

Stunned, I sat down heavily in one of the comfortable chairs in Sir Oliver's office.

"Pardon me, Ollie," I said. "I thought I heard you say that Fenwick is working for King Mark now."

"That is exactly what I said," Sir Oliver West replied.

What a strange turn this was. Fenwick is an assassin. From what I could ascertain, my stepmother hired him to kill me. A couple of weeks before, he nearly succeeded. Fenwick and I met once again the day before this, and I was able to subdue him and turn him over to Sir Oliver as a prisoner.

"Please explain, Sir Oliver," I requested, using his formal name in the hope it would loosen his tongue from its usual taciturn state.

Sir Oliver shrugged. "I sent word to the castle to let them know we captured him—you captured him. I was instructed to deliver him personally to the castle in manacles, but not in the prisoner wagon. We met King Mark when we arrived. The king offered him the choice to work for the crown or die in chains. Fenwick chose to work for the crown. I was dismissed from the meeting after unlocking the manacles."

"You said you presumed he was on his way to the Eastern March," I stated.

Another shrug from Sir Oliver. "Fenwick did confirm to me on the way to the castle that your stepmother hired him to kill you. I am guessing that King Mark wants to eliminate that complication—not for your sake, necessarily."

"Then why would he bother?" I asked.

"The king presented an ultimatum to your father and stepbrothers about the succession in the Eastern March. The desired result was for your stepbrothers to rise to the occasion, not complain to mommy," Sir Oliver explained.

"You're aware of all that?" I inquired.

"Not officially, but, yes, I am aware of the king's concerns," Sir Oliver said.

"What will happen?" I asked.

"I would guess that your stepmother will have an unfortunate accident," Sir Oliver said. "If they're intelligent, your stepbrothers will leave the country as quickly as they can. They're not smart, so I predict more accidents will plague your extended family."

I did not know what to say. My mouth hung open as I sat in stunned silence. Before I regathered my wits, Sir Oliver continued.

"She would not have lived much longer regardless," he said. "The operative I sent to look into things reports she does not have the money to

pay Fenwick for completing the job. Aloysius Fenwick has a reputation to maintain, so would not have allowed her to live without payment.”

“Aloysius?” I asked.

Sir Oliver nodded.

“I can see why he goes by just Fenwick,” I quipped. “None of this bothers you?”

Sir Oliver at least had the decency to grimace slightly. “It does, and it doesn’t,” he said. “As Principal of the City Watch, I’m not overly fond of assassins, as you can imagine. As a practical man who is a member of the government, I can say that having a skilled assassin working for the crown is useful—something King Mark has avoided until now. His father and grandfather both employed one. This Fenwick has a great deal of experience on the southern continent as well. It’s said that he can pass as a native of seven or eight of the different countries down there. Besides, it’s not as though he will start killing people indiscriminately. He doesn’t work any harder at his job than you do.”

I took offense to that. “I *help* people, Ollie. He kills them,” I protested.

“He helps the people who hire him,” Sir Oliver responded blandly.

I shook my head in disagreement. “So, the king sent him to kill Victoria?”

“I don’t know,” Sir Oliver answered. “I do know he left on a ship already, headed to Newcastle. My guess is he is heading in that direction for a purpose. I don’t know of other reasons, but it’s possible there could be a variety.”

I stood slowly. “Thank you, Ollie,” I said. “I appreciate your willingness to share this information with me.”

“You don’t need to worry about Fenwick anymore,” Sir Oliver told me as I left. “While I was still there, the king gave him specific instructions to that effect, in addition to my informing him that your stepmother did not have the means to pay the balance of his fee regardless.”

The day had grown even more gloomy while I was inside the Palace of Justice. The deteriorating weather suited my mood. Instead of walking back to my rooms, I found a hackney. When he dropped me in front of the bookseller, I saw the copy of *The Histories* by Volusius in the window. Renowned for being one of the worst books ever written (at least, until I took quill in hand to pen my adventures), Lyle Forteney used it as a signal to me that he had mail or a message for me.

Entering the shop, he handed me an envelope. Embossed in wax was the royal seal. Without opening it, I knew King Mark wished to see me. Breaking the seal, I pulled out the note. It asked me to come to the castle at my earliest convenience. Such an invitation from the king means *now*.

I turned on my heel and caught the hack I had just arrived in. He was pleased to have another fare so quickly, even though it was me again. I climbed inside and wondered what the king wanted. Perhaps he was being courteous and informing me himself about Fenwick. Possibly he might

mention my stepmother. He could even have made a decision about the future of the Eastern March.

The ride did not take long. It was hardly enough time for me to compose my thoughts, swirling around in my head as they were. The hackney delivered me at the guardhouse on the city side of the bridge to the castle. The castle was on a small island in the river, only accessible by the small bridge where we were.

History said it was the location of the first settlement in the area, and it occupied a natural defensive position. Over time, the population outgrew the confines of the island and moved first to the side of the river where I was now standing. The island became the residence of the rulers and a refuge in times of attack.

I showed the note to the guard on duty. He was more interested in the royal seal on the envelope than the note itself. A page was standing by, and he ordered the page to lead me across the bridge. On the castle side, another page read the note and took me inside. He conducted me to a drawing-room where I was told to wait. He took my oilskin.

I was waiting there for about a half-hour, I guessed. The seneschal came to retrieve me and conducted me to the room where King Mark managed the kingdom. When we reached the door, I unbuckled my sword and handed it to the guard waiting outside. No one is allowed to carry a weapon when meeting the king. The seneschal knocked and announced me, then gestured me into the room, shutting the door behind me.

I bowed. The king waved for me to sit. He did not wait for me but began speaking immediately, as I was still in motion.

“FitzDuncan,” he grunted. “We have news for you that you may find less than pleasant. The man you apprehended yesterday is now an employee of the crown.”

He looked at me for my reaction. Since I had already learned this from Sir Oliver, I was unsurprised. I returned his gaze impassively.

“Yes, Your Majesty,” I responded.

He grunted again, then added, “We have sent him to deal with your stepmother.”

Again, he looked at me for my reaction. I nodded in acknowledgment. If he was surprised by my calm acceptance of this news, he did not show it.

“Your stepbrothers have so far failed to respond to the challenge we issued for them to prove themselves capable of controlling the Eastern March. Though they still have two months, there is no hope they will be able to demonstrate to us that they are competent in that time. They will not succeed your father. Neither will you at this time.”

That last was the first information he shared that I did not already know. Though I was a logical choice to succeed my father in some ways, granting the earldom of such an important territory to an illegitimate son would cause

a serious disturbance in the established social order. That the king considered me at all was a compliment, but I had not allowed myself to hope that it would happen. Certainly, I was disappointed. I was not surprised.

“I understand, Your Majesty,” I said, keeping my expression impassive.

The king looked at me for a few moments. “We can see why you are good at cards, FitzDuncan. Your face betrays very little.”

I did not know how to respond to this. I merely bobbed my head slightly, accepting what I thought was meant as a compliment. The king held me in his gaze a little longer.

“You have been of great service to the crown in the last year, at great risk to yourself,” he said. “We are appreciative, though you might find that difficult to grasp given the news we just shared. At this time, there are more pieces in play than you may know.”

“Your Majesty,” I replied, not knowing what else to say.

“We are making arrangements for the Duke of Braintree’s second son to succeed your father in the Eastern March,” King Mark stated.

That information set my mind in motion. The Duke of Braintree was a second- or third-cousin of the king’s, I couldn’t remember exactly. On paper, he had just as much claim to the throne as Mark, except his side did not triumph in the negotiations that resulted in Mark’s branch of the family taking control many years before. He was one of the two or three most powerful and wealthy nobles in Aquileia. The Duke was influential, with a circle of other nobles who followed his lead on every issue. His family had been a source of discontent for a couple of generations, claiming they would do a better job of ruling. They crowed about every setback the government encountered.

Again, I kept my face expressionless. The king chuckled. “Albert warned me how good you were at controlling your reactions,” he said. “We would not have expected your total lack of reaction to this news unless you are a simpleton. We know that is not true. You must have questions. Now is the time for them. There will not be another.”

I weighed my words carefully. “The Duke of Braintree’s second son is Lord Weald?” I asked.

The king nodded. I allowed myself to grimace. Lord Weald was a couple of years ahead of me in school, so I knew him.

“You owe me no explanations, Your Majesty,” I began, “but Lord Weald is a turd.”

King Mark allowed himself a smile. “Indeed. Continue.”

I thought quickly. Naming Lord Weald to the Eastern March would not be an improvement over either of my lazy and selfish stepbrothers since he was cut from a similar piece of cloth. It would certainly not strengthen the defense of the March. That meant the king had other motives. I considered what else he might be trying to accomplish.

“Naming Lord Weald to the Eastern March silences the Braintree faction,” I said, thinking out loud. “When he fails, as he surely will, it disgraces them for a generation, at least.”

“You are as clever as Lily said,” the king responded, referring to Queen Liliana. “We expect them to trumpet my selection of him as long-overdue recognition of their obvious superiority. That will work against them when, as you predict, he fails. We believe he will fail miserably. When he has proven to be a complete flop, we will be able to name someone else to the Eastern March, social convention be damned.”

I nodded in understanding.

“No questions about Fenwick?” the king asked. “He did almost kill you.”

“Your Majesty, I confess I learned about Fenwick before I arrived. I went to see Sir Oliver this morning before receiving your note,” I explained. “I understand how someone like him would be useful to the crown.”

“More useful than a dozen diplomats,” the king replied with a sigh. “We have avoided having a royal assassin, but it has been increasingly difficult. We considered you for that role. It does not suit you, though.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” I said.

“We can make no promises regarding future disposition of the Eastern March, FitzDuncan,” the king stated as he began to stand, indicating our meeting was drawing to a close. “You are the logical choice, and you have done much to earn our trust and gratitude. Please continue to do so but understand that there will always be other influences that we must consider.”

As the king stood, so I followed suit. “I do understand, Your Majesty, and am grateful for the explanation you shared with me,” I said, then bowed and began to back toward the door.

Before reaching the door, the king stopped me. “This is for you,” he said, holding out an envelope for me.

The guard opened the door for me, and I exited the room. I retrieved my sword belt and fastened it. The seneschal was waiting for me.

“Would it be possible for me to ask the queen a question?” I asked.

“We can see,” the seneschal replied. “If she is not available, you may leave a note.”

The seneschal led me through the castle. He stopped me outside a door and knocked. The door opened, and he was allowed inside. A minute later, he opened the door and waved me in.

Queen Liliana was alone. She rose to greet me with a brief hug. When she released me, she gestured me to a chair.

“What brings you here, Caz?” she asked.

“I need to ask you about a suitable wedding present for Lucy,” I said.

The queen smiled. I suspect she was relieved I did not mention what I just learned from the king. She did not know me well enough to understand that I would never try to involve her in something like that.

“Do you have any ideas?” she asked.

“I do. Lucy’s engagement ring is unusual, and she determined the stones and their arrangement. I’m aware that the stones are linked to her abilities. Your ring is similar, with a topaz where hers has a ruby. For winter solstice, I gave her earrings in the same configuration. I was thinking of adding a necklace.”

“Are you aware of what her ring does?”

“The jeweler actually told me more about the stones and their alignment than she has. His knowledge was based on a very old book he had, passed down from his father, who was also a jeweler. I would like to know more.”

“Oh, I need to talk to that girl,” the queen said with mock consternation. Her smile told her true feelings, though. “Her grandmother... pah! Her grandmother was a product of her own upbringing, and that was probably influenced by the hope that someone with affinity for the dark arts would reappear in the family line.”

“Lucy mentioned that her grandmother was disappointed she did not have it,” I said.

“From talking with Lucy, the last in her line with that affinity was generations ago. Still, the influence lingers on. As you know from our experience in Eatonford and with Esme, the dark arts are extremely, extremely powerful. Though we who are blessed by the Minor Gods are reticent about our abilities, those gifted with the dark arts make us look like blabbermouths. That closed-mouth attitude was passed down to Lucy’s grandmother, who passed it to Lucy. Lucy’s grandmother instructed Lucy from the beginning to keep everything related to her abilities as the closest secrets. Even with me, I need to work to convince her to share her knowledge.”

“I know this,” I stated.

“Of course you do,” the queen replied. “I’m merely reminding you, so that you don’t feel Lucy is keeping secrets for any other reason except she is scared to share any knowledge because of how her grandmother taught her. Lucy’s ring and my ring can act as storage devices. Her earrings, unfortunately, do not, because of where they are worn. A necklace would also act as a storage device. I wore one under my dress when we destroyed the grimoire. My energy alone would not have been sufficient. I needed all that I stored in my ring and my necklace to complete that task.”

“This is all so new to me...” I muttered. “How do you make use of them?”

“You know how to summon your ability,” the queen explained. “It is a matter of summoning your ability and feeding that energy into the stone linked to your ability and from there to the diamond. The stones must be set in platinum, not gold or silver. The energy will not travel through those.”

“How do you know when it is full?” I asked.

“When you sense it will not accept any more of the energy,” the queen answered.

“And you access the energy in the diamond...?”

“In the same way as you do your ability,” she said. “It’s even easier since you have an actual physical thing on which to focus.”

“Can you use just the diamond?” I asked.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “The energy must pass through the stone associated with your ability. It changes or converts it somehow into a form that can be stored in the diamond and then changes it back into what your ability generates when you retrieve it.”

“So, a necklace in the same arrangement as her ring, in a platinum setting, would be a useful and valuable wedding present,” I stated.

“Yes, but be careful in selecting the stones,” the queen cautioned. “Though size is important, lack of flaws is more crucial. A large diamond with flaws will not hold as much as a much smaller stone that is flawless. With the other stones, it affects the transfer of energy negatively.”

“The jeweler commented on that when Lucy chose the stones for her ring—that she picked out the best stones, not the biggest,” I commented.

“Her ability enabled her to sense that,” the queen said.

“Should I have her pick out the stones for her necklace?” I asked. “I was hoping to try to surprise her for once.”

“If you trust your jeweler,” the queen said, “she need not pick the stones.”

“Just out of curiosity, why did they not teach me about this when I visited the Temple of Bellona?” I asked.

Queen Liliana sighed. “The stone associated with Bellona is exceptionally rare,” she said. “I have never seen one and, to my knowledge, no one alive has, at least in Aquileia. It is a stone that was only found on the slopes of one mountain on the southern continent, and the last mention of it is over a thousand years ago. It’s called zyanite and, in its more pure form, looks similar to sapphire. That is probably why they did not teach you about it. If you managed to find one, what I have read indicates you would put it in a ring but place the diamond in the pommel of your sword—probably to fit a larger diamond than would be appropriate for a man’s ring.”

There was a quiet knock on the door. One of the queen’s attendants opened it and came in. Seeing her, the queen rose.

“I’m afraid I must go, Caz. It was delightful to see you again, and your idea for a wedding present is a good one.”

She swept out, following her attendant. I went out the door I entered, and found a page waiting who led me outside. Along the way, I opened the envelope. It was a note from Albert accepting my invitation to be one of my bridesmen at my wedding. I retrieved my oilskin from a page at the entrance to the castle and headed back across the bridge.

The weather now suited my mood—foul. Out of the queen’s presence, my thoughts immediately returned to the news shared by the king. Cold rain was pouring from the heavens. I was glad to have my oilskin. It kept me dry, though the damp cold penetrated into my bones. I trudged back to my rooms, deep in thought.

Ever since the possibility of succeeding my father was dangled before me, I tried mightily to keep my hopes from soaring. Hearing from the king that I would not succeed my father stung nonetheless, however. There was still the possibility I might be considered in a few years, but I knew better than to count on that.

Those of you who are new to my tales might be wondering why my taking over the Eastern March was not a sure thing. The problem is my birthright, or lack of one. Though I strive to conduct myself as a gentleman, I was born a bastard. The name FitzDuncan gives it away. The prefix “Fitz” means “illegitimate son of.” My father is Duncan Barry, Earl of the Eastern March. My mother was a maid in the manor who succumbed to my father’s good looks.

My father later married an unpleasant woman named Victoria. When she finally produced an heir, I was sent away to boarding school, never to return home. I have made my own way in the world since. When my grandfather died, he left me his sword and a small annuity of a hundred ducats a year. I valued the sword more. It is the finest example of the swordsmith’s art I have ever held in my hands. It is irreplaceable. Where grandfather had it made or found it was a mystery. I’d shown it to many people, but no one recognized the maker’s mark. All agreed it was magnificent in the way the different quality steels were melded together along its length, providing strength and flexibility.

After school, I spent seven years in the Rangers, patrolling the western border. I reached the rank of captain quickly but rising further required influence at court or enough money to purchase a commission to the rank of major. When I realized this, having neither money nor influence, I resigned my commission and moved to the largest city in the kingdom, also named Aquileia. I was casting about, trying to determine what I wanted to do to earn a living, when Freddy found me.

Freddy is Lord Rawlinsford and has become my best friend. He was a friend during school days, but events since I returned to the city have drawn us closer. When he found me, he had recently lost a family ring in a card game. He suspected the game was rigged. Freddy was forced to offer his ring as a guarantee of payment for the ten thousand ducats he owed. When he went to make good on the bet, the winner demanded ten times that already staggering sum to return the ring. Remembering my prowess at card games from our time at school, Freddy asked me to win it back. I caught my



opponent cheating, in front of witnesses. I threatened to make this knowledge public unless he returned the ring to me. When I gave it back to Freddy, he rewarded me with half the value of the bet—five thousand ducats. I also kept the money I won at the tables during the two weeks it took. Since then, I have done similar work for others, though not by playing cards. I helped them recover items of value when the law would be of no use. The charge for my service is half the value of the recovered item.

Seventy-five hundred ducats was a nice start. Given that I intended to live a comfortable (though not lavish) life, it would not see me through, but it did give me a foundation. In the last few years, I amassed a tidy sum. I invested it in different businesses and buildings throughout the city. I now owned the bookseller from whom I originally rented the upstairs rooms, though only the former owner and I knew that.

Not quite a year ago, Freddy introduced me to his cousin, Lucy. Lucy's formal title was Lady Darling, after a small hamlet in her father's holdings. She hated being called by her title, considering it too cutesy, so Freddy and I did it whenever we could. Her father used it as an expression of tender affection.

Lucy is my lady love. She is tall and slender, with long blonde hair that wants to curl and the bluest eyes I've ever seen. For me, she is the loveliest woman on the planet. When I was first introduced to her, I felt a sense of rightness, of affection, and of desire, the likes of which I had never experienced. Those feelings have only grown with time. A couple of months later, I asked her father, the Duke of Gulick, for permission to court her. A few months after that, I asked for permission to marry her. He granted both my petitions. Given my lack of birthright, I am an extremely fortunate man.

Lucy, in addition to being beautiful and intelligent, is different. As you no doubt surmised from the nature of my conversation with the queen, Lucy possesses magical ability. In the countryside, folks would have no difficulty in accepting that. Though they are not common, countryfolk treat witches as another skilled professional resource, similar to a midwife in giving birth or a lawyer in assisting with a property dispute. In the city, where people pretend not to believe in the old ways, it is unspoken. Lucy owns an herb shop and sells salves, creams, and potions in addition to beneficial herbs. While city dwellers might profess not to believe in magic, Lucy's shop does good business.

When I first met her, Lucy told me she could see my aura, and it indicated I had some supernatural affinities. According to her, there were many people wandering around with affinities for one or more of the Minor Gods. Most had no idea, and their affinities remained just that, affinities. A few of those people had woken those affinities and learned how to make some use of them. At this point, they are no longer described as affinities but as abilities.

One of Lucy's abilities is a limited form of clairvoyance that involves

people with whom her aura is compatible. These visions come to her in her sleep or in daydreams. The future she sees begins with what she calls a hinge point. If what she has seen at the hinge point happens, then the vision plays out as she envisioned. If the hinge point doesn't match what she saw, then that particular future does not unfold.

As a result of her clairvoyance, Lucy wouldn't tell me much about my own affinities. She said it was for each person to figure out on his or her own. Her grandmother taught her that to speak of the future she saw was to put it at risk. Queen Liliana, without her gift of clairvoyance, was less reticent and recently told me more. I already knew that I possessed ability with Bellona, the minor goddess of war. It is my dominant, meaning the strongest connection I hold. Earlier this year, I made a pilgrimage to the Temple of Bellona, where I learned how to make better use of that ability. According to what the queen told me, I also have affinities with Eir, the goddess of health, and Njörun, the goddess of good fortune.

Lucy's dominant is Freyja, the deity responsible for romance and sexual pleasure. She also possesses abilities with Eir and Njörun. According to the queen, having those shared connections is a reason Lucy and I are so compatible.

All this is part of our religion in Aquileia. We have twelve gods we worship. There are the Three Major Gods, who are the gods of the sky, the ocean, and the land. There are also nine Minor Gods: a male god of love (who was also the god of fertility), a female goddess of love (her area was romance and sexual pleasure), a goddess of good fortune, a goddess of health, a goddess of wisdom, a god of crafts and smithing, a god of travel and commerce, a goddess of art and literature, and a goddess of war. Besides those, there is also the Lord of the Seven Hells, who is the god of the underworld and afterlife. Our religion says he was originally one of the Major Gods, but the other three cast him down because of the darkness in his soul.

As I was walking back to my rooms, the rain found its way down my neck. That bit of unpleasantness actually helped snap me out of my gloomy mood. I began to look forward to getting back to my rooms and getting warm and dry. That reminded me Lucy was due to return today from a visit to Freddy's family home to begin wedding preparations. We were going to marry in less than three months, at the summer solstice.

Lucy and I would be sharing our wedding with Freddy and his betrothed, Greta Hawkins. Lucy, Greta, and their mothers had all gone on the trip to begin wedding planning. I was certain that Lucy would fill my ears with all the details. Not that I was all that interested in the finer points that would have consumed them, but Lucy would be, so I would pay attention and enjoy what I presumed would be her high spirits.

All in all, I decided, as the trickle of cold rain traveled down my back, I had many blessings to count. I had a wonderful woman in my life whom I

would marry soon. I had a couple of good friends I would trust with my life (and did, in earlier adventures). My assets were close to the point where I would never need to worry about money again. Majors and Minors, I even had the crown prince agreeing to be part of my wedding.

The bells of the clock were ringing out noon, so I made a slight detour and went to the Foaming Boar. A former sergeant in the Rangers, Carl Stensland, owned it, and I kept my horse, Andy, stabled there. They were serving pea soup for lunch, and that seemed just about the perfect midday meal for the kind of day it was. I settled down to a seat in the common room, since the dining room was full.

One of the servers brought me a bowl and a large chunk of bread, and I wasted no time in beginning to eat. Carl noticed I was there but was busy. He had not slowed down his bustling to and fro by the time I finished and departed.

I returned to my rooms and wasted no time in shucking off my wet clothes. When I finished dressing again, I kindled a fire and waited for its warmth to overcome the damp chill. I heard footsteps coming up the stairs from outside.

There was a knock on the door, and a voice called out, “Mr. FitzDuncan?”

I rose and opened the door to find a man there. His name was Thomas Gibson. In a recent duel I fought against Paul Jacques, more formally known as Lord Barrowton, Gibson was one of his seconds. In the past, Gibson always struck me as a decent fellow and, on the occasion of the duel, had given me the impression that he was embarrassed to have been made a party to Barrowton’s dispute with me. He had a sheepish look. I stepped aside to allow him to enter.

“How may I help you, Mr. Gibson?” I asked, keeping things on a formal level since we were not on a first-name basis.

“Please call me Tom,” he replied. “Before I say anything else, I want you to know how disgusted I am at Paul’s behavior. He and I are no longer friends, if that means anything.”

“I will say you looked uncomfortable that day,” I remarked.

“It was only after he asked me to be his second that I learned what he did,” Tom explained. “If I knew beforehand, I would not have stood with him.”

I shrugged in acknowledgment. “Would you like to sit?” I asked.

“Please,” he agreed as he took off his cloak and hung it up.

When he took a chair, I sat facing him. “What brings you here today?” I asked.

“A different embarrassing matter,” he said, looking down at his lap. “I understand you help people in recovering things they have lost.”

“I have been known to do that, yes,” I replied.

“You must help me protect my inheritance. I am in danger of losing it. My father died not quite a year ago,” Tom explained. “In his will, he left the bulk of his estate to me, setting aside a sum that would provide my stepmother with a comfortable living. The one unusual condition is that my stepmother controls the entire estate, including the brass foundry we own, until I reach my thirty-fifth birthday. That is a bit more than two years away.”

“You and your stepmother do not get along?” I asked.

“Quite the contrary. My own mother died giving birth to me. Marian and my father married about two years later, so she has been the only mother I have known. We never quarreled until recently,” Tom said.

“What happened to change that?”

“Years ago, when my father was still alive, Marian was indiscreet. My father was unfaithful to her, and she responded by having an affair of her own. She broke it off almost as soon as it began before my father ever knew. Unfortunately, she has been blackmailed by her former lover ever since.”

“What is his name?”

“Laurence Depew,” Tom answered.

“Where did he come from?” I inquired.

“He claims he came from the southern continent,” Tom said, “but she says she heard a trace of a Manton accent in his voice. It is one of the many things that caused her to break things off with him—she realized he was not an honest person. She was right.”

Manton was the duchy controlled by my friend Freddy’s father. Most Mantonese spoke with a tone that was quite nasal. Normally, Freddy did not, though he could when he chose to.

“What form did this blackmail take?” I asked.

“She wrote him some love letters while they were involved. He threatened to turn those letters over to my father unless she paid him a hundred ducats a month,” Tom answered. “Since my father died, he increased that amount and now demands a thousand ducats every month.”

“Your father is dead,” I commented. “Why would she pay Depew anything?”

“My uncle is contesting father’s will,” Tom related. “Since he was my father’s older brother, he feels the foundry, and most of the other assets should have defaulted to him when my father died instead of going to my stepmother. The judge who agreed to take the case is a close friend of his—he was a bridesman at my uncle’s wedding. Evidence of my stepmother’s affair might be enough to justify my uncle’s demands. Depew threatened to sell the letters to him.”

“How did you learn of this?” I asked.

“The bank questioned me a few days ago about the withdrawals Marian has been making. Though our accounts are still substantial, they were concerned about the increase in her spending since my father’s death. They

asked her about it in the past, and she made various excuses. They brought it to my attention when I brought the foundry's books in to review with them, as we do four times every year. I mentioned it to her, and she confessed," Tom said.

"From a legal standpoint, your uncle's arguments seem weak. Why is he interfering?" I asked.

"He is desperate," Tom replied. "My grandfather had two successful businesses when he died. He left the larger and more profitable one, a leather tannery, to my uncle. My father, as the younger brother, was given the smaller business—the foundry. From what I have been told, my uncle was terrible at business. He alienated customers and employees alike, and the tannery began to lose money. My father convinced him to sell the business while it was still worth anything, and he did. From the proceeds of that sale, he had enough to live comfortably, but his lifestyle is extravagant. He is nearly penniless now. Meanwhile, my father took the lesser of the two and succeeded in growing the business and its profitability."

"Somehow, this Depew learned your uncle is contesting the will," I commented.

"It would not be difficult," Tom stated. "What lawsuits are filed with the court is a matter of public record. He would merely need to ask the clerk at the courts to see the ledger."

"What is your uncle's name?" I asked.

"Robert," Tom replied. "Robert Gibson."

"If I can make these letters disappear, will that be enough?" I asked.

"I believe so," Tom replied. "My solicitor tells me that my uncle does not have a very strong case without the letters. Even though the judge is his friend, any judge can only operate within the limits of the law. According to my solicitor, if he ruled in favor of my uncle without the letters as justification, his decision could be, and probably would be overturned in an appeal. Evidence of my stepmother's affair, however, could allow the judge to discard my father's will on the basis that my father did not know of her infidelity."

"Wouldn't the easiest decision be for the judge to rule in your favor in that event?" I inquired. "You are his son. That is not in dispute, is it?"

Tom shook his head at my last question. "There was a clause in my grandfather's will," he explained, "that if either brother died intestate—without a will—that the surviving brother would inherit. If my father's will is discarded by the judge, it can be interpreted that way."

For those of you who have read the previous accounts of my adventures, what Tom was describing might seem bland compared to my recent activity. It was, but it was also a much more usual situation for me than what transpired in the past year. Tom was in a tricky spot and the law would probably not help him. Indeed, legally, it seemed as though things could end

up stacked against him.

I sat quietly, pondering what Tom told me. The original amount of a hundred ducats a month the blackmailer demanded was a lot of money, especially considering that the average earnings in the country of Aquileia were probably less than a hundred ducats a year. Of course, that included all the farmworkers. Here in the city, a few skilled tradesmen might earn as much as five hundred ducats in a year, though most would fall short of that figure. Demanding a thousand ducats every month was even more outrageous.

I wondered how Tom's stepmother hid the expense from her husband. He probably used to give her a monthly allowance to manage the household, and she inflated that number by a hundred ducats. Outside of his business, Tom's father undoubtedly had no idea how much things really cost. I'd seen the same lack of knowledge in my friend Freddy and others of his class. With the increase demanded since his father's death, it certainly would have caught the notice of someone at their bank.

Solving Tom's problem seemed straightforward—find this Laurence Depew and get the letters back from him. Of course, I wondered if Tom's uncle somehow knew of the existence of the letters. I certainly wouldn't dismiss that idea until I knew more. Depew may have contacted him already.

"I think I can help you, Tom," I said finally. "My usual terms are to request half the value of the recovered item. In your case, with your entire inheritance at stake, that would not be fair. In this situation, I will base my fee on what the blackmailer is charging. If I am successful, you will owe me six thousand ducats—half of a year's worth of blackmail. I know it has not yet been a year since the increase he demanded, but I need to base my fee on something and that feels justifiable to me. If I fail to recover the letters, you, of course, owe me nothing. Any expenses I incur in my pursuit of the letters are my responsibility. Is that agreeable?"

"Yes," Tom said, nodding. "Thank you, Mr. FitzDuncan."

"If, when I find the letters, there is also money that this Depew has not yet spent, I may choose to keep at least the first six thousand," I explained. "If there is more, I propose that we split it evenly. In that way, you might not be facing any expense."

"That is certainly agreeable," Tom stated.

I rose and offered him my hand. He stood, and we shook hands. "You can call me Caz," I said.

I asked for his address since I was sure that I would have other questions that he would need to answer. He gave me both his residence and business locations. I then saw Tom to the door, helping him with his cloak. After seeing him out, I tossed a couple of logs onto the dwindling fire in the hearth and returned to my seat. It was too late to do anything about his problem today, but I would return to the Palace of Justice in the morning to ask Sir Oliver if his people knew of this Laurence Depew.

Having a new problem land in my lap was the perfect antidote to the news King Mark delivered earlier. With Lucy due to return and a new puzzle to solve, I would not dwell on the “might have been” and would instead focus on more pleasant and more intriguing matters. Though I did not know Tom Gibson well, my sense was that he was an upright man—well-raised, honest, polite, and lacking in pretension. In shaking his hand, I felt the calluses of hard work, and I guessed he was not afraid of getting his hands dirty at his foundry. I was looking forward to helping him.

Before my thoughts drifted away, I heard light footsteps coming up the stairs from the shop. There was a tentative knock, and a high-pitched voice called out, “Sir?”

I rose and opened the door. A lad of no more than nine or ten years old, soaked to the skin, stood there with a wet envelope in his hand. He held it out to me.

I took it and opened it. The ink had bled all over, and it was unreadable. I chuckled.

“Did the nice lady at the herb shop ask you to run this to me?” I inquired.

“Yes, sir,” he said.

“Do you know what she wanted? The rain has made the ink run and I can’t read it,” I stated.

“No, sir. Sorry, sir,” he said.

“It doesn’t matter,” I told him. I reached into my money pouch and gave him a quarter-florin. “For your trouble,” I said.

“Thankee, sir,” he said, touching his knuckle to his forehead before he spun and scampered back down the stairs.

It didn’t matter what the note said. Receiving it meant Lucy returned. I would go see her and find out more. The fire was low enough that I did not worry about it. I grabbed my oilskin, since it was clearly still raining heavily, and headed outside.

There was a hackney on the opposite side of the market square. The driver was huddled in the doorway of a shop, trying to stay out of the rain. I went to him and asked if he would take me to Lucy’s shop. He nodded and opened the door of the carriage for me.

When we arrived, I gave him a florin. The fare he quoted me was half that, but it was such dismal weather I wanted to show my gratitude for not needing to walk. I went to the rear entrance of the shop, and Lucy opened the door just as I reached the top step.

“You’re early,” she said, ushering me inside. “Didn’t you get my note?”

“I received a note, a soaking wet note, where the ink had run all over the page,” I replied. “I couldn’t read it, but the boy told me the most beautiful woman in Aquileia gave it to him, so I hurried over immediately.”

“Flatterer,” she said as she turned her face up for a kiss.

“Truth-teller,” I responded.



“You can watch me as I finish unpacking and tell me what happened while I was away. I have to say I worried about you,” she said.

I followed her upstairs and sat on the edge of her bed as she pulled clothes from a trunk and put them away in a wardrobe. For a time, I was content watching her bend and straighten, moving to and fro. Her grace never ceased to please my eyes.

“So, what happened while I was gone?” she prompted me.

“Oh, right,” I said, snapping out of my reverie. “Well, Fenwick showed up at my door.”

She looked at me, alarmed.

“I ran away quickly,” I said, “to the castle. Liliana took me in for a few days. Mark and Albert were away. She was incredibly helpful.”

“In what ways?” Lucy asked as she continued to put things away.

“I ate like a hog and slept like a bear in winter. The queen also taught me a great deal. She told me my other affinities are with Eir and Njörun,” I said. “She showed me how to dampen the power of someone else who has a link to Bellona. I even found her praying over me while I slept, trying to stimulate my healing so I would be ready to face Fenwick. We talked about other things as well.”

“Looking at you, it seems she did some good,” Lucy commented. “The scar is much less prominent. You’re not so pale anymore.”

In my previous adventure, Lord Barrowton announced his displeasure with me by striking me in the face with the end of a whip. At first, the scar was as wide and raised as my little finger. By the time I left the castle and Queen Liliana’s care, only a couple of days, it had faded and was reduced in size to slightly smaller than the thickness of a goose quill.

“Thank you,” I replied. “I was more concerned with my health and stamina than my cheek, with Aloysius Fenwick on the loose.”

“Aloysius?” she asked with a smile.

“I couldn’t make that up,” I said.

“She taught you a great deal. Are you upset with me that I did not?” Lucy asked.

“Why would I be?” I responded, puzzled.

“Because I would not tell you about your other affinities?”

“Not at all,” I assured her. “I accept that your clairvoyance prevents you from sharing things and that you prefer to err on the side of caution. The queen stated that since she is not clairvoyant, she felt free to tell me.”

Lucy looked relieved.

“After a couple of days, I felt prepared to take on Fenwick. I left the castle and made myself visible, hoping he would find me. While I was out, he accosted Freddy at the Equestrian Club and knocked him senseless. He sent a note to me, threatening Freddy’s life. I hurried over, and Freddy and I subdued him.”

“It sounds like there is more excitement in that than in your bland description,” Lucy commented wryly.

I shrugged. “Sir Oliver came and collected Fenwick.”

“So he’s a prisoner now?” Lucy asked.

“Um, no.”

Lucy stopped and turned to me with her hands on her hips, an expression of outrage on her face. I recounted the events of the morning—my visit to Sir Oliver and then my summons to meet King Mark. In the midst of my explanation, she sat next to me and clasped my hand.

“I’m sure you’re disappointed,” she said when I finished.

“About which bit?”

“Though I expect it’s troubling to learn your stepmother wanted you dead, I was thinking more about the Eastern March,” she said.

“Only a little,” I admitted. “I’m not surprised, so that lessens the sting. The king has his reasons and did not need to explain them to me, but he did. I understand why he followed this course. There is more in play than just my situation. Plus, I have so much for which to be thankful. And, I have a new puzzle to solve.”

“Already?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Tell me about it over dinner,” she said.

We went to the Brass Frog, a fine inn nearby. Over dinner, I shared with Lucy what Tom Gibson told me earlier. When our server cleared away our plates, she put her chin in her hand and gazed at me.

“Do you think this will be difficult?” she asked.

“It depends on who this Depew fellow is,” I said. “If it is just him, getting the letters back should not be difficult. If he is connected to Donald Farquahr or Nils Pedersen’s organizations, it will be much trickier.”

“Do you think Depew has contacted Gibson’s uncle?” she inquired.

“I am guessing he has, though I don’t know for certain. From what Tom told me, I doubt his uncle has the money to meet the blackmailer’s price,” I said. “At least, not right away.”

“How much would the blackmailer charge?” she asked.

“It might be as much as fifty thousand ducats,” I stated. “It depends on Depew, but I think he’ll eventually settle for less.”

“May I borrow Andy tomorrow?” she asked, changing the subject entirely.

Andy was my horse. I resisted owning a horse for the longest time. They are expensive, and they, as living beings, require attention and pleasant interaction with people. Lucy maneuvered me into a corner not long ago, and it resulted in me buying Andy from Carl Stensland. Andy still stayed in the stable behind his inn, and a boy named Jerry continued to care for Andy. Jerry was a precocious lad who was an orphan. He showed up at the inn

begging for food. Carl learned of this and gave the boy the job of tending to his horse and those of any guests. He made Jerry go to school, gave him a roof over his head, fed him, and paid him a small wage. When I bought Andy, Carl bought another horse, and Jerry now took care of both of them. Carl and I both paid Jerry, and, at nine years old, he was earning a decent weekly sum. With Jerry still a part of Andy's daily life, it relaxed my obligation to spend time with my horse—not that it was any great burden to do so.

“Certainly,” I agreed.

“I'll need your saddlebags, too,” she said. “The country markets will have the first herbs and flowers of the spring for sale, and I need to restock the shop. The same goods won't arrive in the city markets for another month. I'll use the saddlebags to carry my money and some samples back. The bulk of the material will be delivered by the growers later.”

“I'll make sure the saddlebags are at the stable,” I said. “Though I was hoping it could wait until the morning.”

“I've missed you, too, Caz,” she answered, clasping my hand across the table.

We departed the inn and returned to her shop. She lived upstairs. Without sharing any sordid details, she showed me how much she had missed me while she was away. I will say that when your beloved has magical ability, with her dominant being Freyja, the goddess of romance and desire...

Later that evening, Lucy shared with me the plans they developed for our wedding during her visit to her aunt and uncle. As I mentioned earlier, we would be married at the estate of her uncle, Freddy's father, the Duke of Manton. The duke had offered an excellent suggestion. Since Freddy was his heir, the wedding was a cause for celebration throughout the duchy. Freddy's father suggested making the wedding into a fair for anyone from the duchy who wished to attend.

Given that we were marrying on the evening of the summer solstice, a time for revelry throughout Aquileia, this made sense. Our weddings would now be the excuse for a gathering similar to a late summer harvest fair, except it would take place at midsummer. Word was being sent to all the mummers, musicians, and other entertainers in the duchy and beyond, informing them of the occasion. Freddy's father was happy to cover the expense of expanding our wedding in such a way, as a fair of this type would benefit many residents of his duchy.

It also transformed our joint wedding from an affair involving only the upper classes into an event for the enjoyment of everyone. Lucy and Greta, and Lucy's mother, Marta, were enthusiastic about the plan. Greta's mother was a bit disappointed that her idea of a socially elite wedding was discarded so rapidly by the others. Lucy said she would change her mind when the day arrived and she saw the festivities taking shape. I thought the idea of a fair

was excellent fun and told Lucy so.

She shared the list of those who would be invited. All my friends were included, and I noted my father's name among the guests. Lucy and her mother would be busy addressing the invitations over the next few weeks.

In the morning, I returned to my rooms. After I changed my clothes, I took my saddlebags to the stable. Jerry was not present—I expected he was at school—so I left the saddlebags hanging outside of Andy's stall after giving my horse some attention and affection.

It was a fine, fair spring morning, unlike the cold rain the day before. I set off for the Palace of Justice with a smile on my face and a bit of bounce in my step. The people I passed seemed to share my good humor. Pleasant smiles and friendly greetings accompanied me along the way.

The scribe at the end of the entrance hall in the administrative section of the Palace of Justice did not share my good mood. He was scowling and snappish. When I asked to see Sir Oliver, he put down his work with great annoyance and went to see if Sir Oliver was available. When he returned, he almost snarled that Sir Oliver would come see me presently.

As is my custom, I idled in the hall, examining the portraits of the previous holders of Sir Oliver's post. As usual, I found myself lingering over the portrait of Sir Samuel. Unlike the sleek, plump, contented men in the other paintings, Sir Samuel seemed to have a spark in his eye—he had only one. There was an eyepatch covering his left eye. On the right side, there was a scar from his hairline down to his cheek, crossing over that missing left eye on a diagonal, just below the line of the strap to his eyepatch. He was a pirate of sorts before becoming the Principal of the Watch. The king gave him a letter of marque and reprisal—a license to act as a pirate against our neighbors, the Rhetians. He was so successful, that the Rhetians offered trade concessions if the king would rescind Sir Samuel's letter of marque. The king did and made Sir Samuel the Principal of the Watch, where he had similar success.

Eventually, Sir Oliver came to collect me. I followed him upstairs to his office. He sat behind his desk, and I took a chair in front.

“Visiting me two days in a row, Caz. I am truly blessed,” he said with a sarcastic edge to his voice.

“Thank you, Ollie, but the pleasure is all mine,” I replied, twitting him back by using a nickname that, as far as I know, only I ever used. “What can you tell me about a man named Laurence Depew?”

“The name is not familiar,” Sir Oliver said. “What has he done?”

“Blackmail,” I replied. “Had an affair with a married woman. She wrote him some love notes. He's used them to extract a hundred ducats a month from her ever since.”

“A tidy sum. About how long ago did this take place?” Sir Oliver asked.

“I don't know exactly,” I admitted. “I'll guess it's been ten years or so. I

can find out?”

Sir Oliver shook his head. “Not necessary. It’s old enough that the information would be in the archives and not the active files.”

“I don’t need to put you to that trouble, Ollie,” I said in a friendly tone. “It’s enough for me to know that this fellow is not linked to Pedersen or Farquahr.”

“Unless he uses another name, he is not,” Sir Oliver stated.

“Thank you, Sir Oliver,” I said as I rose from the chair.

“How are you planning on getting the letters back from him?” Sir Oliver asked as I was leaving.

“It’s probably better if you don’t know,” I said with a wink.

Leaving the Palace of Justice, I headed for the brass foundry Tom Gibson owned. It was in the part of the city populated by dozens and dozens of small manufactories. This part of the city was just upstream from the mouth of the river. The area had its own unique set of smells, which varied as one walked along. Underlying it all was the smell of smoke from the many furnaces. Passing a smelter, a metallic tang would occasionally appear. A lead smelter produced a taste you sensed on the back of your tongue that lingered for hours. Some smelled like rotten eggs or fish gone bad. The buildings were small and set apart from one another to lessen the risk of a fire spreading from one to the next.

The Gibson foundry was next to the river. I entered the small office and asked for Tom. A clerk waved his arm in the direction of the shop. I went to the door and saw him. He was busy overseeing one of his men pouring molten metal carefully into what I assumed was a mold. Tom’s collar was off, and he wore a heavy leather apron, as did the other men.

When they finished, he turned to head back into the office and saw me. He waved and crossed over. His face was ruddy from the heat of the furnace he was standing near. I followed him into his office and shut the door.

“What brings you here, Caz?” he asked.

“Some questions I didn’t think to ask yesterday,” I replied.

He opened his arms as if to welcome them.

“How long has this Depew been blackmailing your stepmother?” I inquired.

“It’s been at least eight years,” he answered. “I’ll ask Marian tonight.”

“Does Depew have an address where she sends the money?” I asked.

“If he does, we don’t know it,” Gibson stated. “He sends someone to collect the money on the fifteenth, according to what Marian told me.”

“She pays in cash?”

“Yes.”

“So, I will need to wait until the fifteenth of Harpa to see this man and follow him,” I stated. “When we get closer to the date, I’ll contact you with any further questions.”

The month of Harpa had just started, so it would be eleven days until the man came to pick up his money. A load of a thousand gold ducats would be bulky and heavy. “How are the coins provided?” I asked

“I don’t know,” Gibson replied. “I would guess in whatever box or sack the bank delivers them in.”

“Either a wooden chest or a heavy canvas bag, then,” I said. “Does the man come with a cart to carry them?”

“Again, I don’t know,” Tom answered.

“Find out and let me know,” I said. “There is no way to track down this Depew until then unless you know where he lives.”

“I don’t. I’m sorry,” Tom said.

“Don’t fret, Tom. We’ll find him. Once we do, the rest should be pretty simple,” I said.

I took my leave and headed back up to the heart of the city. The river curved, so instead of following its course, I cut across overland. Along the way, I stopped and ate at a street vendor’s cart. He had spiced meat, just cooked, wrapped in soft bread. It was delicious. I then headed to my *salle d’armes* for some exercise.

Over the next ten days, I lived at a leisurely pace. I visited the *salle* almost daily. Freddy invited me to play cards twice at the Equestrian Club. I helped Lucy when shipments arrived at her shop. Most important, I arranged for Robby and Hank, two former rangers, to help me on the night I planned to retrieve the letters from Laurence Depew.

Ordinarily, I would have asked Carl Stensland to aid me, but his inn was still enjoying an uptake in business. The evening before my duel with Lord Barrowton, my seconds and I dined at his inn. One of my seconds was Prince Albert. When word got out that the crown prince saw fit to dine at the Foaming Boar, patrons swarmed the place. Carl was simply too busy to take

a night off for a fun adventure.

On one of the first days, I paid a visit to the jeweler who made Lucy's betrothal ring and earrings. He remembered my name. *As well he should*, I thought, having spent nearly fifteen thousand ducats with him not long ago.

I explained what I wanted and particularly stressed the importance of the lack of flaws in the gems. He pulled out trays of the different stones and selected two or three of each type. They were not the largest in each group. Then he fastened what looked like a small spyglass to his right eye and held each stone up to examine it. In the case of the rubies, he discarded both stones he chose initially and rooted through the rest.

"Ah," he said, "this is the one I was looking for."

He held it up to his spyglass, turning it this way and that, then put it with the others he selected.

"These are as near to flawless as I have," he said when he finished. "I take great care in choosing stones initially, and these are the best of the best. They are of a similar quality to the ones in her ring. That's important, you know," he said, laying his finger beside his nose.

I grinned at his gesture. The jeweler was curious about Lucy's ring and earrings when I bought them. At the time, he asked me if Lucy possessed magical ability, as notes and drawings in a book his father compiled indicated. I claimed ignorance. Since then, I suspected he had done more research. His gesture with his finger indicated to me he wished to be discreet.

I leaned forward to whisper to him. "You were right," I admitted. "I've learned she does have powers. But we mustn't talk about it. City folk like to think the old ways are gone. You and I know different."

The jeweler beamed with happiness. "I'm honored, sir, believe me," he said. "In looking through my father's notes, he was extremely proud to have been selected to make jewelry like this for some of the gifted people. If you'll pardon the pun, he considered it a crowning achievement."

I laughed at his play on words. He then drew a quick sketch of how he suggested we arrange the stones. They would be connected by a filigree of thin platinum. He then went into the back and returned with the old dusty book he showed me months earlier. Flipping to a place he marked, he turned a couple of pages and then showed me a drawing of a human torso. On it, four spots were marked. Two were on the breastbone, with the other two slightly above and to either side. The diamond was the centerpiece.

"According to what my father was told, these are the places for the most effective connection, if that is the correct term," he whispered. "The dominant goes here, on the lower region of the heart. The diamond, here, on the upper region of the heart, with the others here and here. Once you give this to your lady, she should come visit so I can adjust to make sure the gems are situated precisely."

He then added up some numbers. His face bore a slight grimace. "What's

wrong?” I asked.

“I do not want to scare you away,” he said. “This will be expensive.”

“Sir,” I responded, “I knew that before I walked in. You will not scare me away. My lady trusts you, and therefore, so do I.”

He sighed with relief. Rather than say it, he showed me his figures. The total was ten thousand, two hundred ducats.

“As I said, you did not scare me away,” I assured him. “My only question is whether you can have it finished before the end of Skerpia.”

“Certainly, Mr. FitzDuncan,” he replied, relieved.

As we drew closer to the middle of the month, I examined the area around Gibson’s house. Tom told me the man who picked up the money came to the back, to the servants’ entrance. The Gibson house backed up to a service alley. I found a spot where I could hide and wait for the man to appear. It was more difficult to find a place to leave Andy, my horse.

Since a thousand gold ducats weighs more than five stone, I wanted to be prepared if Depew’s accomplice rode. I suspected he would not and would use either a cart or a sturdy rucksack, but if he showed up on horseback and I did not have Andy nearby, I would lose the trail. Hank and Robby were both between jobs currently. Hank would hold Andy near the end of one entrance to the service alley. Robby would hide near the other entrance.

The fifteenth of Harpa finally arrived. I woke early and found my hiding place. Gibson told me the man generally arrived just after midday, but I did not want to miss him if he came early.

I will admit, the waiting is exceedingly boring. The necessary patience is something I learned while in the Rangers. I certainly was not born with it. While in the Rangers, there were times when we would need to wait for several days before the Rhetians would appear in the jaws of a trap we prepared for them. The success of the operation made the boredom worthwhile. Since I found my way into my strange sort of business, there were several times when I needed to wait like this. As when I was in the Rangers, successful outcomes made the time spent in anticipation an investment rather than a waste. It did not make that waiting time pass more quickly, though.

True to what Tom told me, the man appeared just after midday. Dressed as a common laborer, there was nothing special about his appearance. He seemed about my age, so I knew it was not Depew himself. He was steering a wheelbarrow in front of him. He went to the servants’ entrance and knocked. Mrs. Gibson’s butler allowed him inside briefly.

The two of them appeared shortly, sharing the weight of the stout canvas bag containing the money. They put it in the wheelbarrow, and the man turned it around and headed away. As he departed, the butler looked daggers at him.



I allowed the man a head start (and also wanted the butler to return inside). The butler did go back in, and I popped out of hiding just in time to see which way my wheelbarrow toting acquaintance went. I thanked all the heavenly beings that I guessed correctly and positioned Hank with Andy in the direction the man headed.

Robby saw me come out into the alley and followed me. I walked briskly, not wanting my wheelbarrow man to get too far ahead. Hank saw me as I passed him, and he followed as well. Robby hurried to catch me, as we had planned before.

“We’re following a man with a wheelbarrow,” I explained. “When we turn the corner, we will see him, then we should split up.”

Robby nodded. He knew what to do. Hank was still trailing us, leading Andy by the reins. When we turned the corner, we saw the man with the wheelbarrow not quite a furlong ahead of us. Robby crossed to the far side of the street while I stayed on the near side.

I allowed Robby to pull ahead of me for now. Later, we would switch, and I would pass him by. This was in case our man with the wheelbarrow was being cautious and checking to see if he was followed. There was enough foot traffic that neither of us stood out.

Our target did not stop and turn around once. He kept marching ahead, pushing the wheelbarrow. He turned twice. First to the north for a bit, then west. He only paused twice to wipe sweat off his face with a rag.

We reached the part of the city where the houses began to separate from one another. Each house was typically surrounded by a small amount of cultivated land—less than an acre—on which mostly vegetables were planted. The traffic dropped and made it more difficult for us to avoid being spotted if our quarry ever turned to look behind.

I gave Robby the hand signal indicating he should stop. I continued on, though allowing the distance between me and my target to increase. There was no danger of losing him in a crowd. He turned his wheelbarrow into a property on the left. I continued to walk along at an unhurried pace as though I was heading further down the road.

As I approached the house, I made note of its configuration. It had a more pronounced set of eaves than the other houses, and I felt confident I would recognize it in the dark when I returned. Just before I passed, a gray-haired man came out and clapped the other on the shoulder. The two of them hoisted the heavy canvas bag out of the wheelbarrow and took it into the house. I kept on my current course until I was out of sight, then turned down the next lane I reached. In this part of the city, near the outer wall, the streets were no longer paved.

Unlike most of the other houses in this area, the land around his house was not being used to grow anything useful. There were clumps of grass, shin-high, somewhat choked by the remnants of last year’s mowing. Plenty

of weeds, most above the height of my knee, grew more aggressively.

After circling around, I caught up with Robby and Hank. From where we were standing, we could just see the house. Robby earlier spotted a stele along the road, inscribed with a dedication to the Three Major Gods, and it stated that a Rufus Burnham paid for the monument. Counting from the stele, our target occupied the fifteenth house on the left, according to Robby. We arranged to meet at the stele at dusk that evening.

Riding Andy, I returned to the center of the city. We all needed to change clothes, planning on wearing dark colors to fade into the night. I stopped by the Foaming Boar and wheedled with the cooks to get them to serve me some dinner since I could not wait to be seated in the dining room. They stalled until Carl appeared. When he heard my request, he nodded briefly to indicate they should feed me. Earlier in the week, I told Carl what I planned to do. He was slightly envious and expressed a wish that he could join us for our bit of fun.

After I ate, standing up in the kitchen, I found the large bundle of sticks I stored earlier in the stable. Jerry wanted to know what they were for, but I wouldn't tell him. He came and watched as I lashed the bundle behind the saddle and asked again what I was planning to do.

"I'm heading out to help someone who asked for my assistance, to do something he couldn't," I said, being evasive.

"Why do you need a bunch of sticks?" he asked.

I laid my finger beside my nose in the customary gesture of "it's a secret." Seeing his look of frustration, I added, "If all goes well, Jerry, I promise to tell you about it later. That will have to be enough."

Jerry gave a dramatic sigh of disappointment as he turned and headed back to his loft room above the stalls of the stable. I swung onto Andy's back and set off. The light was beginning to fade as I departed, and it was quite gloomy when I arrived at the stele. Hank and Robby were already there, with their own bundles of sticks.

We waited for the darkness to become complete, then walked slowly toward the house. The three of us split up. Hank and Robby positioned themselves to see the front and both sides of the house. I left Andy with Hank and moved quietly to behind the building. I kept my distance from the small privy located there. We could see candlelight within. It seemed to take forever for them to decide to go to bed but finally, the candlelight disappeared from the ground floor and reappeared in the two windows at the rear of the house.

One thing I saw before the light was extinguished that pleased me greatly was both windows were open slightly. The day had been warm so it made sense to want to sleep with a nice spring breeze blowing in. That suited my plans perfectly.

After the lights went out, I waited as long as I could stand, then went out

front to collect Robby and Hank and our bundles of sticks. We crept quietly to the rear of the house and piled our bundles together. We kept the mass of branches away from the side of the house. Then I wandered around, feeling with my feet to find clumps of moldy grass that were cut half a year earlier. When I gathered an armload, I returned to our pile of sticks and put the soggy grass on top of the sticks.

Hank produced some tinder and quickly knelt and started a fire. The sticks we heaped up caught the flame quickly. The moldy grass on top produced plenty of noxious smoke. From inside the house, you would believe the whole rear side of the building was on fire.

Robby and Hank went back to their mounts and returned holding cudgels. The three of us went to the door at the side of the house. It did not take long before we heard one of the men inside yell, "Fire!"

The first one out the door was our wheelbarrow-pushing acquaintance. Hank grabbed him by the arm and pulled him away from the doorway. Robby struck him just behind the ear with his club. The man went down in a heap.

The second to appear was the gray-haired man. He was holding what looked like a small strongbox. This time, Hank did the honors and bashed him in the back of the head. Robby neatly caught the strongbox before it fell as the man collapsed.

I went back to the fire, already almost burnt out. I found a stick with one end untouched and withdrew it, using it as a small torch. Returning, I entered the house, found a candle, and lit it. I tossed the remnant of the stick outside.

"Bring the box," I called.

While I waited for Robby to appear, I found another candle and added its light to the scene. Looking around the room, I saw it was comfortably furnished, contrary to the distressed appearance of the grounds outside the house. Robby brought the box in and laid it on a table. Hank followed him in.

"Find some more candles or a lamp," I suggested. "Then we can see what we have here."

In short order, they found more candles, and we could now see easily. I opened the strongbox, hoping to find it contained the letters from Mrs. Gibson. In this, I was disappointed. There was a single piece of paper: a bank draft for thirty thousand ducats made out to Laurence Depew. Examining it, I saw the effective date of the draft was not for another ten weeks, on the first of Heyannir.

"Seven hells!" I cursed.

"What's wrong, Cap'n?" Hank asked.

"We came here tonight to retrieve some letters that a woman wrote him years ago. He was using them to blackmail her. It seems he sold the letters to her brother-in-law already," I explained.

"So, we're done?" Robby inquired.

“No,” I replied, shaking my head. “We all saw the one bring a thousand ducats here today. I don’t think I’ll need to look too hard to find more.”

“Want any help with that, Cap’n?” Hank asked.

“Of course,” I said. “You two will split ten percent of whatever we find. I’ll keep the rest unless it comes to more than six thousand ducats. Above six thousand, my client gets half of it back.”

I’d already considered this before asking the two of them to help. Paying them was my responsibility—part of the expense of taking on this problem. The two of them might leave tonight with a few hundred ducats each, and I knew they and their families could both use the money. It certainly made them eager to begin searching the house.

Finding the money took very little time. Robby found the door to the root cellar. At the bottom of the ladder, there were four bags identical to the one we saw earlier today, all lined up. We heaved them up and arranged them on the backs of our horses. We then rode back into town, moving slowly in the darkness.

We returned to my rooms above the bookseller and carried the bags upstairs. All the bags weighed the same, and I figured each one held a thousand ducats. Taking one, we dumped it on the floor and began counting. Less than an hour later, Robby and Hank left, each sporting grins they could not wipe from their faces. Neither had anything in which to carry two hundred ducats, so would need to return. I asked them to find a cart for tomorrow. I would take the rest of the money to the bank, but having a cart of some sort would make it far easier to carry.

While I was happy for Hank and Robby, I was distressed that Depew had sold the letters already. How I would get them away from Robert Gibson was a problem I had not even considered. It would be far more difficult than what we just did. Gibson might not even have the letters. Chances were good that he already gave them to his solicitor.

The next morning they returned. They each had sturdy bags to carry their shares in. They helped me carry the other bags down to the cart they brought. When it was loaded, they walked with me while I wheeled it to my bank, not far away. I deposited the money into my account. Hank and Robby took the cart to return it, and I started to head back to my rooms.

Halfway there, I stopped. Lucy might have some thoughts about what I should do next. The Majors and Minors knew I certainly did not have any good ideas. I aimed my steps in her direction. When I reached the door at the rear of her shop, two things happened.

First, I smelled something marvelous. Whatever it was reminded me of the scent of Lucy’s hair when I woke next to her in the morning. I wondered if she was making the tonic she shared with me when we visited Eatonford. A small amount of that liquid was a near-miraculous restorative. The little I knew about it, I learned that it had a different scent depending on whose

nose was experiencing it.

The other thing that occurred was Lucy calling out to me from upstairs where her kitchen was. "Caz," she shouted, with a tone of panic in her voice, "this is a bad time for you to be here. I'll explain later, but please don't come in!"

That puzzled me, but I obeyed and left quietly. I did not want to give Tom Gibson the bad news yet and didn't feel like returning to my rooms and brooding. Freddy's house was not far away, and he would be able to sympathize with me at least. Besides, if I could stretch out our conversation, he might invite me to lunch at the Equestrian Club. After all, I had just saved his life not long before when Fenwick threatened to kill him.

In response to my knock on the door, the hulking mass that was Theo answered it. For those of you who are new to my stories, Theo is Freddy's manservant. He is, to put it kindly, a bit odd. He has told me he does not like anyone except Lucy. He barely tolerates Freddy, his employer. Theo is terrified of Freddy's diminutive betrothed, Greta. He despises all Freddy's other friends and acquaintances and thinks part of his job is to write reports to Freddy's father, finding fault with everyone Freddy sees and everything Freddy does. Despite that, he keeps an excellent house and is an accomplished cook when he is not trying to poison me by adding dead mice, insects, or rodent droppings to my plate.

He opened the door and gave me his usual baleful look. He did not speak. I tried to wait him out but was not successful. My temper was already up due to my frustration at not obtaining the letters the night before.

"Hello, Theo," I said through clenched teeth. "I feel it only fair to warn you that I am in the process of digesting some rather bad news today. If you try to enrage me in the usual manner, I might not be able to control my impulses. Understood?"

Theo's expression did not waver in the slightest amount. "Lord Rawlinsford, FitzDuncan here to see you," he bawled out, not even turning his head.

"Send him back, Theo," Freddy shouted in return.

Theo stepped aside, giving me room to enter. In addition to his actually announcing my presence (something that was not always sure to happen), his stepping aside showed me he was taking my warning seriously. Theo maintained his character, though, by not offering to take my sword and jacket. I took them off myself and hung them on the pegs nearby.

Freddy was in his drawing-room, sprawled on the sofa. That was Freddy's usual posture. He was a lanky fellow and liked to stretch his body out. He had been reading, and the book was now pages down on the table.

"Hello, Caz," he greeted me.

"Good morning, Freddy," I responded and flopped myself into a comfortable armchair near him.

“What brings you by?” Freddy asked.

“I need some sympathy and some good ideas, if you have any to spare,” I asked.

Freddy’s eyebrows rose. “Who are you, and what have you done with my friend Caz?” he teased.

I gave him a look that combined a scowl and a smile.

“It’s not like you to want or need either, Caz,” he explained.

“I have a project I’m working on that just became more difficult,” I said.

As I mentioned earlier, Freddy was the first person to employ me with a “project” and understood what I did to earn a living as well as anyone. He had been an integral part of two of my more complicated endeavors in the last year. He was an enormous help in both situations and expressed a desire to be involved in the future. Plus, he introduced me to his cousin, Lucy, and I would be forever in his debt for that kindness.

I explained the task Tom Gibson gave me without mentioning his name or the nature of his business. Freddy listened thoughtfully. I then told of my disappointment the night before at finding a bank draft instead of the letters.

“So, the uncle has the letters? Or his solicitor?” Freddy clarified.

“Yes,” I responded. “The solicitor, most likely.”

“I agree,” Freddy said. “Something like that is best put in the hands of the lawyers quickly. Are you going to break into his office?”

I shook my head.

“Why not?”

“It’s different,” I explained. “Taking the letters and the money away from Depew did not bother me in the slightest. His keeping the letters to use against the woman who wrote them was a breach of trust. He used them to blackmail her and so obtained the money illegally.”

“But it’s a lawyer,” Freddy said. “They’re almost as bad as blackmailers.”

I chuckled as he intended me to but shook my head again. “The lawyer hasn’t done anything illegal. We can argue that he should have a better class of client but stealing the letters from him would be outright theft. I can’t justify it to myself.”

“I understand,” Freddy assured me. “Let me think about it. Over lunch, perhaps? Come to the club with me?”

Freddy and I departed not long after. He brought the walking stick I’d given him as a solstice present. He had no need to use it for walking—he was in no way lame—but the stick had a heavy gold knob on the end, and I’d given it to him for self-defense. Most men of our standing carried swords, as I did, but Freddy was a clumsy fencer on his best day. A stick with a weighted end was a much better weapon for him, and it had already proven useful on two occasions that I knew of.

Once we left his house, we began discussing what we knew about the plans for our weddings. Freddy was delighted with his father’s idea of turning

our weddings into a fair for the entire duchy. Greta was equally enthusiastic, he assured me, and even her mother was beginning to warm to the idea.

We reached the Equestrian Club and were seated for lunch. We continued to share what we each learned—from Lucy in my case, Greta in his—about the trip the women took to his father’s. Halfway through the soup course, Freddy looked up, excited. “The judge,” he blurted.

Freddy’s pronouncement was a complete change of topic. It caught me like a sudden shift of the wind can catch a sail on the wrong side of a boat. It took me a moment to realize what he was talking about.

“The judge,” he repeated. “You explained that the judge was a friend of the uncle’s, correct?”

I nodded.

“Would another judge rule in the uncle’s favor, even with the letters?” Freddy asked.

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “I’m not a lawyer.”

“You should discuss this with your client and his solicitor,” Freddy advised. “If they feel that the uncle’s case falls apart without a friendly judge, that will be your best chance of success.”

I thought about it briefly. Freddy’s idea was worth pursuing, especially since I was unable to develop any better plans. I excused myself from the table and found the major domo. He gave me paper and lent me a pen, and I scrawled a quick note to Tom Gibson, asking to meet him and his solicitor the next morning and to let me know where and when we would be meeting. I gave the major domo a ducat and asked that he have the note delivered immediately and gave him the address of Gibson’s foundry. The major domo would pocket most of the ducat, but I knew he would make sure the note arrived promptly.

When I returned to the table, they had just served the main course. Freddy went back to trying to discuss our wedding, but I must admit I listened with only half an ear. Freddy’s idea about the judge started my mental gears turning again.

