

"Marta!"

A white cloud billowed around her as Marta shifted the weight of the sack of flour to her knee. She lifted her head above the edge of the sack and breathed deep to yell back, but choked on the dust that leaked from the badly spun cloth. She heaved the sack to the ground in another cloud of dust, and coughed until her eyes watered.

"Marta!"

Leward panicked easily. Boisterous sounds from the early dinner crowd filled the hallway. There were only a handful of rolls left from the morning, and probably everybody's mug was empty. Marta wiped her eyes and saw that a large trail of flour had poured from the bottom of the bag, back all the way to the store room.

"Marta." This voice was soft, directly behind her.

"Cadras!" She spun around. He still had not slept. His brown hair was greasy and stuck out in a few directions. A couple days worth of stubble bristled around his cheeks and chin and his eyes were red and sunken. He pulled a plug of something from his pocket and began to chew it.

"Your eye is twitching." She told him.

"Marta!" Leward called again.

"More ale!" Somebody cheered from the other room and the call was immediately echoed by a dozen other voices.

"Ale!" Came the particularly loud call of a particularly drunk patron.

Cadras eyed the door to the front room, and grabbed hold of her arm, more roughly than he intended.

"I want you to work for me." He was whispering, for no apparent reason. "I'll pay you five weight gold pieces a month."

"Gold?" Marta whispered back, thinking he must have misspoken. Cadras nodded, looking over her shoulder toward the main room. Marta had been working for Cadras for a long time, for a weight of silver every week. Cadras wanted to know everything, and Marta knew

everybody in the Valley. Children in the Valley-- the ones that survived, anyway-- had to find niches. Most boys were petty thieves until they grew old enough to sell their muscle to petty merchants. Most girls were petty thieves until they grew old enough to sell their bodies to petty merchants. Marta had done a bit of thieving here and there, but had found at an early age that some people would pay her for secrets. She had created an odd trade, bartering information. Even as good as she was at listening, getting people to confide in her, and deducing people's motivation, her occupation had been a rather poor and unpredictable one, until a couple years ago, when Cadras had put her on retainer.

"Five gold pieces?" She whispered again.

Cadras shook his head and corrected her, "Five weight. Scrip."

It was odd for anybody in the Valley to deal in the Empire's paper money, but Marta knew where to get a good deal on an exchange.

Cadras nodded again and pulled out a cigarette. He took out his strange vial, full of iridescent liquid, and pulled off the cork. A small, blue, flame shot out of the top of the glass vial and he held it up to light his cigarette.

"When?" Marta asked.

"Now."

A dozen men were yelling her name from the other room. She could picture Leward's exact expression, standing over the pots, muttering to himself with his brow furrowed, and scowling over his shoulder ever couple seconds to look for her. Even after thirty years of fairly successful cooking, Leward always seemed to be on the verge of crisis when he was in the kitchen.

"I can't just leave Leward like this." She said, but then said, with barely a pause, "My things are upstairs."

"Go get them, I'll be in back." Cadras was holding gold coin that was at least a double weight. He set it down on the broken flour sack, saying, "This will make it up to Leward."

Marta bounded lightly up the stairs. The commotion in the main room died down as she

got farther away, until it was just a murmur. She wondered how Cadras could throw money around like this. He had always been extremely tight with his money.

It did not take her long to throw her belongings into a satchel. She shrugged out of her dress and fastened a thin leather belt around her that held a sheathed knife in place between her shoulder blades. With her hair down, it was invisible even if somebody was looking for it. She dressed again, threw her slippers into her satchel and pulled on her boots, lacing them quickly with sharp tugs. She stuck her other knife in her boot, heaved the satchel up to her shoulder, and felt better than she had in months.

A lazy breeze stirred her curtains and the pungent, smoky, smell of the Merendir streets filled the room. She heard Leward's lumbering footfalls on the stairs. She went to the window and tossed her satchel down to Cadras, then grabbed the ledge and vaulted over. She staggered a bit when she landed, cursed, and left Leward's tavern behind forever.

At the mouth of the alley, they were accosted by a filthy man leaning heavily on a crutch. Marta sneered at him. She had known him since childhood, and she had no love for him. His filth was carefully cultivated, his degenerative disease an invention, and his personality an impressive collection of undesirable traits.

He spat in her direction, and shrewd eyes regarded her from behind a mask of grime and scars. "Well, if it isn't Marta," he sneered, bowing as best his crutch allowed him, "the haughty darling of old tavern men and soldiers everywhere."

Marta gave him her most ferocious smile. "Hello, Derkses. Your insults would hurt so much more if you weren't covered in your own shit."

"How about a kiss?" Derxes leared at her.

Marta spat back at him and skirted him by several feet as they left the alley. Cadras followed, having attended the exchange with only minimal interest.

"Beggar?" He asked her as he led them out onto the street and turned uphill. A team of Lamplighters walked downhill past them, joking among themselves, their long, hooked, torch poles over their shoulders. The Lamplighters were nearly to the Valley, so their work was

nearly done. A few working lamps still stood along the Street of Fools, but there were no lamps in the Valley. Some lamplighters would spend their evenings in the Street of Fools-- there was even a tavern named for them-- but most would retreat quickly to the parts of the city that were gentler, and better lit.

"Beggar, liar, layabout, lecher, jerk..." Marta told him.

"Cutpurse?"

"You'd have to be an idiot to get that close to him, but yeah."

"Is he a Union member?"

Marta shook her head. "Nah, but he's small time. It would have to be a pretty slow week for Grainger to bother with him."

Cadras nodded. He seemed not to be watching where he was going at all. He was staring at the ground and chewing his lip, muttering. It took her a minute to realize that he was muttering to her, and not to himself. "...picked me out, I'm not sure why, so Dantley decided that I should take his place." He looked up at her and said, "So that's why I need you to work for me exclusively. Help keep me informed. Maybe even get some people on a payroll. Well, maybe not a payroll, but you can make it worth their while. I can give you an extra gold weight a month for that."

"You want me to 'help' keep you informed? Without me, you wouldn't know which way to go to get to the docks," Marta smiled at Cadras, but he didn't seem to notice. He stopped to light a cigarette. It looked like his hands were shaking.

Marta stopped, planted her feet, and crossed her arms. Cadras stopped also, and turned to her with a frown.

"Civil service doesn't pay this well," Marta said. "You must have scored something big."

"Lucky horses," he lied. She glared at him for a while, to let him know she knew he was lying, and then turned abruptly and started walking.

"So who should I spy on first?" Marta asked with a grin, but Cadras ignored her, turning suddenly down a side street. They had been approaching the Victors' Arch-- a ponderous

marble monument, installed after the Empire's conquest of the Southern Isles, and carved with elaborate scenes from the war. It had been intended to instill Imperial pride among the common people, but instead the common people made a game of guessing the expense and saying how they would have spent the gold instead. Marta had heard everything from extending the sewer system into the Valley, or recobbling every street on the south hill, to draining the bay and refilling it with wine. Eventually, "an arch" had entered the lexicon-- at least in the Valley-- as shorthand for a vast amount of money.

"Why are you hiding from Grainger?" Marta asked.

The top of the Victors' Arch held a small chamber with an eternal flame and a great view of one of the main thoroughfares into and out of the Valley. The custodians of the flame were supposed to be knights, or priests of Quelestel, but they were really all Grainger's men, watching who came and went.

Cadras said nothing, so Marta stopped trying to talk to him. Marta held the immodest opinion that she was just about the smartest person she knew, but still Cadras astounded her sometimes. Other times, like now, she wanted to slap sense into him. Marta had an affection for Cadras that she imagined must be similar to that of a mother for her most idiotic child. She assumed that he was in love with her. He had certainly been loyal to her. He even gave her something resembling trust, and Cadras did not trust anybody.

"Don't tell people you're working for me," Cadras said, abruptly.

"Okay."

"You'll have to be discrete with the money."

"Sure. Where are we going?"

"To the Palace. To my office."

"Your what?"

"Don't tell people I have an office."

He was a truly strange person.

They heard the resonant note from the ram's horn well before they saw the rare, brilliant,

blue of the Crier's tunics. Marta laughed as the two men came into view. Cadras cocked his head at her quizzically, but she shook her head with a smirk. The younger of the two Criers had just filled his lungs, when he noticed Marta and choked.

"Nice tunic," she smiled at the Crier as they passed. He flushed to the tops of his ears, and she looked like she might cry trying to restrain her laughter.

"Citizens of Merendir!" The Crier bellowed behind them, emphasized by a long, deep, note from the horn. "The Emperor invites his loyal subjects to three days of feasting, races, and contests of skill, beginning at the dawn after next..."

Marta threw an arm around Cadras' shoulder, and wiped her eyes.

"You remember how the grain scare last summer had people talking about rebellion?" Marta asked.

Cadras nodded. His shoulders were taut. He twisted out from underneath her arm and lit yet another cigarette.

"Well," Marta exhaled, "I had been spending some time at the Lucky Run-- down by the Longshore Rooms? So anyway, Buernev..." she gestured back toward the Crier, who was loudly repeating his message a short distance down the street, "...he was there a lot too, and he and the bar man-- Moran of Eastflats, with the grey beard and the different colored eyes?-- they were always talking about how to make the Empire look foolish, how to turn the people against them. He took himself very, very, seriously, and he really wanted me to take him seriously, too. But now there he is, in a blue tunic... I hear that dye costs five weight a brick, except you can't even buy it, because you have to observe the old rituals before it bubbles, so the Church hates it, so it's really just the Emperor who can use it. And now Buernev has a bright blue tunic, and he goes around blowing horns and yelling whatever the Emperor wants him to."

Cadras considered all of this solemnly.

"First Buernev, and now you..." Marta said, shaking her head and watching Cadras out of the corner of her eye. "I never imagined you'd become a stooge for the government."

"I've been in the City Guard for three years," Cadras reminded her. Marta had been hoping for a better reaction.

They had climbed the steep west face of the north hill, where worn stone stairs flanked the cobbled streets and the whitewashed wood two-flats leaned and buckled with age. Near the palace, the north hill flattened out into broad avenues, and the fading sunlight cast the rows of well-kept houses and shops in a rosy warm light. The gold-capped central spire of the palace looked like a giant candle. Somewhere, a red band of light reflecting from the palace moved slowly down toward the bay, widening and fading until night finally fell.

Marta had never been inside the palace before. The third ring was unimpressive, especially in contrast to the grandeur that lay ahead of them. The outer wall was squat, made from ordinary brick, and tended by a very ordinary city guard, who was at least half-asleep when Cadras identified himself and hurried through the open portcullis. All Marta could see of the inner palace were the slender white spires of the the Imperial quarters, peeking out over the blocky red brick of the administration buildings.

Cadras led her through a series of connected courtyards, all deserted. Marta surmised that there must be a feast somewhere occupying the travelling parties and the palace staff. A group of Islanders carrying large sets of pipes and drums hurried past. Cadras led her through a passageway, over the seal of the City Guard, carved into a moldy flagstone. Marta had a moment of anxiousness, thinking that that she might run into Monegray, but he had joined the priesthood, citing a broken heart, and shipped off to the Southern Isles, sparing her from further ballads composed in her honor and performed with excruciating care and lack of talent outside her window at inappropriate times of the night.

They stopped in front of an unmarked door, banded in metal, and fitted with a tumbler lock. Cadras produced an iron key, cut for six pins. Marta whistled in appreciation, and Cadras actually half-smiled at her. She followed Cadras into a sparsely furnished office. It was too tidy to have been Cadras' for long, but whoever had occupied the office before had a complete disregard for aesthetics that must have made Cadras feel immediately at home. Plain

shelves, stacked with papers and ledgers, were the only adornment for the plain walls, aside from a large and somehow unsettling portrait of plain-looking young woman.

Cadras tossed his tobacco pouch onto the table and slumped into the armchair. His eyelids drifted closed and then shot open again. He sat up straight, spat something into the dustbin, and pulled a fist-sized lump of resin from his cloak. He produced a knife so quickly that Marta was not even sure where it had been hidden, cut a chunk from the resin, and started to chew it. Marta could see her reflection in the amber, glassy, spot where the knife had cut away the opaque, off-white, surface.

"What is that stuff?" Marta reached for it, and Cadras looked at her with a ferocity that made her draw her hand back, quickly.

Cadras sighed and even looked a little embarrassed.

"It's gum from the casper trees on the Southern Isles," he said, with a thin smile. "It keeps me awake. You can try some if you want."

Marta picked up the gum, angular and scarred from being whittled away a piece at a time. The outside was rough and chalky. A film was already beginning to form over the clear spot where Cadras had cut the most recent plug. Cadras still looked ashamed for having reacted to her so strongly, so she figured this was a good chance to play with his stuff with impunity. She picked up his knife from off the table and started to spin it on her finger. It was brilliantly balanced. It was plain, but the edge was excellent. She stabbed the corner of his tobacco pouch and pulled it across the table to her.

Marta cut a small plug of the casper gum and put it in her mouth. The bitterness made her cheeks hurt, but it was a bizarrely pleasurable sensation. She grinned at Cadras.

"Good stuff," she said. She felt her heart quicken. The colors in the room seemed more vivid, and the shapes more distinct.

Cadras reclaimed his tobacco pouch and began rolling cigarettes. "The man who used to occupy this office was Althurre Barwell," he said, "former Captain of the Guard and a member of a secret guard."



Marta's mouth was terribly dry from the astringent gum. She swallowed, and bitter liquid flowed down her throat. Her vision was practically pulsating. She was meticulously casual as she leaned over to spit the gum into the wastebasket. She sat up straight, dug her nails into her thigh, and tried to take deep breaths without Cadras noticing.

Cadras lit a cigarette. Marta watched the plumes of smoke that wreathed around his head as he spoke. "Althurre Barwell died this morning, supposedly in an accident at the forge, although I have my doubts. He had at least one very profitable side project, and I want to know about it."

Although she was practically trembling, and her skin felt too sensitive, and she couldn't blink, and she was obsessed with visual minutiae, Marta had no trouble listening to Cadras. She heard everything he said and more. He had disliked Althurre Barwell, but he was alarmed by the man's death. He saw a puzzle, and so he had to solve it. He also believed that somebody was using him, but he could not tell who or to what purpose. She focused on listening, and gradually the ugly rush of sensation subsided to a mild hum throughout her body.

Cadras produced a panelled wooden box from beneath the desk. He set three coins on the table and then set the box on top of them. He contorted his fingers in a specific, awkward, grip and then pushed the box down onto the coins. The dark panels sank a little and he pulled the top up.

"Clever." Marta said, then added, "The box, not you," She reached out and took the burning cigarette from his hands. He lit a fresh one without comment. He was excited. He removed two scraps of parchment from the box and set them on the table, with the writing facing her. He even grinned, so she blew a cloud of smoke in his face, but she got no reaction.

"One of those is a note requesting a meeting, tonight, at the Spotted Goose," Cadras said, sliding the parchments closer to her. Marta's entire body tingled. She laughed, for no good reason. Cadras cut himself another plug of gum and explained, "It would be entirely

innocuous, except that it was in an elaborately locked box hidden in a secret compartment under the desk. I'll need you to go find out why."

Cadras stood to pace, furiously smoking with one hand and unconsciously making a gold coin dance between the knuckles of his other hand.

"Who's he meeting?" Marta asked.

"It's signed 'Your Man In the South' and it says 'my man will meet you.'"

"South like the docks?" Marta wondered aloud.

Cadras shrugged and nodded at the papers. "This second one is a list of guards. You'll notice that I'm on there, with no mark, and that Stanton's name is crossed out..."

"I know Sidill," Marta interrupted, pointing to one of the circled names. Cadras snubbed out one cigarette and lit another. "He was kind of a prick," she said, "but he did a couple things well."

Marta gave Cadras a sly look, but he seemed not to notice.

"My theory," he said, pocketing his coin and pulling out a dagger, which he flipped around his fingers by the point while he spoke, "is that Barwell was feeling out these people to see if they could be bribed."

Watching Cadras made Marta feel restless, so she got up to pace, too.

"That place is really exclusive," Marta pointed out.

"What?"

"The Spotted Goose." Marta's heart was racing. She had not recognized how numb she had become at Leward's. She wanted to grab Cadras and embrace him, to thank him for relieving her tedium, but he was twitching and playing with a knife, so she thought better of it. Instead, she went to the desk and cut herself a tiny sliver of the casper gum. The bitterness was less shocking this time. "It's a classy place. I'll need some new clothes and some coin to throw around." She stopped near Cadras when their pacing brought them together, and held out her hand. His eyes narrowed a hair, but he dropped a scant weight gold into her palm. She wrinkled her nose and informed him, "You need a bath."

Cadras sat at the desk, put his head in his hands, and closed his eyes. Although his eyes were only closed for a moment, his body went into a restful state and every muscle, from his cheeks, to his fingers, and all the way through his back, slackened a bit. Then, in a space of two heartbeats, he was up and out of the chair the again, lighting a cigarette, and looking at her with sunken eyes.

"You better get going if you want to clean up before the Spotted Goose," he said.

Marta turned to leave, then turned back and took Cadras' hand. She looked into his wide, tired, eyes, and saw yearning that made her think of death. "Thank you," she said. She kissed him lightly on the cheek and left. He closed the door behind her.

The sun had set. She did not have much time to get to the Spotted Goose, and she was covered in flour and ale. She headed toward the baths nearest the palace. She would have to find Sidill and coax, threaten, or trick him into telling her why his name had been circled on the list of guards. She had always gotten her way with him before, so she anticipated little difficulty there, even if seeing him again was not an idea that she relished. Marta wondered how she would ever find the author of the anonymous note. Your Man In the South. It seemed odd that Barwell should have saved the note at all, since it contained no important information. Whoever had sent it was rich enough to have men. The handwriting was male, but written with such a flourish that it could almost have belonged to a woman. Maybe it was in code. Maybe Barwell had left it purposefully to deceive them. Maybe Althurre Barwell had been murdered and the note had been planted by his killer to confuse the matter. Marta realized she was still chewing some of Cadras' gum. She was walking very quickly and her head was swimming. Maybe Althurre Barwell was just bad at being sneaky. She spat out the gum and leaned against the nearest building, focusing on the solidity of the brick against her palm. She felt bile rising in her throat. She fought the urge to vomit, or to kneel in slick muck of the street.

With a deep breath and a snarl, Marta focused her eyes and pushed off from the wall. The first steps were hard, but before long the sickness had passed. She was glad that Cadras had

not seen her get sick. She wondered how much of the stuff he chewed. By the time she got to the baths, she was not at all nauseous, but lights still flashed around the edge of her vision and her fingers still tingled.

The bathhouse was one of the new monuments of Merendir, grand in its scale and architectural detail, but built of brick and mortar and chiseled stone, and nothing compared to the old monuments-- the Sea Wall, or the palace. Even the unassuming aqueduct that supplied the baths had an effortless combination of grace and solidity that seemed to quiet the space around it. Marta stopped to listen. In the late summer, the aqueducts whispered low and steady, as cold water rushed through them, unseen, to fill the cavernous cisterns. Marta liked to close her eyes and listen to the aqueduct, and imagine purple wildflowers peeking through the melting snow on a bright green mountain, like in the song that Rhoudenian men would get weepy and sing when they had had too much to drink.

A dispirited man sat in the steaming entry to the baths, sagging in the heat. His black hair was sodden and water was dripping down his face. He mopped his face with a wet sleeve and sighed when Marta walked in. Marta gave him a cheery smile. She took a comb and a clean dress from her satchel with tingling hands. The attendant took her satchel and handed her a damp token of engraved stone. She winked at him and he brightened a bit, and even nearly smiled at her, but slumped again as she turned away from him.

Although Emperor Galant IV had so far been a mostly uninspired and uninspiring ruler, one good thing that he had done was open the baths to women. It was dinner time, so Marta had the women's bath to herself. The bath was a circle of five rooms. They were all lovely, tiled in calm blues and greens, in intricate geometric patterns. With the exception of the large portrait of the Emperor that gazed out over the first room, where the women undressed, it was all very tasteful and relaxing. When she leaned down to unlace her boots, she lost her balance and nearly fell. Cursing Cadras' gum, she lowered carefully herself onto one of the tiled benches and removed her boots shakily. Even though she was alone, she removed her concealed knife and its entire assembly quickly from beneath her dress and shoved it deep into her boot.

It was not forbidden, or even uncommon, for a girl to carry a concealed knife in the city, but nice girls did not carry knives. Also, there was little point in hiding the knife if people knew you had it.

Marta left her boots and her dress on the shelves and went into the next room, smiling at the smoothness of the floor against her toes. The first hot room had a central well of steaming water, surrounded by three rings of benches, stocked intermittently with clay pots and stiff-bristled brushes. Marta dipped one of the pots into the well and poured the hot water over her, scrubbing and watching the red dust of Merendir pool at her feet and run into the drains. Once she had scrubbed herself clean, she moved quickly through the next two rooms-- the hot pools, where a group of women talked, the thick steam muffling their voices and obscuring them from sight, and the cold pools, where Marta briefly submerged herself and jumped out shivering-- and into the last room of the baths, where she climbed into the large pool of mild water, lay her head back against the tiles and closed her eyes.

Marta found that she could not keep her eyes closed very long. She sat up, her head suddenly clear. She waited a little while to see if her dizziness would return. When it did not, she rose, dried and dressed herself quickly, ran the comb through her hair a few times, then practically sprinted up the stairs. She tossed her towel into the huge wicker basket at the top of the stairs, and put a half copper in the hand of the old woman that sat beside it.

"Good evening to you, Marta." The woman smiled toothlessly.

"Good evening, Rena. How are the dogs?"

"Oh, fine. Just fine. Some brute layed into Motley with a walking stick, but I gave him a lashing with my tongue that he'll not soon forget." Rena lived alone in the Valley in a the last standing corner of the steadily collapsing building which, many years ago, had been her late husband's dye shop. She shamelessly fed the dogs that roamed the street and there were always half a dozen of them outside her door.

"Some people have no decency." Marta shook her head.

"No decency at all." Rena clicked her tongue. "And are you married yet, dear?"

"No Rena, I didn't get married this week, either. Believe me, when I do you'll be the first to hear about it."

"That boy, the attendant. What's his name? He's handsome. Would you like me to introduce you?"

"Thanks, Rena. I'll introduce myself."

Rena raised her eyebrows and feigned a scandalized look. "'Girls, these days. Why, when I was your age..."

Marta leaned forward and kissed the old woman on the cheek.

"Take care of yourself, Rena. I'll see you soon."

Marta retreated up the stairs before Rena could expound on the strict rules of courtship in her youth. She retrieved her satchel from Rena's attendant, who was at least twenty years older than her. She gave him a coin as well, and rejoined the now noisy streets of Merendir.

She felt refreshed and energetic, and she started to think about what she would do when she reached the Spotted Goose. She decided to skirt the valley. This was precisely the hour when everybody would be emerging to look for amusement or trouble, and she did not want to get distracted by running into anybody that she knew. She walked instead through a quiet neighborhood of modest houses. She imagined that each of them contained a sewing mother, a daughter cleaning up after dinner, and a gruff but jovial father trying to coax a sleepy little boy to bed. The thought made her wistful, even though she was certain that such a lifestyle would drive her more or less immediately insane. She remembered neither her mother, nor her father, and her fond memories of her younger brother were tempered by the painful memories of his decline into sickness.

The Spotted Goose was open when Marta arrived. She tugged on her dress as she approached the door, hoping to pull some of the wrinkles out, but of course it did nothing. A doorman stood at attention by the door, with a stylized goose on the front of his richly dyed coat. Marta smiled at him, but he moved to block her from entering. He looked her up and down with no expression and then sniffed. With his chest puffed out, she imagined that she

might be able to literally deflate him. Tempting as it was, stabbing the doorman was probably not the best way to get inside, so she settled for deflating him figuratively.

"I work for Lighthall, asshole." She lied, and doubt flickered across the man's face. "If you don't let me in to deliver my message, Lighthall will have to come himself and I'll tell him to make sure that you never get to wear that stupid goose on your chest again."

The doorman scowled. "The side door is for servants."

Marta patted his face and smiled brightly. "Thanks, darling."

He was so taken aback that it took him a moment to recoil and scowl at her again. He clearly was not used to such treatment. It was good for him, Marta was sure. She practically skipped around into the alley to the side door. Right now the patrons at Leward's would be well on their way to getting sloppy, and she would be running back and forth with ale, tired and sticky and smiling all the damn time.

The side door led to the kitchen. She walked in and brushed past the cook without making eye contact. A serving man opened his mouth as if to stop her, so she walked a little faster and pretended not to see him. She emerged into the seating area and sat down at a corner table that afforded a good view of the whole place. The serving man was trailing after her uncertainly, mouth moving slightly as if he was running through things that he might say. She preempted him.

"I'd like a large glass of brandy and a pipe of your most bitter shag." She smiled warmly at the man, who was not much older than her and carried himself with precision, and pressed the scant weight of gold into his palm. She had no idea how much things cost here, but at Leward's that single coin would buy food and ale for a half a month. The man looked at the coin and then back at her with poorly concealed surprise, so she winked at him and told him, "Keep the change."

The waiter gaped at her for a moment, then disappeared back into the kitchen. Marta studied the room. Everything was dark-- dark wood tables and floors, dark tapestries of beautiful men and women reclining in shady groves, or bathing in crystalline pools. Marta ran

a hand over her dark table cloth. It was silk, and very clean. There were only a handful of other guests, all richly dressed, talking in polite tones, and sipping wine. Two men sat at a table set for three, in the corner opposite Marta. One of them was familiar. The other was an Islander, rigid in countenance and posture, dressed well, but still out of place. Marta was certain he would not have been allowed inside on his own.

The familiar man was Endrev Berekker, the newest of the merchant elite in Merendir. Berekker had noticed her-- she did stand out a little-- and he gave her a slight smile from across the room. She had only seen the man a couple times before, and never for very long. He looked nothing like the pudgy, pale, ill-tempered Lighthall. He was lean and well-muscled. There was a bit of grey in his hair, which he wore tousled with the careful disregard for propriety that the stupendously rich can flaunt over the merely fantastically rich. He was unshaven to match, and his posture was bad. His slouching made Marta realize that she was sitting straighter than she had in years. She slouched back at Berekker, and his smile widened. She suspected that he spent a lot of time with unbearably dull people. There were wrinkles near his eyes, but Marta thought they suited his face well. Berekker glanced around the room and then settled his gaze back on Marta. He was tense. He was waiting for somebody.

Now the waiter and the cook were standing in the doorway conferring urgently and occasionally glancing her direction. She was about to blow them a kiss, but it occurred to her that rich people probably did not do that, so instead she assumed her best haughty expression and continued to watch Berekker.

A glass of brandy and a pipe were set down in front of Marta. She looked up expecting to see the befuddled waiter, but a more distinguished looking, and therefore probably more important, man stood at her table. He sat down across from her and cleared his throat. Berekker was watching from across the room, so Marta drained the brandy in a single gulp. She nearly coughed. This was not cut with water like most of the stuff that she drank in the valley. The man who had just seated himself at her table looked alarmed. Proper girls, and



most other girls, did not drink brandy. Marta had done very little drinking recently, so she figured she would be drunk in about ten minutes when the brandy settled in.

"Madam," the man began comfortably, in a hushed tone, with a disarming smile that did not quite reach his eyes. "Please do not consider me rude, but... who are you?"

He was immaculately groomed, from his mustache to his finger nails, but he had none of the doorman's pompousness, nor the waiter's uncertainty. The ember that had been set in the top of the pipe was beginning to go grey. Marta picked it up and puffed it to life. She wanted to wait around to see if anybody showed up to meet Berekker. She also did not want to ruin her chance of getting back into the Spotted Goose.

"Marta," she said simply, with a cold enough expression to make it clear that the lack of patronymic was not merely casual. She looked the man full in the eyes and he did not flinch.

"Marta," he began, without looking away from her, "we have a dress code at the Spotted Goose."

Marta's eyes narrowed in spite of herself. It was true that she was shabbily dressed. No matter how much gold she threw around, it was obvious that she did not belong here. That did not mean that she would not get her way, though. She looked away.

"Oh, I'm sorry." She said, changing tactics, and looked back at him with wide eyes-- her sweet, dumb, girl look. His change in expression was almost imperceptible, but Marta saw what she needed. A hint of cynical amusement played across his face at the notion she thought he might be so easily manipulated. She mirrored his cynicism back at him, letting it creep in at the very edge of her wide-eyed dumb girl look, and he saw it. She was every bit as subtle as he was, and every bit as accustomed to getting her way. You see? She was saying to him. You and I are very similar. He would not let her stay, but now she thought he would do her a favor.

"Will you do me a favor before I leave?" She asked. She blinked her eyelashes at him blatantly, hoping that he would laugh, but he did not lose his poise.

"Anything for you, Marta," he said, his voice so dripping with sincerity that it made her skin

crawl.

"Will you bring me a pen and paper so that I can leave a written message for Berekker?"

If he was surprised that she knew her letters, he concealed it well. He spent longer than she expected considering her request. Meanwhile, Marta was nearly frantic considering what she would write. Finally, he nodded slightly and glided away, returning quickly with a quill and a piece of finely-made paper.

With the quill in her hand, she was suddenly certain that Berekker was here to meet a man who would never arrive. She wrote "Barwell is dead. The guards have been chosen. Proceed." She folded the paper twice and handed it to the man, letting her fingers brush against his.

"If I dress up nicely, can I come back?" She asked.

"Perhaps."

Marta rose, feeling a touch light-headed, and left the Spotted Goose through the front door, smiling at Berekker and sniffing at the self-important doorman as she passed. She walked a few yards to a deep doorway and waited in the shadows. Not two minutes later, Berekker and the Islander left the Spotted Goose, looking distinctly displeased. They walked down the street with such force that people moved out of their way when they were still a block away. The Islander wore a sword and moved like a soldier, not like Lighthall's street thugs. Marta followed them at a distance, slipping from doorway to alley, fearless from brandy and casper gum.