

Chapter Three

After two more weeks of agonizing heat, another day dawned bright and clear. The wharf rats went out to the edge of the breakwater to escape the heat and to dream of better lives. They saw the galleon's approach before anyone else in the city and they marvelled at her grandeur. She was an impressive, but now rare, example of what had made the kingdom great. None of the children on the breakwater could remember seeing her like before. She sported a full rack of brightly coloured sails unfurled. Atop the mast, fluttering pennants displayed the designs of an azure lion, rampant, on a crimson field separated by a black lightning bolt from a green field featuring the Crown Regent. The latter design advised everyone who noted the galleon's rapid approach that the vessel's owner claimed some relation to the throne.

The other design was unknown in the capital but some guessed that the mighty man-of-war was the flagship of a great lord up the coast, towards Baranthia. Speculation flew among the watching children faster than a surf-hawk as the ship brought on board a harbour pilot, who took the wheel and steered the vessel past the breakwater. The ship made one last tack, hauled in its mainsails, and docked. The dockyard became a hive of activity as longshoremen unloaded trade goods from the vessel and as merchants re-supplied the ship for departure on the high tide. Hidden by the bustle, the visiting delegation descended the gangway and packed itself into six different carriages. On leaving the quay, the carriages drove to six different locations throughout the city. One rambled up to the citadel; another wove through the markets to the Saint Garyn Temple; another stopped before the residence of the well-known Assemblian, Lord Rattyn;

another before a fine restaurant in the Central Glades; another parked in the conspicuously large lane behind a famous brothel; and the last went to a reputable pub in the Docks Quarter.

The King reportedly held a private audience, the Archprelate remained locked away behind the doors of his quarters, Lord Rattyn had a personal dinner with an old friend, the famous restaurant was closed for a private gathering, the best prostitute in the city was tied up for several hours, but the pub was open for business as usual. The carriages returned to the ship late that afternoon and the galleon set sail on the ebb tide.



The red and tan tiled roofs of countless houses illuminated by the last rays of summer daylight transformed the city into a desert-scape to rival the twisted lands beyond the Dragonheok Mountains. Contours featuring rolling hues of amber spread out in all directions, similar to the dunes and stark jutting rocks that adorned the Nadeem far to the west. As the day had been hot, one of the hottest of this most unnatural heat wave that had stalked the realm for nearly two months, the clay tiles sweated with renewed vigour, panting waves of shimmering heat into the clear evening sky. Close at hand, the tiles' dun glow radiated a fierce yellow, but as they spread away from the viewpoint high on the temple spire, their colour grew deeper and deeper, passing through tones of dun, to brown and eventually to purplish-black as they met the shadows of the Encircling Hills. Even then one could sense their angry heat rising under those

lazy shadows that crept down the slopes. The ridge line of the hills formed a stern, stark stain against the sky; a dark barrier behind which the sun fled.

The day drew to an end. Or rather, the Red Fox thought, a most interesting day drew to an end. Dressed in a radiant scarlet shirt that draped over loose-fitting ruby trousers, which in turn led to his soft, ebony leather boots, Fox pondered the day's events from a lofty height. He balanced himself on the ledge of the bell tower, teasing his notorious vertigo and hoping against reason to conquer his terror. While his stomach lurched, his gaze skimmed the desert-scape like a butterfly moving among a glade of tall flowers, tracing an erratic path over the clay canopy of this tropical port city. His mind kept returning to the day's events in an attempt to put together random, assorted pieces of a grand puzzle. When his eyes passed over the grand dome of the Saint Garyn Temple that rose from among the green of the Guardian District, he smacked his forehead and exclaimed, "It was rampant! Wake up thief! Someone else came to town."

Rarely did the city's pubs and restaurants fill with wild talk of ships and carriages and people close to the Crown. Normally, Prallyn's inhabitants did not care about such grand affairs, busy as they were getting through their day. Today, however, the city seemed alive with talk of matters of state and speculation as to which faction had laid what plans. Charano would find the talk interesting, no doubt. Fox sighed and pursed his lips. More plots and intrigue filled a city already bloated with dark designs. Fox often found Prallyn tiring, trite, at times forbidding - but never boring. Today, he found Prallyn enigmatic, and, unable to resist a mystery, he had worried at the quandary all afternoon.

He resigned himself to defeat in the struggle against his lurching stomach and he hopped away from the tower ledge onto the wooden platform underneath the giant bells. He scurried

down the steps to the dark interior of the temple, where he made a quick benediction - in case anyone was watching - before slipping out a back doorway. He followed narrow pathways snaking between buildings, always casting his eyes about, taking in all windows and doorways. He made his way to one of the main thoroughfares and studied it closely before slipping into the teeming throngs that crowded the street.

Fox crossed Vyvid's Strand, the unofficial border between Sandy Town and the Docks; then he turned onto Salima's Parade, a wide avenue that ran from the breakwater through the entire length of the Docks District, up the Royal Walk and to the Citadel. Although most thoroughfares of the Docks did not strike the eye as beautiful or elegant, the Parade stood out as a noticeable exception. On both sides of the Parade, white stone and clay buildings topped with red, blue or yellow roofs and adorned by dark wooden window frames formed striking rows. These buildings housed a plethora of shops and services, some furnishing the shipping business with its needs; others preying on the whims of travellers arriving in the city after days at sea by offering spices and gem stones.

Only the old maps of the city still listed the avenue's name as "Hasmyll the First Road." Prallyn's citizens had long since changed its name in celebration of the fall of one of Thrylland's cruellest rulers. Nearly two-hundred and twenty years earlier, in 2248 by the reckoning of the Thryll calendar, King Jerryn the Third took a beguiling young lady, Salima of Yinnindowns, as his Queen. According to legend, the King had doted on his new Queen, becoming so enamoured that he could not concentrate on his duties. Salima had beguiled the King with her beauty and then ruled in his name - conducting a reign of terror that lasted fifteen years. She was finally unmasked as a witch who had taken total control of the King's mind. The barons had finally

joined their forces with those of the Church, overthrown her rule and put her on trial in the ecclesiastical courts. When the guilty verdict was announced, throngs of people had formed and had followed the tumbrel of the Witch Queen as it carried her from the Citadel to the quays where Markoth the Executioner lopped her head from her body and then fed both resulting parts to a sea serpent that the witch had previously bound to her will. Ever since, the broad avenue had been called Salima's Parade in reference to that joyous event, but no one had forgotten Salima's reign and the common Thryll still harboured a deep hatred of witches or those that smelled of unknown magic. Every year one heard talk of a witch craze that gripped some small town or other. More often than not scores of innocent victims were drowned, burnt, or otherwise "purified." Given his own past, Fox never forgot this Thryllish cultural trait, and used each occasion that he walked along Salima's Parade to renew his vow that he had made after leaving Floria to forsake forbidden arts.

Fox approached the monument to Sir Nyrrn Redheath that rose from the centre of the road above the daily bustle and forced traffic around its immense pedestal. From his impressive vantage point, the renowned navigator looked down Salima's Parade, out over the harbour, the breakwater and Fortune Bay. Redheath ignored the view of the bay, looking instead to the sky. He had written himself into history by sailing and charting the world's oceans, but historians claimed that he had longed to sail the heavens. In his right hand he held the metal instrument he had invented to navigate. In his left hand he held his sword, *Truestar*, that he had used to cut his path through the pirate-, and monster-infested waters around the world. His cape, set in fixed flutter, caught the eddies of some eternal sea breeze; a sea breeze, Fox noted, that had failed to make a refreshing appearance in eight weeks.

On steamy nights such as this, Fox's list of reasons why he hated the city grew longer. Masses of stinking, sweaty people jostled into his way. They babbled and shouted. Other odours mingled in the air, from animal dung, rotting fish guts and decaying rubbish. Every now and then, Fox glimpsed a rat darting between heaps of rags. Yet, despite his oft-voiced tirades against "Prallyn the less than magnificent," he moved as one bred for city life. As he made his way to Flagan's, he darted to and fro with ease, slipping between people walking too slowly or animals trotting in his way. He danced along the streets, stepping over the filth and flitting under water-wagons unloading their cargo. He even lunged under a moving carriage and took other wild chances that others would deem insane, but that he considered everyday practice for his nimble body - not to mention a good way of losing secret followers. Indeed, Fox felt at ease in this large city, the so-called jewel of Thrylland, and Prallyn was really now his home in spite of his harsh words. He passed in front of Madam Tzonga's House of Happiness and gave it a knowing smirk.

The Red Fox had caught the scent of intrigue in the pungent harbour air. He had spent a considerable amount of time and money - most of it other people's - constructing a network of contacts throughout the Docks District. Normally, talk of minor royalty paying secret visits to the capital would not concern him; the transportation of valuable goods interested him more. However, after having intercepted a letter from the Florian ambassador to Neckrar and Ilynik earlier in the day, he had met with one of his interlocutors at a seedy tavern in the Docks District. In her description of the goods that had come ashore that day, the woman had noted the look of the galleon and, in response to his question, had joked that it might just as likely have come from the Florian Isles as anywhere else. To his informant, this was only like saying that the ship had sailed directly from the land of the dead or some other impossible place. To Fox, however, as a

native of those isles, the statement was equivalent to saying that the galleon had a hold full of demons. Fox had pressed his contact for further details. Though her remark had been but a jest, Fox had drawn a more sinister significance from it. With this in mind, he had undertaken an afternoon full of adventures, but, despite calling upon the most reliable and best connected of sources, the ship's cargo and the identity of those who disembarked remained a mystery to Fox.

Fox vaulted over the outer wall of Flagan's Tavern and Free House, hurried across the courtyard and slipped into the private part of the building. He moved to the study and crept in without knocking. Charano sat in a yellow plush chair in front of the fireplace reading a book. He looked up with an arched eyebrow. Fox caught the tail end of the fleeting look that passed across Charano's face and he asked, "What?"

Charano shook his head and said, "You creep into my study, you never walk down any street without spying rooftops for hidden attackers, you let no one know where you live, and yet you make a glaring sight in your scarlet clothes. Do you sneak up on your friends out of a sense of fear or simply for vanity's sake?"

Fox's sharp blue eyes traced a nervous circle in the air, and he asked, "Why are you reading a history of Protectoran currency?"

Charano closed the tome and replied, "I want to establish firmly the reasons for which the Council Mint decided to embed the gems in the serpentine coins in the manner that they did." Charano gestured towards the sofa. Fox crossed the room and collapsed into it, throwing his feet up onto the cushions. Charano reached over and slapped Fox's boots off the furniture before continuing, "Despite the Protectorate's passion for secretive government, they must have written down criteria for placing the gems in the coins and sent them across the realm. Had they not,

they would have jeopardized the ability of their citizens to discriminate between authentic and counterfeit coins. Most scholars seem to disagree with me, though, and I cannot prove them wrong for I can find no criteria whatsoever.”

Fox’s eyes roamed around the room, looking without seeing at the rich tapestries hanging from the walls. “Long before I ever found any serpentine coins, I came across references to a *Criteriat Draggonar* in my readings once,” he said. “I cannot remember all the details but it stated the real value of such coins was as much based on an aesthetic appreciation of their artwork and the outdated belief in the holiness of the dragons portrayed therein than on the value of the gold and the gems.”

Charano nodded and then asked, “If you know all this, what are the criteria and why did you never utter such a word when we first found our coins?”

“I remained silent simply because I, like you, have a deep belief in the forces of darkness as well of those of light,” Fox replied, wearing a pious, angelic expression. “I also realized, given the way I have come across most of our coins - not to mention my luck in general - they are probably not authentic, and therefore would have lost value. Not a difficult decision, really.”

Charano leaned forward in his chair, “I see. Do you remember the title of the book that you pilfered to gain this knowledge.”

Fox feigned horror, “You do not believe I would *pilfer* a historical document? I, sink to such depths? Charano, let the mystery sleep with the gods of creation. I might remind you that your coins came from the same source as mine.”

Charano’s voice hardened, “Come now, my friend. I give you my word that I will appraise your coins before revealing my findings. If I can establish a historic precedent that

proves the authenticity of *our* coins, *and*, if it reveals others as fraudulent, then ours will *increase* in value. What kind of spy master would you have made? You never learn to look beyond your petty thievery to see the wider scope of available opportunity.”

“I enjoy petty thievery,” Fox protested. “Why does anything have to threaten the fabric of existence or have the bouquet of a shiraz before it interests you?” Only the faint music from the pub broke the silence of the room. Finally Fox said, “*The Krillian Legacy.*” Pages one hundred and four to one hundred and forty-six. You might have difficulty finding a copy here in Prallyn. However, the ancient shelves of your parish in Galdhorn might well house one.”

Charano nodded. “What can I do for you this evening?” he asked in a tone that, when compared to the harsh, dark nature of his earlier comments, bounced off the walls with the lightness of a mountain glade under a clear summer sky.

“Oh *no*,” Fox countered. “Not just yet, my nefarious friend! You want to do more than just set the historical record straight and make a profit, do you not Charano?” He looked at his companion through narrowed eyes. “Could there possibly be,” he said as his thoughts raced on ahead, “some mystical significance to the pattern of the jewels in the serpentine coins?”

Charano sat back in his chair, clasped his hands together as if in prayer and placed them in front of his mouth, under his long nose. The skin beside his eyes crinkled with delight as he smiled broadly. “As I asked, what can I do for you this evening?”

Fox relented; he had other ways of prying into his friend’s affairs. “I need to pick Your Majesty’s brain, as my own seems lacking. Or, perhaps Your Majesty needs to pick Your Majesty’s own brain.” Charano rolled his eyes as Fox continued, “I caught wind of something in Prallyn’s foul air that will likely interest you more than me. A noble and an entourage sailed into

port today on a ruddy big galleon, flying a pennant bearing a rampant lion, a lightning bolt and,” he paused, “the Crown. I do not recognize those designs and I thought I knew the emblems of all the royal families.”

Charano leaned forward, “Well, that *does* interest me. You probably do not recognize the designs because no one has seen them in Prallyn for years. They are the arms of the Duke of Praylaar.” Charano tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair for a while, oblivious to any movement of scarlet around the room, before he continued. “Interesting. His visit carries some risk. Many influential people - including the King, from what I hear - believe his jockeying for the throne borders on sedition. The old duke must have reached the end of his patience and come to town to argue for an immediate sitting of the Assembly of Barons.”

“That seems odd. I heard that Jerryn had forced a truce in that idiotic succession debate.”

Charano smiled. “I know how you feel about the hereditary nobility, Fox, but it . . .”

Charano broke off with a frown. “Did you say a *rampant* lion? I seem to recall . . .”

Fox gazed up at the ceiling and nodded, “Ahah! You doubt your judgement! Yes, the lion rampaged across the banner.”

“Hmm.” Charano stood and went to the bookcase lining the inner wall. He pulled out a tome on heraldry. Thrylland was crazed with the trappings of status, and King Jerryn stripped or granted titles more often than an army of artists could design new heraldry. Fox knew Charano kept up with the latest changes, and so, was among the most reliable sources on the subject. The tall man leafed through the book. “No, Praylaar’s lion is not rampant. I wonder if it was one of his newly raised relations. Or perhaps there has been a political change at court of which I have not yet heard.” He pondered a moment and then shook his head, “No, I doubt that.”

“Well I am pleased that my own limited knowledge of this asinine form of vanity sufficed for me note the difference,” Fox noted with mock humility as he stealthily raised himself from the sofa. “So, who was it?” he asked with genuine interest.

Charano leafed through his tome, then slowly walked back across the study to his chair, causing Fox to glide around him. As Charano thought and read, Fox palmed a corkscrew and set to work. Charano rubbed his long nose with a finger, pondering the heraldry, then he reached up and took the goblet of wine that had appeared upon the end-table beside his chair, not noticing that he had not had a goblet of wine moments before. Fox smirked and poured another glass of the rare Florian vintage he had liberated from Charano’s private - all too often forbidden - stock.

While his friend leafed through his book, sighing in exasperation, Fox toured the room, scanning its fixtures and features. “You know, you should really give this place a new name. After all, Flagan is dead and buried. How about, ‘The Imp?’ Yes. That would be a grand name! I could envisage it boldly emblazoned upon a sign out front, with you standing under it saying ‘Come Fox! Have a complimentary drink in, ‘The Imp.’’” What do you think?”

Charano looked up from the book at Fox. He blinked. Finally, he spoke, “I *do not* know!” He shook his head and then continued, “However, not only do I *not* recognize the designs, they do not appear in this reference.”

Fox, now fully at ease back on the chesterfield with a hand behind his head and the other holding his glass of wine, snorted. A glum expression passed over Fox’s face. “So, not ‘The Imp?’ Alas, a grand name shall not take its rightful place in the annals of the history of this fine house.” He gave a pronounced sigh. “Well, impish deception floats in the hot salt air. Whoever arrived on that ship remains a mystery. She set sail on the ebb tide and that same Whoever left

with her. While here, this Whoever either had an audience with the King, visited Lord Rattyn, or had a hell of a time at Madame Tzonga's House of Happiness."

Charano merely arched an eyebrow and awaited an explanation. Fox continued, "No less than six carriages met the ship, the *Eastern Scythe*. The passengers climbed into these carriages and dispersed after they had passed the Port Authority's gates. Through some intelligent investigation, I have determined the destinations of three of the six; but only three, mind. This Whoever took great care in concealing his or her movements. It appears that something is afoot."

"I think any deception is unlikely, Fox." Charano responded. "Who would sail into the harbour, devices unfurled, then go through so much trouble to disguise who they had visited? If one desired secrecy, one would be wiser merely to sneak into town and remain un-remarked. More likely, the King has given one of his relatives a new title and a coat of arms similar to that of Praylaar just to anger the duke - you know how Praylaar is always going on about his family's heritage. Then the King probably rented the most impressive ship he could find to get rumours started. Jerryn has done such things in the past."

"I thought much the same when I first heard the tale," Fox replied. "But Charano! No baron unfurled a device today. I suspect your precious reference does not contain the design simply because it does not exist. The Duke of Nowhere arrived in port today!"

"Moreover, this Duke of Nowhere either met the King or has influential friends at court if he can coordinate his visit with His Majesty's schedule . . ." Fox purposefully stumbled in mid-thought, "or rather, His Other Majesty. My deepest apologies, Your Majesty."

Charano shook his head and sipped his wine. "Perhaps there is more to this," Fox continued, "than meets even your sceptic eye, Charano. I still have my drones looking into the

matter. I think this is a ruse to make people in the know think there is trouble in Praylaar, and that the “old Duke,” as you call him, has taken his schemes one step too far. Perhaps Whoever hopes Miss Thrynn will divert some of her spies from the Altapi or from the Guardian Church to Praylaar’s Whitestone Fortress. How many people in the city, other than you, would have noticed the difference in the arms? I guarantee you that the false device fooled Thrynn’s spies, not to mention those in Prallyn looking after the affairs of all the seven dukes. No doubt this will trigger all sorts of pandemonium. Yet, in the event that the bluff is called, Whoever can swear in front of a cleric of the Guardian Church that the arms unfurled were not those of Praylaar or anyone else, therefore no misrepresentation, no criminal proceedings and no fifty years in exile!

Fox when on, “Maybe Praylaar and his Assemblian cohorts are setting themselves up to look victimized - conceive whatever deceit you fancy. In any event, though I have little inclination to follow this up, I shall do so for the usual consideration. The information is yours to do with as you please. I can merely speculate about who else among the great and not-so-great also finds it interesting. As I noted, my drones are still on the prowl, but unless you let me know otherwise, I will pull them off after tomorrow. I will, of course, inform you of any interesting developments as I learn of them.”

Charano nodded. The two men again sat in silence and sipped at their wine. At length Charano asked, “What makes you think that Whoever unfurled false designs? Perhaps the King has granted a new title to someone in Praylaar’s family and this is that person’s manner of announcing his or her new status to the city.”

“Mm hmm,” Fox concurred in an offhand tone as he stole another gulp from his glass. “It seems to me, though, that you could easily determine whether the King has granted a new title.

Meanwhile, I hunger. I shall therefore respectfully excuse myself from your company, Your Majesty.” Fox finished his glass.

At the last remark Charano shook off his ponderous thoughts and replied with a smile, “Fox, you lie; you never excuse yourself from, or for, anything.” Then, as a grinning Fox got up to leave, Charano added, “By the way, the Valtina Reserva ’32 was on the house this evening, Fox, but take care next time you grab an eight gold-piece bottle. It may have more than a silent alarm charm inscribed on the bottom.”

Fox scratched the skin on the back of his neck and responded with one of his patented nervous smiles. He opened the door, peeked into the hallway, then replied, “You know very well not to tempt me to call on long-forgotten Arts with such threats. If I started seeking enchantments, where would it end?” He looked back at Charano and cracked another crooked smile before slipping out and closing the door.



A solitary dhow ran with the persistent north-east wind, its prow thrusting shining droplets into the salt air to refract the orange fire of sunset. In the small ship’s wake, night stalked the heavens. Up ahead, tall hills rose above cliffs that kept the relentless Southern Sea at bay. The shoreline faded into the creeping night; the last rays of sunlight licked the tops of the looming cliffs. Slowly, as darkness crept from the cliff tops towards the hill’s upper ridges, minute, isolated points of light sprang to life inside the seeping blackness.

Siko Bikoyo felt her eyes drawn to the lights coming from the scattered homesteads and she wondered what sort of people lived in these lands. She had seen many foreigners and had even met a few slaves working the plantations near the Kaquyth Mountains, but such experiences had not prepared her for her mission, and she had learned much since she had set sail from Sanya Baran. She had stopped in New Rijis at the beginning of the rainy season and had gleaned a passing knowledge of Thrylls, but only of those who crowded into their strange cities. As she looked at the lights of farmhouses and village cottages, she wondered if the peasants who tilled the land here differed greatly from those who did so further north, in her home.

Home. A pang of longing swelled inside her. Each moment that passed brought her further from her land. Prallyn marked the end of this leg of her quest, not Sanya Baran, not the Kaquyth, not the Great Enclosure of her M'para. She clenched her fingers about the narrow rail and peered down into the foaming wash swelling from beneath the boat.

She recalled the dire warnings about Thrylland that her colleagues had impressed upon her before she had departed Baranthia in search of answers. She had already heard numerous tales regarding the plight of *habirinyara*, women of the Craft. As the dark silhouette of the land of the Thrylls slipped past, she remembered marvelling at the strange tales of beheadings, burnings, and drownings. She had decided then, prior to her voyage, that history had isolated the Barantu people; the M'para, warriors and traders all welcomed the powers of a witch. Now, after having met scores of foreigners from different lands, she wondered whether people had more in common than she had thought. While she kept her powers carefully hidden, she now understood that everyone she met wanted food and clothing for their children, they wanted a sense of belonging, and they all wanted the chance to forget their many worries, to enjoy a laugh.

And yet, of all the people with whom she had spoken, only one old man had been able to cast any light on her mission - a crazed noble, she reminded herself, who had only spoken honestly after she had plied him with nearly a bottle of the finest Cape Agaryn port. "In Prallyn," he had declared. "Your answer lies in Prallyn." From what she had heard of the city, a great many secrets lay hidden in Thrylland's capital.

The cliffs fell away behind the dhow, replaced by gentle slopes and clustered lights of settlements crowded down to the sea. Slowly, the ship rounded a point and Prallyn came into view. She leaned over the starboard rail and stared at the grand city. In the wide bowl formed by the surrounding hills it stood; its reaching, illuminated spires and domes completely unlike anything seen in squat Baranthu cities. She marvelled at the city's light. In Sanya Baran, only small oil-filled lamps lit doorways and cast faint radiant tendrils into the narrow streets. In Prallyn, she could see, light washed over everything.

Once they had skirted the waters near the point, the captain pulled the prow about and struck north across the dark bay. Suddenly he barked out orders and sailors scurried around the small ship, trimming the mainsail and preparing ropes. Soon a breakwater towered over them, a black shape against a backdrop of light. Then they pulled clear and slid into the still, glittering waters beyond. They glided over to the southern-most pier and tied up against its stone mass.

Bikoyo grabbed her staff of teak and hopped onto the steps that ran from the marks of low tide, presently beneath the slopping harbour water, up to the top of the pier. She turned and signalled to the captain. He moved forward along the dhow's port rail and leaned towards her. "Have you looked into your future?" she asked him.

He smiled and replied, "I have. It lies with you until you no longer have need of me."

Bikoyo held out a long finger in warning, “I shall not return unless I have great need. I cannot forget that the Wolds have eyes even here. It would be simple to follow what I do if I began each of my days in this place. It can be watched with ease.”

The captain nodded, “I understand, *parenaya*.”

“I do not know when I shall need you again,” she informed the old sailor.

The captain slapped each of his palms with the back of the other hand to dismiss Bikoyo’s worries. “It is not of concern. We shall give these Thrylls fat, juicy fish and they shall send us a rain of things we need. We shall obey our M’para. We shall stay here and, when you decide to go elsewhere, we shall take you there.”

She nodded and placed a hand upon the man’s brow, “May your nets reap you a bountiful harvest.” A dark look passed over the captain’s face and Bikoyo recoiled. In a hush voice she asked, “What is wrong? Why do you look as though I have insulted your family?”

“*Parenaya*, you must not display the powers that give you your name. Should any Thryll see through your attire and your manners, then you shall be killed. Take care, for all our sakes.”

Bikoyo protested, “I gave you my best wishes, not a spiritbind.”

“I could not know this. Neither would any of these Thrylls if any had seen or heard you. Remember, you are strange to them, as they are strange to us. What they cannot explain they shall look to place upon the head of *someone*. They shall place their worries on your head if you give them the smallest of reasons. In fact, you may wish to leave your staff on board so that it will not cause tongues to wag.”

The witch stared long into the man’s serious eyes and finally nodded, “*Kandyanami*, I understand.” She straightened her diminutive frame and took on a more reassured look. “I shall

take my staff but keep it hidden whenever possible. Do not fear for me,” she said. She patted her abdomen where, beneath her cloak, a long, sharp *Iskarti* lay nestled under a belt, “I can protect myself. You shall have me yet again as a passenger.”

“Such is my hope, *parenja*, and that of all our people.” Again Bikoyo nodded. Then she turned her back on the captain and his small boat, mounted the broad steps and walked along the length of the pier. By the time she stood on solid land she already felt the probing stares of a dozen eyes on her. Here, as in most of the lands to the west of her home, she could not disguise her foreignness. She could not slip in among the people and transform herself into a faceless entity: her black skin made sure of that. Here, all eyes followed her out of curiosity. Who knew what they might see if she should let down her guard?

Strife and conflict littered the history between the Thrylls and their neighbours. After the Thrylls had rounded the Cape, they had wrested land from the Altapi and had founded their new kingdom. Then they had turned their attention from those in surrounding lands to those they met on the high seas. Thrylland had grown steadily in power and quickly her ships pushed north far enough along the coast to come into contact with the dhows of the Baranthu. Naval battles had quickly followed and even the odd land campaign. Once, the Baranthu had secretly sailed south, escaping the naval patrols of the Thrylls, and had sacked Prallyn itself. Bikoyo had heard that the ruins of the old tower and its surrounding town still scarred the far end of the East Arm of Fortune Bay. Powerful spirits, some said, yet roamed the ravaged streets of the old town seeking to feed on the souls of the living; if she had time, Bikoyo thought she might give the ruins a visit. As power had shifted in the world, the Thrylls and the Baranthu had come to a sort of grudging peace. Nevertheless, people here still viewed the Baranthu with deep suspicion. As Bikoyo

emerged into the throngs of people crowding into the streets now that the day's heat had abated, she could sense guarded hostility from those around her.

She walked towards a part of town where the captain had told her several Baranthu families had taken residence. They would help her find a place to stay. If she were going to delve into the cryptic words of the old lord she had met, she would need time and a place to stay. A retreat. A lair. She wormed her way back and forth along the cobbled ways, making sure no one had followed her from the docks. In a side street, only dimly lit by the city's many torches and braziers, she ducked inside a dark threshold and waited a long while, watching the way she had come. When she finally decided that no one had followed her, she continued on her path through the streets of Prallyn's Docks District and, she hoped, into peaceful ambiguity.



Finally the moon dropped behind the encircling hills. A dark-clad Red Fox waited another short while to allow the residual argent sheen in the night air to fade to black before moving from his shadowy vantage point. He crossed the empty street quickly, but at a walk, not a run; running could draw attention. He moved past the doorway of a building and stopped briefly before a windowpane decorated with the painted words, "Levryn, Purchasing Agent and Transporter." Fox hopped up onto the window sill and stretched to his full height. Fingers worked their way into the cracks between the building's bricks and a foot propped itself against the side of the window. He pulled himself up high enough to come within jumping distance of the upper story's

window ledge. His feet took purchase where most others would have found nothing, and a sudden burst of energy launched the figure upwards. His hands grasped the two sturdiest-looking bricks of the ledge and he clambered onto it before kneeling against the window. A quick glance inside confirmed that the small child in the bedroom still slept soundly.

As in most houses that made up the housing block, the upstairs window frames each contained two windows. A smaller window above the principle one stood out from the wall, propped on a support. Though people disliked the heat wave that strangled the city, including the figure on the windowsill, it had nevertheless proven a boon for the most agile of thieves. From his black waist belt, the thief removed a small, finely sharpened blade that silently cut the cheesecloth that lined the small window frame and served as protection against mosquitos. Then a hook attached to small length of fishing line likewise emerged from the belt and was poked through the hole. The hook quickly found the window's latch and puled it from its socket. Then Fox applied oil to the window frame's hinges before giving a gentle pull. The window swung out noiselessly. Fox slipped through and delicately allowed both feet to touch the floor.

Using well-practised steps, Fox moved to the bedroom door, keeping close to the walls where the floorboards were less likely to groan under even a slight weight. Slowly, he turned the doorknob, opened the door and crept through onto the landing. Quickly, but silently as a ghost, he moved down the stairs and to the door of the business's office. The remaining occupants had locked the door and removed the key. Undeterred, Fox removed from his waist belt a leather wallet containing small tools, and withdrew the two picks needed to defeat the lock. Moments later the door was silently pushed closed from the other side.

From the street outside, any random observer would not have spotted the hands that drew the blinds. Then an oil lamp that sat upon the desk flamed to life casting light on Fox's delicate features. The thief rifled through the drawers of the oak bureau. As expected, nothing of interest hid therein. Then Fox crossed the room and examined a chest sitting next to the far wall with a large padlock protecting it. Squatting next to the chest, he examined the lock without touching it. A quick flick of the wrist propelled a dagger from its sheath on his forearm into an awaiting hand. Silently Fox shifted his weight and moved to the side. Then he used the dagger to lift the device. A slim snake of a smirk slithered across Fox's hooded face. Pads of poison were rare in Prallyn, but Levrynn had, no doubt, heard tales of their legendary efficiency. The thief gave special care not to touch the deadly rear surface while cracking the lock.

Inside the chest lay a pile of invoices, files and receipts. Names and numbers littered each file. Fox briefly looked at each in turn and pulled one in particular from the pile. Then he took the dossier to the bureau and examined the documents inside. When he reached the end of the assorted papers, he returned them to their original place. Fox flicked through the rest of the files and once he had given each a cursory glance, he replaced them in the chest, which he then closed and re-locked. Soon afterwards the lamp's light died and the curtains opened. Fox waited a short spell to allow his eyes to adapt to the darkness. Then he left the office, re-locked the door, and crept back upstairs and into the young boy's room. Taking a small, multi-faceted jewel from a blouse pocket, the shadow carefully crept across to the bed and placed the jewel under the boy's pillow. In a whisper he said, "You poor little shit."

The Red Fox dawdled no longer; he had two more such jobs before dawn arrived.



Twigs snapped and eyes probed the darkness. Like a mist slithering between the slats of a palisade, silver moonlight floated through the gaps in the tropical forest canopy and brushed the lush life slumbering underneath. Dark eyes moved back and forth, and a thick neck twisted, turning a large head. Weight transferred from one heavy foot to the other as the man crept forward. Ahead, orange flames flickered dully and reflected off the shallow cavern's walls into the forest. Dark, wet smoke poured from the small fire pit that heavy hands had dug in the middle of the dank recess.

A broad arm reached up into the boughs of a tree and tentatively pulled at a branch. Then another, equally muscled arm reached up and pulled the large body from the floor of twigs, dead leaves and small stones. Large hand reached over large hand and the body swung from side to side further along the branch out over a narrow ravine. When it neared the far edge of the defile, the hulking form dropped down onto the rocky ground, bending deeply at the knees to quiet the impact of leathery flesh on stone. Again the dark eyes probed the night.

Then a low, throaty voice echoed in the night, startling the large man by the ravine. "I am here," it said without revealing its location. Still the dark eyes searched the night for the owner of the voice as the echoes drifted off among the buzzing and chirping of insects. Again the heavy voice sounded: "You need not fear, brother; I would never kill you from a hidden place."

The body straightened into a proud figure standing on solid rock. The man replied, "Brother, how did you know?"

The throaty voice gave a scornful chuckle, “Mine is the curse of *skanslart*. Remember? I can see what for you lies hidden. But now? I see across a chasm that cannot be crossed by the mightiest of Altapi.”

“Why did you leave us?”

“You saw the pyre?”

“I did.”

“Then it should not take *skanslart* to see why I have left you.”

The man near the ravine continued to cast his eyes around, but now in thought more than in caution. “Brother, the Altapi know the Thrylls did not ride from the Valley of the Silent Souls with your head upon a pike. We therefore know that you did not fight in that ill-fated battle, for if you had, your dead body would have been left there. We also know that you, the chieftain who brought us from our caves and fired us to reclaim our birthright, has disappeared. Our fortunes have already turned quickly. The Altapi know that Fuse Ruknor would never leave us to rot.”

“Pah!” the throaty voice spat in reply. “The Altapi know nothing! They are fools to revere me for a gift that brings ruin in its wake.”

“Brother, you do not understand. Already there is talk that the Gods have called the great wisdom of Fuse to their council table. The Altapi now talk of a time when the wise Fuse Ruknor will return to finish his task, to lead us to our destiny.”

“Such wisdom! So like the great wisdom that led two hundred to their death.”

The man nodded, glancing into the ravine, gauging its depth. Even in moonlight the contempt on his face shone like a fire. “So, you *did* lead our troops! And yet you lived. What sort of Altapi is this?”

“One that shall never again stagger helpless across the field of battle as warriors uselessly hurl themselves against the biting spears of our enemies. An Altapi who will only return to lead his people when he has broken his curse. One that shall never again walk from a lost battle.”

From the middle of the moon shadow, the figure replied, “No, you shall not. That is why I have come.” Silence followed. Then more silence.

“I know you have not come to convince me to return to lead our people.”

“No, I have not come to bring you back home. Your legend must outlive rumours of your working in some Thryll labour yard. If your legend lives, it might inspire us for generations to come. I cannot allow a rumour to shatter the people’s belief in the return of the Clanlord! We need it too much. For the same reason, I cannot allow the Altapi to be led by a coward. If you ever returned, you would have worship heaped upon you. No. That would be disaster, for you are false. You must know I have come to kill you.”

“Rukrig, my brother, even you cannot prevent my fate.” The tearing of a branch from a nearby tree filled the night air. As the man beside the ravine, Rukrig, twisted his head and scanned the night, a flash of moonlight refracted off his axe head. Another form, shorter and more slender, emerged from the foliage and the darkness, holding a crude club. The larger figure holding up the long, double-bladed axe was the perfect image of an executioner.

Then Rukrig stepped forward and swung the axe. The shorter Altapi ducked the weapon and brought the butt of his club up, striking his brother’s extended arm. The large man stumbled to the side as his brother strode forward forcing Rukrig behind a tree. As Ruknor moved around the trunk, Rukrig twisted around to the other side and charged, knocking the club aside with his axe and driving the top of the axe head into his opponent’s belly. Ruknor gasped as the flat axe

head winded him. Rukrig raised his axe and swung it with deadly force but Ruknor twisted, diving out of reach, and the axe rang off the stones that littered the ground. Again Rukrig hoisted his weapon, but Ruknor had disappeared into the night once more.

Rukrig called on every measure of night sight he possessed. He hovered, axe at the ready and poised on the balls of his feet. When the crashing noise burst from his left he twisted easily and met his smaller brother's charge. Ruknor closed quickly and swept the heavy branch. Rukrig spun sideways out of danger but his brother swung back again, catching the large warrior on the side of the head. Rukrig staggered backwards, tripped over the root of a large tree and lost his footing. Before he had hit the ground, the club dropped on his chest and sent a wet cracking sound through the forest. Another blow fell from the darkness and another. Rukrig gasped and twisted his axe up into the path of the falling branch. He could not deflect the third blow, but he did divert the fourth, sending the rough club against the stones to his right.

Despite his cracked ribs, the large warrior scrambled to his knees and ducked another swipe of his brother's cudgel. Then he struck out, catching Ruknor's leg with the axe. Blood sprang from Ruknor's thigh and, though the gash was shallow, it forced him back a single, important step. Rukrig pushed himself all the way to his feet and braced his body against a tree. He levelled his axe and prepared for another attack.

Ruknor glared at his brother. He saw the readiness with which Rukrig held his axe and read the anticipation in his brother's eyes. Rather than do what Rukrig clearly expected, Ruknor hoisted the club and heaved it through the air, then he threw himself after his crude weapon.

Taken by surprise, Rukrig pulled his axe up and deflected the incoming branch, only to feel the heavy impact of his brother charging into him. The axe sprang from the large man's

hands and clattered to the ground not far from where they crashed into the biting rocks. Rukrig grunted in pain as his brother slammed down on him. Then Ruknor drove his forehead into his brother's face, causing blood to spout from his nose. Rukrig drove a desperate hand against Ruknor's next head butt, catching him on the chin and slowly driving the strained face back. With a quick twist of his head, Ruknor slipped loose and snapped his teeth on his brother's vulnerable fingers. Rukrig screamed and wrenched his hand free - at a cost.

Ruknor spat out two fingers and used his fists on his brother. Despite the hammering, Rukrig thrust up with a knee and knocked the smaller Altapi to the side. Then he twisted onto his stomach and, still splayed, reached for the axe that lay but a pace away. He wrapped his good hand about the wooden shaft and dared hope that he could yet win the battle. No sooner did he touch the axe, however, than he felt his brother's bulk crash onto his outstretched back. Another dull snap and wheeze of agony sounded into the night. Rukrig gasped at the air but refused to give up. From his prone position, he swung the axe back over his shoulder as best he could. Through his hand and arm he felt the weapon bite into unwilling flesh, and sensed his brother's body wince with pain.

Before Rukrig could manage another swing, he felt his brother clasp a fistful of his hair and suddenly his face was slammed into the stony ground. Again Ruknor drove his brother's head into the ground. And again. Then the smaller warrior grabbed a large stone, raised it high over his head, and drove it downwards against Rukrig's vulnerable, protruding neck. Like the cracking of crisp kindling, Rukrig's spine gave way beneath the rock. Twice more Ruknor brought the crude weapon down upon the lifeless form of his brother. Only then did he rise to his

feet, panting, to wipe a stubby forearm across his sweaty brow. With his hairy foot he turned the crumpled form onto its back and looked down on the vacant, yet strangely peaceful, eyes.

Some while later, the small Altapi picked up Rukrig's axe, considered its keen bite, then lay the weapon on the body of the fallen figure. For the rest of the night the grieving, wounded warrior collected large stones for a cairn. He laid them on top of the bloody, beaten mass and when he had finished, said a prayer to the Lunar Circle. Then Ruknor, the young chieftain who found himself without a tribe, turned and walked away from the battleground into the bush, into the night, leaving the broken body of his brother behind him.

To add to the darkness of his curse, yet another sorrow fed his shame. His soiled pride devoured him, but it also filled him with dark purpose.



The guardswoman glanced around one last time before pursing her lips and shaking her head. Then she turned around and walked back up the narrow street towards the main road. Once she passed from view, lost among the sweating throng of the city, the Red Fox moved from his hiding place. He twisted, rolling off ribs pained from being pressed against the struts of the eaves under which he had avoided her prying eyes. As he dropped, he pulled up his legs and landed with silent, feline grace to the cobbled ground of the tiny square. Although the Red Fox would never hesitate to defend himself against Prallyn's city guards, he believed that the best way to avoid confrontation lay in staying clear of them altogether. Thus, though he had done nothing

wrong when he noticed the guardswoman take an interest in him, he had decided to slip under the roof, away from her view. In his dealings with the Guard, Fox drew no distinction between his licit and illicit activities since they rarely failed to overlap at the best of times.

He surveyed the fronts of the houses that faced what amounted to a courtyard in the Market District before returning his two daggers to his bandolier. Then he approached one door in particular and gave a delicate knock. After a prolonged pause, a large, round man, dripping sweat from his bald brow, opened the door and allowed Fox to slip inside a long corridor. The large man quickly closed the door behind the smaller man and took time to peer between the curtains that covered the window set into the door. Finally he turned and demanded, “What’re you doing here? I thought I told you never to come back!”

The Red Fox laughed and strode down the hallway. He ducked inside the sitting room at the far end of the house and flopped onto the settee, his feet sprawled out on the cushions. The fat man stormed into the room, crossed to the window and quickly pulled the heavy curtains closed. Then he pulled a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and wiped his brow before lowering himself into the chair opposite. “I’m vexed! I’m good and vexed! Our business is finished! You’ve no right coming ‘round here.”

“Perhaps not,” Fox replied, “but another opportunity has presented itself and you could profit handsomely from it.”

The large man squirmed uncomfortably in the chair and replied, “I’m not interested. Do you understand? I’m not interested!”

“You poor timid man,” the Red Fox chided. “You have yet to hear what I have to offer and you reject it out of hand? How irresponsible of you! Think of your wife and children.”

“I *am* thinking of my wife and children!” hissed the man. “Business with you is too damned dangerous. I’ll transport no more weapons and certainly no more live crocodiles, do you hear? Those scaly things nearly cost me two of my best drivers.”

Again the small man smiled. “Ah, yes, but they earned you a tidy profit, did they not? But we stray from the point. I wish nothing of the sort. This new opportunity brings you no risks. It will not land you in Jerryn’s gaols and it will not lead to any healer’s fees for your drivers.”

“I don’t believe you!” spat the man in reply while again wiping his brow. “To you nothing’s illegal. To you the law may’s well not exist! And what don’t exist can’t be broken, you’ll say.” The man levelled an accusing finger at his unwelcome guest, “I know you, you crafty Fox. You can’t fool me as easy as all that.”

“Very well,” retorted Fox, jumping from the settee. “I can see you have no interest in listening to my generous offer. I find it a pity, though not an unforeseen one.” He strode from the room and headed for the door.

The round man waddled after the lithe man as best he could and called out, “You’ll not come back now will you?”

The Red Fox shook his head, “Fear not. Neither of us can prove the other did anything unlawful. Indeed, our arrangements guaranteed it. I have no choice but to leave you alone.”

The large man breathed a sigh of relief and again wiped his brow. “Good,” he said. “I don’t want no more trouble.”

Fox smiled his crooked smile. He turned and reached for the doorknob. “Oh!” he added, “Did I mention that I came across some records Luksa Levrynn kept on that wagon you sent up to New Rijis for him last month?”

At first the large man went pale, but then realization dawned upon him and he turned red. He placed his hands on his hips and asked in a menacing tone, "Was that a threat? Are you trying to threaten me?"

Fox cast his nervous eyes about and replied, "Ah, no. I *did* intend to threaten you, but I do not think I got as far as that."

"Well you can't threaten me. I know for a fact that Levryn takes special precautions with his papers."

"Took," Fox corrected.

A puzzled look crawled across the man's face. "What's that?" he asked.

" 'Took', not 'takes.' Levryn *took* special precautions. You see, he had an accident in his sleep last week and he has passed on." A look of mock shock washed across Fox's face. "You mean his family neglected to invite you to the funeral? They did not even inform you of the poor man's demise? And you were such close associates! Or at least you were from the time he arranged for bandits to rob that shipment of Crown weapons you sent up to Fort Holy Fallryth."

Again the man turned pale. He dabbed his handkerchief against his forehead and licked his lips nervously. "How . . . how?"

"The poor man had it all well documented in his records."

The man hung his head and gave a quiet sigh. He looked up and said, "Come in. Come in and we'll talk about your opportunity."

Fox smiled, returned to the sitting room, flopped back onto the settee and asked, "What do you know of a ship that arrived in port and rented five, or perhaps six, carriages yesterday?"