backed himself into the edge of the woods, and then turned to rush deeper into them. Berchtold followed close behind him, stealing a final backward glance at the celebrated warrior-diplomat, before disappearing into the oaks and pines.

Jacques Gardien sighed in relief, stepped over to his purse and stooped to retrieve it. He returned it to his doublet and continued on to the city of the sun.

Every time Jacques returned to the Doturi capital, it seemed as if another new splendid edifice had been erected around the Palace Square. Since his previous visit, the last of the official structures put in place by the former Emperor had been demolished. A gaping hole in the earth marked the former home of the Imperial Armory. A scurrying flock of ritual magicians, wearing the golden armbands of the Enchanters' League, measured its foundations with their arcane instruments, the bearded elders yelling out contradictory instructions to their smooth-chinned apprentices.

Zigzagging between carts and carriages, Jacques crossed the Grand Circle to the palace walls, then passed the Imperial Gates—used only when the Emperor was in a departing or returning entourage—to the workaday service gate on the south side of the grounds. Though less grand than the

ceremonial entrance, it too was decorated with a frieze of gilded cherubs, disporting on a field strewn with lyres, pipes, amphorae of wine, and theatrical masks.

The guards at the gate snapped to nervous attention at Jacques' approach. He tried his warmest smile on them, but it did little to relax the guards. They held themselves rigid, their gazes following Hungerblade, as if afraid it would leap from its sheath to capriciously skewer them.

Vast gardens arrayed themselves around the palace, arranged in an obsessive symmetry meant to evoke the twin principles of Harmony and Authority. Jacques moved through them with the greatest possible haste. His long-legged, loping stride led waggish young nobles to compare him to a heron, or sometimes an awkward crow, but only when he was well out of earshot.

Jacques sped past the famed enchanted fountains, which spewed spouts of water in an ever-changing choreography evoking the eternal progression of the major astrological constellations. Near the first of several sets of polished granite stairs, lingering near a topiary garden, stood a covey of court maidens, tightly wrapped in multiple layers of daytime finery. They fluttered their jeweled fans as he strode by. He couldn't help but hear the giggling words that floated in his wake:

"Him? Surely not!"

"No, no, it's true!"

"He is not at all what I pictured, from the legends of his... prowess."

"His first impression is, they say, deceptive."

At a further remove stood a group of court bravos, staring envious daggers at Jacques as he swept by. If he took a step toward them, they would pale, step back, and look away. Gardien saw no reason to disturb them as they enjoyed their indignation. He certainly harbored no designs on their girls.

The Solar Palace loomed ever closer. Despite the darkening of clouds overhead, its enchanted panes still reflected the sunlight of days past. The animating enchantment of its semi-vaulted silver pillars and panels maintained its radiance not only on the dimmest afternoons, but also deep into the night, making the Emperor's mansion a literal beacon of enlightenment. The beam it cast into the sky was, on a clear day, visible for dozens of miles in every direction.

The door guardians jolted into action as he neared the steps to the southern entrance. They heaved open its looming oaken doors, allowing him to continue inside without breaking his determined lope.

He stepped into a scene of chaos, as workmen struggled to emplace a marble figure on its pedestal. The statue, carved in ghost-white marble with the ideal proportionality of ancient Æthenas,

depicted an athlete in repose, thinking profound thoughts with a discus cradled under his arm. The work crew used a small crane to ease the heavy sculpture into place. Pale green light stabbed out from joints in the casing, but the typically omnipresent smoke of these machines was absent. It must be a newer version, Gardien thought idly. The Doturi, who had never learned the magic of bridge-building, used massive versions of similar design to move large cargoes over rivers and across mountain passes. An ensemble of lutists, accompanied by a sole cornet, stood at a remove, playing a spritely air. Its soothing regularity was intended to keep the laborers of the court content and productive. No doubt the enchanted instruments helped in that regard.

Buzzing around the workmen a staff of harried curators removed paintings from the walls for replacement with new pictures more greatly in vogue. The recent discovery of perspective in illustration would forever alter the nature of artistic depiction—or so Guntram, whose expansionist ambitions did not stop at the mere acquisition of territory, had determined.

Although largely indifferent to the arts, Jacques did feel a touch of regional pride. The statue, the musical composition, and most of the paintings were the work of his fellow Gallusi. The Emperor and the majority of his senior nobles were of Visigi stock. Their descendants were barbarians, who, before the devastations of the Red Plagues, were notable only for their unceasing attempts to storm the walls of Roma. Guntram's people had been among the first to recover from the great depopulation, and were known for their bluntness, pragmatism, and taste for ale. The Gallusi, liberated and enfolded into the empire by Guntram's father, brought it their philosophies, arts, and the liquid bounty of Uropa's finest vineyards. Thanks to Guntram's taste for all of these gifts, the stolid dukes of Visigiland now struggled to emulate the fashions and caprices of Gallus.

Through the curatorial hubbub, Jacques saw the High Chancellor, Salomon Pineau, waving a baton to catch his attention. Gardien navigated through the throng down the polished marble hallway. Pineau, who waxed his snowy beard to two sharp points, was a Gallusi like Jacques. Together they comprised a conspiracy of two, to protect the Emperor from a certain dangerous impulse.

Jacques tugged uncomfortably at his collar. "You have a job for me...?"

"His Imperial Majesty wishes to convey its parameters to you personally."

"Ah," said Jacques.

"He is in one of his restive moods, so under no condition are you to..."

"Of course not."

"He is entirely too fascinated by that blade on your belt, and has been speaking of it all the more

frequently of late.”

Jacques placed a reassuring hand on the older man’s arm. “No matter how he coaxes...”

He would not permit the Emperor of Dotur, the standard-bearer of Reason Radiant, to doom himself by stupid misadventure. The sword’s enchantment made no allowances for mock combat, or even a simple inspection.

Whenever it was removed from its scabbard, Hungerblade took a life.

Part Two: The Important Assignments Are Always Vague

“Jacques Gardien, grand messenger to the Empire!” announced Cynewulf von Walberg, sergeant-at-arms of the Imperial Guard. His bellowing voice had been trained to fill an entire ballroom, and he took no care to modulate it for smaller chambers. The sergeant punctuated his cry with two stamps from the haft of his halberd. This was in turn followed by a cornet blast from his herald, a small man with a large mustache, clad in a uniform of sapphire brocade.

Gardien eased into the room, positioning himself so that his scabbarded sword faced away from the Emperor. Guntram stood on a pedestal, contemplating an easel, on which rested a canvas half again his height. A young lady of the court, whose name Jacques would be able to recall if only he were a more diligent gossip, lay several feet away. She lounged impishly on a divan, clad only in a few shimmers of diaphanous fabric. Guntram, charcoal in hand, was attempting to capture the ineluctable curve of her hips as they sloped toward her porcelain midriff. A bandy-legged man, his fine garments protected by a paint-spattered smock, hovered nearby, whispering instructions: “No, Your Imperial Majesty. You must not see the line. You must *feel* the line.” Guntram jabbed the charcoal stick at his art tutor in a gesture of dismissive annoyance, then paced to a side table covered with maps and documents. A mournful functionary pointed a finger at a piece of parchment; the Emperor read it briefly, scratched out a line here and there, and affixed his signature to it. The functionary then finished it with a drop of red wax and a press of the Imperial Doturi seal—a solar emblem emitting waves of enveloping light, the symbol of Reason Radiant. Guntram returned to his sketching.

Even while signing documents or practicing one of his many artistic pursuits, Guntram moved with a bantam’s strut. Though currently attired in a simple linen shirt and golden leggings, he carried himself as if balancing a heavy crown on his head. Guntram’s fine features, once considered pretty and callow, were aging into a mask of forbidding confidence. The Emperor’s most off-putting physical quality, at least in Jacques’ opinion, was the chameleonic changeability of his eyes. Depending on the light, they might appear to be blue, hazel, green, or the silver of a polished rapier.

Jacques remained still, hands clasped in front of him, until Guntram deigned to acknowledge him. He had, as a matter of idle curiosity, fallen into the habit of counting the seconds between his entrance to an audience, and the moment when Guntram pretended to have noticed him. This was one esoteric coded signal among many to consider when fulfilling his missions.

Among the secrets behind the rapid success of the Doturi since the plague ended was in the

freedom it granted its roving legates. Though known as simply as messengers, Jacques and his six senior colleagues enjoyed considerable leeway in negotiating treaties, establishing foreign policies—even in declaring the occasional minor war. One could not risk the hides of ordinary state officials by asking them to travel the continent’s broken and bandit-infested roads. Hazardous times called for more adventurously capable corps of diplomats, such as one entrusted to carry the legendarily bloodthirsty Hungerblade.

Jacques had long ago learned, the most important assignments were always vague. His challenge in these meetings was, as always, two-fold: to read the parameters of his task in the pauses and evasions of the Emperor’s discourse, and to protect him from his own impetuous curiosity regarding Jacques’ dangerous enchanted weapon.

“The rest of you, out,” Guntram commanded. Artist and bureaucrat glided through the main door with quick and shuffling efficiency. Guntram’s model slipped on a silken robe, itself embroidered with the seal of Reason Radiant, and eased through a secret door into an inner chamber.

Guntram bounded from his platform to encircle Gardien in a vigorous bear hug. In the repertoire of His Majesty’s emotional displays, aggression and affection were not always well-delineated. He released Jacques, then fainted, grinning broadly, for the hilt of his sword.

Jacques grabbed his wrist, and deployed his best and humblest stutter. “Your Imperial Majesty...”

Guntram reddened, turned steely, then barked out a belly laugh, striding to a sideboard. He poured two goblets of purplish red wine, handing one to Jacques. Jacques swirled it to release the bouquet, breathed it in, then tasted. A fine vemien, though a touch pushy.

Jacques guessed at the region. “Monsen?”

The Emperor smiled broadly. “Sireau. I knew I could fool you. Delightful, no?”

Jacques nodded.

“Let me test you on another question. The North Coast League. What comes to mind?”

“One of our major mercantile leagues,” Gardien replied.

“The largest, in fact,” Guntram corrected. “I did not even know that.”

“My dealings with them have been peripheral at best. They control the trade routes along the Albearic. Skirmish occasionally with Thulean raiders.”

“Well they’re perhaps tired of freezing seas and ship-to-ship combat with musky dwarves. They hope to expand their sphere southwards. Very much southwards. One of their grandees, name of Wigandus, has developed some contacts for himself among the Romari. I don’t need to tell you how

profitable an alliance with them would be—or how costly a war.”

Jacques took a careful sip of his wine. “You speak Wigandus’ name with skepticism.”

“Don’t mistake me. We need the mercantile leagues. As a fish breathes water, an empire survives through the inhalation and exhalation of money. Whether this particular league warrants our favor or a subtle squeezing on behalf of its competitors, is a fact to be determined. And this Wigandus, he seems to sweat butter. Yet if his claims of Romari connections prove their worth, we are capable of tolerating no end of coarseness. That sword. Surely if you withdraw it merely for the purposes of examination . . .”

Jacques raised his goblet. “To your admirable persistence, my liege. Which I am nonetheless duty-bound to rebuff.”

The Emperor stepped closer. “There must be some way of suspending the curse, just long enough to . . .”

Gardien shook his head. “If I remove it from its scabbard, with only two of us here, one of us will die. I assure you, Your Imperial Majesty, that either result would cast a pall on the rest of my day. Perhaps this fine vintage has inflated my self-importance, but . . .”

Guntram turned his back on him. Despite his lofty station, he was not above a little regal pouting. “But what?”

“Under normal circumstances, wouldn’t a preliminary trade mission warrant the services of a less senior messenger?”

“Wigandus requested a member of the Seven. He implied that anything less than that would constitute a snub of the entire North Coast League. Perhaps he reckons that your presence will smooth his way as he seeks trading partners—think of yourself as a walking and talking Imperial seal of approval.” The Emperor prowled over to the sideboard in search of figs.

“Yet . . .”

Guntram tested a knife for sharpness and plunged it into the heart of a juicy fig. “Yet I acquiesce to his demand in hopes that you will attend to a second mission, one more suited to your particular qualifications.” He cut the fig in two and paused to eat the red interiors of each half.

“I heard a funny story while out in the world,” said Jacques. “That the Romari Emperor, Nero, has been defanged by his Senate, and that a power struggle now ensues there.”

“Pesky things, legislatures. I don’t know how the Romari have lasted for so many centuries by allowing them. Oh yes, I do—by continually deposing and killing their Emperors.” He wiped his mouth and fingers with a square of bleached linen, then came toward Jacques. “Say you wish to cut a rope in

two. If you draw the sword for that purpose, surely—“

Jacques clapped his hand over Hungerblade’s hilt. “It will still kill someone. So I always use a knife for cutting rope.”

Guntram circled him. “Perhaps you need to will it more strongly to heed your commands.”

“It doesn’t work that way, my liege. So the mission—am I be right in thinking that my real task is to see which senatorial faction holds the upper hand in Roma?”

“That would be the start of it.”

“And, if necessary and possible, to tilt the balance of power in a direction favorable to Dotur?”

Guntram seemed to nod. “There are others of the Seven available, Jacques, but it’s your way of seeing the world I seek here. Understand?”

Jacques didn’t, but figured that he would, eventually. Important missions and their vague instructions . . .

The Emperor continued: “Upon arrival in Romulus, you will meet with our messenger stationed there, Isabelle Darras. You know her?”

He did indeed know her, as the Emperor was unquestionably aware. Isabelle had been something of a protégé.

Guntram lunged suddenly for the blade. Jacques executed a perfect turn, catching the Emperor by the arm and folding it behind his back. His Majesty was in no pain, but would be if he resisted, even slightly.

“Thank you, my liege,” said Jacques, “For so skillfully testing my judgment.”

The Emperor broke into a schoolboy grin. “And your reflexes,” he added.

“And my reflexes,” agreed Jacques Gardien.

* * *

After a week’s travel, Jacques reached the town of Hreiburg, which sat on the southern spur of the Riba River, just above the much-feared Iron Wood. He stood on a wooden pier, watching as crates of provisions were loaded onto the *Geistschritter*, one of the empire’s coveted self-propelled barges. Although his upcoming journey down the Riba would not be his first on one of these conveyances, his awe at their magical ingenuity remained undimmed. A small cabal of ritualists recharged the engines every morning, allowing the barge to move up and down river with equal ease. There was no need for

any type of fuel; however, the cabins of the ritualists took almost as much space. Over thirty feet long and constructed of bronze and alchemically-treated pine, the barge's prow bore the solar emblem of Reason Radiant, rendered as an imposing shield of brass. Behind it streamed an array of colorful banners, in turn marking the barge's allegiance to the empire, the local duchy, the enchanters who built it, and finally the transportation syndicate that commissioned and operated it. Sculpted nymphs and cherubs capered on the prow and side rails. Its engines, located at the stern, were encased in the forms of gleeful gargoyles. In their glinting eyes registered the Doturi hunger for wealth and territory. Jacques spied three obvious enchantments, but he was sure the most deadly ones worked into the barge's design and embellishments would be hidden to the unaided eye.

Behind him, Jacques heard the hocking sound of a man pointedly clearing his voice. He turned, glanced down, and beheld a portly gentleman bedecked in the fur-lined hat and voluminous cloak of the northern Visigi provinces. His wide face and bulging eyes lent his features an unfortunate amphibian quality.

"Jacques Gardien?" he said, bowing in greeting. He pronounced the surname with three syllables.

The messenger bowed in turn. "And you must be Wigandus."

"Yes, yes. I am most glad to see you. And nervous of this next leg of the journey. The näcken, they alarm me. Spirit creatures, hah? Have you ever encountered them? Ordinary bandits are one matter, but ghosts!"

Jacques realized that the man was accustomed to speaking continuously, and that, if he was to answer any of the questions posed to him, it was his job to interrupt.

"I have not met the näcken. But I'll venture that most things described as ghosts turn out to be more solid than that."

Wigandus trundled down the pier to more closely watch the dockside crane loading his trunks and crates. Two stevedores roared atop the extensive traveling possessions, mutely testifying to the strength of the magical crane. "I thank you, and the North Coast League thanks you, for your interest in our dealings. Mere commercial arrangements are, I'm sure, a bore to you, compared to your usual perambulations and adventures and such. I've heard such exciting tales of your exploits, Jacques Gardien."

"They're all exaggerations." Jacques' pesky forelock fell down to annoy him. He batted it back in place, only to have it fall down again.

Behind him, Jacques heard a sharp intake of breath. He turned to see two familiar figures standing by the pier.

Wigandus clapped his hands together in a gesture of summoning. “Monsieur Gardien—or is it Lord Gardien?—allow me to introduce my bodyguards, Hemwold and Berchtold.”

Wigandus had employed the two brigands who’d tried to waylay Jacques on the road to Lichtstadt.

Part Three: Into the Iron Wood

Hemwold the troll and his fellow bandit Berchtold stood hesitantly at the lip of the gangway. Their new employer, Wigandus, beckoned them on.

Wigandus clapped impatiently. "Come now, come now, let's all get loaded. The sooner we're all aboard, the sooner we'll be through all this." He glanced to the south, where lay the fearsome Iron Wood. "Don't tell me I've hired bodyguards who are afraid of boats."

Jacques Gardien, standing at Wigandus' side, thrust his hands behind his back and idly whistled. He attempted to reproduce an air he had heard the lutists play back at the Solar Palace, but its complex counterpoint eluded him.

Wigandus' jowls quivered. "Honestly! Explain yourselves!"

Hemwold shoved Berchtold forward. Once on the gangplank, he moved swiftly, keeping a close watch on Jacques, and especially his sword. He leapt down onto the deck of the *Geistschritter*, maneuvering himself to keep Wigandus between himself and the imperial messenger. The troll's face set in determination; he bounded across the gangplank. It sagged and bounced under each step.

"Where do you want us, sir?" Berchtold asked.

The merchant made an indistinct gesture, which took in the entire length of the barge's deck. "Situating yourself in a defensive position. You are the bodyguards. Demonstrate your expertise."

Berchtold waited for Hemwold, whose bulk tipped the barge slightly as he stepped off the gangplank. The two of them scattered to opposite ends of the boat.

"I swear," complained Wigandus. "I knew the troll was thick, but last I spoke to his companion, he seemed to have a brain in his head."

Jacques said nothing; in his short acquaintance with Wigandus, he had already learned that there was no need to respond. Others would not have agreed, but Gardien appreciated the trader's willingness to keep up both sides of a conversation.

Wigandus went on. "I suppose it is the price we must pay. For the Emperor's expansive military efforts. Of which I approve, I must add. But they drastically dry up the pool of skilled, smart, loyal fighters. Where the rest of us are concerned, a man who refuses to hire idiots gets nothing done at all."

The barge's captain, identifiable by the loops of silver braid on his half-cloak and the golden pendant around his neck, approached, bowing in turn to Jacques, and then Wigandus. The merchant prince cleared his throat in annoyance and stepped between the other two men.

“Jacques Gardien, of the Seven,” he said, looking at neither of them, “this is Captain Dietfried of the *Geistcritter*. What haste can we make, Captain? I am anxious to reach my destination. And what of the näcken? They have been restive of late, or so I’ve been told. Separate fact from fiction for me, Captain. I am a practical man with little cause to truck with spirits and their ilk.”

Dietfried took care to shake Gardien’s hand and to exchange pleasantries with him before answering his client’s queries. The captain was a surprisingly young man boasting a full head of wavy chestnut hair and a thick, downturned mustache. The latter lent him a permanent frown. “Wish I could say that the river spirits have been quiet. Last week they swarmed from the woods and water alike to board the *Herzbrund*. Three men slain, another four maimed. A month past, the *Henasunda* set out from this very pier; neither it nor any aboard have since been seen.”

Wigandus tapped his fingers against the metal rail, as if tousling the hair of one of the bronze cherubs molded to it. “Perhaps then we should go overland, if the monsters are attacking on the river.”

Dietfried shook his head. “The näcken are even thicker in the woods than in the water. Even if its worst inhabitants were only wolves and bears, which is not the case, I’d not attempt it; the forest itself’s near impassable.”

Wigandus huffed. “If the North Coast League held sway here, we’d commission crews to raze the forest to the ground. Turn the entire Iron Wood into field and pasture.”

Dietfried smiled slightly and shrugged his shoulders slightly. “Such was tried, in Emperor Theofract’s time. The wood took its vengeance.”

“The wood takes its vengeance still,” Jacques added. “Even Emperor Guntram for all of his, ah, resolve has not attempted to clear the area of its, um, inhabitants.”

Wigandus looked at Gardien strangely. Just when he thought the merchant would press him regarding the emperor, he turned to the captain. “So these näcken, what do they look like? Your men have fought them before, but what should my bodyguards prepare for?”

The captain pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve to dab at the points of sweat welling on his forehead. “No two are quite alike. I’ve seen antlers, tusks, claws . . . Some are furred, others finned. The one that came closest to sinking us had the head of a horse mounted on a snake’s body.”

“You jest, surely,” countered Wigandus, perhaps a bit too quickly.

“From my lips to the Emperor’s ear,” Dietfried said solemnly. He even swirled the life-symbol over his heart with the middle finger of his left hand. Wigandus frowned, but did not appear completely convinced.

“So what you said is right, Gardien,” Wigandus mused. “They’re not so much ghosts as creatures of solid flesh.”

Dietfried squinted in apparent agreement. “All too solid. My brother lost an arm and leg to them, and he’d attest to that.” He gazed at the horizon, where dark clouds gathered with unnatural speed. “Weather magic,” he said with a nod of his head to the darkening skies, “or I’m a Thulean. I’d like to beat that storm. Are all your party aboard?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll away.” The captain turned to shout commands to his crewmen.

Turning to Jacques, Wigandus abruptly altered his manner, laughing and wringing his hands eagerly together. “Ho, then. If we can’t minimize the danger, we can at least hope to enjoy it. A grand adventure, let’s say.”

“Tell me, Wigandus, how did you happen to employ those two bodyguards of yours?”

“Well it is as I said. The difficulty of hiring suitable men. I lost several guards to injury after a skirmish outside Kronheim. I found these two on the road; I gather they’d had a dispute of some kind with their previous master. Then at Arnheim Lake someone fired upon us with a carbine, and that scared off the remainder of my entourage.”

“A carbine? Only the army has those or the ammunition.”

“Some go missing from time to time,” the merchant replied. Wigandus appeared ready to say more when, with a bucking jolt, the barge’s engines kicked into motion, sending rhythmic vibrations throughout the craft. Jacques felt them juddering up from the soles of his boots. Wigandus lurched for the rail.

A white spray churned in the barge’s wake, as if the bronze gargoyles encasing its engines were kicking furiously in the water.

The barge’s crew wandered the deck. Some gathered to share a meal of cold sausage and bread; others checked the state of their crossbows. The vessel itself required only a helmsman to operate it and the ritualists to keep the engines alive. The crewmen were present to load and unload, and to defend the ship against attackers. They carried themselves with the bored confidence of experienced professionals.

“You have reason to doubt Hemwold and Berchtold?” Wigandus asked him.

“We had an unfortunate encounter on the road to Lichtstadt, not so long ago. Perhaps it was a misunderstanding.”

“You’re saying they had not left a reputable employer, but were instead acting as bandits before I

met them? If you say so, I'll discharge them, as soon as we make safe landing."

"They've done nothing to arouse your suspicions, then."

The barge made good speed past the docks and warehouses of Hreiburg, and now navigated the bend that would take them into the northern fringes of the Iron Wood. The cries of gulls and songbirds dropped off, and then fell silent. Civilization slipped away. The crewmen took active watch positions. Some kept vigilant eyes on the banks, while others peered down into the river itself.

"You messengers," said Wigandus, "have the luxury of high standards. If I disqualified from my service every guardsman who's ever contemplated a bit of brigandage, I'd never be able to travel, would I?"

"Yes, one must be realistic."

Wigandus became fretful. "As it is, with only two men, I feel lightly guarded." He smiled, as if forcing himself into better cheer. "Though I reckon the troll counts the same as four ordinary men. And of course no one sensible will dare threaten us, with you as part of our party."

"I wouldn't count too heavily on that."

Time passed. They passed under a scattered canopy of trees—oaks, beeches and firs, mostly—which reached graspingly over the river from both shores, to intertwine their leafy fingers. A loud splash on the port side attracted the jumpy attention of the crewmen, who readied their crossbows or fumbled for spyglasses. Berchtold pulled a long knife from a sheath on his belt and craned his neck to see what the crewmen had spotted. Hemwold, who had perched himself atop a low stack of crates, picked his teeth disinterestedly.

The alarm passed, and the crewmen moderated their state of alert. There were more spyglasses out, and everyone armed with a crossbow now had it cranked and ready.

Wigandus paced. Then, evidently realizing that Jacques was observing him, made an effort to stop, finally sliding into a chair next to the calm messenger. "Perhaps you wonder why a man in my position would undertake such a risky journey."

"Wealth goes to the bold," Jacques blandly noted without looking up.

"Ah, but there are also countless ways to multiply a fortune by sitting in a comfortable chair at home. It is duty to the Empire that prompts my sacrifice. And—please do not take offense—there are certain negotiations so fraught that they cannot be performed by go-betweens."

Jacques struggled to calm his disordered mop of hair, as a cold wind wreaked further havoc on it. The storm was gaining on them despite the speed of the barge. "If I took offense easily, I'd be a very poor

go-between.”

“Ah, ho. Yes. What I mean to say is that, I, as a high counselor of the North Coast League, buttressed by you, as emissary of the Emperor himself, mean to accomplish a service to the Doturi to eclipse the actions of any general.” Wigandus lowered his voice and looked cautiously around. “I will persuade the Roma to sell us their bridge-building secrets.”

Jacques could not help but smile. “You can’t be faulted for lack of ambition, can you?”

The reaching archway of trees over the river had thickened, so it was now as if they traveled through a tunnel of vegetation. Dapples of light, marking holes in the canopy above, played across the darkening waters of the river. The wind picked up, heralding the imminent arrival of the storm the captain had hoped to avoid. Weather magic was tricky and as often as not it caused more problems than it solved. Of course, those problems were often confronted by more magic.

Wigandus shouted to be heard above the susurrus of wind-lashed leaves. “Bridge-making rituals may only be the start. I hear that they have a new conveyance, powered by some force called magnotrism.”

“Magnetism, I think it’s called. Well, I always hate to go on easy assignments.”

Wigandus leaned forward in his chair. “You think it impossible that they will agree?”

“If you’re asking bluntly, yes. They have the ritual magic to build bridges, and we do not. Empires must preserve their arcane monopolies. In fact, they are often built on them. Would we sell them the secret of the carbine, or cranes, or the cannons on the Emperor’s war carriage?”

Wigandus dismissed his argument with a wave of his hand. “It is not like I seek the cooperation of the Castilians or Onogur. The Roma are a practical people. Almost as practical as we. It is a matter of finding the conditions that render the transaction imperative.”

“Näcken!” cried a crewman, up near the prow.

The water came suddenly alive with dark shapes, moving toward the barge. Crossbow bolts pelted down into the river, one magically flaring into a fireball before sizzling beneath the water. Berchtold rushed to Wigandus’ side; Hemwold strode ponderously over to join him.

An enormous form half-sprang from the water a few yards from the barge’s starboard side. It was a creature of flesh and blood, but of an anatomy so bizarre that Jacques found it difficult to take in all at once. At least fifteen feet of it protruded above the water level. The being’s tiny, crested head mixed human and amphibian traits. It was suspended on a long, scaly neck, above a wide torso from which protruded a series of long, fleshy tendrils. Thick, brushy quills sprouted from its shoulders; behind these

flapped a wide sail of flapping skin reminiscent of a bat's wings.

Its fleshy tendrils darted out, wrapping themselves around the barge's railings, rocking it. Another seized a crewman, entangling his neck and arms and pulling him over the side. A second guard was captured as he tried to reload his crossbow.

Jacques bolted to the side of the ship, springing onto the shaking railing in stride, and launched himself off the side at the monstrous näcken, drawing his blade as he fell toward it.

Part Four: A Monster, An Emperor, and a Thief

Hemwold the troll left his place at his employer's side to gape at Jacques Gardien, who had leapt from the railing of the *Geistschritter* to combat the bizarre, enormous river monster that had taken two of the barge's crewmen. He wanted to see the sword Hungerblade, which the imperial messenger had finally drawn. Flashes of metal moved through the air, but the furious speed of the struggle made any closer inspection of the weapon impossible. The creature turned and flailed in the water, throwing up an obscuring curtain of frothing liquid. What little light got through the leaves and branches above was now further dimmed. A heavy rain had started, sending streams of droplets through breaks in the tree canopy overhead. These were seized by the wind and dispersed in every direction as a punishing, sideways precipitation.

Jacques appeared to be clinging to the creature's torso with one hand as he slashed with the other. Several of its tendrils entangled him. One choked him; another wrapped around his sword-arm, pulling it behind his back. Jacques groaned in pain. The näcken threw back its head and keened. Its cries at first reminded Hemwold of a gull, then grew distressingly intelligent in their inarticulate expression of pain and fury. Blood rushed down the creature's torso, but Hemwold couldn't tell whether its source was Gardien or the näcken.

A crewman, previously pulled over the side, burst up from the river a few feet from Hemwold. Annoyed by the interruption, the troll reached out to grab his arm and haul him from the water. The näcken shrieked while he heaved the guard up onto the railing. The creature listed like a sinking ship and then rapidly vanished beneath the river's surface.

Wigandus lurched to the railing, his shouts drowned out by the howling wind. The creature's sinking roiled the waters, rocking the barge and threatening to send the merchant pitching overboard. Berchtold pulled him from the railing.

A crimson cloud appeared in the water where Gardien and the monster went down. It widened and dispersed, occasionally punctuated by bursts of bubbles.

The barge settled; Wigandus returned to the rail, punching the air in impotent frustration. "No. I needed him!"

A splashing arose at the back of the boat, near the gargoyle figures guising its engines. Wigandus shouted redundantly for aid, as the *Geistschritter's* crew scrambled to respond. They pulled a sodden

figure over the side rail and onto the deck.

It was a second crewman, the other one seized by the näcken's tendrils before Gardien leapt to engage it.

Hemwold muttered. "Gardien wasn't so tough. I could have taken him after all."

A shining object surfaced, just on the other side of the railing. It was Gardien's sword, Hungerblade. The troll got down on his knees to reach his long arms through the railing for it.

A hand still gripped its hilt.

Gardien burst to the surface, gasping for air. Hemwold scrambled guiltily back, leaving the ship's captain, Dietfried, to throw him a rope. Jacques clung to the side of the barge, then gathered the strength to haul himself in. He was provided a blanket and ushered into the sheltered front of the barge, where its helm was located. Dietfried placed him on a stool before an iron stove.

"If this rain keeps up, soon everyone out there will be as wet as I," Jacques protested.

"None of them saved the whole ship just now," replied the captain. Dietfried poured a hot dark beverage into a stone mug. "Drink this; you'll find it invigorating. It is kafra, from Zanatium."

Gardien nodded gratefully. "I've had it before. Thank you." Kafra beans were a costly indulgence.

"You slew it," said Berchtold, who had pushed his way into the helmsman's cabin.

Jacques blew into the steaming liquid before taking a careful sip. "What choice did I have?"

"None. It was going to kill us all."

The messenger remained gloomy. "Maybe I'm mistaken, but I looked into its face and believe I saw intelligence."

"So?" asked the ex-bandit.

"So I'd be happier if there'd been a way to speak to it."

"You can't talk your way out of everything,"

No danger encountered during the remainder of the *Geistschritter's* journey down through the Iron Wood proved more noteworthy than the encounter with the gigantic näcken. Screams were heard from the woods a few hours later. A beast with glowing eyes surfaced when the rains let up, but it was content to imperturbably skim the surface of the river for fallen leaves. Other beasts were more

inquisitive, but they were beaten back by the ship's crew. Propelled by the barge's enchanted engines, they passed through the Iron Wood and into the port of Starcklingen, which stood at the northern tip of the large glassy lake called the Tanzerg. The next morning, the *Geistschritter* took them across the Tanzerg, then left them to make the rest of the journey to Roma territory themselves.

Wigandus outfitted the group with horses, except for Hemwold, who had no choice but to plod along on foot. At Bregenau, on the southern tip of the Tanzerg, the merchant struck a deal with a cargo caravan, promising them the protection of a mighty troll and a legendary member of the Seven in exchange for the right to travel with them. Eventually Jacques, speaking to the caravan leader, learned that Wigandus had bargained a fee for himself in exchange for making the arrangement. The amount so gained had to be trivial compared to the assets of a high counselor of the North Coast League. Wigandus, Jacques concluded, drove bargains for their own sake, or perhaps to keep in practice.

Keeping company with a load of fine wood, crates of silver cutlery, and dozens of grain bushels, the four moved down through the mountainous region separating the Dotur and Roma empires. The caravan moved in the shadows of snowy peaks, following riverbeds and tracing a winding path through valleys and switchbacks.

Incidents of banditry were few. On three occasions over as many days, Jacques saw the flare of sunlight bouncing off a distant spyglass and called a halt. Furtive figures circled the party's camp when they had bedded down for the night by the side of a stream, but apparently decided not to chance an incursion. Wolves were constant shadows, but they never attacked, much to Jacques' surprise.

In the lush grasses of an alpine meadow, they were hailed by a trio of local peddlers, led by a one-armed Romari named Ranero. The newcomers held aloft a brace of pheasants each, with which they paid for the right to accompany the caravan for a day and a night.

Wigandus sidled up to Jacques. "This Ranero, I wish to glean from him the latest on the state of his Empire." It transpired that the peddler spoke only the vulgar version of the Roma language, and that Wigandus had learned only the High Tongue. Jacques agreed to translate.

It was Wigandus who directly invoked the Emperor's name.

"Nero?" the peddler exclaimed. "He's the one who cost me this!" Ranero rotated the stump of his left arm at the Doturi travelers. "Nero! They say in the old days the Emperors were gods. Nothing but a demon he is. What was my crime, you might ask. Well, I'll tell you. He had declared another of his carnival days—this one in celebration of his pet ass, who supposedly had bested a fine race horse in a match—which surely was fixed, perhaps with the horse being poisoned—and I was a seller of olives and

figs in the capital then, and the crowd was poor and dispirited, for how many festivals can you attend before you become listless and tired of them all? Apparently I wore a discouraged look on my face, doubtless from my poor sales that day—and at this moment, the Emperor’s carriage comes through the square, and he singles me out. Me! Has his soldiers beat me. For looking unhappy. And I fight to defend myself, and I get stabbed, and the wound becomes infected, and the physicks eventually cut my arm off, for I had no money for a ritualist. I lodge a formal protest and in exchange Nero himself hears me out. He weeps wet tears at my tale. He settles a thousand denari on me as compensation. So I allow myself to think that justice has—“

Ranero’s companions groaned and told him to shut up.

“These gentlemen asked about Nero and I will tell them! Soon afterwards, I am told that I have been exiled to the north, to this deity-forsaken region of mountain goats and men who marry their aunts. For what crime? Despoiling the serene quiet of the emperor’s contemplation, they call it. For which the fine is nine hundred and ninety denari!”

As Jacques suspected, Ranero had no current information on affairs in Romulus, where he had not ventured since his exile. For fresher intelligence, they would have to wait until they arrived there themselves.

That trip took another twenty days, from the foothills of the northern mountains down through the lowlands to the capital. Along the way, they paid the normal tolls to a series of bandit kings and local generals, and were neither waylaid nor unduly extorted. Half a day was lost when Hemwold drank himself insensate, and Wigandus refused to leave him behind. Only once did they have to hide from dinosaurs. They didn’t actually see the giant lizard, but Jacques guessed it was an Allosaurid. It was, all told, one of Jacques’ more uneventful journeys.

By the time they reached the via Cassia, Wigandus had picked up an additional four bodyguards, including one who spoke Visigi in addition to the high and vulgar Roma tongues. Away from the cities the road was lightly used and in poor repair. Although the small troop occasionally passed Romari clibanarii, the armored cavalry seemed happy enough with Wigandus’ papers. At least the merchant didn’t complain too loudly about the coins that disappeared when the papers were passed. Ultimately they reached the farmlands around Romulus itself and traffic began to pick up noticeably. The road at midday was a bustle of men, carts and horses jostling for position. Further out stood the crumbled villas of a more prosperous time, before the depopulation, when the city’s people overflowed its gates. Vineyards and fields were still barely recognizable, although the wilderness had reclaimed much beyond

the boundary of the road. Nearer the city hard-working farmers and their slaves toiled in the fields and vineyards, gradually beating back the wilderness and reclaiming what previous generations had lost.

A few members of the jostling throng, mostly children or the simple-minded, gawked openly at the Doturi travelers. Others, Jacques saw, took more surreptitious note of them, as if mentally preparing reports for masters, patrons, or their fellow gossips. It was not without reason that Romulus was known as the city of spies. In its taverns and salons, the smallest scrap of news would be studied, turned over, and cut apart, so that portents might be seen in its entrails. In its taste for schemes and counter-schemes, it put the cities of the Dotur Empire to shame.

Wigandus ably threaded himself through the crowd, using his bulk to push aside the hoi polloi. Hemwold followed close behind him, creating a larger wake in the crowd, in which Jacques and the others could easily follow. The road was well maintained near the city and the crowd moved quickly. The enchanted walls towered above the throng, intimidating outsiders and providing mute testimony to the empire's strength. Colonnades and statues lined the road, growing grander as they neared the entrance. Jacques could not help but notice the excellent craftsmanship and longed to study each piece at length, but he was apparently alone in his sentiment. The others, Romari and Doturi alike, walked through the flanking pieces with hardly a sideways glance. Jacques could only shake his head and continue with the rest.

The northern gate was, perhaps, the most used, and for that it was the most impressive. Towering warriors of ancient marble stood in recesses to each side of the gate, weapons drawn. As the traffic constricted they moved more slowly and Jacques finally had time to examine the statues. The left held a trident and net. His face was masked, but his body was practically naked. The right held short sword and shield. His open-faced helm allowed Jacques a good look at his face; beautiful and fierce were the worlds that immediately sprang to mind. As he watched, he was certain the eyes moved over the crowd, slowly, but surely. Perhaps it was only his imagination that they lingered on him and Hungerblade for long moments before continuing on. Without knowing the type of enchantment on the statues, Jacques decided better safe than sorry and kept his hand well away from his blade.

They finally reached the fabled gates of Romulus, which in ancient times had repelled wave after wave of barbarian invaders. Among these would have been Wigandus' ancestors. Now he strolled boldly to the centurions on duty, exchanged a few quiet words, dropped a small bundle in a legionnaire's hand, and sauntered through the gate.

Romulus did not share the regular street pattern of later Romari cities. Having grown from the

confluence of seven hillside villages, it was a warren of cramped, winding streets, whose snakelike routes worked around the land's varying elevations. Moving wagons, or troops, through the constricted streets would be long, hard work.

The company headed for the villa of Isabelle Darras, their Doturi contact. After Zanatino, Wigandus' new translator, took them down a series of wrong avenues, Jacques seized control of Wigandus' map and led the party to the steps of her villa. Jacques memorized what he would of the map before returning it to Wigandus' outstretched hand. He would create his own copy at the first opportunity. Accurate maps of any type were nearly priceless and Jacques wondered how the merchant had acquired his. The Messengers had an extensive collection of maps, perhaps the best in the empire, but new maps were precious and they all looked for ways to increase their stockpile. The Doturi legation was housed on a narrow but busy avenue. On its stone gable, an old frieze of Roma and foreign gods had been altered, so that they supported the Doturi emblem of Radiant Reason. A servant, seeing their approach, bolted from a wooden stool outside to fetch his mistress.

Jacques awkwardly adjusted his dusty traveling cloak. It had been several years since he had last seen Isabelle.

A small figure saw her opportunity and darted from the throng. She came at Jacques as if she had been pushed aside, bumped into his hip and slipped a piece of metal against his belt, then dashed away. Jacques reached for his waist, to find the belt missing, scabbard and all.

The girl had stolen Hungerblade.

Part Five: Giovanna

The fleeing girl held Hungerblade in her fist as she dodged deftly around the midday throng. Jacques ran after her. The sword was still in its scabbard, at least, but that fortunate condition wouldn't continue for long if he lost sight of her.

The girl was, Jacques guessed, a little over four feet tall. She was skinny, dirty, dressed in rags, and very fast. She slipped around a portly knife sharpener, dodged between a pair of private guardsmen, and dashed up a set of villa steps, narrowly avoiding collision with a fruit vendor. Jacques did his best to follow her, but had to execute a graceless leap to avoid being tripped by the knife sharpener. He circumnavigated around the guards and fruit vendor only to see her rush down the steps and slide beneath a moving ox-cart. Jacques expected to see the girl cry out in pain as her bare legs skidded across the grit-covered stone of the Romulian road, but she barely winced. Fearing that he might lose her, Jacques became bolder, openly pushing his way through the crowd. "Make way!" he cried, in vulgar Romari. "Danger!"

His peripheral vision registered the bobbing movement of a plumed helmet behind him. Whether the soldier meant to stop the thief or the marauding foreigner remained an open question. He kept running, but made his explanation clearer, just in case: "Stop that girl!" he shouted. "Thief! Thief!" It abashed him to cry out like a common fool who couldn't take care of his own property. His pride meant nothing, though, compared to the risk Hungerblade posed if allowed into anyone else's hands. He tried not to picture what would happen if the girl popped it from its sheath with no one else around.

The girl disappeared into a shadowed alley on the other side of the street. A house slave stepped from one of its doorways, rug and rug-beater in hand. Some helpful plebeian had taken up Jacques' cry: "Thief! Thief!" The slave threw the rug onto the girl as she passed him; she fell, a cloud of dust billowing behind her.

A mob coalesced at the alley's mouth; Jacques grabbed at shoulders and arms to pull his way through them. Finding a pickpocketing hand worming its way past his cloak and into his doublet, seeking his purse, he grabbed the offending index finger and twisted. There was a soft pop and the pickpocket jumped aside, moaning faintly.

Jacques looked down the alley's length to see the girl regaining her feet. She reached down for the sword. An evident friend of the pickpocket seized Jacques by the shoulders to pull him back. A quick elbow to the face, unleashed with only an instant's backward glance, broke the man's nose and deterred

his grip.

A matronly slave stepped from a doorway behind the girl, blocking her flight. The girl's tiny hands curled around the weapon. Jacques pelted down the alley: "You do not want to do that!"

The girl turned on Jacques, flashing shocking green eyes at him. The child was filthy, her hair a tangle, but beneath the grime was the feral beauty of a wild beast. "Don't come any closer," she hissed.

Jacques made his approach imperceptible. "I won't punish you. I just want my property back."

She thrust the scabbarded sword at him, truly looking at it for the first time. "Why don't I want to draw this?" It had begun to register on her that she had stolen something much more valuable than an equestrian's sword.

"It's magic—like whatever you used to cut my belt. But this is the kind of magic you can't control."

"Magic, you say?" she cocked her head, as if performing a calculation. Jacques could see her ribs through a hole in her shift.

"What is your name?"

"Why would I tell you that?"

"Because I'm being friendly, and when friendly people speak, they use each other's names. My name's Jacques."

"You're not from here."

"I come from Dotur and I know what you're thinking. That any promise I make to you now, when you have what I want, means nothing after I get it. That you'll be captured and punished. But we foreigners have funny ideas sometimes, and one of mine is that I don't take back promises. Or have children hurt, for that matter."

The girl moved back a step. Behind her stony expression Jacques could see her survivor's mind working out a hundred permutations.

"It's been a long time since you've been able to trust anyone, hasn't it?" he said.

She did not so much nod as shudder her agreement.

"But for some reason you can't explain right now, you know you can trust me, can't you? The only way for this to end well is for you to hand me the sword, right now."

"My name's Giovanna," she said, holding it out for him to take.

Now that she was cleaned up a bit, Jacques tried to better estimate the girl's age. She sat in the small reception room—or tablinarium, as they called it here—of Isabelle Darras' villa. The child in the center of the room was a stark contrast to the surroundings. A black and white mosaic floor was only partially covered with thick rugs and carpets from Zanatium. The walls were brightly painted and, when combined with the bright Medrano sunshine, the room was initially quite dazzling. Marble busts on wooden pedestals lined the walls. Jacques would not have put it past Isabelle to have had the busts created especially for the room and he'd earlier looked for any likeness he recognized, but they were strangers. Perhaps he would meet them later.

Giovanna had consented to a topical washing of her face, arms and legs, but had so far refused a more thorough scrubbing. She ate from a bowl, wolfishly consuming bread, olives and pieces of cold fowl. More food was set out on the center table. The girl's skinny, knob-jointed physique showed the signs of chronic malnourishment. She could be anywhere from nine to thirteen, Jacques concluded.

Wigandus and his party had departed to settle in other accommodations, leaving Giovanna alone with Jacques and Isabelle. Before departing, Hemwold made sure to volunteer his services for the necessary thrashing.

"You've been stealing long enough to get clever at it," Jacques told the girl. "You waited until I was distracted, and moved in quick. Someday I'll ask to see that enchanted implement of yours."

She dangled it before him: a knife-shaped sliver of polished black stone, tied to her wrist by a cord of supple leather. She slid it under a simple leather strap beneath her wrist.

"Where did you get it?"

"I stole it," she said, flatly, with neither shame nor pride.

"That would be worth a good sum, if you sold it."

"Then how would I steal? And besides, I'd be cheated." She looked with suspicious fascination at a new linen garment a servant had presented to Isabelle. Although simple, it was dyed yellow with bit of red trim.

"How long have you been fending for yourself?" Jacques asked her.

She shrugged and tore her eyes from the clothing. "A long time."

"I have an offer for you, Giovanna. If you come here every morning, to report for possible duty, you will get one denari. Each day." He paused to let the generosity of this sum register. "Some days we will have a small job for you to do. Nothing dangerous, nothing you don't want to do. Some days we'll

send you on your way. But even then, you'll get the denari."

Giovanna sat mulling the offer, a piece of sausage poised before her mouth. "If you do as you say, foreigner," she finally said, "I will be loyal to you, always." Jacques nodded and left the girl to finish her meal.

After instructing her servants not to let the girl leave without a head-to-toe washing, Isabelle retreated into the villa's atrium with Jacques. The black and white mosaic of the floor was continued here, but instead of paint brightly colored mosaics covered the high walls. Natural light poured from the upper windows and, diffused by water of the impluvium, bathed the room in a warm glow. The southern clime seemed to be treating her well, having warmed her once-pallid complexion. She wore her wavy brown locks in the loose fashion of a Romari grand dame with simple golden accessories. The flowing fabric of her simple dress, bound by golden cords, showed her figure more clearly than the Doturi finery Jacques had last seen her in.

"Word travels swiftly in Romulus," she said. "The Emperor already knows you're here."

"Is that so?" Jacques moved toward the impluvium in the center of the room, staring into the shallow pool as they spoke.

"I believe he knew you were coming before I did."

"Who else would know, then?"

She smiled and moved beside him at the pool. "All three major Senate factions, I'd imagine. But them you can meet later. An imperial summons has arrived. Your presence—and that of Wigandus—is immediately requested."

"Meaning demanded. Well then. Let us gather up Wigandus, and bow down before great Nero."

The Emperor prowled the lip of the polished granite platform that held his marble throne. He paced compulsively, moving along the dais' edge, stopping, turning, reversing his course, and then repeating the route in reverse. Jacques recalled the bears and the lion imprisoned in his own Emperor's menagerie.

Nero was a diminutive man, swimming in the purple cloak that marked his imperial majesty. He swaddled it around himself like a blanket, compulsively swatting it against his stick-like legs. By walking with a pronounced stoop, he gave himself the appearance of a hunchback, although Jacques was

reasonably sure that this was a matter solely of bad posture, and not a malformation. Nero's round face and protruding top teeth, however, could only be attributed to a sadly thinning bloodline. His family had given Roma three Emperors over the last generation, each less respected than the last.

The audience was half an hour long, and so far had consisted of a rambling monologue, mostly concerned with the imperfections of his senators. Occasionally the Emperor seemed to be on the verge of saying something, but stopped before the words would leave his lips.

"You there," he said, pointing to Jacques. "Your name again?"

Jacques supplied it, for the fourth time.

"Jacques Gardien, an Emperor is an Emperor is an Emperor. So I must know if your Emperor, Guntram, supports this Emperor, Nero." He pointed to his own breastbone.

"In what endeavor, Your Imperial Majesty?"

"Should I be challenged by my lessers," he said. "Should I be challenged by my lessers," he repeated. "They bite and chew me, like maggots they do, as if I am already in my grave. Do you understand, Jacques Gardien, how I must feel?" A set of a dozen shallow steps led from his imperial dais to the floor below, where Jacques and Wigandus stood at respectful ease. He stared down at the first step as if it represented a precipice. He rubbed his hands together, dug at a blemish on his chin, and hopped down onto it. A smile of childish accomplishment broke across his face. He sat down on one of the lower steps, his head only slightly above Jacques. "You think me mad, but this is not madness. This is—" His face twitched. "—different." He beckoned Jacques closer. "If Guntram's senate conspired against him, played him for a fool, deserved to have their tiny necks wrung . . . You would not hesitate to aid him."

"We do not have a senate, but yes, of course I serve empire and emperor alike."

Nero stood and walked slowly back up the steps. "But if there was a cleavage between empire and emperor, if an iron wall was placed by worms, by snakes, between the two . . . Emperors rule with the favor of the gods, do they not? My predecessors, the first Julius, the first Octavian—they were considered gods themselves. So it is a blasphemy, is it not, to undermine the Emperor, to drag him low?"

"In Dotur we believe in Reason, against which it is not possible to blaspheme."

"Reason?" The Emperor laughed bitterly as he collapsed on his throne. "The world has never been run by reason. It is change and chaos and caprice, those are its guiding principles. Reflected here on Earth, and on Mount Olympus." He leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees, his tone essaying a quicksilver shift from complaint to bargaining. "But the point I make is this: Emperors must stick together. Our authority is the only bulwark men have against unreason. And Reason is what you stand

for, yes? So Guntram will aid me, should aid be needed, which is—“ Again he twitched. “—something we must consider.”

Jacques had been stealing glances at Wigandus, to see what he was making of this distressing show of weakness. The merchant prince shifted his weight uneasily, no doubt happy that Gardien was the exclusive focus of the Emperor’s frenetic attention. If he noticed anything strange about the emperor, he gave no indication.

“It is our belief in Dotur,” said Jacques, “that both our empires should be strongly led, and that both should naturally benefit from the prosperity of the other.”

“Good then.” Nero moved to a panel behind his throne, which was decorated with the imperious profile of his father, Emperor Placidus. “I have tired myself. Go.”

Attendants conducted Jacques and Wigandus out of the throne room and into an antechamber, where Isabelle met them. A lavish spread of food and wine was laid out for them. Jacques waited until Wigandus was in the deep throes of gourmandizing ecstasy, and then pulled Isabelle aside.

“Where in this city,” he asked, “might one hire a magician?”

Part Six: A Senate Of Magicians

Jacques followed Isabelle down the Imperial Way from the palace, which stood on the highest of Romulus' seven hills. From this vantage point he could see the city's sprawl in its entirety. Even here, in the heart of the world's mightiest empire, generations of civil war with Zanatium and the scars of the Red Plague still showed. Some quarters buzzed with activity; other neighborhoods seemed deserted and ghostly, inhabited by only a few desolate souls. Romulus had yet to fully repopulate itself, leaving swaths of villas, insulae, and warehouses still derelict.

"Tell me again why you need a magician," said Isabelle.

"At first, I thought that the Emperor was mad. He called us with great urgency, then paced about and made vague accusations against his Senate. And he might well be mad. But as he rambled, I sensed that he was attempting to tell us something, but was constrained, by some unseen force."

"What does Wigandus think?"

They had left the merchant prince behind to feast on Romari delicacies and ingratiate himself to palace officials.

Jacques stopped, leaned on Isabelle's shoulder, and struggled to remove his boot. Despite the difference in size the woman did not sway in the slightest. "The question is what to think of Wigandus. He seemed . . . I don't know . . . *unfazed* by Nero's condition." He turned the boot upside down, dislodging a tiny pebble. "But the secret to this sort of thing is not just to ask the correct questions, but to confront them in the right order." Heedless of the indignity of his position, he sat on the stone road to wrestle his boot back on. "So then: a magician who knows his field, and can be trusted to keep quiet?" Isabelle helped him to his feet.

"A tall order," she mused. "Romulus has plenty of the first, not so many of the latter."

Jacques sat at a bench in a shadowed corner of a tavern near the Forum Romanum. On the table's other side sat the sorcerer Isabelle had commended to him. Most of the establishment's patrons were gathered outside, at street-side tables. A hanging basket dripping with ferns provided an additional obscuring element to maintain the relative privacy of their meeting. Isabelle provided a brief introduction.

Ermanno de Abano wore a blue-green toga, trimmed in copper thread. He was perhaps fifty

years of age, his dark hair speckled with flecks of silver, which grew especially dense in the trim, pointed beard he sported on his chin. Only his cylindrical velvet hat and the mystical symbols on his many rings identified him as a practitioner of the arcane arts. Ermanno spoke in a hushed yet animated manner that gave even his most innocuous statements the air of delicious conspiracy. His initial queries after Isabelle's well-being had suggested an interest in her extending past the collegial and undoubtedly hastened her departure following a subtle gesture by Jacques. The two men settled into a conversation while patrons drifted in and out of the tavern.

"It is as you say," the magician agreed. "The symptoms you describe could be those either of madness, or of ensorcelment. If it is unnatural influence, it would be very difficult to prove."

"But it is possible that someone is using magic to force him to act against his will."

Ermanno weaved in his seat. In defiance of Romari practice, Ermanno drank his wine unwatered; he was on his fourth goblet already. "Possible, but difficult. It would, naturally, require the concerted activity of a cabal of magicians, all of whom have mastered the same ritual. For something of this nature you would need at least five, but seven would be better." Ermanno paused and tapped his cup in thought. "Eleven would be best, unless the cabal's leader were especially powerful."

Jacques did not need basic magic explained to him. He was probably as well versed in magical theory as Ermanno. All magic was performed by rituals of some type. Even a child knew that all magic, from the creation of enchantments to building construction to the protection of grain stores, was performed by groups of sorcerers, working together. These groups had different names and traditions, but at least three ritualists, working together, were required for even basic spells. Although there were variations in individual ability, the more ritualists involved the more permanent, effective, or spectacular the result. Guntram used no less than thirteen ritualists for all construction on the Solar Palace, preferring seventeen for certain key aspects.

"Unless it was one of the fey," Jacques said.

Ermanno shrugged. "Yes, yes, one must always consider that it might be the fey."

Fey were not human. No human alive could work magic alone. The fey were not so constricted. Although his contact with the fey was limited, Jacques had read reports of individual fey levitating, ensorceling weapons, and casting protective magics. The Imouha of northern Frikara seemed to be the most powerful sorcerers, and the culture that was the best documented among humans, but so little was known about the cultures of that unknown continent there could well be more powerful practitioners working deeper inland.

Jacques swished his wine around in his goblet. "I've always found that mysteries involving magic are better solved by looking for motives, and from there, witnesses and records of payments. Who would benefit from placing a geas on Nero?"

Ermanno laughed and slapped the table. "This is Romulus. Who wouldn't?" The magician's chuckle smelled of fermented grapes. "I'd look to the senate. They've been looking to restrain the throne since Nero's father launched his fool campaign to reunite the empire."

"Foolish? He succeeded, didn't he?"

"Yes, the eastern territories formally submit to Romulus again, instead of merely trading with us, sharing our customs, and intermarrying their noble families with ours. Zanatium is now formally part of our glorious empire. What a splendid victory, worth all the legions and caskets of gold it cost on both sides. What the plagues did not kill Nero's father did." Ermanno paused and shoot his head sadly. "I assume you've walked the streets? Here in the heart of the empire entire sections of the city lie empty. My brothers in Licinopolis tell me it is even worse there." Ermanno drained his goblet, which Jacques refilled.

"Then came Nero's older brother, Certarius, who was worth even less than his father. The day he ate that bad clam was an auspicious one for the empire." The magician mimed the pouring of a poison into an imaginary plate of food, apparently fearing that Jacques might otherwise miss the implication. "Except that it left us with Nero, whom you've met."

"You are a partisan of the Senate, then?"

"Hah! Which faction? I'd take my chances on the Coliseum floor before I stood at the Senate. I am a partisan of minding my own business."

Jacques regretted his decision to pour the magician more wine. "Which perhaps you ought to do more quietly. Let us say that I am a senator wishing to commission a ritual of the utmost sensitivity. Who would I hire?"

"Hire? If you were a senator, you'd do it yourself. Among the equestrian class, sorcery is the latest vogue. Anyone can learn magic, though few have the discipline or opportunity to go far in the arts. With money there is no shortage of opportunity to learn and those powerful in the Senate are surprisingly disciplined. Now there is no ambitious patrician who does not attend weekly tutoring sessions in the arcane arts. A lucrative position, by the way, if one can stomach all the toadying it entails. Nowadays the *equites* boast of their ritual accomplishments as they used to compare horses, or statues of themselves. All part of their eternal quest for glory, which, I suppose, is all that really motivates them."

"Who started this fashion?"

Ermanno abruptly wobbled off to the latrine. On his return, he continued, as if he had not been gone: "That would be Senator Circe. Try to meet her, and see if you do not fall headlong into her emerald eyes. She's no mere dilettante; if she weren't of noble birth she could easily be head of a magician's guild. Very clever to perform your own magic. With no hirelings or payments involved, the spying efforts of, let's say, inquisitive foreign messengers are made all the more difficult."

"And, as a dedicated glory seeker, it goes without saying that she seeks temporal power."

"This is Romulus."

Jacques sighed. "Then how might a ritual of this sort be accomplished?"

Ermanno thought before speaking "The geas is not my specialty, but I can tell you this. If they have placed one on the Emperor, its power is most likely invested in a locus. Yes?"

"A locus?"

"A small physical object which features prominently in the ritual. It stands in for the subject; the first part of the ritual establishes a correspondence between the object and the person you wish to ensorcel. Once you've done that, the rest of the ritual is devoted to issuing your command or commands."

"What will the locus look like?"

"Something precious and easily handled: a gemstone, a silver knife, a tortoise shell comb. The ancients used rare shells. But don't bother looking for it. The locus is required for a ritual that would undo the geas. So, if they're clever, which of course they are if they're senators, they'll have destroyed the object after the ritual, so it can't be undone. Besides, are you sure you even want to undo the geas?"

"I'm not sure of anything," said Jacques, standing. "I'm a messenger without a message." He withdrew a heavy coin purse from his tunic and placed it beside Ermanno. As Jacques left he took careful note of a slouching figure positioned at one of the tavern's outdoor tables. The man was strangely gaunt for his comparatively young age; Jacques guessed that he was scarcely twenty. A feathery mass of severely-cut hair adorned his large head. Thin, but taut, arms dangled from the sleeves of his toga. Jacques had first spotted him during Ermanno's explanation of geas rituals. The fellow had been inching his chair carefully back, so that he could observe their meeting without seeming to do so. He was not an unskillful watcher. Were he observing a less experienced subject, he would have surely passed unnoticed.

Jacques paid the taverner and, adopting a tipsy gait, moved out onto the plaza. He stood at street-side, like a gawping traveler seeking his bearings. Sensing movement behind him, he turned slightly to see the gaunt man ease himself up to his feet. He plunged into the street, moving alongside a

massive cart bearing a large iron cage. Inside the cage squirmed a young thunder lizard, presumably bound for the Coliseum. It wailed piteously, raising its horned snout in animal distress. It was already six feet long and three feet high, but it would grow much bigger. Jacques looked at the sharp horns protruding from the bony crest around its head and felt a twinge of horror on behalf of the condemned prisoners who would one day be forced to fight it. He wondered if it breathed flame, as some of its kind was known to do, and concluded that its snout would have been fastened shut if that were the case.

In the polished shield of a passing tribune, Jacques noted the reflection of the gaunt young man. He was being followed. Jacques picked up his pace, darting down a narrow avenue to a parallel thoroughfare. At the archway marking the terminus, he moved a few paces to the left and stopped. The gaunt man stepped quickly into the thoroughfare and saw Jacques standing a few feet away. Quickly recovering his composure, he made a determined line to a silk vendor's stall, where he pretended to examine the merchandise until Jacques moved on.

Jacques played dawdling mouse to the man's cat, stopping frequently to examine the goods on offer at every third or fourth stall. He sniffed at cones of incense, hefted jars of olive oil, and considered the purchase of an indigo toga. This forced the gaunt man to pretend an extensive interest in a wide variety of wares.

Abruptly Jacques made off down a twisting alleyway. Earlier, on his way to and from the Imperial Palace, he'd seen the city from its highest point, gaining a quick sense of its general layout. As Ermanno indicated, Romulus still bore the scars of the great depopulation; certain of its quarters were busy and densely occupied, while others stood crumbling and derelict. The abandoned sections of the city were scattered through the active quarters, like pockets of dead flesh in an otherwise living body. Jacques, who had a knack for literal and mental maps, headed for the nearest stretch of desolated buildings. He checked to see that the thin fellow still followed him and sped on. Even though the other man did not know it, the chase had reversed.

Jacques wended through a series of empty warehouses and collapsing domuses, leaping over the still-maintained furrow of a burbling aqueduct. He sheltered himself behind a column, carved to celebrate the victories of centuries past, and watched his pursuer stand in frustrated confusion in the middle of a windswept plaza.

The man poked his head into several of the nearby structures, forcing Jacques to relocate to a wooden shed, then to crouch beside a gargantuan urn. Finally, the man gave up and headed back the way he'd come.

Now Jacques followed him. The young man plodded unwarily through the city, sticking to traffic-choked streets which afforded his pursuer an abundant selection of people, carts and beasts to hide behind. His incaution easily made up for Jacques' lack of familiarity with the city, and his relative obtrusiveness in his outlander's garments.

When the gaunt man reached the hilly territory of the city's patrician class, the roadways widened and traffic decreased, making it harder for Jacques to shadow him unseen. Fortunately, he had no desire to catch up with his former pursuer, and this allowed him to hang back and carefully choose his hiding spots. The upward slope of the road made it progressively easier for Jacques to watch from afar.

Finally his former pursuer stopped at a set of freshly whitewashed gates, which encircled a sprawling estate containing a large central villa and numerous out-buildings. The watcher passed its spear-wielding guards without challenge, suggesting that he was a regular fixture there.

Jacques sauntered along the deserted street until a butcher trundled by, wearily pulling a cart loaded with knives and barrels of meat. A simple talisman, suspended from a wooden bar, hung above the barrels, doubtlessly keeping the meat fresh. He pointed to the estate the gaunt man had gone into and asked who it belonged to. The man surveyed Jacques clothing and snorted.

"Foreigner? That's the Senator's estate." Jacques noticed one of the guards look his way.

"The Senator?" Jacques replied as he pulled out a single golden coin.

"Senator Circe."

Part Seven: Circles Of Power

A network of bonfires lit the grounds of the senator's estate, throwing ever-shifting shadows onto the painted stucco walls separating it from its neighbors. Revelers made their way between a dozen tables, laden with food. They ate grilled fish, roasted boar, and fatty slivers of smoked Iguanodon. Sweetmeats, figs, and olives were presented on a silver tray the size of a table top, which rested on a cage imprisoning a trio of dispirited baboons. Enchanted buckets held ices, flavored with pomegranate juice, keeping them at their ideal temperature. Muscled, near-naked drummers pounded on thundering instruments to accompany a dance troupe of acrobats and fire breathers. Perfectly proportioned slaves of both sexes wandered the grounds, clad in flimsy costumes and wearing masks of silver and gold.

Jacques kept Isabelle at his side as the fête raged around him. "And I thought parties in Lichstadt were daunting."

Isabelle smiled. Her fancy robe and gown were impeccably fitted to her slender curves. "I have you to thank for the invitation. My company is not normally highly sought at such lofty affairs."

A few hours ago, Jacques had trailed a would-be pursuer to the gates of this estate. Now he was inside them, as an honored guest. The invitation had arrived at Isabelle's villa while he was chasing the gaunt young man across town. Whoever had ordered him followed was clever enough to keep the fellow out of sight for the duration of festivities.

"Show me who is who," he said.

Isabelle discreetly indicated a white-haired man surrounded by hangers-on. He was in the midst of an amusing anecdote, to which they responded with the over-eager laughter of sycophants. Advancing years had not diminished his open, handsome features. Despite a wide slab of girth encircling his midsection, he moved with a young man's energy. He spotted Isabelle and beckoned the pair of them to approach.

"That's Senator Orientius," Isabelle quickly explained. "His syndicate enjoys a monopoly over certain ritual construction techniques. He leads a good-sized faction in the senate. Close to Consilius, the Zanatine Proconsul. Some say too close."

Isabelle introduced the Senator to her mentor. With a subtle gesture, Orientius dismissed his coterie of supplicants, leaving the three of them to talk alone in the midst of the increasingly frantic soirée.

The Senator spoke in more-than-passable Gallusi. "Your arrival has been the occasion of much

discussion, Jacques Gardien.”

The use of Jacques’ native tongue was meant to be both flattering and ostentatious. Gardien responded with his best courtly bow. “I can’t imagine why,” he said.

Orientius switched back to the Roma High Tongue. “Life is very boring here in Romulus.”

As the trio watched, the estate’s cooks placed an enormous egg on a bonfire. The heat cracked it open, partially hatching the giant lizard within. It screamed in agony as it cooked in its own egg. A trio of chefs, careful to avoid its snapping beak, drizzled it with sauce and spices. As soon as it had stopped writhing, the cooks moved it to a plate for carving. Their colleagues folded the sizzling nuggets of meat into bundles of pastry and distributed them to a staff of masked servers.

“Pelorosaurus,” said Orientius. “They grow to staggering heights if you give them the chance. They are as common as cats in the western quarter of the empire.” Jacques wondered if the demonstration was for his benefit. The Roma and Dotur shared a long border and nowhere was it less exact than in the west, near Castille. Jacques was fairly certain there were towns in that region being taxed by Castille, Dotur, Roma, and Tyria. Emperor Guntram longed to fix the borders exactly on the western fringe of his empire, but lacked the manpower to do so. Roma seemed to have the same problems so the area remained in dispute.

“Any event, no matter how trivial, captures our wizened imaginations,” continued Orientius, who now fixed Jacques with an intent stare. It was less of a challenge than a boundary. Here was a hard man, used to having his way, but not blatantly aggressive.

“I have heard much about you as well,” Jacques ventured. Orientius smiled and looked away.

“Much of it scandalous, I hope.”

“I have heard your name mentioned in conjunction with Consilius.”

“The two of us were close as young officers, and keep up a correspondence.” Orientius smile faltered for a moment and he raised an eyebrow. “His name is known in Dotur?”

Jacques shrugged. “It is a messenger’s job to know the important personages of neighboring empires,” he replied. In truth, neither Jacques nor the Dotur knew very much about one of the most powerful men of the Roma Empire. Consilius was undoubtedly a brilliant general, succeeding in battle where others had failed. He had been installed by Placidus II, his brother and Nero’s father, as ruler of Zanatium, the eastern empire, after the re-conquest. Supposedly, he had been gifted with a wisdom and sense of proportion not found in the rest of the dynasty. He appeared to be rebuilding the shattered eastern half of the Empire rather than looting it for the benefit of Romulus. He had also managed to build

trading ties into Imouha, which would have secured his legacy had he done nothing else in his career. Other reports, however, dwelt on his coldly ruthless suppression of dissent and a growing population of slaves. Unfortunately, so little was actually known about what was going on in Zanatium it was hard to get any real picture about what Consilius was doing.

“As we might have already been saying, second-hand information is often over-dramatized,” said Orientius.

Jacques found this anticipation of his thoughts distressing. To the best of his knowledge, which was considerable, no one, not even the Fey, had managed to create an enchantment that could read men’s minds. That did not, however, stop entire guilds from trying. He found himself wondering if the Roma had cracked that secret. Perhaps one of the Senator’s many tasteful pieces of jewelry was an enchantment allowing him to read thoughts.

I’m going to draw Hungerblade and kill you, Jacques thought. Orientius grabbed two glasses of chilled wine from a passing slave. He offered one to Isabelle and the second to Jacques. Perhaps the senator was just very, very good at reading people.

“From Consilius’ communications to me, it is clear that he supports the authority of the throne, and wishes his nephew nothing but success and prosperity. This has never been an easy empire to rule.”

Jacques wondered which unvoiced accusation this statement was meant to rebut.

“I hear that you’d scarcely pounded the dust from your traveling cloak when His Imperial Majesty summoned you to an audience.”

“Yes . . .” Jacques found it suddenly difficult to concentrate on the Senator’s words. A darkly alluring woman clad in lush robes stood in the light thrown off by the cooking fire. It highlighted her elevated cheekbones and the serpentine angles of her willowy frame. She made brief eye contact with Jacques, looked away, and then transfixed him again.

A resonant chuckle sounded in Orientius’ throat. “There she goes. Only Circe can interrupt a conversation from a hundred paces.”

“Pardon my rudeness,” said Jacques. “I’ve never been good at large parties.”

Orientius reached out to give him a mocking shove. “I will ask you about your impression of our beloved Emperor at some other time. If Circe has signaled you, I can scarcely compete.”

Jacques moved to find the woman, but he had lost sight of her.

Isabelle grabbed his arm. “Roma fêtes are disorienting. You can get drunk just from watching, can’t you?”

“That was Circe?” he asked with a gulp.

She seemed unhappy. “It was. I’m sure she’ll sneak up on you later.” A masked serving girl ran past them, stifling tears, red slash marks on her arm. Isabelle stared at the drops of blood then turned to face her mentor. “Listen, Jacques, if they drag a prisoner in here, I think that it should be our signal to leave.”

Jacques stopped scanning the crowd and looked down at the resolute woman standing before him. “What?”

“Sometimes at these events they pay for a condemned prisoner and behead him right in front of you. Then everyone applauds and goes back to eating their peacock’s tongues. Look, that’s the legate from Tyria over there. Do you want to meet him?”

Jacques spotted Wigandus, making imploring eyes at him from the far side of a banquet table, his mouth full of stuffed grape leaves. He ignored the merchant and gave up on finding the senator. “Yes, let’s meet our Tyrian counterpart.”

Isabelle made the promised introductions. The Tyrian, whose named was Khaaliq, did not bow in greeting, essaying only a barely perceptible nod of recognition. He was taller even than Jacques, and bore the telltale enlarged cranium and prominent brow ridge of the Fey. Khaaliq’s complexion had been burnished by the harsh desert sun of his homeland, on the other side of the Medrano Sea. His dark hair and beard were worn long and were exquisitely woven. Diamonds glittered from the braids and gold strands kept everything in place. For the evening’s festivities, he had augmented his wide, green, ankle-length Tyrian tunic with a thick belt of gold, worked into the shape of intertwined ropes. Jacques could not see any obvious charms or talismans, but Fey magic was different than human. He gazed down at Jacques with ancient, inhuman eyes.

“It is a challenging question, is it not?”

“Which question is that?” replied Jacques.

“The difficulty of choosing sides among the Roma. Whom to throw one’s lot in with, whom to abjure . . .”

Jacques knew, but did not say, that the Tyrians were scarcely in a position to tip the scales one way or the other. In olden times, only they challenged the supremacy of the Roma. Now, both of the great sea empires were shadows of their ancient selves, with Tyria in worse disarray than their erstwhile rivals.

Although Jacques knew little about the intrigues of the Frikara nations, he knew there were more than just the Imouha and the Tyrians contending for prominence among the Fey. The Nguni, about which

little was known except their name, were rumored to be fierce warriors, but peaceful in outlook. The Samai of the south, the Xeresia of the far east, and the Æthenas of the western Medrano isles all traded with the Roma, albeit through intermediaries, but had little dealings with the Dotur. Tyria was currently in a very difficult position.

After years of dominance in southwestern Uropa, the Tyrians had been all but kicked off the continent by the suddenly powerful Castilians, who then went on to form an empire of their own. New war rituals, known only to Castilian priests, had dramatically tipped the scales, allowing the conquered to strike out. After generations of oppression by the Fey, the Castilians threw off their shackles, seemingly overnight. The Tyrian war machine was all but destroyed, seriously jeopardizing their holdings in Frikara. Now reduced to a few fortified holdings on the southern coast, the best and the brightest of their warriors had been slain. They were now forced to augment their military with Thulean mercenaries. Jacques suppressed a shiver. He could not image a situation dire enough to warrant working with the murderous dwarves. The loss of their armies and a resurgence of Roma naval might in the Medrano had many Roma casting greedy eyes on the north coast of Frikara.

Gardien humored the haughty Fey. “Is it because no faction seems more clearly virtuous than the others?”

Khaaliq laughed. “Virtue? A sly sense of humor you have, Jacques Gardien. What has virtue to do with power? No, I speak of the speed of machination and betrayal here. One has no sooner sent home advice of an alliance with one faction, than the wheel of conspiracy turns, and one’s chosen horse has been sent to the stables. Or the butcher’s block.”

“In Dotur it is believed that a ruler draws strength from his benevolence.”

Khaaliq all but rolled his eyes. “Your strange northern logic must provide you much solace on harsh winter nights. What was your impression of the Emperor?”

“You are right; the wheels do turn quickly here. How was he, when you saw him last?”

“It has been some time since I’ve been privileged with a personal audience.”

Wigandus circuted his way through guests and servers to plant himself at Jacques’ side.

“Khaaliq, legate to the Tyrian Empire, this is Wigandus, of the North Coast league, a noted mercantilist concern.”

Wigandus thrust out his hand. “I have always admired your people, especially for—“

“Ah,” said Khaaliq, and stepped away.

Anger hardened Wigandus’ fleshy features. “Stinking Fey!” He swallowed his words, so the

swiftly departing legate would not hear them.

“Tyrian nobles do not respect merchants as we do,” Isabelle ventured.

Wigandus fumed. “They are on the wrong side of history, then. Radiant Reason will swallow them whole. They will surrender their secrets on the altar of commerce, and then fade away into memory.”

Jacques cleared his throat. “Perhaps it would be best, so that others do not misunderstand, to describe our credo in less vehement terms.”

Wigandus turned on him. “When I requested a member of the Seven, I did not expect a shrinking mooncalf! You should have corrected that Fey’s effrontery.”

Before replying, Gardien counted silently to five. “I am here to extend the Emperor’s friendship to all, Wigandus. If I told him I started a feud with the Tyrians over a slight at a party, how pleased do you think he would be? How would the Roma react?” Wigandus shook with rage, but turned on his heel without another word. He bowled over a small serving girl on his way back to the banquet tables. Jacques searched the crowd for a distraction, and found it in a small group of armed and armored men standing noticeably aloof from the heaps of food and decadent performances. “Who would they be?” he asked Isabelle.

“The balding one is Julius Laminus,” she explained, indicating a taut-muscled, sharp-nosed man of middle years. He stood with crossed arms, discoursing to a coterie of younger men, all of whom wore the same armor. It was that of a private army, modeled on Imperial designs, but of better workmanship and much of its ornamentation de-emphasized or removed altogether. What little remained was likely the focus of an enchantment. “Along with Circe and Orientius, he is one of the most powerful Senators. His faction advocates a return to the austere virtues of the early empire. They believe that men must learn again to fight and suffer, and to turn their backs on circuses and debauchery.”

“A most unpersuasive philosophy.”

“More popular than you’d think,” said Isabelle. “Nero won them many converts, by nearly bankrupting the empire with his endless festivals.”

At Julius Laminus’ side stood a younger version of himself, who shared his martial posture and aquiline profile, but boasted a lush head of blond hair. He elbowed Laminus and pointed to Jacques.

“That’s his son, Antonius. And it looks like you continue to be the evening’s central novelty.”

“It is very boring in Romulus,” Jacques sighed. He set off, meeting Laminus and his entourage halfway.

Isabelle followed Jacques, and performed the introductions.

“So you are here to nursemaid that fat merchant?” Laminus asked.

“I see that bluntness is held to be among the stoic virtues,” Jacques smiled.

“We in Roma have lost our true selves. To find them again, we must say what we mean, and mean what we say.” Laminus was fixed on Jacques’ sword. “You of Dotur are closer to your rugged barbarian heritage, and thus are perhaps less damaged by the use of diplomatic mealy words.”

“That’s direct, all right.”

Antonius pushed himself closer. “The tales of your exploits are well-known to us, Jacques Gardien.”

“Is that so?” Jacques said, resignedly. He had been on this conversational road before, and knew where it led.

“Yes,” Antonius said. “And we—you are a guest here, and we do not wish to seem . . . But it is a matter of great interest to us, your sword, that is, and we wish to...”

His father pulled him out of the way and planted sandaled feet in his place. “Jacques Gardien, I challenge you to a duel.”

Part Eight: Two Duels

“A duel?” Jacques repeated.

Julius Laminus grunted in affirmation. Nearly palpable excitement rippled through the knot of similarly outfitted young men arrayed around the armored senator.

Jacques had grown used to this request; it was made of him all too often. “What offense have I given you, Senator?”

“None,” bowed Laminus. “To the contrary, I am familiar with your reputation and hold you in the highest esteem.”

“Hrm. You see my confusion, then. In my homeland, you see, a duel is traditionally fought in anger, to resolve a question of honor.”

“I assure you that among those of my philosophy, the opposite is true. I would not seek to engage you in ritual combat except as a tribute to your warrior prowess, word of which has reached down through the snowy Althus Mountains to the seven hills of Romulus.”

“In other words, this request of yours is to be taken as a compliment?”

“You have cut to the meat of the matter.”

Jacques ran his fingers through his hair. “So you are not insulted now, but if I was to decline, that would be like refusing a compliment, which would be insulting . . .”

The Senator’s smile was hard and mirthless. “It is the duty of warriors to test their skills against one another, for the moral benefit of the populace.”

The revelers at Circe’s fête had broken from their debaucheries to encircle the two men. Behind Jacques, the drummers, who had been providing an orgiastic beat for sword swallows and writhing flame eaters, now commenced an anticipatory martial thumping.

Jacques shrugged. “Far be it from me to deprive people of their moral education. What are the terms of the duel?”

“We fight till first blood, or until a combatant yields.” Implicit in the Senator’s blunt speech was the fact that no Romari warrior worthy of the name would be so dishonorable as to yield, and that the latter option was only provided for the benefit of weak-willed foreigners.

Jacques looked to Laminus’ son, Antonius. “May I borrow your sword, then?”

All around him, expressions fell as they always did when Jacques adopted this gambit.

“My sword?” Antonius asked. All eyes were now on the young man, who suddenly seemed

unsure of his moment in the spotlight. He looked as his father for support.

“Yes,” Jacques pressed. “I need a weapon other than Hungerblade, if I am to honorably enter into the contest your father seeks.”

Julius Laminus imperiously cleared his throat. “If the tales are to be credited, much of your success in battle can be credited to the sword you carry.” Jacques grimaced, but nodded.

“A fair enough statement,” Jacques admitted. “Hungerblade, like many powerfully enchanted items, seems to have a reputation all its own.”

“It is my intent to test myself against the Jacques Gardien we have heard of, not his pale shadow. Do not defang yourself on my account, sir.”

“Ah. My dilemma is this, Senator: you and I might understand the terms of our duel, but Hungerblade is never satisfied with first blood. When it is drawn from its scabbard, it kills. Unfortunately, Hungerblade does not discriminate between combatants. While you and I may be perfectly agreeable to the risk, trusting in our skills, everyone at this gathering is equally at risk. I am sure, as honorable warriors, neither of us would willingly put innocents in harm’s way. ” The senator considered the words, but Jacques knew he had already made up his mind.

Laminus’ shoulders slumped. “It seems hardly . . . very well, then! Antonius, give him your weapon.”

“I assure you, sir, that while my reputation does not approach that of my blade, I am an accomplished duelist.”

“Enough boasts, sir. Allow me to prove you wrong.”

Jacques removed his cloak and doublet, handing them to an attendant, who had appeared with outstretched arms while the senator removed his armor. He and Laminus retreated to an even, well-lit patch of ground. The mob followed. The music dropped in volume, but picked up in tempo. Jacques took Antonius’ gladius, slashing it through the air to test its weight and balance. The sword was shorter than Hungerblade, and much lighter. The weapon was two-edged, but Jacques knew it was primarily a thrusting weapon. Even a fight to first blood could be deadly. Romari runes ran down the length of the blade and around the hilt. Although most Jacques recognized as martial mottos, some were definitively enchantments. The symbol on the ricasso was especially complex and probably the heart of the blade’s enchantment. He doubted they would work for him as they were likely keyed to the senator’s bloodline or activated by word Jacques did not know. Well, he had wanted to fight without a magical blade.

Most of the guests had, by now, assembled around the two men, albeit at a distance. Some stood

on benches for a better view, while others climbed onto the serving tables. Laminus barked orders to a priest, who uncurled his arm from a pleasure slave's waist and tramped over to officiate. The portly man mumbled a brief dedication to Mars, then turned to each man. Several of Laminus' entourage made symbols over their heart as the man continued, but most seemed annoyed at the delay in the festivities. Finally, the priest counted to three and waved a red scarf in the air, signaling the start of the match.

Jacques let Laminus make the first move. The Senator circled him, waiting for a moment of advantage.

"Strike him, father!" Antonius called.

Jacques allowed himself to fall into an unprepared posture, in hopes of luring Laminus in. The Senator nodded, grinned, and declined the trap.

"He is nothing without the sword!" cried another of Laminus' stoics.

Suddenly, Laminus charged. Jacques held for the moment of maximum advantage, then deftly combined moves, at once parrying and tripping his opponent. Laminus sprawled onto the lush lawn of Circe's estate, but quickly flipped over to his back. Jacques came at him to aim the tip of Antonius' sword at the Senator's ear. The audience gasped. Laminus rolled, escaping the blow.

Jacques let him get to his feet. Onlookers groaned unhappily at this show of mercy. It took Gardien a moment to understand their lack of sympathy for the local combatant. A crowd of libertines did not, it seemed, comprise the austere Senator's natural constituency. Some actually cheered for Jacques to defeat their countryman.

Jacques feinted at the Senator, putting him off balance. He danced backwards, slashing precisely, forcing Laminus back. Laminus mostly dodged, but ultimately blocked a blow with his sword. Sparks flew and Jacques felt a surge run up his arm. His fingers spasmed for a moment as his hand went briefly numb. Laminus looked embarrassed, and did not press the attack. So, the senator's blade was enchanted. Had Laminus wished, he could have ended the duel at that moment, but he held back. Jacques nodded his head briefly in thanks at the slight pause, doubting if any on looker understood what had happened.

His hand tingled, but his grip was firm and his arm was strong. With a shout he lunged forward, stabbing toward the senator, who skipped backward out of reach. The crowd parted to make way for him, as Jacques shuffled forward, pressing the attack. Laminus continued to stay just out of reach until he slammed into one of the tables. Jacques saw an opportunity—a chance to place an impressive yet relatively safe cut across Laminus' arm, just above the wrist.

Laminus' face was flushed with more than exertion. Jacques chopped down, a dramatic move,

but one he purposely aimed just beyond the senator. The crowd roared in delight as the foreigner's blade deeply gouged the table. Laminus gouged Jacques in the ribs with his near elbow, rolling away and coming up to a guard position. Though the senator may have spoken unflinchingly of a test between equals, Gardien was too much the diplomat to humiliate a local leader in front of an unsympathetic crowd that was clearly more on his side than Laminus. He had already learned how quickly the most trivial news ricocheted through the capital. The mocking stories would begin immediately, diminishing the senator's authority. He was, as he had just told Wigandus, not here to make enemies, either for himself or for Dotur.

Jacques left an obvious opening for Laminus. The Senator, evidently expecting another trick, let it go by. Gardien moved in. A series of inconclusive feints and jabs followed. Their blades touched once with a shower of sparks, but this time Jacques was ready and the effect passed quickly. Then Jacques lunged, letting the Senator use one of his own tricks against him. Fighting the instinct to roll away, Gardien twisted and fell into Laminus, receiving a deep cut on the leg.

The messenger stepped back and dropped his sword. Blood from the wound, flowed clearly down the front of his leggings.

Antonius punched the air jubilantly. "Father has won!"

Though not the crowd's chosen favorite, the senator still received a decorous share of applause. Laminus favored them with a victory salute, after which the guests quickly returned to their food, drink, and amorous pursuits. Again the music changed, the drums dropping in volume until they were almost silent as flutes gently joined in.

A cool, slim hand wrapped itself around Jacques' and gently pulled him toward the villa. In doing so, Senator Circe pressed her body against his, as if Jacques required help standing. Her perfume smelled of honey and rose petals. Just as he had decided it would be unwise to offend one powerful senator by defeating him in combat, Jacques told himself that it would be less than judicious to push another away from him.

"Let me get that wound tended to."

"It's a shallow cut," countered Jacques.

"I'm sure," she said. "You let him win."

"It wasn't too obvious, I hope."

She pulled him, still wrapped around her warm, hard body, into the dimmer light of her villa. If anyone noticed the two disappearing from the festivities, they did not show it. Other couples were, in

fact, slipping out of the light to find their own darkened alcoves. The walls of the villa were populated with painted figures of gods and heroes, rendered in the flat, perspective-free style still followed among the Roma. Jacques couldn't stop himself from blushing at their activities, and hoped that Circe would attribute his reaction to his injury. As fond as the painters of his Gallusi home province were of the faintly-clad female form, the art of a Romari private home made their most scandalous works seem positively chaste.

"I'd say most of the crowd believes that Laminus won without any assistance from you. So, well-played, Jacques Gardien. Sit yourself down on that couch and I'll find a bandage." Circe crossed through an archway and disappeared from sight. "Take off those leggings so I can get at the cut," she called.

Gardien complied. He set Hungerblade on a wooden table; it was blue, with images of sea creatures inked on it. Jacques thought about Isabelle, and hoped she wouldn't worry for him, although he worried for himself. No, Jacques thought. This time, he would stay strong. His weakness for intelligent women had led him astray for the last time.

Circe returned, bearing a tray. It held a roll of bleached linen, pieces of torn sponge, and various jars of clay and glass. She had shed a layer of clothing, discarding a filmy shawl that Jacques noticed only in retrospect, now that it was gone. The senator knelt beside him, to examine the cut.

"You're right; it is nothing." She dabbed a clear liquid from one of the jars onto a piece of sponge and touched it to the cut. The liquid bubbled like acid and burned only slightly less. Jacques tried not to wince.

"A simple purifying balm; it will prevent corruption from entering your blood. I should have predicted what Julius Laminus would do when he saw you, and forbidden him from dueling. But it would be like telling a frog to stop eating flies. The advice might be briefly taken, but will not stick."

"He's not the first and won't be the last," Jacques said as he got his breath back.

She laid her hand on Hungerblade's scabbard. "Don't worry. I have no desire to see that particular sword in action."

Circe inspected the balm to see that it had dried on his skin, and then applied the contents of a second jar on a large ball of cotton, which immediately turned blue. As she pressed the damp cotton to his thigh the mass flattened and covered the wound entirely. Taking a second sponge, Circe wiped away a bit of the cotton, leaving the wound exposed, but filled with the blue cotton.

"This will minimize the scar, but I think that such a thing would not be bad in your line of work." Jacques nodded, but did not speak. He was enthralled by the medical skills of Romulus' alchemists. Circe

took a long strip of cloth and placed it in a copper bowl, pouring the contents of the final jar over the top. When she removed the cloth Jacques was surprised to find it was nearly dry. Wrapping it around his thigh several times, she smoothed the cloth into place where it held perfectly.

“And have you no wish to inquire after my meeting with the Emperor?”

“That is the standard opening question, is it?” She sighed. “I weep for the alleged subtlety of my people.”

“In other words, you already know how my meeting with the Emperor went.”

Circe took a towel and dabbed it in a clay jar. Starting at his ankle, she began cleaning off the blood which had run down his leg. Jacques was shocked to find the blood nearly leapt onto the towel as she rubbed it lightly over his leg. “You found his aspect strange and the purpose for your audience obscure. So much so that you wondered if he might be under a hex of some kind. This led you to consult a local magician, Ermanno de Abano, for a more thorough grounding in our local magical techniques. You overpaid him for his services, but I suppose that is the prerogative of a messenger from a wealthy and expansive empire.” She flung herself fetchingly into a couch within easy reach of Jacques’ divan.

Jacques was tempted to ask if de Abano had broken their confidence, or if she had merely made an accurate guess based on her gaunt spy’s surveillance of their meeting. But if she was only guessing, his question would give her the confirmation she sought.

“And is the Emperor under a hex?”

“In my opinion, you mean?”

“Unless you have direct experience that bears on the question.”

He had to concede that her eyes were every bit the mesmerizing emeralds that de Abano had described to him. What he had not been warned against was the Platonic perfection of her clavicles, and of their irresistible relationship to her gently peaking shoulders.

“My mother always told me: never ascribe to magic what can be explained by nature.”

“Meaning?”

She came closer. Jacques found himself estimating the precise distance between her lips and his.

“Meaning,” said Circe, her gaze unrelenting, “that the exalted Nero is the bad issue of an ever-worsening bloodline. He has succumbed not to sorcery, but to madness.”

“And how might we know this for sure?”

“Why ask the question? Never has an Emperor’s madness been a greater blessing to his empire. His spite and melancholy have turned inwards, and prevent him from wasting still-scarce resources on

endless festivities.”

“In his insanity, he has left the senate in charge.”

Jacques’ pesky forelock betrayed him, falling over his face at a crucial moment. Circe seized the opportunity, brushing it back into place.

“Yes,” she said. “So instead the imperial treasury is used to equip a neglected army, for the reconstruction of the capital, and the rebuilding of the eastern provinces ravaged by combat. What is there to say then, other than this: may the Emperor remain mad forever.”

Jacques steeled himself against her charms. “I have heard it said that the senate is full of magicians. And that the vogue for magic was started by you.”

“There is no other senator,” said Circe, “who will bind a wound for you for such a small price. I created those unguents myself.”

“What price is that?”

She tapped her wide, thin lips, poured him a goblet of wine and came in for her kiss.

“Perhaps we should get back to your party,” he said as she leaned in.

He awoke with his head pounding, tangled in snowy linen sheets. Sun streamed through an arched window set high in the wall. Blinking the sleep from his eyes, he was confronted, in daylight’s added clarity, by the distressingly frank wall paintings of a Romari boudoir.

He’d spent the night with Circe.

Part Nine: Magnetic Forces

Jacques could not help but feel that the sardines on the plate before him were regarding him balefully. Also, it seemed to him that Isabelle had clattered them down on her table with a touch of undue relish. If he didn't know better, he'd say she was taking a degree of pleasure in his suffering. The fish were stacked beside a pale cube of cheese, which wept a pool of salty liquid around them.

"This is a hangover cure?" he asked. He'd stumbled back to her villa with the cruel morning sun pounding at him. The metallic clamor of the city still echoed through his throbbing head.

"The Romari are experts in the field." Isabelle stood at a distance, her arms folded before her, in a knot of neatly contained disapproval.

"I know what you're thinking," he said.

"Do you?"

"I value your concern." He picked up a fork to poke at one of the frowning sardines. "And not to make any promises, but there may come a time when, ah, my, ah..."

"Prolonged meeting with the Senator?" Isabelle volunteered.

"When *my decisions of the previous evening* may not seem entirely foolish." He popped a chunk of cheese into his mouth.

"Like the way they worked out with the Duchess de Pegoux?"

"If I didn't know you as a respected colleague first and foremost, Isabelle, I'd say your attitude was, I don't know... *possessive*."

Isabelle blanched, and Jacques immediately regretted his words. The crawling sensation under his scalp intensified. He cut the flesh from one of the sardines and swallowed a forkful. "Let's say, for sake of argument, that Nero has been ensorcelled. What has the ultimate effect of this been?"

"Guntram surely won't approve of a fellow Emperor being subjected to a ritual of influence."

"The Emperor made nothing clear, except that he sought my kind of judgment. You've been in the city for many months now. Would it be better off if Nero returned to public life?"

"My contacts seemed to breathe easier for the first few months of Nero's withdrawal, although at the time we all thought he was merely diverted with a new hobby. As the withdrawal lengthened they fell in amongst the senators. Soon it was clear the senate was divided into three powerful factions headed Orientius, Julius Laminus and your new friend Circe, although there are certainly many slightly less powerful factions apart from those three. Some of my contacts have suffered financial setbacks, now that

there is less call for gladiators, performers, fighting beasts, parading animals and prisoners. But where some fall, others rise—those who sponsor armories and construction teams are busy counting their denarii. Anyone who can take part in a ritual of magnetic enchantment finds his purse bursting with coin.”

Jacques rubbed his head. “But what of the ordinary citizen?”

The question surprised her. “It is hard to say. . . perhaps they miss Nero’s circuses? I could ask the servants . . .”

Gardien stood. “Never mind. I know someone who can show me.”

The urchin girl, Giovanna, led Gardien toward a warren of apparently abandoned domus. Some had partially collapsed; others were surrounded by a rubble of broken, rotting planks and torn-up paving stones. “It has become easier for you, then, in the last few months?” Jacques asked. He had started by asking how conditions had changed since Nero turned governance over to the Senate, but the question, put that way, had only annoyed her. It was not the place of beggar girls, she’d explained, to concern themselves with such things.

“It is easier to beg, so I do not so much have to steal,” she said, cheerfully.

“You prefer begging to stealing?”

“Yes,” she said brightly.

“But not so much that you can resist taking a sword from the occasional foreigner,” he said, lightly.

The girl shrank back from him, as if expecting a smack on the head. “I told you, I am sorry.”

He put on his best reassuring smile. “I am only joking with you. The sword has that effect on people.”

She took him inside the network of domus, and found them bustling with lowly commerce. Ragged citizens laid out goods ranging from pots to cutlery to pieces of statuary. Dented and dusty, their wares appeared to have been salvaged from the city’s ruined districts, or perhaps the trash heaps of the wealthy. Peddlers in frayed tunics dickered over the items, loading their purchases into sacks for resale. Others purchased bundles of firewood, cakes of soap, or mended garments.

“This market is new,” Giovanna told him. “Until a few months ago, it was smaller, and had to

move around all the time.”

“Why is that?”

A nearby peddler, an old woman missing the majority of her front teeth, volunteered a reply. “Thugs would come and rob us. Now there are auxilliae, patrolling even in the ruins, and they run the brigands off. Until a few months back, there weren’t enough of them to police any but the best neighborhoods.”

“And the auxilliae don’t rob you?”

The peddler picked up a copper lamp and inspected it for holes. “We pay them a courtesy fee, naturally. Give ‘em the occasional gift. Much better than the thugs, who’d take everything you had and then beat you all the same.”

“What happened to the thugs?” Jacques asked.

“Hard to believe, but most have taken to honest labor. Between the new forum and the Serracum, a man with a strong back can earn himself far more than he can by terrorizing the likes of us. ”

A cross-legged scrounger chimed in. “And them what used to be deserted soldiers have gone back to their legions, which are paying wages again.”

Jacques looked to Giovanna. “Serracum? I don’t know that word.”

Giovanna smiled. “I’ll show you.”

“Isn’t a serracum a wagon?”

Giovanna smiled even more. “A serracum is a wagon. This is the Serracum; a wagon that floats in the sky.”

She led him from the peddler’s market down the winding avenue called the Via Arcana. Pointing to a series of bronze pylons rising several stories around the surrounding buildings, she said, “That is the Serracum.” Some of the far distant Jacques could see a string of similar pylons connected by slightly drooping cables. He counted over 20 pylons before the cables disappeared from view.

“That is where I will someday live,” she said, indicating a district of well-kept domus, not far from Isabelle’s.

“Is that so?”

“If I tell you a secret, you won’t repeat it, will you?”

“Certainly not.”

“Even when I am hungry, I do not spend all I earn. Especially now that I have this job working for you and Isabelle.”

“You must eat, Giovanna.”

The urchin dropped her voice to a whisper. “There is a place where I keep my money. Because coins are like rabbits. You put them together in the right way, and they multiply.”

“Perhaps I should introduce you to Wigandus.”

She grabbed him by the sleeve. “Who is this Wigandus? Someone who can help me grow my money?”

He laughed. “Excuse my rudeness. It was a private joke.”

“Because one day the goddesses of fortune will favor me with the right chance. Or maybe I will just work very, very hard, until I have one hundred aurei.”

“That is a great deal of gold, Giovanna.”

“That is what the license costs, here, to buy your way into the curia, and to become a magician, or scribe, or maybe an artisan. Are you of the curia in your homeland?”

Jacques winced; her excited exclamations were drilling into his aching skull. “Uh, no, I suppose I am of what you would call the equestrian class.”

“Is the license cheaper, in Dotur, to join the curia?”

“There is no license. In my homeland, a girl like you could rise in the world through talent and ambition.”

“Truly?”

“Truly.”

“I would ask to move north with you, but I do not speak the language there and I hear it is very cold. Instead I will stick to my original plan, as hard as it will be.”

Giovanna’s chirping voice no longer the worst threat to Jacques’ headache. As they drew closer to the nearest vast bronze pylon, it was eclipsed by the piercing clangs of hammers on metal.

“If you came to Dotur I am sure you would take it over in a few short years. You will plot your rise with care, Giovanna, I hope.”

“What do you mean?”

“This city has a thousand ways to devour a girl like you.”

The hammers ceased for a moment, to be replaced by chanting in the Romari High Tongue. To his half-trained ear, it seemed that the singers were divided into two groups, their haunting voices rising and falling in what Jacques recognized as an antiphonal pattern. Jacques could not tell this for sure, because a large curtain on portable stanchions had been erected around the base of the pylon. Symbolic

representations of the Romari gods were embroidered across its red silk surface. Grim faced auxiliaries formed another circle outside the curtain, keeping onlookers well away.

Jacques stood well back from the scene, but climbed a short set of steps and rested in the doorway of a nearby domus. Above the crowd he had a good view of the proceedings, at least as good a view as any outside the curtain. The chanting continued to rise and fall in volume and pitch. At times it one group would pause amid a series of hammer blows, while the other continued. Then the second would pause while the first continued. Smoke rose from behind the curtain, but Jacques was upwind and could not determine the source, although the light blue color was certainly unusual.

“The curtain is there so you can’t see the ritual they’re performing inside,” whispered Giovanna.

“Yes, I know,” said Jacques, his eyes never leaving the scene.

“They don’t want anyone to steal the secrets of their construction magic,” she further explained.

“That certainly makes sense.”

With a cry from both groups, a thick wall of smoke mushroomed into the sky, bathing the pylon in light blue smoke along its entire height. Jacques noticed, or thought he noticed, some of the smoke clinging to the pylon, almost like small serpents working their way into the ornate bronze. Dark blue flares of energy lingered along the pylon like twinkling, dark stars and then slowly went out. For moments nothing happened, then Jacques realized the ritualists were chanting again, swiftly increasing the volume and tempo.

On the pylon immediately to the north, a set of copper cables came to life, like a family of gigantic serpents. They undulated above the gawking crowd in rhythmic accord with the chanting, defying gravity, threading themselves through hollow reaching-arms protruding from the top of the curtained pylon. As they fully attached themselves the chanting slowed, and then stopped. After an instant of silence a bright blue flare ran up the pylon and down the copper line, shooting northward to the next pylon. When that pylon flared blue a cheer went up from a throng of plebeian onlookers.

As the crowd dispersed, Jacques remained entranced. In the distance he could make out a large coach moving silently southward. Suspended on the cable, it moved from pylon to pylon. At the head of the coach Jacques could just make out a horse’s head, its eyes aflame with the same blue shine he’d seen earlier. As he watched a crowd of well dressed equestrians exited the coach and descended a set of marble stairs that led to the top of the platform. They were quickly lost in the crowd to be replaced by a larger group who returned to the north. Jacques made a conscious effort to close his mouth. Self-propelled barges suddenly seemed like child’s play. His mind was still whirling with implications and

possibilities when a commotion in the crowd caught his eye. He slipped Giovanna an additional coin. “Wait here for me, will you, Giovanna?”

Outside the curtain stood Wigandus and Orientius. The Doturi merchant leaned in toward the Romari senator, who edged away as if seeking a graceful exit from their conversation. Wigandus was clearly agitated and beginning to make a scene. Behind them, workmen removed the curtain, revealing the massive, claw-like base of the pylon, gripping deep into the street like a bird of prey tightly clutching a snake. Dozens of ritualists slipped masks, censers, and strangely decorated staves into a large wooden box, which was then loaded onto a cart. A massive golden mallet was placed carefully into a silk lined box, which was, in turn, placed inside a metal strongbox. Their work done, the ritualists gathered into groups, chatting and laughing. A crew of broad-backed workmen, clad only in loin cloths, trooped past them, carrying heavy hammers and strange, box-like devices made of bronze and what seemed to be ironstone. They clambered up the side of the pylon on wooden scaffolds. Once atop the pylons, they began to secure the cables by hooking them into the box-shaped objects.

Orientius, noticing Jacques, brightened visibly and headed his way and Jacques had to abandon his examination of the pylon.

Wigandus dogged his heels. “If it’s a matter of remuneration, I can assure you that the North Coast League fully appreciates the value of a project such as this—“

Orientius bore the pained look of a man laboring to seem cordial. “It is not a matter of remuneration, as I’m sure you understand. Roma is simply not in a position to share its construction or magnetic magic—just as your empire would rightly rebuff me, were I to seek the rituals to build your self-propelled barges or bolt-throwing rifles. Isn’t that correct, Sir Gardien?”

Jacques grimaced; any answer to the question would offend one of the two men. He pretended to be distracted by the arrival of several large carts. In each cart were marble slabs of different sizes and shapes. A third group of ritualists followed the carts and began instructing the workers where to place the slabs. So the stairs would be raised magically as well, and likely before the day is over, Jacques thought. He pulled his attention back to the senator. “I have been taking a tour of the city, to assess the current state of its governance,” he said.

“And what have you concluded?” Orientius asked.

“That your empire has set aside circuses for more permanent wonders.”

“Well-answered, messenger. Perhaps your compatriot here could stand a lesson in the virtues of diplomatic indirection.” Orientius blessed them with a regal wave and padded off, joining his ritualists

and workers as they traveled south to the next pylon.

Wigandus wheeled on Jacques. “Some help you are!”

Jacques sighed. “I’ve always thought subtlety a virtue. Particularly when demanding the impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible,” Wigandus exploded. “You’ll see the proof of that soon enough, you cocky, libidinous lackwit.” The merchant paused and drew a deep breath, glaring at Jacques. “And speaking of your reckless choice in bed partners, I hope you derived some advantage from your tryst with Circe. What did you learn from her? I don’t suppose your thrashings with her gained us any valuable contracts or rituals?”

Jacques counted silently to seven. “I am sorry that your discussion with Orientius disappointed you.” He turned and walked away.

He stood with Giovanna and watched as the merchant stomped off, flanked by Hemwold and Berchtold. The troll snarled at him as they went. Giovanna slid up to him as the trio departed.

“Giovanna, I have a new task for you. I’d like to you—very carefully, mind you—follow my friend Wigandus for a while, and tell me where he goes and who he meets with.”

Giovanna jumped to attention. “Yes, my lord!”

“Something tells me that I need to know how, exactly, he means to prove me wrong...”

Part Ten: Acting And Reacting

Giovanna rubbed the silver coin on the new shift Isabelle had given her earlier in the week. She'd managed to keep the garment nearly spotless in the days since. It occurred to Jacques that this was not an easy feat; undoubtedly, the girl was still sleeping in an abandoned building. "Is there another job I can do for you, sir?" she asked.

"Nothing, for now," Jacques said. "Come back tomorrow, as usual."

The girl pivoted like a spinning top, then bounded out of Isabelle's villa onto the noisy street outside. Jacques turned to Isabelle; he intended to ask her if a bed might be found for Giovanna in her servant's quarters. He would wait to do this until after he'd worked his way back into her good graces. As senior messenger, he could command Isabelle to take her in, but Jacques thought it would be better for all of them if the invitation came voluntarily.

He eased cautiously into the villa's cramped kitchen, where he found Isabelle supervising the production of an orange omelet, in the Gallusi style. Her cooks regarded him, a male interloper poking his head into their exclusive preserve, with expressions as sour as the Romari oranges they were slicing. Jacques motioned Isabelle to follow him into the atrium, where there was a measure of privacy.

"The girl followed Wigandus back to the imperial palace," Jacques announced.

"He's dealing with Nero behind our backs?"

"It certainly appears that way."

Isabelle's expression turned hard; the gravity of the merchant's offense required no further explanation. As a free man of Dotur, Wigandus had every right to negotiate arrangements with his counterparts in Romulus. Direct negotiations with Nero or his court constituted affairs of state; Doturi law dictated that they be carried out by a duly authorized messenger of the Emperor. Wigandus had been committing treason and being rather careless about the fact.

"What do you think he's up to?" she asked.

"If I had to guess, I'd say he's asking Nero for the same thing he wanted from Orientius—he intends to purchase construction rituals. Given the ultimate goals of his guild, I'd say he's bargaining for the rituals of the Serracum."

"But Orientius and Nero are adversaries."

"Wigandus was sizing up two potential partners. That's just good business practice: see which competitor will give you the best terms. But Orientius didn't want to deal at all. Which sends Wigandus

straight to the palace, to negotiate with his sole remaining source.”

“Does Nero even have access to the rituals?”

“An excellent question.”

Isabelle paused as servants brought in the meal. Waiting until the meal was almost finished, she broke the long silence.

“Would it be such a bad thing?”

Jacques dropped his knife and pushed away from the table, suddenly tense. “No, it would not be a bad thing. At least, not on the surface and not at first.” Isabelle frowned and Jacques continued. “How would it end? That’s the question. The Empire gains the Serracum, which could well open up our borders, link towns, improve trade, expand resources.”

“That does not sound like a bad thing.”

Jacques smiled and held up a finger. “Ah, did it say Empire? I meant North Coast League. The league gains those benefits, which do, indeed, help the Empire, but where does the true power lie?”

“With the League.”

“Exactly.” Jacques sighed. “If Guntram held the secret, great. If two guilds held the secret, great. If one guild holds the secret...”

“Disaster.”

Jacques nodded and reached for his cup. He had half expected Wigandus to work against him during the journey. Guntram had almost told him as much. He had not expected Wigandus to find Nero as an apparent ally.

“So what do we do?” Isabelle asked. “We can’t arrest him until he’s back in Doturi territory, but we can still inform him of an intent to lay charges.”

“We wait.”

“Wait?”

“Remember that lesson I was always trying to teach you?”

“Oh, that.”

“Yes, that. Never act until you absolutely have to.”

“And why is that again?”

“Because by then you might actually know what’s going on.”

Isabelle’s houseboy, Paolo, edged nervously up to the threshold of the atrium. A scrawny kid, he resembled a male version of Giovanna. However, where the girl was ebullient and brimming with

heedless confidence, Paolo's demeanor was glum and skittish. Jacques wondered what had happened to him before Isabelle had taken him in.

"What is it, Paolo?" asked Isabelle.

"This arrived for Lord Gardien," he said, entering the chamber to hand a small parchment scroll, sealed with a dab of red wax, to Jacques.

Jacques pulled the wooden spindle from a metal sleeve. The papyrus bore a heady fragrance that began to fill the large room. The seal displayed an emblem: a slender hand holding an enchanter's wand. Jacques pinched the seal, releasing a thin thread of red smoke. He wondered how Circe had managed to key the message to him alone; perhaps the bloody bandages. He pulled the scroll open and read its contents; it was an invitation to join Circe at her home, at his earliest convenience.

"Circe?" asked Isabelle.

Jacques nodded.

"That reminds me."

"Yes?" asked Jacques. He was getting the feeling that Isabelle was now enjoying his discomfort.

"About your . . . close relationship with the Senator. What was that about not acting until the last possible moment?"

"Ah. Well." Jacques took a sudden interest in the flooring stones beneath his feet. "There's acting, you see. And then there's reacting."

She'd folded her arms, as if waiting for further explication.

"Two different things entirely," said Jacques, making his way for the exit.

Circe led Jacques through the sandy pathways of a fig grove. "This has belonged to my family for nine hundred years," she said. She reached up into the branches to seize one of the yellow fruits and hold it out for him. Circe seemed to want him to take it with his teeth. He plucked it from her fingertips, examining it before popping it into his mouth.

"And where was Nero's family nine hundred years ago?" he asked.

Her exquisite shoulders twitched. The one nearest him was bared by her flowing garment. "That lineage barely traces to the plague years. Men have occasionally risen from the coarsest origins to ascend the Imperial throne."

“I have been reading my Romari history,” he said, as the prelude to a new topic.

A twitch of irritation disturbed the sublimity of her features. “It is mostly gossip.”

“Then it is much like today’s political discourse,” Jacques said.

“You are a wit,” she said.

“Thank you.”

“It was not a flattering observation.”

“And in these chronicles, there is an eternal rivalry between throne and Senate. When the Emperor is powerful, the Senate is weak. And vice versa.”

Harsh southern sun pounded down on them, baking the loamy soil beneath their feet. Jacques could feel its rays cooking his pale Gallusi skin. Circe, in contrast, seemed to bask in the light, which placed an ever-shifting series of halos around her cascading hair. Resistance to her charms was ebbing away from him. It was little consolation to him that her breath, too, was visibly quickening, and a rosy glow of desire rising around those damnably perfect clavicles.

“I did not summon you here to give me a lesson in my own history.”

“Then why did you . . . ?”

She took hold of his arm, slowly brought it toward her, and bowed her head slightly to plant a slow, damp kiss on the inside of his wrist.

“Ah,” he said.

She clapped her hands, commanding a quintet of slaves to jump into action, unloading a series of canvas bundles from the back of a pack horse. “I have brought a tent, that we may enjoy a light meal together.”

“I see,” said Jacques. “And here I thought my subject matter appropriate to the occasion. Given that it’s an aphrodisiac.”

“What is?”

“Power.” He returned her previous gesture, kissing the inside of her wrist. It tasted faintly of lemon juice.

“You’re right. That isn’t boring.”

“As much as I would like to dally with you throughout my stay, I have been charged by my Emperor with a task to perform. Maybe if you helped me get that out of the way, we’d have more time to take these, ah, light meals together.”

She smiled. Behind her, slaves pounded the pegs of a large tent into the dry and yielding ground.

“I have been wondering just what your task is, Jacques Gardien.”

“It is simply to accumulate information.”

“And then act on it?”

Now it was Jacques who shrugged.

Circe moved in to kiss his neck. “You Doturi messengers are famous for the wide leeway your emperors grant you.”

He pulled her into him. After a while, he came up for air. “And if you had your say, how would that discretion be exercised?”

The senator gently broke their clinch. “The eternal struggle, as you call it, between senate and throne has been resolved, for the moment.”

“In your favor.”

She came up behind him and bit the back of his neck, which Jacques took as an answer in the affirmative. “Yes. Nero is powerless, so the only real question is . . . who commands the senate?”

Jacques struggled to keep his mind on his work. “And how, incidentally, did he come to lose his authority?”

She wrapped an arm around his throat. The gesture, though erotic, was not entirely friendly. “We’ve already discussed that. Let’s return to the important question.”

“Who commands the senate?” replied Jacques.

Circe loosened her grip on him, moving to kiss him on the lips. He turned her firmly around, brushing his lips against her shoulder blades. “Yes,” said Circe.

“And you would naturally prefer that it be you, instead of Orientius or Julius Laminus.”

She slipped out of his grip, placing herself on the other side of a fig trunk. “Saying their names spoils the mood. But naturally, yes.” Her slaves had worked quickly; the tent was already up. Circe tossed her head in its direction. “Shall we?”

Jacques nodded.

She took his hand in hers and led him toward the tent.

“If I help you undo your competitors,” Jacques said, “Emperor Guntram will ask me how Dotur stands to benefit.”

“You’re clever. I’m sure you can come up with something.”

“Favorable trade agreements? Border concessions?”

She pulled harder on his arm. “Make up whatever he’ll believe, so long as he posts you back here

to administer the details.”

“Ritual secrets? Maps?”

Her laughter resembled a run of notes struck on a lute. “As I said, you are a wit.”

“You’re right; the story must be believable.”

She ducked into the tent, where a blanket, cushions, a tray of cheese and fruit, and an amphora of wine awaited them.

“Pour the wine,” Circe instructed. “I have a surprise for you.” Jacques tasted it; it was not the usual watery Romari stuff, but a fine Gallusi vintage. They held their goblets up in mutual salute and drank.

This time he allowed her to feed him by hand, sliding a handful of pomegranate seeds onto his tongue. He flattened them against the side of his mouth, squeezing flat their soft outer sacs of tangy juice. Circe held up a silver bowl; he spit the seeds into it. “And how exactly am I to help you displace Orient . . . those two whose names we’re not using?” He took a similar quantity of pomegranate seeds and let the Senator lick them from his palm.

When she had finished, spitting the seeds into the silver bowl, she said, “You are, I have heard, on good terms with someone who possesses a certain sword. If he wishes to withdraw it from his scabbard, it is all but guaranteed that his foes will die.”

An unplanned chortle escaped from Jacques’ throat. “You want me to assassinate them?”

Circe stiffened. The move reminded Jacques of a leopard. “Of course it must be done so that no one can say for sure it was you.”

Jacques rubbed the back of his neck, as if it suddenly ached. “You see, Circe, I thought you had something subtler in mind . . .”

“You are disappointed that I only want you for your sword?” It was a clever line, but the humor had drained from her voice.

Jacques sensed that he had been put to a test, and failed. “We are granted wide leeway, on intoxicating one, but it doesn’t extend to the willy-nilly slaughter of prominent figures.”

Circe stood suddenly and crossed her arm. Her mouth formed a long, straight line. “You have taken something from me, and I want it back.”

“I have?”

“I can still save you, if you return it now. Everything we talked about can still be yours.”

“What everything?” Jacques blinked. Circe had grown blurry. His head felt as if someone was

pressing hard on both of his temples. He pitched over, heaving, seized by a powerful urge to vomit; at the same time, his windpipe closed up.

She backed away from him and stood over him as spasms racked his body. Jacques thought he saw regret on her face, but her apparent remorse may have simply been a product of his fogged vision. Then he lost his sight altogether.

He'd poured the wine. She'd drunk from it, too. But she'd poisoned him, all the same.

Part Eleven: Links and Chains

Jacques awoke to an insistent poking sensation in his ribcage. An odd smell, reminiscent of mint and rancid barley, invaded his sinuses. He blinked open his bleary eyes; the chamber where he found himself, and its inhabitants, defined themselves slowly, as his drugged mind returned grudgingly to operation.

It was cold, that was the first thing. Second, he hurt. The sources of pain were several: his head throbbed and the sockets of his arms burned. Then he realized why: he hung suspended, in chains. Tentatively, he tested the ground beneath him. His toes only brushed it; the shackles and, thus, the sockets of his arms supported his weight. The surface of the ground was uneven and strewn with gravel.

Third, it was dim. Fourth, it was damp. His cell, he intuited, was situated underground. Its gray, diffuse light led him to conclude that it was daytime. Behind his captors, he saw a wooden door. Weak light spilled through its rectangular frame.

Fifth, his captors were here with him. One of them—it was Circe—stood by a censer, wafting incense at him. This was the source of the mint and sour barley smells, and, Jacques guessed, the agent countering the poison and wresting him back to consciousness. The second was Orientius, who was responsible for the poking—he held a broom handle and jabbed it into Jacques from a concerned distance. Standing behind the two of them was the third member of the senatorial triumvirate, Julius Laminus.

The sword! Jacques looked for the sword.

It leaned, safely in its scabbard, against the set of stone steps leading up to the door. He could only hope that it had stayed in its sheath throughout his involuntary sleep. Jacques wanted to ask, to make sure that none of them had been stupid enough to draw it, that no blood had been spilled. But, even with a self-propelled war carriage thundering about on the inside of his skull, he was not quite stupid enough to blurt that out. If his captors had staved off temptation this long, there was no reason to remind them of it.

“Wake up,” Orientius tartly commanded.

“Uhh . . .” Jacques managed.

“Wake up!”

Jacques thought he saw a vestige of concern on Circe’s face. Then again, it could as easily be a performance. She would play the sympathetic interrogator, he guessed, softening the others’ threats and

demands.

Circe swept up to knock the stick away from his ribs, then turned to viciously slap him. “Now you will answer our questions.” So much for the sympathetic interrogation.

The force of her blow had set him in motion, like a pendulum. “Ow. That hurt, Circe. You should pose some questions before you start slapping. I might even answer them.”

“Is he an idiot or is it a pretense?” Laminus growled.

A feline grin surfaced on Orientius’ well-fed face. “He was smart enough to let you win that duel, Julius. So be sure that it is entirely a masquerade. But the mummery stops here, doesn’t it, messenger?” He moved around Circe and punctuated the query with another jab of the broom handle.

“Ouch. As I said, I’m ready to start answering as soon as you start asking.”

“We know that Wigandus acts as Nero’s cat’s-paw,” said Orientius. “So tell us why Guntram has decided to intervene against us.”

“You have two points in there. The first one is probably true and I’m curious to know how you found it out. The second, you’ll be glad to hear, is utter nonsense. So, can you let me down? I give more articulate answers when I’m not passing out.”

Circe blew more incense at him. “You’ll stay conscious so long as you’re breathing this.” Jacques wondered what would happen when she removed the incense, but decided not to ask.

“That reminds me. Someday I’d like to find out how you poisoned me with wine you also drank.”

“I’m sure you would,” she said.

In fact, Jacques did not particularly care. It would be some enchantment or alchemical antidote. The details of magic bored him. But he knew the question would annoy the others.

Julius Laminus pushed himself past the others. “We know Wigandus works with Nero, because we have spies in the palace. We have intercepted communications.”

“I’d like to see those, because I’m also trying to figure out what Wigandus and Nero are up to.” Jacques subtly tested the shackles. There was no way to slip free.

“What kind of fools do you take us for?” Spittle flew from Laminus’ lips. “You are here to vouch on Guntram’s behalf for Wigandus. What Wigandus does, he does at Dotur’s behest!”

“I see. You’re making the classic conspirator’s mistake.”

“What is that?” asked Circe. Jacques turned to face her, keeping an eye on the enraged Laminus.

“Assuming that everyone has the same information you do. Not surprising, given that you live

here in Romulus, where every second person is a spy and everyone knows what everyone else is doing. Believe it or not, we in Dotur, many dangerous leagues away from you I should point out, lack that sort of window into your affairs. When Guntram sent me down here, all he knew is that the political winds might be in some way shifting. I didn't learn the scope of Nero's distress until I met him." Circe eyed him critically, then turned away when he regarded her with the same hard stare. He turned toward Laminus.

Confusion and anger battled each other across Laminus' hawkish face. "We have letters from Nero's minions to Wigandus', offering him rewards in return for Dotur's help."

"In that case, I understand why you've strung me up here and forgive you for the rough treatment."

Laminus punched him in the stomach. "You expect us to believe that Wigandus acts alone?"

Jacques groaned. Despite his predicament, he was losing patience. "And Wigandus, he speaks for the Emperor? He has the power to make treaties, offer terms?" Laminus raised a fist to strike again, but Orientius waved the broomstick and Jacques continued. "Who can speak for the Emperor in Romulus, Wigandus or me?" Circe turned back, realizing Jacques point before he made it.

"Wigandus only promised the support of his guild," she said. "He implied the cooperation of the Emperor, but did not express it directly."

"But you wanted to believe it was a grand conspiracy, so you jumped, incorrectly, and attributed Wigandus with powers only a messenger possesses." Jacques sighed. "Will you let me down now? I'm not the bad guy."

Orientius dropped the broomstick and Laminus punched him in the ribs, although not as hard as the first time. Jacques swayed slightly on the chains.

"You know what Wigandus seeks, don't you?"

Laminus seemed confused by the question.

"He wants our rituals," said Orientius. Clearly what he thought he knew upon entering the cell was now in question. "He came to me this morning to see if I'd sell them to him."

"When were you going to tell us that?" Laminus snapped.

Jacques spun slowly on his chain. "Wigandus is a presumptuous man. Maybe that's a trait you know something about, Laminus. Although you've not met him, let me assure you Emperor Guntram is a very smart man. He knew that there was nothing Wigandus was going to be able to do to acquire any Romari rituals. His hope was simply to establish better trading relations. Wigandus had other ideas, using the trade agreements as the means to get something else – the rituals. The theory I was working on,

before, you know, all this unpleasantness, was that Wigandus realized Nero's plight and seized the opportunity to make himself useful. He breaks, or circumvents, the geas in return for the secrets of the Serracum or bridge building; perhaps both. He thought if he struck this bargain with Nero that I would go along with it, as naturally as flowers follow rain."

"And why wouldn't you?" Orientius asked. "Your emperor would love to be able to build bridges, instead of hauling goods across rivers on those ridiculous winches of yours. Any leader would kill for our secrets of magnetism."

Jacques looked at Orientius as if he were an idiot.

"Wigandus does not intend to share those secrets with his Emperor," volunteered Circe. Jacques nodded as she continued. "His guild prospers directly, and the Doturi prosper indirectly from his stolen knowledge."

Orientius broke the broomstick with a harsh snap that echoed through the room. "Bah! The question remains. Guild or emperor, it does not matter. If Wigandus succeeds, the Doturi prosper at our expense. Why wouldn't he help the merchant if the plan is about to succeed?" He threw the remains on the floor, punctuating the question. Circe tapped her lip, but did not speak.

"That's an even tougher question now that you've drugged and tortured me. Because before this happened, I was thinking that Roma was better off with the three of you in charge. My only concern was getting Wigandus out of Romulus without causing an international incident."

The three senators traded uncertain glances. Jacques tried to find a purchase on the floor, but it remained agonizingly out of reach. "I doubt you have had the experience, but believe me when I say hanging from the ceiling is extremely unpleasant. Perhaps now you can let me down?"

Circe broke the silence. "If you are trying to stop Wigandus, as you claim, then you'll tell us where it is."

Jacques looked at her in complete surprise. "Where what is?"

"The locus," Laminus shouted.

"Locus?"

"Don't play ignorant!" Laminus seemed ready to strike him again. "We know you spoke to Ermanno de Abano, and that he told you that for this sort of magic, a ritual object is required, to hold and fix the magic."

"So you *have* hexed Nero. At first I thought you were making him do something, but my present thinking is that you're stopping him from taking action. He can't issue decrees, or give orders to any

officers of the state. That would have to include the legions, too, wouldn't it?"

Now it was Orientius turn to make Jacques feel like an idiot. "Of course."

"It took me a while to realize why he couldn't reveal his condition to me, but I'm a diplomat of another sovereign court. That would make any discussions with me, beyond the mere ceremonial, a matter of statecraft—and also forbidden by the geas."

"An excellent guess, Jacques," said Circe.

"Hmm. At any rate . . . With Nero stuck in his magically maintained cage, the path remains open for the three of you to rule the Empire."

Circe took Laminus aside for a duet of harshly whispered words. During this time, Orientius' nervously divided his attention between trying to eavesdrop on them, and watching Jacques in case he attempted an escape.

Laminus remained at the back of the cell, while Circe came forward to continue the questioning. "Where is the locus?" Jacques ignored her.

"So that leaves the question of why you didn't just destroy the locus to begin with," Jacques mused. "That would have left the magic in place permanently. Why keep it, risking the eventuality that, well, let's say, *mysterious persons unknown* could take it from you?"

Now both Orientius and Julius Laminus silently fumed, while Circe fought to retain composure.

"Great gilded stars," said Jacques, comprehension dawning.

"Jacques, where did you hide it?" There was a pleading look in Circe's eyes.

Gardien continued to ignore her, musing out loud. "You kept it, didn't you? These two thought it destroyed, but you kept it. Pulled some sleight of hand after the ritual, did you? And now I'm here because you've had to tell the locus still exists." Jacques whistled. "That couldn't have been a pleasant admission."

All three of them glowered at him. He'd overplayed his hand—he was accusing her of duplicity, and the two men of falling for it. That the deduction was correct only made it worse.

"Where is it?" Circe demanded.

"What makes you think I have it?" Jacques asked.

Circe stiffened. "You know full well."

"I'm sorry, you've confused me again. It must be the drugs and all the hitting and jabbing."

Orientius shoved her aside. "You took it during your first . . . liaison with her at her fête."

"You three don't like each other very much, do you? I guess that's why she kept the locus, to

have something to hold over you and Laminus. If either of you, together or separately, tries to move her out of your triumvirate, she can threaten to restore Nero's freedom. It would take her a matter of hours to gather her magicians and use the locus to undo the ritual that keeps him in check. By retaining the locus, she keeps your uneasy alliance in place. Although I suppose you need her more than she needs you."

Orientius looked for the remains of the broom, finding the remains of the handle on the floor at Jacques' feet. He cracked Jacques left knee. "She is scarcely the only indispensable one. Our program would be nothing without our public works projects, which I control."

"Of the three of us, only I receive any degree of public adulation," snarled Laminus.

"That explains it, then," said Jacques when he got his breath back. His knee radiated pain, but he didn't think it was permanently damaged. Orientius was displaying hidden skills and seemed ready to display more. Jacques decided to revise his tone. "The two of you have ongoing sources of influence, whereas Circe, once she completes the ritual and dismantles the locus, becomes dispensable. Little wonder, then, that she felt the need to keep it." Jacques smiled. "It's as my mother told me: there's always a good explanation for everything."

"If you find yourself so amusing," said Laminus, as he moved toward Hungerblade, "find the humor in this: if we were unhappy to find Circe still in control of the locus, imagine our response to the discovery that it is in the hands of an insolent outlander." He picked up the sheathed weapon.

"Of course, if I had this locus, I'd have made arrangements to have something bad happen to it if I were to disappear," Jacques bluffed. "Bad for you, I mean."

Julius Laminus wrapped his hand around the blade's ornate hilt.

"Also," Jacques bluffed again, "I wouldn't count on your getting the result you expect, if you draw that sword in my presence."

"Ah, your legendary sword." Laminus turned it over in his hands. "You are its sworn custodian, are you not? What value is the locus to you, compared to this?" He turned to address Circe. "I have no more patience for this. Let him swing for a while, and contemplate what he is without his magic sword. Soon he will beg us to make the trade." He strode toward Jacques. "But don't take too long deciding. After I've tested it, I may decide that I too value the sword over Circe's golden gewgaw."

He headed for the stairs.

"Laminus listen to me," said Jacques. "You do not want to take that."

"But I do want to take it, Doturi. It is a sword, and I am a swordsman."

"That's what they all say," Jacques said under his breath. Only Circe was close enough to hear

him.

“Pathetic, isn’t he?” Laminus addressed Orientius, who seemed bored by the whole exchange. His mind continued to race toward the conclusion of the current problem. He could not be distracted, even by an enchantment as powerful as Hungerblade.

“You’re the magician, Circe. You tell him,” pleaded Jacques

Circe held out her palms in a gesture of impatient surrender. Laminus was beyond her help. The senator walked up the steps.

Jacques called after him. “If you heed only one piece of advice for the rest of your life, Laminus, hear this: leave it in its scabbard.”

“I am no child, to be warned and coddled.” Laminus opened the wooden door. Light flooded into the cell through the exposed opening, turning Laminus into a silhouette. He paused for a mocking salute and then departed, sword in hand.

Part Twelve: Nero's Move

Shortly after Julius Laminus' departure with Jacques' sword, Circe and Orientius left the cell together. A muscular slave pulled the door shut, once more reducing the chamber to near-darkness. Jacques could hear an animated conversation between the two senators just beyond the cell door, but couldn't make out its contents. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the thickening gloom, and then looked up at the shackles that bound his wrists, and the chains that suspended them from the cell's ceiling. The chains hung from an iron hook fixed to a wooden beam.

At least three obstacles stood in the way of his freedom: the chain, the shackles, and the door. After that, there would also be guards and so forth, but that would be getting ahead of himself. So far he only had a solution to the first problem.

He swung himself on the chain, gaining momentum until his feet neared the wall. Jerking himself upward, he planted his feet flat against it, pulling the chain taut. Breathing methodically, he moved one foot upwards, then the other, gradually walking his way up the vertical surface. He took the rusty chain in his shackled hands. With each laborious step, the length of the slack links behind his hands grew, and the tight side shortened. He groaned his way up to the roof beam, his body parallel to the ceiling. Finally he had his head near the hook and his feet flat against the wall. By lunging forward, he slipped the chain off the hook.

Jacques plummeted to the stone floor, landing on his back. He laid there, stunned, for a long interval of half-consciousness. When his breath came back to him, he rolled onto his side. Extricating himself from the chain, which was wrapped around him, he pulled his wrists up to his face for a better look at the shackles. There was no obvious keyhole. It appeared as if the shackles had been somehow forged onto his wrists, but his skin was undamaged.

The door opened. Circe stood at the top of the steps, flanked by the burly slave, plus another who looked like his twin. Although not trolls, based on their size and appearance the pair likely had troll ancestors.

"Oh," she said. "I was just about to have my fellows lower you from the chain." She seemed to make a calculation, and then swept down the steps to kneel beside him. The near-trolls followed quickly behind their master, faces alert with implied menace.

"I don't suppose you also planned to remove the shackles?" said Jacques.

She knelt to inspect him for injuries. "I've always had a soft spot for reckless men, but enough is

enough. Now that the others are gone, you can give me the locus without shame.” She moved in closer, brushing her lips against his. Jacques checked her guards to see if they were averting their gazes. They took it all in as if their mistresses’ near-clinch with one of her prisoners was a matter of dull routine. Their vigilance ruled out any attempt to grab her as a hostage.

“Return it to you alone, you mean, and restore the previous balance of power,” he said.

She ran her fingers through his hair. “Why not?”

“I might just do that—once I’m sure it’s the right choice.”

“So you admit you have it.”

“There’s a more pressing matter—we’ve got to get that sword away from Laminus, before he—”

A third functionary, a gray-bearded man whose bearing and clothing suggested rank and education, rushed in through the open door. Unlike the guards, he showed the good grace to blanch slightly at catching Circe in a quasi-embrace. “May I approach?” he asked, his tone urgent.

Jacques sat up, pain orbiting through the muscles of his back, as she conferred in low tones with the functionary. The guards, unfortunately, kept themselves fixed on him.

Jacques thought he saw a flicker of suppressed panic as Circe turned back to him. “Nero is making a move,” she said. “He’s mustering an army.”

“I thought your magic prevented that.”

“The geas renders him incapable of making decrees, or give orders to any state official outside his own household staff. He’s circumvented it by seeking outside help. He’s retreated to his villa, a few miles outside the city walls. There gathers a force of rogues, brigands, and foreign mercenaries.”

“I’m impressed” mused Jacques. “Wigandus must have started collecting his forces immediately after our first meeting with the emperor. How could he do that?”

“His hiring was extremely discrete,” offered Circe’s majordomo. “He must have hired them in small groups and sent them separately to the emperor’s villa.” Jacques eyed Circe for confirmation.

“It could be done,” she sighed. “Apparently it has been done. An outlander hiring outlanders is hardly news in the city. he would need a place to hide his growing forces, but the emperor’s villa is perfect. We, I, assumed Nero powerless. We barely bothered to have him watched.”

“How soon can you muster an opposing force?”

“Ancient law prevents the stationing of troops in the city.”

Jacques, who was familiar with this tradition, nodded in understanding. It had been enacted at the height of the Republic, to prevent generals from seizing the throne. Now an emperor was relying on it

to reverse a coup.

“We can’t call in a legion without first convening the Senate and reaching an agreement. Even then, the nearest forces are . . .”

She turned to her majordomo for the answer: “Several days away, milady.”

“I’ll straighten this out,” said Jacques. “Of course, you’ll have to free me first.”

The enchantress warily cocked her head. “You’re not sure you want to return the locus, but you do know you want to stop Nero?”

“The first thing he’ll do if he retakes the city is have the three of you killed. That will counter the geas, won’t it?”

“It’s more complicated than that, but yes.”

Jacques stood. “I admit, captivity and beatings aggravate me. But the last thing this city needs is a wave of mayhem and bloodshed. There is also the matter of Wigandus. No matter how this turns out it is unlikely to reflect well upon my sovereign.”

“What can you do against hundreds of mercenaries?”

“I’ll start by asking nicely, and work my way up from there.”

Circe patted at the pockets of her robe. “The key . . .”

“I have that already.” Jacques revealed it, hidden in his palm, and held it to the light. It looked like a small silver shell on length of tiny iron chain. He’d taken it while she was leaning over him. “Of course, I hadn’t quite figured out how to work it yet.” He held it sheepishly to Circe who snatched it from his hand. Removing a hairpin, she jabbed the small finger of her left hand, while chanting softly. Continuing the chant she caught some of the blood in shell and then held it over Jacques outstretched arms by the small chain. With a final word, she dipped the shell once on to each shackle. There was a slight pop and each shackle split in two. Circe replaced the shell into her pocket.

Jacques rubbed his wrists and shoot out his fingers. Although the opening enchantment was painless, hanging by his wrists had caused his hands to go slightly numb. He levered himself to his feet. “Now, I simply require your muscular employees to step aside. Oh, and directions to Laminus’ place.”

“You mean the imperial estate.”

“That too, but first I need the sword. It’s much more persuasive than I am.”

Jacques bolted from the cell; it exited outdoors, inside Circe’s estate. He dashed for the stables, followed by one of the slaves. The slave told the livery workers to give him a horse. They led him to a towering, white-coated steed; he swung onto its saddle and impelled it through the estate’s back gates.

He could see Laminus' villa from the road, but the chaotic layout of Romulus afforded no direct route to it. It was located on another of the city's seven hills, and to get to it, he would have to take the winding lane he presently rode into the congested heart of Romulus, turn around, and ride back along another of the wide, circuitous lanes that led to the widely dispersed manors of the equestrian class. He spurred the horse on, rehearsing arguments, hoping to get there before Laminus made the inevitable mistake.

His son Antonius at his side, Julius Laminus stood before his largest and most ornately carved weapons case in the family armory. Hungerblade hung inside it, still in its sheath, against its backing of crimson velvet. To its left was the gladius with which their ancestor Vitellus had slain the dwarf chieftain Alfsigr. To its right, the trident of Gaius Magnus, the renowned gladiator, which Julius' father had purchased from the late warrior's trainer for a lordly sum.

"It doesn't look right," said Antonius.

"How so?" mused his father.

"The other weapons are exposed to view, yet Hungerblade is covered by that dowdy sheath."

Laminus wandered to a table to chew thoughtfully on a grape. When he had seized the weapon, he was sure that he would promptly loose it from its scabbard for a careful inspection. At first, he had taken the Doturi messenger's words for the exaggerated squawks of an arrogant bumpkin. Now that there was no impediment to his drawing the sword, he was afflicted by doubt.

"I was warned to leave it that way," he said. As the words left his mouth, they felt cowardly, shameful.

"He would tell you that, wouldn't he?" said Antonius. "He doesn't want you using it."

Jacques rode from the constricted streets of the city center toward the avenue leading to Laminus' villa. Private guards rushed from their posts at nearby gates, calling him an outlander and demanding that he turn around. Jacques, riding past them, heard something about needing permission to enter.

Laminus spit his grape seeds into a tiny dish, which was marked with the symmetrical visage of the deity Apollo. He had selected the god as patron of his austerity movement, because he symbolized both self-restraint and war-like zeal. It occurred to him that his current predicament put these two traits at odds with one another. “The sword is enchanted, Antonius.”

“I know. That is why it is legendary.”

“It is a rash and foolish man who tampers with magical forces he does not understand. What would our followers say, if they learned that I had, out of idle curiosity, brought a curse upon myself?”

Antonius drew nearer to the display case. “What if it’s all a trick? Behind that pointy-toed gait and his stuttering speech, Gardien is a wily fox. I bet he created the legend of the sword, to scare people.”

Laminus bristled. “He is only half as smart as he thinks he is.”

Antonius touched the scabbard. “You do intend to use this one day, in earnest?”

“If I own a weapon of fabulous enchantment, I must use it to enhance our family glory.”

“Well, then, what if it is a fake? You must test it beforehand, to know if you can trust it in the heat of battle.”

“You pursue the logic of your position doggedly, my son. Such verbal zeal will serve you well, when you are old like your father, and ascend to his senate seat.”

“Thank you father, but I will let no one call you old.” Antonius stalked to the table to grab a pear, moving backwards so as not to let the weapon out of his sight. “In the meantime, we must at least substitute a more impressive sheath for it. That worn, dusty piece of dross—it is barely fit to be in our house, much less enjoy pride of place next to the sword of Vitellus.”

“Perhaps. I will consult with my enchanters, to see what advice they give.”

“You know what they will advise. *Caution.*” The young equestrian spat the name like it was an obscenity.

“Yes,” said Julius Laminus.

“After all, what does Vitellus say, in his memoirs?”

Laminus quoted the passage. “*The man who is prudent all the time is half the time a coward.*”

Jacques stood at the gates to Laminus’ estate, a pair of armed porters barring his way. The smaller of the two acted as spokesman, while the troll placed himself directly in front of the entrance and struck a pose of quiet intimidation.

“You must let me in immediately,” said Jacques, his manner stern but measured. “It is the direst emergency.”

“The Senator does not entertain uninvited guests,” replied the porter. Despite his impassive air, he seemed to be enjoying his power of refusal.

“I come from Senator Circe, do you understand?”

“Do you bear her seal or token?”

“Nero is gathering a mercenary army outside the city. Your master and all of you in his household are in the gravest danger.”

The porter wavered. “I will call for a boy, and he will see if the Senator is receiving—“

Jacques grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. “Let me in now, or I’ll tear you to pieces!” His expression grew wild. “You too!” he shouted at the troll.

Antonius handed the weapon to his father. “A blade cannot harm what it cannot reach. I will move back, far out of range. Then you can safely draw the sword, so we can see what it looks like. What harm can there be in that?”

Laminus held it out, weighing it in his hands. “Very well. Move back, then.”

Antonius stepped backwards, until he was halfway across the large chamber. He took up a spot on the other side of a table.

“Move further,” said Laminus.

“If I go any further I won’t be able to see. What can happen?”

Laminus sighed and drew the blade.

Part Thirteen: Spilled Blood

Jacques bolted through the rooms of Julius Laminus' villa, pursued by a household slave. The man, who Jacques took for one of the senior stewards, pleaded for him to stop and allow himself to be introduced.

Like the other Romari villas Jacques had seen, Laminus' had few hallways, but was a collection of open rooms, separated by pillars and curtains. "Where is he?" he demanded.

"Please, sir . . ." puffed the steward.

Jacques called Laminus' name. He ducked into a kitchen, then an empty atrium.

A mournful yell sounded from behind a curtain. Jacques parted the curtain, crossed a small antechamber, and found himself on the threshold of Julius Laminus' armory.

Laminus knelt on the floor, cradling the body of his son Antonius in his arms. Both men were soaked in blood, the son even more so than the father. The front of his white toga was wet with crimson, obscuring the location of the wound. Antonius, already pale and limp, shuddered, releasing a new gout of fresh blood. He had been stabbed in the heart.

The Senator brushed back Antonius' hair. Tears streamed down his cheeks, washing rivulets into the spatters of blood on his face. He moaned inarticulately, then noticed Jacques' presence. Fighting to swallow his grief, Laminus froze his face into a rictus of self-denial. All around the room were arranged busts of his ancestors. They stared down at him with blank nobility.

"You," he breathed.

"Fetch a medic," Jacques told the servant, who had stumbled stupidly backwards. The man gathered his bearings and thudded off.

There was nothing a physician could do; the young man was clearly dead. The medic would be needed only for formality's sake—and to get the panicked servant out of the room.

"He was nowhere near me," Laminus said.

The blade's sheath lay near Jacques, on the marble floor. He reached out with his foot to pull it discreetly closer.

"We thought it through," continued Laminus. "He stood over there, many paces away. Many paces. I told him to move even further, but he . . . Still, he was well away from it."

Jacques understood what had happened, but let the man tell it.

"I meant only to examine it," said Laminus. "We were curious. It was as if the sword imposed

itself on us, forced us to release it.”

Gardien nodded, even though this was not the case. The temptation men felt when alone with the blade was not a factor of its enchantment. It was the product of human nature alone.

“As soon as it was free of its scabbard, it began to quiver in my hand. I could not control it. It was as if it sought a target.”

This was what the sword did, if you did not already have a victim picked out for it.

“Its tip swung through the room, like a rod dowsing for water. And then it found Antonius. Pointed to him. I seized it with both hands. The scabbard had dropped to the floor, so I ducked down to snatch it up again. The sword, it resisted me, like a horse bridling against a rider’s command. As I struggled to put it back in the sheath, it suddenly dipped. As if lunging at me. Trying to cut my wrist. It surprised me . . . I was startled, so it . . .”

Jacques had been slowly approaching the man, and was now close enough to duck down beside him and place a hand on his shoulder. Laminus quivered and gasped.

“I know what it did,” said Jacques.

“It flew—flew from my hand! One moment, I held it, and the next, Antonius had fallen to the floor. Did I see a silver flash in the air? I do not know. I did not see the blade go in.”

He turned his son’s body, so that Jacques could see the exit wound in his back. Hungerblade had thrown itself like a spear, penetrating Antonius’ heart and severing his spinal column.

“He’d seen me struggling with the sword, and came toward me to help. If he had not done that, it would have taken me instead. He laid himself open to it. ”

The sword lay beneath the senator’s kneeling legs. It posed no more danger, now that its hunger had been sated, and would remain inactive until the next time someone took it from its scabbard. Even so, Jacques would not feel right until it was safely stowed. There was also a broader emergency to address. As much as the senator required consolation, Gardien had to extricate himself from this situation, quickly. “Laminus . . .” he whispered.

Laminus gripped Jacques’ hand.

“Nero gathers troops for a strike on the city. I must go deal with them. Let me take the sword?”

“Nero . . . ? What? But he can’t . . . we . . .”

“Your geas forbade him to command Romari troops, so he’s gathered mercenaries through Wigandus.”

“Mercenaries? Wignadus? The geas also prevents him from commanding treasury officials.”

This was a splendid question Jacques had no time to discuss. “I don’t know how long you’ve got until they’re all mustered, but when they come, you can be sure that this domus will be among his first targets.”

Laminus slumped. “Let him. Let him take me.”

“He might extirpate your entire line, Laminus. You must collect yourself now, do you understand?”

“Yes,” he quavered.

“Gather the young men of your movement. Prepare to mount a defense, if I fail. I must go now, and take the sword away from here.”

Laminus stiffened, shifting further onto the sword, and wrenched himself away from Jacques. “How could you have let me do this?” Laminus punched out the words with a sudden, concentrated fury.

Sooner or later they always said this. They never wanted to hear the true answer, that he had warned them repeatedly. Instead, Jacques had learned to say this: “It is natural for grief to turn to anger, Laminus. But now you must protect the rest of your family.”

He scrambled for Hungerblade’s hilt. “I will use the sword against them!”

The trembling Laminus was a shadow of the man who had fought him at Circe’s fête. Jacques placed his foot on the senator’s shoulder as he struggled up, toppling him over onto the floor. He ducked to scoop up the sword and departed. Over his shoulder, he saw Laminus lying on the floor, clutching at his son’s corpse.

Jacques wiped the blood from Hungerblade with a cloth he kept inside his doublet, then smoothly slipped it back in its sheath, which he then attached to his belt.

Laminus would make a formidable enemy. If Jacques were fortunate, he would come to realize that he had no reason to blame anyone but himself for Antonius’s death. Experience suggested that he would not be fortunate.

Jacques bounded up the steps to Isabelle’s domus and reached for his purse, fumbling for the key that opened its brass doors. The purse was gone. He grimaced, exasperated at his forgetfulness. Of course the purse would be missing—Circe and her allies would have taken it from him before throwing him in her dungeon. Jacques banged the knocker against the door.

It opened.

Hemwold the troll stood there. He grabbed Jacques by the doublet and hauled him inside.

The villa had been reduced to a shambles. Dressers were overturned, the contents of their drawers spilled onto the floor. The carpets were rolled up. Isabelle's cooks and porters had been herded into the kitchen, where Berchtold and another rough-looking fellow, dressed like a Doturi brigand, stood watch over them, cudgels in hand.

"He's here," Hemwold grunted. With rude force, Hemwold shoved him into the atrium, now grabbing the back of his doublet like the scruff of a kitten's neck.

Wigandus bounded into view, carrying a small jewelry cabinet. "Is it in here, Gardien?" he asked. The cabinet appeared to be locked.

Jacques released himself from the troll's grip. "You may not have considered this, but Emperor Guntram takes, you know, a dim view of people who ransack the homes of his messengers."

Wigandus' nostrils flared. "It's you who'll have to answer to His Imperial Majesty, when I lay the rituals for Romari magnetic magic at his feet, and then inform him of your lackadaisical and obstructionist attitude. However I may be prepared to soften my report, if you stop wasting my time and give me that locus."

Gardien inspected the fabric of his doublet, which the troll had torn. "I'm willing to take my chances. I've been much more lackadaisical and obstructionist in the past, yet oddly enough, he keeps sending me out on important missions."

The merchant smashed the cabinet against a pillar, breaking it open. A cascade of brooches and necklaces fell to the floor. He knelt to paw his way through them, and then tossed them aside.

"What does this locus look like?" Jacques said. "Maybe I can help you find it."

Wigandus came at him. "Don't play dumb, messenger! We know all about it. The ritual object in which Circe's treasonous geas resides. We have a spy in Orientius' household."

Jacques picked up an upended chair and sat in it. "Ah, like the one they have in yours."

The merchant's face fell. "What do they know? This damnable city . . ." His composure quickly returned. "It cannot be much, or they would have acted to prevent us."

"Yes, I doubt Circe would have invited you to her fête if she'd known you were raising a mercenary army for Nero."

"Guntram will be quite distressed, I am sure, to discover that you favor the continuance of a coup against a legitimate Emperor."

“I do not believe that His Imperial Majesty sees himself as exactly the same kind of Emperor as Nero.” Jacques tapped his fingers lightly on the hilt of his weapon. Berchtold and Hemwold grew visibly nervous, but Wigandus paid no heed to the gesture.

“It is you who are the naïve one,” he spat. “Yes, yes, there is the idea of spreading Radiant Reason throughout Uropa, and being enlightened and benevolent toward all mankind. Such pretty talk can be useful, when it convinces people to obey. But at its core, Gardien, statecraft is like everything else—a matter of finances. Just as Nero needs my money to regain his authority, Guntram can use the thousands and thousands of ducats magnetic magic will bring him. If a little blood must be spilled, he may lament it. He may write a poem, or paint a painting. But this prize is so great, he will accept whatever I had to do to get it.”

“Ah, so you’re a patriot.” Jacques clapped his hands and chuckled. “You plan to simply give these rituals to the state.” Jacques froze Guntram with a firm stare. “I’m sure your brothers in the guild are also great patriots and will willingly, no, eagerly, give away such a monopoly. You probably discussed that with them before you left.” Wigandus was silent for a moment, and then tried to mumble a response, but Jacques cut him off.

“And what makes you think you can trust Nero? I assume that as part of your arrangement, you have to get him the locus . . .”

“So what?”

“After your mercenaries have put him back on his throne, and the geas is broken, what leverage do you have then? What assurance do you have that Nero will give you the magic you seek?”

Wigandus mopped sweat from his brow. “You won’t sow the seeds of doubt with me, messenger. Naturally, the locus will only be provided in exchange for the grimoires containing the rituals.”

“In other words, without it, all of your effort here is wasted.”

“Shut up and tell me where you’ve hidden it! It must be here!” He turned to the troll. “Hemwold, beat it out of him.”

The troll pointed to Hungerblade, grunting uncertainly.

“Here’s a fact you might find interesting,” said Jacques. “One of my tasks here was to assess your trustworthiness.”

“Then you leave me no choice but to go forward, hah? You will malign me, and doom my interests in Dotur forever—unless I get that locus, and through it, the grimoires. Well, then, Jacques

Gardien, consider this. We have your junior messenger, Isabelle. And you have maneuvered me into what, frankly, seems to be a position of some desperation. I did not want matters to reach this point, you understand. But unless you immediately hand it over, I will be forced to order the slitting of her alabaster throat.”

Part Fourteen: A Series Of Exchanges

Hemwold followed Jacques through Isabelle's domus, as he moved calmly from the atrium into the kitchen. "Even now that you've lost, you still think you're smart, don't you?" A blast of rancid breath accompanied the troll's muttered words. "I'll show you how you weren't smart at all."

"Is that so?" said Jacques, bending down to dislodge a loose tile from the kitchen floor. He snatched up a glittering item. Hemwold reached for it. Jacques held fast, nodding in the direction of his sword. "Your employer gets this when Isabelle is safely returned."

Gardien moved back to the domus' atrium, where Wigandus waited, with his other guardsmen. "I have it. Let's go."

Hemwold grinned at the frightened servants. "Clean this place up while we're gone. Somebody made a mess of it."

Wigandus seemed to regard his chief bully with mild disapproval, but said nothing, beckoning Jacques and his other guards down the domus steps and onto the street.

They wended their way through the city in silence. Jacques listened to the shouts of food-sellers, the cries of vendors, and the chatter of drinkers sitting on wine shop patios. A noisy procession celebrating an obscure eastern god disgorged itself from a tiny temple, into an avenue already choked with workers and shoppers. Upon Jacques' arrival just a few days ago, these streets had seemed ominous, heavy with a sense of sinister watchfulness. Now they seemed, if not quite innocent, dangerously oblivious. If Nero's forces burst through the city's poorly defended gates, the unruly clamor of commerce would give way first to terrified shrieks and then to hideous groans of the wounded and dying. To raise a mercenary army of the necessary size, Wigandus would have hired all manner of brigands, deserters, and malcontents. No matter how forcefully they were commanded, only a fraction of them would obey their orders once inside the walls. Indiscriminate looting and slaughter would inevitably result. Wigandus clearly considered this an acceptable prospect, given the precious folio of arcane secrets he stood to receive in return for his finance of the motley force. This did not chill Jacques' blood nearly so much as the thought that he might be right.

After several hours of travel, Nero's country palazzo loomed on the horizon. It lay on a promontory overlooking a crystal lake, both of which had been conjured into being by a team of magicians at the apex of the Empire's golden era. Wigandus again grew talkative, as if energized by the sight of it.

“Now that you are resigned to our plan, messenger, it occurs to me that it would be in your interests to play a greater part in it.”

“It occurs to you?”

“When I present Emperor Guntram with the grimoires, he will ask what you did to help. I will put in a positive word for you, overlooking your earlier heel-dragging, if redeem yourself now.”

“And what form would that redemption take?”

“You will wield that sword, which as I understand is property of our Empire, at the head of our army. You’ll cut down the coup plotters and anyone who stands in your way. This is your final chance to mantle yourself in glory, and to stave off what will otherwise be a devastating blow to your reputation.”

“Thanks for the offer,” said Jacques, flatly.

“What does that mean?”

“I remain undecided.”

The road to the estate skirted the lake, which was shielded by an honor guard of poplar trees. It reached the terminus of its curve and then grew sharply steeper, leading to the plateau on which the palazzo rested. Its fortress walls, made of limestone and marble, ornamented with exotic stone, formed a near-square. Except for the back wall facing the cliff, each was surmounted by six watchtowers. On closer inspection, Jacques noted all but the two towers nearest the main gate were unmanned. Though the palace was large enough to bivouac a large force, mercenaries were camped outside its walls. Either the Emperor did not trust Wigandus’ mercenaries well enough to let them inside his palace, or it had fallen into disrepair during the plagues and was still largely uninhabitable.

Jacques counted approximately a hundred and fifty men. A few sparred; others sharpened their blades. Most gathered around cookfires, threw dice, or roamed sulkily in search of diversion. Several dozen men had gathered around a well; they’d captured a writhing animal, perhaps a fox or badger, and stuck it in a sack. Now they were dunking it in the water and wagering on how long it would take to drown. The mercenaries were mostly of Romari and Doturi stock; among the latter, most wore the distinctive leather cowls favored by Visigi mountain men. Also among the company’s human cohort were dark-browed Onogurs, fur-hatted Russkans, and mustachioed Castilians. Outcasts from the inhuman peoples were also present. A trio of Imouha fey held themselves at a haughty remove, brandishing soul-stealer staffs. Rancorous Thuleans hunched their squat bodies over a roasting boar, tearing loose chunks of barely-cooked meat. Spatters of grease clung to their thick pelts. Jacques even spied sun-hardened desert raiders from across the Medrano Sea.

The mercenaries paid no heed to Wigandus as he arrived, neither greeting or challenging their paymaster. He ordered Berchtold to run ahead to alert the Emperor of their arrival.

“Where’s Isabelle?” Jacques asked.

“In the Emperor’s entourage. You don’t think I’d expose one of our empire’s loveliest representatives to this riff-raff, do you? They’ll send her out with a trustworthy guard detail, you can give me the locus, and then we can discuss your further role in the suppression of this disgraceful coup.”

Wigandus ushered Jacques into a large tent, which had been erected on a wooden platform. Inside it were arranged a divan and several cushioned stools, in addition to a pantry box, a wardrobe, and a trio of chests.

Jacques took the seat offered him. “Nero hasn’t offered you a spot in the imperial apartments?”

The merchant prince wrinkled his nose. “I found them surprisingly damp and drafty, and so relocated here. This palace has not been used for centuries. Besides, it is best to keep an eye on the men, who are not, shall we say, born to discipline.”

“You have no seasoned commanders?”

“With that damnable geas, which prevents Nero from issuing even the slightest command to any serving officer, it has been difficult. We have a few retired tribunes, but they were accustomed to the ready obedience of Romari troops, and have had only passing success with this lot.” Wigandus indicated the mercenaries with a distracted wave of his hand. “The bulk of our force, disbursed among the populace, awaits our signal.” He reached into the pantry box to offer Jacques a plate of olives. “Here is another area where you can redeem yourself. With the geas lifted, Nero will wish to act hastily. Understandable, given the maddening constraints Circe’s magic has placed him under. But I think that, once he can again call on his legions, he should wait until he can bring a few to the capital. We have enough men to round up the rebel senators, but if the people of Romulus back the traitors instead of their rightful emperor, we may be pushed back. The sight of a legion at the gates could certainly prompt them to resist. The emperor knows you by reputation and for some reason respects you. Assist me by convincing him to wait.”

Jacques chewed noncommittally on the flesh of an olive.

Berchtold appeared at the tent’s entrance, prompting Wigandus to briskly clap his hands together. “Let us complete the exchange at least.”

Berchtold shook his head. “He wants to do it himself.”

“What?”

“He is coming, himself, with the woman, to take the thing from the messenger. Himself.”

“No, he must not,” Wigandus said.

“He is. He is coming,” said Berchtold.

Jacques stepped past Wigandus through the tent flap. Nero’s arrival was heralded by a troop of eunuchs, blaring elongated trumpets. Standard bearers held aloft his purple banner, which bore the emblem of the imperial eagle. Nero sprawled on a couch on a gilded litter, carried aloft by four sweating cyclopean giants. At the couch’s foot, Isabelle crouched, her hands and feet bound by lengths of silk rope. Jacques searched for signs of mistreatment, but saw none. She was gripping tight to the platform’s edge, her concern that the giants might tip the litter evident in her posture.

The giants knelt in response to Nero’s command, placing the litter on the roadway. Eunuchs scampered forth to unroll a length of purple carpet, upon which he deigned to walk. “I see the two of you have come to an accord,” he said.

Wigandus shot Jacques a look pregnant with significance. Gardien ignored it, stepping forward to bow to the Emperor, as protocol demanded.

“You have something for me,” Nero said, “but first it pleases me to know how you managed to slip it from the fingers of that accursed witch.” The Emperor’s movements still showed the tics and twitches that Jacques now understood to be symptomatic of the geas. This time, however, they were overlaid by a predatory exuberance.

“It’s an unseemly story, Your Imperial Majesty.”

Nero’s teeth were tiny and sharp. “Sully my ears, then.”

“As you perhaps have heard . . .” Jacques became aware that Isabelle was staring a hole in his doublet.

Nero chuckled. “You prudish Doturi. You act as Romari do, but are ashamed to speak of it.”

“Then you know the beginning of the story, Your Imperial Highness. Circe and I had an, ah, yes. Well . . . And although I was . . . distracted, not to mention intoxicated, I couldn’t help but notice that she removed all of her jewelry but this one small piece, which fit on her ankle. So I, ah, liberated it, in case it was the locus I was seeking. When she and the other Senators imprisoned me in hopes of recovering it, I knew my guess had been right.”

Nero held out his hand for it. “I will take it from you now.” He was, Jacques noticed, carefully phrasing his words to avoid making any formal requests of him. Instead, he spoke by inference, or as if Gardien had already agreed to everything, circumventing the terms of the geas.

“There are ritualists standing by, waiting to undo its magic?”

“You have asked more than enough questions in my city, Gardien. Quit now, while I am still favorably disposed toward you.”

Jacques executed a second bow, shallower than the first. “You’re right, Your Imperial Majesty. I’m sure you’ll understand if I ask to observe a simple formality during the exchange. My emperor is a stickler for that sort of thing, as doubtless you are, too . . .”

“What is it, messenger?”

“Isabelle must be well out of harm’s way—past, let’s say, the range of a very strong bowman—before I hand you the locus.”

Nero let the request hang in the air for a long, uncomfortable moment. When he spoke, he faltered, hampered by the geas. Finally he spit out an indirect response: “Although a weak leader might interpret this request as a sign of distrust, I choose to honor it, as a gesture of regard for Emperor Guntram.” He waved to a pair of servants. “Release the woman,” he instructed.

They shuffled up to cut Isabelle free of her bonds. Isabelle shook the ropes loose, poised her shoulders, and moved at a slow and dignified pace away from her captors. By now Wigandus’ mercenaries had gathered around Jacques and the emperor, forming a loose ring of armed men. They parted to make way for her as she left the encampment. She reached the road and continued walking. When she was nearly out of sight, Jacques reached into his doublet and withdrew an anklet, consisting of a curved shell of gold on a delicate chain.

He dropped it into Nero’s outstretched palm.

The Emperor clasped his fingers tightly around it. “Are you so sure, Doturi, that your emperor will applaud you for turning this over? Many empires would value such a piece of leverage far more highly than they would life of a single junior diplomat.”

Jacques clasped his hands behind his back and bit down on his upper lip. “When Guntram wants to see the selfish thing done, there is someone else he sends.”

Nero smiled. “How amusing. And when he sends you, what does he want done?”

“The right thing. And you know the problem what?” Jacques leaned in and whispered into the emperor’s ear. “I’m not always sure what that is.” He withdrew before the emperor could take offense at his proximity. Jacques bowed again. “May I take my leave now, Your Imperial Majesty?”

“Go, Doturi. I, too, have much to do today.”

Jacques turned and, in his curious stork-like gait, moved toward Isabelle, who stood waiting for

him at a bend in the sloping road.

Hemwold ran to catch up with him, a dark object slung over his meaty shoulder. Wigandus called after Hemwold. Although Jacques couldn't make out what the merchant was saying, the frantic, protesting note in his voice was unmistakable. Jacques stopped. Wigandus' cries grew angrier; Jacques heard the phrase "you fool!" The merchant ordered nearby mercenaries to intercept the troll, but few of them reacted at all, and then only to take hesitant steps toward the monstrous brigand.

The object Hemwold carried was a sack, large enough to hold a small person. "I told you you weren't smart!" he bellowed at Jacques, his face a twitching contradiction of both fury and glee. "I told you I was going to show you!" Hemwold dropped the bundle at Jacques' feet. Bobbing down, he tugged deftly at its opening.

The sack held the corpse of the urchin, Giovanna. Flakes of dried blood marred the paleness of her face. The girl's head had been bashed in.

"You protected the woman," Hemwold exulted, "but you forgot all about the girl you sent to spy on us."

Jacques recoiled. He hadn't sent Giovanna anywhere. Instantly he understood what had happened. She'd gone off on her own, reckoning there'd be more gold for her if she got him more information about Wigandus' movements.

"This was your idea?" Jacques asked.

Hemwold, as if realizing a terrible error, took a step back. "Of course, this is what you do to spies." Frantically, he pointed back at the merchant. "Wigandus told me . . ."

Finally, Jacques knew the right thing to do.

He reached for his belt and slowly drew Hungerblade from its scabbard.

Part Fifteen: A Sword Unsheathed

Hemwold stared at Hungerblade. The blade itself was a simple, narrow one, devoid of the ornament that marked its sweeping hilt. Nonetheless, it possessed a mesmerizing quality.

“You’d better get yourself a weapon,” Jacques told the troll. With the sword exposed, Jacques’ stance had lost its birdlike awkwardness. He stood straight and still. The hesitations characteristic of his speech had given way to a hard, cool, calm.

Breaking from his reverie, Hemwold fumbled for his cudgel, which he kept strapped to his back. He gripped it tightly and rose up to his full height. Where a human would drop into a defensive crouch, this was the ideal fighting posture for a nine-foot combatant; it placed his head and heart out of his opponent’s reach.

Gardien glanced down at the girl’s corpse as he stepped reverently over it. Hemwold took advantage of the apparent lapse, surging at him with cudgel swinging. Jacques skirted the blow as if walking through it. This move led imperceptibly to the next: a reaching slash to Hemwold’s weapon arm. Although the sword’s tip seemed to barely graze the troll, it opened a ferocious wound, ripping through his leather sleeves and separating flesh from bone. Screaming and clutching at his ruined arm, Hemwold doubled over. Jacques directed an almost casual swipe at the brigand exposed neck and edged back to let the body fall. Hemwold’s head dropped from his shoulders. His decapitated body toppled down onto it.

A cold wind blew in from the coast, blowing Jacques’ pesky forelock out of his face.

The assembled mercenaries, who had moved back to give the combatants a wide berth, goggled in amazement. Then they surged in two directions. The bolder men came at Jacques. Others, seized by primal terror, hurtled themselves out of the fray.

Four men flew at the Doturi messenger. Four men died. Jacques moved over their twitching bodies like a stork on the hunt.

“Listen to me,” he called, his voice booming off the palace walls. “If you come at me, you will die. If I have a quarrel with you, I will come at you, and you will die. If I have no quarrel with you, you may flee, and live. This is your only warning. Take heed of it.”

A dwarf, outfitted in clanking scale mail forged in a distant fjord, barreled at him from the side. Froth jetted from the Thulean’s furry jaws. He screeched in his shwooshing tongue, slashing with a rune-covered double axe. Jacques sidestepped him, sending him tumbling into the unpaved roadway. He rolled to his feet, axe ready, then looked down at the diagonal line Hungerblade had drawn from his

right hip to his left shoulder. It had cut open the Thulean's armor and incised a red wound across his torso. Blood gushed from it in a sudden torrent. The dwarf sank to his knees, bleated out the traditional Thulean cry of demise, and was dead before he hit the ground.

The circle of men tightened around Jacques, but wherever he feinted at them, they fell back. A Visigi woman clad in the leathers of the mountain hill tribes jumped at him, a curved knife in each hand. He ran her through; she slumped into the dirt, Hungerblade protruding from her back. Jacques grunted, struggling to yank it from her dying body. Emboldened, three local ruffians ran at him. The first knocked him down; the second piled on the first, and the third completed the tangle of pressing bodies.

Finding a knife on the belt of his first tackler, Jacques drew it and jabbed it toward his face. The man squirmed to avoid the blow, giving Jacques the leeway to slide out from under him. He planted the knife in the neck of the ruffian on top of the pile.

Another mercenary, a swarthy Russkan, was fumbling to free Hungerblade from the body of the Visigi mountain woman, the soles of his tall boots finding purchase against her ribs. Jacques placed his hands on either side of the Russkan's sweating head and twisted, snapping his neck. He reclaimed his sword in time to spear it through the weapon hand of a lithe, blond-haired young man wearing a patchwork of different armor styles. Moaning in surprise, he dropped his gladius. The wound in his palm began as a small puncture, but continued to grow, even as Jacques turned to hack his way through the throng of hired soldiers. The hole spread, eating the man's hand from the inside out, then moved up his arm. He clutched at his chest and died, his heart exploding from the shock of the injury.

"Stand aside!" Jacques shouted. The mercenaries obeyed, either throwing up their hands in a gesture of abjection, or fleeing across the plateau or down the roadway. Their rout proved contagious, sending ever-increasing numbers of men into panicked flight.

Wherever Jacques pointed his dripping blade, the crowd of routing men parted further. Stray arrows flew into the throng. Some of the brigands, once they'd put what seemed to be a safe distance between themselves and Jacques, had halted to pepper the scene with missile fire. The barrage intensified until a bare-chested Romari, wielding a gladiator's trident, went down, an arrow in his neck. Other arrows struck fellow mercenaries. Those bowmen who did not give up after seeing their comrades hit turned tail when Jacques strode a few paces toward them, blade feinted at them like a javelin. Satisfied that the arrows were quelled, at least for the moment, Jacques resumed his previous march.

Ahead he saw Nero desperately stumbling for gates of his palace. Not a man accustomed to physical exertion, he ran poorly, already winded. His eunuchs struggled to match his enervated pace; it

would not do to beat their master to safety. Nero's gilded litter lay overturned on the road. One of the cyclopean bearers stumbled out of the way clutching the feathers of an arrow that was all but buried in his side. Another sank to his knees, hands clasped in supplication as Jacques approached.

Wigandus tottered into his path, fists out and trembling. His round head, quivering with rage, reminded Jacques of an angry beet.

"You fool!" he cried, expelling a cloud of spittle. "What are you doing? You have ruined everything! Everything!"

"As a grandee of the North Coast League, you deserve a measure of deference," said Jacques, his words drained of emotion. "So say whatever you wish to say."

"Can you not see the larger import of this? The secrets of magnetism and construction magic are worth more to Dotur than the life of one worthless Romari girl."

"You could have kept her as an additional hostage. Imprisoned her. Sold her into slavery, even. That you choose gratuitously to murder her tells me something essential about the nature of your enterprise."

A drop of blood gathered on the tip of Jacques' sword. It fell onto the petals of a yellow wildflower.

Wigandus watched it land. "Nero demanded it, so what choice did we have but to satisfy him?" His pores opened, dotting his face with gobbets of sweat. "She was a spy, and a lowly one at that. People need to be taught lessons, Gardien. They need to respect power. Listen, I am prepared to negotiate. I will compensate her family. Extravagantly."

"She was an orphan."

"Well, that is so very sad, Gardien. Hear yourself! Think for a moment of what Emperor Guntram will say when he hears of this. The prize I stand to gain for him—it is worth more to us than the life of an orphan girl. Than a hundred such girls! It is worth any amount of blood Nero will spill, when we restore him."

"There is a cold logic to what you say, Wigandus, if I believed you or if I trusted Nero." Hungerblade's tip continued to redden the flowers below it. "Had Guntram wanted a calculating man for this mission, there are others he would have chosen. But instead he sent me. And when he did so, he knew what he was getting."

"And what is that?"

"This," said Jacques, plunging the sword into the merchant's gut.

Despite all that he had seen and heard, Wigandus seemed surprised to see the blade piercing his flesh. His lips pursed together, as he worked to piece together an objection, to put forward another argument. Jacques pulled the sword out, pushing the merchant away from him. Wigandus teetered circuitously, then sat himself down in the damp grass. Weakening, he lay back among the golden blossoms. His last words were, "Listen, we can still reach an arrangement."

Jacques moved on.

He found Nero in the forecourt of his palace, surrounded by six soldiers of his personal bodyguard. "Take him!" the emperor yowled, running up a set of limestone steps. Jacques guessed that these led to the imperial suite.

Dressed in lavish ceremonial armor, the six men faced him with long swords at the ready. Jacques did not insult them by warning them against Hungerblade, and telling them they were free to take flight. Honor bound these men to their duty, which would not be to Nero the man, but to the tradition he represented. It was sad that they would die for an abstraction, and more unfortunate still that it was Jacques who would have to bring this about.

They were smart fighters, and knew not to come at him all at once, where they would get in each other's way. They lost their lives singly, confident that they faced death's long sleep with their oaths fulfilled.

Nero had stopped midway up the stairs, frozen by the carnage below him. He spun and fled into his apartment. Jacques picked his way methodically up the steps to the threshold of the apartment. He saw the emperor pressed up against the archway, a knife clutched in his hand. Faking a move inside, he waited until Nero lunged, and then tripped him. Nero stumbled into a side table, smacking his head against it. The knife slid across the floor. Jacques kicked it into a corner. Nero faced him, cowering.

"You can't kill me! You can't!" It was not a command, but exclamation of disbelief.

"You're right," said Jacques. "You may be cruel, and a lamentably inept ruler, but you are still an Emperor. So I cannot kill you despite what you have done." Nero's closed fist still held the locus. Jacques reached for it and pried his fingers open. The emperor fought him, whining piteously, until the increasing pressure on his fingers became too great to bear. "You symbolize authority yet cannot be trusted to wield it. So I sentence you to a life of servile obedience." He held out the locus. "If this is destroyed, the geas that restrains you remains in effect forever." Using Hungerblade, he severed the thin filament that comprised its chain. He placed the ruined locus in his doublet; later he would throw it in a forge.

Nero fell at his feet, burbling.

He left, walking slowly down the steps, through the forecourt, and out of the palace, ready to take on any foolish stragglers who dared to obstruct him. Once on the grounds, Jacques picked up his pace, to get to Isabelle as quickly as possible. She was still alone on the road, where any of the escaping brigands could have at her. He'd trained her in the fighting rudiments, but she was scarcely a hardened warrior.

The dead littered the road, and the grassy spaces to either side of it. A few wounded men groaned among the field of corpses. No one who'd been touched by Hungerblade still survived; these had been hurt accidentally, by their own comrades.

In the distance, at the road's first bend, Isabelle stepped onto the roadway.

The low grasses of the palace grounds ended at a crumbled stone gate; on the other side of it lay a tangled forest of encroaching trees. Lying in a break in the wall was Hemwold's partner, Berchtold. The brigand's leg jutted out at an alarming angle. He'd been trampled, Jacques presumed, in the rush to get away from him and his sword.

Berchtold noticed him and began to beg. "Please don't . . . I saw what you did to the others . . . I tried to get away, really I did . . . I told Hemwold not to show you the girl. I told him!"

Jacques stopped. "Did you tell him not to kill her?"

"What?"

Jacques stepped past him. Hungerblade leapt out, slitting Berchtold's throat in a single backhand swipe. Jacques kept walking.

It took several days to arrange a caravan out of Romulus, which would head north to Dotur. Isabelle had chosen to return north with Jacques, accepting an invitation to attend Guntram at court.

A distinguished senatorial delegation met at Isabelle's domus to bid them a formal farewell. Circe wore an enchanted robe; it surrounded her in a subtle mist of miniature stars. Orientius brought chests laden with gifts for the Emperor. They contained wines, spices, incense, and jars of salted snails. An additional chest was designated as a token of appreciation for Jacques, who was trying to think of someone back home who would like the snails. "It is not a ritual grimoire, but will have to do," said Orientius. When he saw that his attempt at levity had fallen flat, he added, sotto voce, "Nero would never have given them to you."

Jacques nodded, but it offered little comfort.

Julius Laminus wore a mourning toga of unadorned black wool. He brought no gifts, made only pro forma remarks, and shook Jacques' hand with studied reluctance.

Circe's gift was a chaste kiss on the cheek. "You should have given the locus back to me," she whispered.

"It seems to me that your Empire is better off with the three of you forced to accommodate one another, and compete for the favor of the people," Jacques observed. "All is arranged?"

"Yes."

Jacques had arranged for the retrieval of Giovanna's body. A senate declaration had made her a posthumous member of the curia class. Circe and Orientius had funded a stately funeral procession, bearing her body to the funeral pyre. Nine days hence, the urn would be placed, with all due pomp, in the crypt holding the remains of the worthiest servants of Circe's family.

"Thank you," he said. "Also, it is the official position of the Doturi Empire that we would not like to see the three of you kill each other off."

Circe was distracted by the sight of death in Jacques' eyes. It had been there all along, but she had failed to see it. Succumbing to sudden impulse, she pulled him closer, for a more passionate and unplanned kiss. Then she pushed him back. "Your remark on what is best for Roma is presumptuous, foreigner."

"Yes, of course, senator."

He broke from her to join Isabelle, who again seemed abruptly displeased with him, in the carriage that would take them along the roads of Roma. Before he heaved himself up on its running board, he reflexively checked, as he habitually did, to ensure that his sword was still safely in its scabbard.