

SOURCE

SYLVIA KELSO



JGP

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Sylvia Kelso



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Dedication

For Helen Merrick again, but this time as the 'onlie begetter' for this
one

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Stephen H. Segal for permission to re-use his very much
better work-up of my original maps.

Also by Sylvia Kelso

Everran's Bane, 5 Star Books, 2005

Amberlight, Juno Books, 2007

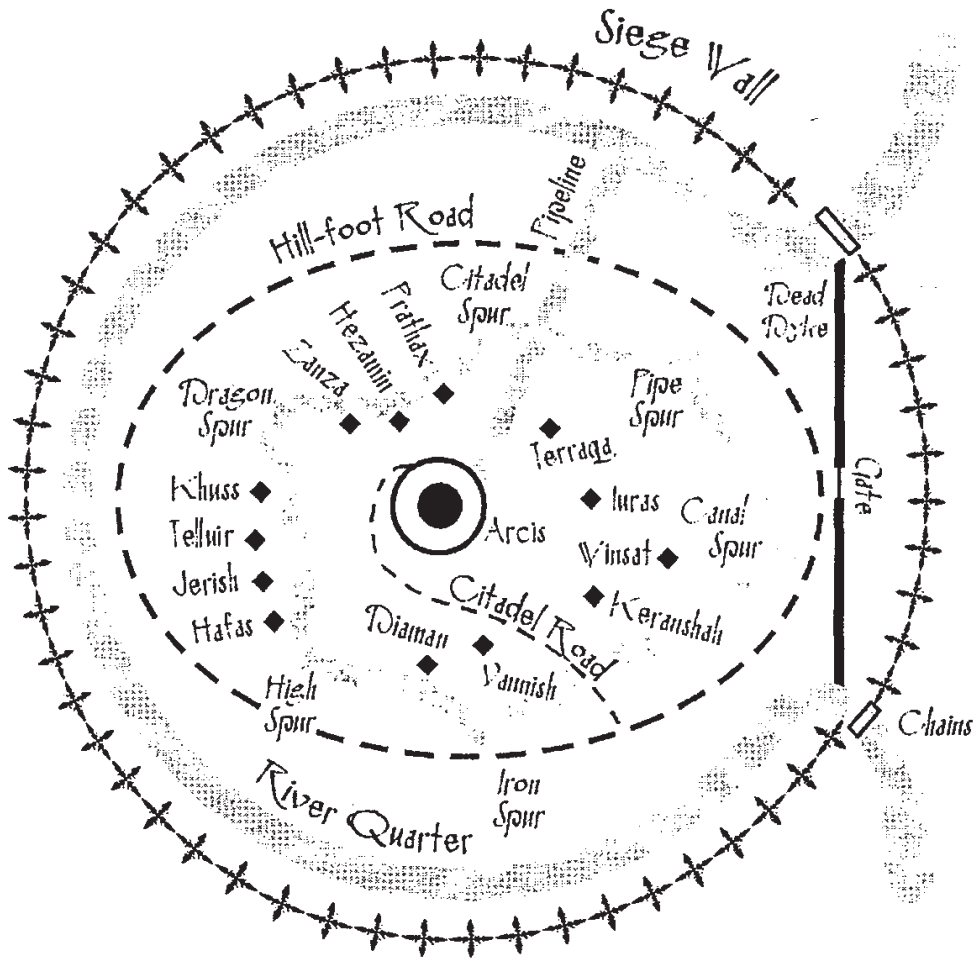
The Moving Water, 5 Star Books, 2007

The Red Country, 5 Star Books, 2008

Riversend, Juno Books, 2009

Amberlight

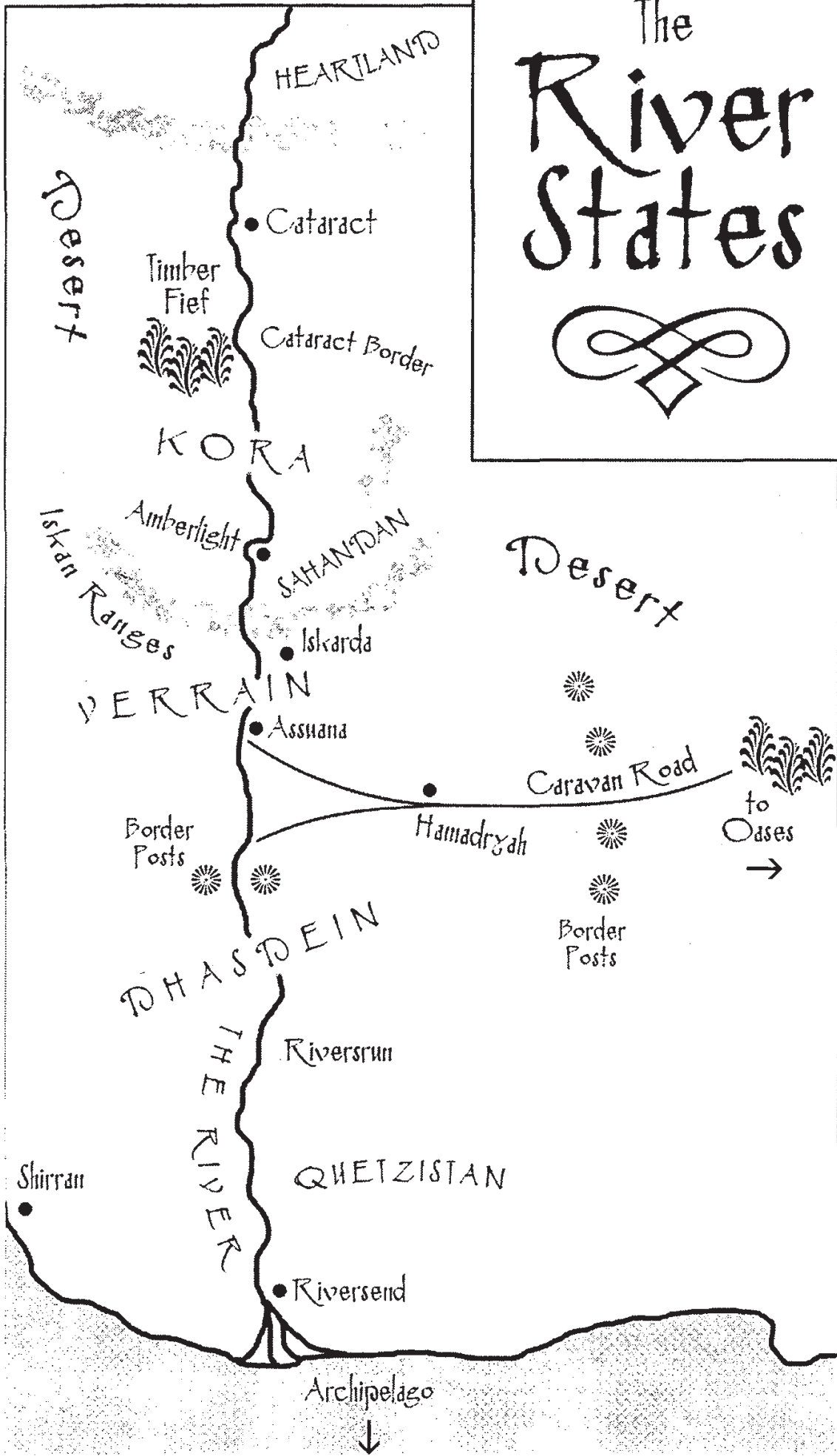
City & Houses



Sahandan



The River States



Previously in *Amberlight* and *Riversend*

Along a Nile-size river that flows south rather than north lie the nations of the Riverworld: first and largest, the empire of Dhasdein, with its capital Riversend at the river's mouth, then the desert-limited oligarchy of Verrain, then the matriarchy of Amberlight, and to its north the ever restive and threatening tyranny of Cataract. Beyond Cataract, the River drops over the "Jump-up" cliffs from the tribal territories of the Heartlands, and after that disappears in a vast swamp of reed-beds and mystery. No-one in the Riverworld actually knows the River's source.

Amberlight rules the Riverworld through its monopoly on qherrique: a mysterious substance or entity that grows like a vegetable or crystal, and looks and feels like rock. It is also photosynthetic, pizo-electric, produces an analogue of electricity, and has some psychic relation to humans. "Cutting" qherrique from the mother-face, "shaping" it for tools and weapons, require a rapport between human and qherrique, and Heads of Amberlight Houses can call on it as a kind of oracle. Its chief use beyond Amberlight is as statuettes "tuned" to a ruler that help him or her "control" his/her people. But only women can actually craft qherrique, and only women of Amberlight, and then only Amberlight women who have the Craft ability.

Consequently, the thirteen great Houses who control the outcrops of qherrique have become centres of power, wealth and inequity. House men are kept in the Tower, where they serve as counters for marriage alliances and highly educated and skilled toys for their multiple wives: a situation maintained in no small part by the decree that an Amberlight House woman must bear a girl before any of her children can live. House customs filter down to the business classes, who compete for status through the chance of a daughter who may possess a Craft, and thence to the poor, despised because their men must go out to work. Now Amberlight's dominion is only matched by the chasm between its slums and the Houses on its heights.

When the story opens Tellurith, Head of the notable Telluir House, has just come upon an amnesiac gang victim bleeding to death in the street. She decides to rescue him when the qherrique warns her, It matters, if he dies. Though he has forgotten his mission along with his paymasters or loyalties,

she guesses him to be not only an Outlander, but once a master spy or high-flying mercenary, signaling yet another external threat building against Amberlight. The site of his discovery suggests he might also have been conniving with another House, which would be the deadliest threat of all.

As she tries to discover the truth, their long duel of wits culminates in mutual attraction and a passionate love affair. She gives him a new name, Alkhes. He gives her a vision of Amberlight's injustices she has never had before. Her attempts to instigate change lead to an assassination attempt. They also have to survive a street ambush and an encounter with Tellurith's redoubtable husband, Sarth, and the affair ends when something, perhaps the qherrique, restores Alkhes' memory and he escapes to his older world.

From that world then comes a ferocious new attack, a simultaneous pincer from Dhasdein and Cataract that locks Amberlight inside a deadly siege, and Tellurith finds Alkhes, in his old persona as a notable soldier, Assandar, is now the presiding enemy general. Their mutual struggles to reconcile love and loyalty end with the culminating battle during which the Houses fall, and the eventual destruction of the City itself.

Escaping with the remnants of her House, saved in a surrender dictated by the qherrique, Tellurith sets out for a vassal holding in the ranges to the south. The village of Iskarda has a marble quarry: and, Tellurith tells her people, the one thing they are trained for is cutting stone. Though she and Sarth have become reconciled, she fears Alkhes has been killed in the final cataclysm, and she expects to grieve for him as long as she will for the qherrique. But then, battered, bruised, saved by a warning from the qherrique, and having resigned his generalship, he overtakes them on the road. And Tellurith, overjoyed and carried beyond all limits of custom, decides she will marry him and Sarth both.

~* * *~

Reaching Iskarda, Tellurith and her folk settle in to build what she intends as both a new and different life. Most of all, she wants gender equity: to let men to follow a trade, and perhaps even a Craft – the qherrique's motherlodes are gone, but they still have some of the cutters and light-guns powered by qherrique, which also demand a rapport to "wake" – to give them the freedom, taken for granted by women, to marry as they please, but also take a partner outside the marriage, especially a same-sex partnership, and above all, to stop the exposure of first-born male babies, like her own two lost sons.

Implementing this vision demands struggle at every level: from the clashes and confusion as Alkhes and Sarth try to reconcile their varying concepts of "being a man," and sharing a woman whom they both passionately love, to physical remodeling of the houses the refugees build, to combat with

the traditionalist views of the old Iskardans, to whom Tellurith's reforms are anathema.

Beyond Iskarda wait the perils of the River, where Cataract has found a new tyrant, Verrain threatens what remains of Amberlight, and Dhasdein may at any moment stretch out a single finger and obliterate Tellurith's colony. The complications from all these sources find Tellurith obliged to co-marry Sarth to her "troublecrew" Head, a dangerously sadistic fighting woman whose skills are too priceless to lose, and to nearly lose Alkhes again to the Iskardans' antique religious practices. Then, when it seems all the internal complications may be resolving, Dhasdein demands the surrender of their renegade ex-general. When their troops arrive, Sarth's daughter Tez has already been taken hostage. Resistance may only cause the destruction of Iskarda. Refusing to let Alkhes go alone, Tellurith and Sarth accompany him to Riversend.

Attempting at once to rescue Tez and actually reach the Emperor to comply with Alkhes' summons, the three must contend with the capital's internal intrigues and a cluster of new or old enemies. Then Tellurith realizes that her most precious dream has come true, but as a present nightmare. She is pregnant again. And if anyone in Riversend finds out, the baby will become the most valuable hostage of all. A series of hasty manoeuvres bring them to the Empress, who has the power to release Tez, and then uncover their most deadly opponent, the highest noble of the empire and Alkhes' long-term bete noir, the Riversend Suzerain, Tanekhet.

A mere glimpse of Tanekhet sends Alkhes into catatonic withdrawal. Enraged and desperate, Sarth goes alone to Tanekhet's palace, determined either to seduce him into letting them alone, or murder him. The event does not go as he plans, but Tanekhet is sufficiently impressed to open their way to the emperor, and then to offer asylum in his palace from other, more straightforward enemies. Though equally fearful of Tanekhet, they have little choice but to accept. And when the imperial interview ends in détente, with an alliance organized between Iskarda and Dhasdein, Tanekhet makes another proposal: he is disillusioned with his life as the unofficial ruler of Dhasdein, of his black reputation and worse habits, especially in bed. But having watched Tellurith and her husbands together, he sees in Iskarda the hope, for a new, better world, a world based in changed relations between men and women. A world that, at whatever price, he wants to share.

Tellurith and her party see no option but to agree: they are still in Tanekhet's power, they must leave Riversend before Tellurith's pregnancy shows, and a final confrontation between Alkhes and Tanekhet leaves Alkhes not only free of the past, but willing to support Tanekhet's request. They extricate Tanekhet from the emperor's clutches, and embark on a ship upRiver. But a storm in the Narrows below the Amberlight border sinks the ship, and though they all get ashore, Tellurith loses her child, and, but for Tanekhet's experience with his own wife's fatal miscarriage, would have lost her life. In the morning, amid the mud and blood of the Riverbank, Tanekhet

finds a pearl-like object that “stings” his fingers with an electric charge: it is a “seed” of the qherrique.

Alkhes is devastated, Tellurith torn between grief and undreamt of joy. Sarth is torn over the impossible questions of how the qherrique came there: carried in someone’s blood, or gestated with the child, “born” with the child, or at cost of the child’s life? His already shaken faith in the Amberlight Mother goddess buckles under the strain. But in Iskarda the general grief passes eventually into euphoria at finding that the qherrique, the *raison d’être* of so many of their lives, has not been eternally lost.

It is left to Tanekhet to point out that one tiny “seed” can hardly produce the tools and weapons that were “cut” from the huge Amberlight motherlodes, and hence protect Iskarda. And Iskarda will need protection, for word of the recovery cannot be suppressed, and every nation on the River will be trying to capture Iskarda or the qherrique or both.

Tanekhet has no solution, but it appears that the qherrique or something else does. Over the next few nights, Tellurith, her husbands, and then others across the width of Iskarda, both men and women, in various crafts or trades, experience a common dream: an image of a lake and a springhead, high in a forest above huge savannah plains, and a frantic sense of urgency demanding that they go there, at once. The House-musician, recalling the oldest lore known in

Amberlight, identifies the image the River’s Source, the place from whence, perhaps, the people of Amberlight originally came.

The consummate strategist Tanekhet instantly points out to strategic possibilities of a perfect pretext to protect both the qherrique and Iskarda. Despite the menace of passing Amberlight, then Cataract, then the Jump-up cliffs, and the Heartlands, with their rumoured perils of predators human and animal, the House-Head and the other chosen dreamers must be known to have undertaken a quest, seeking the source of both the River and the qherrique.

The company embark on one of their port’s patrol-boats, escorting a freighter of Tanekhet’s toward Amberlight, the first obstacle. As night falls on the River, Tellurith looks forward not to the perils that wait, but to the sense of community that surrounds her, and the conviction that something, qherrique or god, will ensure they reach the mystery that lies at the River’s end.

Character List

ISKARDA-AMBERLIGHT

Tellurith	Head of Telluir House, leader of Telluir emigrants to Iskarda
Sarth	Born Hafas tower, husband to Tellurith
Tez	Daughter of Sarth and Khira, ex-Navy, marble-factor for Iskarda
Alkhes	Outland, husband to Tellurith
Iatha	House-steward
Roskeran	Husband to Iatha
Hanni	Head's secretary
Esfafal	Sister to Hanni, musician, member of the Quest
Shia	Head's cook
Zuri	Troublecrew Head, member of the Quest
Querya	Troublecrew –partner with Verrith
Verrith	Troublecrew – partner with Querya
Ethar	Husband to Querya
Querya	Troublecrew, member of the Quest
Ethar	Husband to Querya, member of the Quest
Ahio	Shaper, member of the Quest
Fira	Ahio's second daughter
Charras	Power-shop senior – building planner in Iskarda
Hayras	Cutter's Head ex officio
Huis	Husband to Hayras
Quetho	Power-shop head ex officio
Zariah	Cutter – Iskardan house-head,
Asaskian	Zariah's second daughter, house-keeper in Amberlight
Dhanissa	Telluir house, Assembly leader in revolution Amberlight
Caitha	House physician
Fetha	Zariah's house, assistant cook
Desis	Troublecrew
Ferrias	Assembly leader, Dhanissa's cousin and partner, revolution Amberlight
Juiza	ex-troublecrew, Uphill Amberlight Assembly delegate
Tesra	Amberlight assembly male stevedores' delegate
Qualla	Amberlight assembly female stevedores' delegate
Eizo	ex-Shaper, Amberlight assembly delgate
Dheya	ex-Amberlight Steward, steward of Tanekhet's Verraini embassy
Hathris	Amberlight Downhill man, Tanekhet's embassy secretary

Kheizo	Amberlight, Tanekhet's embassy troublecrew
Darthis	Village-Head, Iskarda
Eria	Darthis' eldest daughter
Keraz	Darthis' second daughter, member of the Quest
Quiran	Keraz' betrothed, physician to the Quest
Zdana	Seer, Iskarda
Krestyr	Zdana's son, bonded to Eria, Darthis' daughter
Sunya	Waterwoman from Marbleport, member of the Quest
Gearth	Sunya's husband, member of the Quest
Deor	Waterwoman from Marbleport, member of the Quest
Chenath	Deor's husband, member of the Quest

Damas	Jerish House head, old and new Amberlight
Quizo	Jerish House Trouble-head, new Amberlight
Ciruil	Terraqa House head, old and new Amberlight
Eutharie	Prathax House head, old and new Amberlight

Sfina	Head-Shaper, Amberlight, wife to Sarth
Khira	Navy captain, Amberlight, wife to Sarth
Phatha	Telluir sub-clan head, Amberlight, wife to Sarth
Averion	Keranshah House-head, de facto general in siege of Amberlight

Amanazar	legendary founder of Hafas House and Amberlight
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THE RIVER

Shuya	President of Verrain
Keshaq	Quetzistani by birth, ex-slave, Tanekhet's partner
Nathyx	Leader of Council in Verrain
Rihasso	Cook in Tanekhet's embassy

Antastes	Emperor of Dhasdein
"The Empress"	Quetzistani born, married to Antastes, then ruler in her own right

Therkon	Dhasdeini Crown Prince, army commander
Tanekhet	Dhasdein noble, Riversrun Suzeraine, court eminence

Saarieq	Tanekhet's first love and first wife
Tarriz	Dhasdein army field commander
Queziar	Dhasdeini torturer
Catheor	Dhasdein ex-Army soldier, ex-mercenary

Dinda	Ex-tyrant of Cataract
Wonsa	New tyrant of Cataract
Jirba	Heartland, father of Wonsa
Varris	Heartland, sister of Wonsa, member of the Quest
Haturi	Tribal leader in Cataract
Tibari	Lieutenant of Wonsa's faction in Cataract
"The Hazi"	Leader of Forest-Landing, Heartlands
Ihar	Woman of Thilliansar
Errissal	Woman of Thilliansar, border scout
Atha	Woman of Thilliansar, hunter, cousin-kin of Errissal
Pryax	Priestess of Thilliansar

I

Iskarda.

14th Day, 2nd Spring Moon.

Ruand

Tellurith

~~My lady Tellurith~~

This is most embarrassing.

With my former—in my former position, the correct mode of address was always at my fingertips: “His Imperial Majesty, Antastes son of Thearkos, Overlord of Shirran, Riversrun, Mel’eth and Quetzistan, High King of the Sealands and Archipelagoes, Emperor of Dhasdein.” For feastday rituals, proclamations, dispatches announcing the successful closure of a campaign. “The Emperor Antastes”: for Court memoranda, official communiques.

“Sire.”

Face to face, in audience chamber or presence room. With the exact shade of gratitude, pleasure, protest, outright anger, conveyed by the turn of voice and mouth and eyelids. As I chose.

How does one address the Head of Telluir House?

A—woman. Neither my sovereign nor my overlord, without titles, without fixed precedence. Whose folk accost her to her face as, “Tellurith,” or, at best, “Ruand.” Or, the River Lord marvel, as unceremoniously as, “Rith” or, “Tel.” And in the open passageway.

“Rith” is Iatha’s sole prerogative. Her Steward, Head’s right-hand. Oldest comrade. More than friend.

As for “Tel . . .” A lover’s, a beloved’s impudence. That one cannot imagine suffered from any but the man who invented it.

Since this is clearly to be a draft, in which my pen has already run away with me, since I cannot conceive of—my ruler—reading such stuff, had I the face to inflict it on her, I may as well go on.

Very well, for the nonce—Tellurith:

I am supposed to report, from the House, for the House, on the state of affairs along the River and at home.

Here. In Iskarda.

Small. That is the most surprising thing. Oh yes, I was supposed to know that. Coming from Riversend, the Dhasdeini Court, the height of empire, the River's greatest nation, I was supposed to find it so. But when the mules finally clambered round that last road-bend, and the light caught on the ribboned tools and festival clothes and waiting faces—and beyond them the cup of the range-front held the houses, sixty, seventy at most, high gables, weathered timber, faded paint, raw new blocks of rough-cut stone, the huddle of outhouses and stock-byres, the mud in the single uncobbled street . . .

Well. There is a view. Walk out the front-door and the hill falls to it like a hawk's plummet: fifty, a hundred miles of tawny ploughland, gray-blue timber-clots, the opulent green of newly risen grain. And the great band of the River, laid like a zone of argent and silver through the midst. If I have lost a world, I have prospect of another in exchange.

And the houses are sound. If the walls lack tapestries, and they are still struggling for any sort of running water, it is warm. There is food enough, if it has cost me a month of stomach gripes. Of all my renunciations, I never thought a decently milled poppy-roll would be the worst loss of Dhasdein.

Work there is naturally in plenty. One confronts life's staples bare: carry the water you wash with, chop and carry wood to heat you, cook the flour you ground, or the beast you have slain. Of that I was warned, at length, with relish stretching to the gruesome. I think they wanted to revel in it: the image of me with an axe in my hands—or my shins, no doubt—my fingernails broken and my back bent—or “pneumonia from chopping our firewood in the rain.”

In truth it took longer to settle quarters, for an unmarried, unrelated man, than it did to fathom my use. A single day found me in Zuri's disemboweling clutches, the one thing I truly expected. What else, from the House's chief intelligencer, with a man who had been in every secret council of Dhasdein?

Her lieutenant still turns to me at any River signal, demanding, “What's behind this?”

And I have done my best for her. It is what earns me the water to wash, the blankets I sleep in—if there is one other thing I miss, it is linen sheets!—even the food I eat. But to fill the balance, the Craft-heads have ruled that I should not be wasted—perhaps, entrusted?—with shovel or bucket or axe. Instead I am—

In Dhasdein's terms, I suppose, I am a scribe.

Not a word current in Iskarda. Hanni, the only other whose value is in such skill, is the Head's—aide? secretary? At all events, a place she has held since Amberlight. I, on the contrary, am no-one's adjunct. Instead, Iatha and Charras and the rest have decreed I am to go where there is writing and figuring's need. Which has meant three days of four up at the quarry, working out tallies and weights. Whence I am fit to die of boredom, since in three days I could do it in my sleep.

Bless the days, then, when River news comes in. Couriered up on muleback, flashed by the signal towers, from up or down the River.

And most of it comes through Marbleport.

Also essential, also shrewdest good sense. There is a very good road, the way they have always packed the marble out, fifty miles of it from quarry to port, leading downstream. The way to the richest market, the quarter of greatest threat. Dhasdein.

So naturally, they have a factor to run the export business, and in their case, again only to be expected, the intelligence net. When Telluir was one of the Thirteen Houses who ruled Amberlight, the one thing they never scanted was intelligence.

Amberlight. Here, in the mountains, three years after the city's fall, it looms above us like—an emperor. They talk about it continually, in nostalgia, in exasperation, when lack or longing overflow. "In Amberlight we had hot running water. And carpets. And coffee. And ivory, and ebony, and all the gold of the Riversrun." And none of it is exaggeration. Amberlight was the River's queen.

Because Amberlight had the qherrique.

~* * *~

I have touched that. With my own hands, a man's hands, and was probably lucky to suffer no more than fingers knocked numb for five minutes or so. Everybody knows the stories, from legend to the yarns of siege-survivors. Qherrique. Pearl-rock. Used to rule the River. Used to power ships, and light-guns, and horseless vehicles, used to light and warm whole Houses. Used by

rulers to sway nations. Mined, shaped, tuned, sold, and worked by women alone.

That past I find wholly unimaginable. Amberlight: the city where women ruled. Where the whores are still men, and lower quarter men and women work together, and Uphill clans aspired to follow their bloodlines to the splendor of a House. Where they exposed three out of four boy babies, and married the men to four and five women together. And kept the survivors in the towers.

The Tower. When Sarth says it, you can hear the capital. But I can imagine what losing their child must mean to him. Because I know that, while he gave his other wife four daughters, he gave Tellurith three sons.

And all of them are dead.

A pity, in so many ways. A great pity. If I were to remember Court habits, I would speculate about the child they lost downriver, and whose paternity it showed. Alkhes, whose hair and eyes are blacker than Heartland ebony, slight and lithe and deadly as a Heartland tigersnake? Sarth, tall and splendid as a River-god's statue, with eyes as bronze as his waist-long hair?

Probably it had the brandy-colored eyes and sharp nose and high cheekbones that are pure Tellurith. Pure Amberlight.

Pure—

Is there a demon in me, that I have ended here again?

Enough. I have a report to write. If this is a draft, let it function so.

~* * *~

Tellurith:

The House has commissioned me to report on matters in Iskarda and on the River. And firstly, I must say that the advice I gave you was good.

Word of the qherrique's rediscovery has indeed run from here to Riversend. You, then, might confidently predict that here we have already had a plague's worth of intelligencers. You will be pleased to know that your acting Trouble-Head is a fine teacher. Hiring the work gangs, Charras and Quetho can sniff one out now, twenty paces away.

A somewhat messy transition, there. Yet it is how most of them have come: in the flood of workers, from the Kora, the River, Amberlight itself, who have answered the call for spring employment in Iskarda.

If your House has all my secrets, I must confess, lady Tellurith, I find it somewhat churlish that none of you breathed a word of yours to me. Cataract silver, I presume, and obviously brought here after the siege, though I—even I—still have no idea where or how much there is. No wonder, though, that you have a plethora of workmen, when you pay in minted silver. And such workmen are a perfect screen for intelligencers.

So far we have unearthed two from Amberlight—one, Verrith considers, from Jerish House—four from Cataract, three from Verrain, and seven from Dhasdein.

Naturally enough, Antastes is anxious. As I would be, if, with the kindest of partings, I had exiled him. You will be—you may be relieved, as I certainly was—to hear that my moneys have been allowed through.

You will probably be amused by Verrith's treatment of the intelligencers. I must admit, when I was forbidden to question them, if with my own hands, in something like an efficient Dhasdein manner, I was distinctly piqued.

Verrith's method is to escort them through the establishment, from your work-room to the village altar. To point out the spot where Zariah used her cutter to behead another intelligencer, to let them watch the cutters working on a quarry block. Assure them that Tellurith really did find a qherrique seed—with my pledge to vouch for it—and that River-word is correct about what she has done with it, and send them to enquire further down at Marbleport.

The Nine-armed Adversary avoid me. I have ended there again.

You, my lady, will doubtless be most interested in what the gangs are working on. Or would it be the River? Pest take it. The River first.

To the best of—our—knowledge, then, Dhasdein has honored the treaty. The intelligencers are no more than anyone would expect. But apart from my funds, the—we—have had three notable orders from downriver: a temple facade in Shirran, a colonnade repaired at Deyiko, something in Riversend itself. You may, with some justice, detect the personal hand of the emperor. The quarry is working to capacity; in truth, your cutter is sorely missed.

You will undoubtedly be delighted to hear that Antastes has made good his understanding with the Empress. I recognized one of her people among the Dhasdein intelligencers—doubtless some sort of advantage, though I have trouble deciding to whom. What the Crown Prince will make of it . . . Well, Therkon knows how the ledger lies. He has stayed a perfect cipher for most of his life. I see no reason for him to alter yet.

Verrain, to move upRiver, is as deceptively uproarious and as actually stagnant as before. The Forty have made censure motions, and there is talk of a Ruler's election, but nothing will come of it. The cause is that Shuya lost a

rich Hamadryah gold convoy to “bandits,” in the first spring moon. The rumor is that they were from Quetzistan.

Therefore, my lady Tellurith, I have advised Iskarda to keep particularly sharp watch, and if something does arise toward us, to develop a counter-initiative. Quetzistani are notorious robbers, especially in such a poor season as the last. It will need *very* careful management, but it would be possible to embroil Verrain and Dhasdein, to our advantage, without unseating the Empress.

You will, by now, know the state of Amberlight for yourself.

Of Cataract I have very little word. These men were underlings, and their intelligencers are notoriously tough nuts. If I thought this would reach you in time, I would counsel the greatest care in passing Cataract. They have not yet even begun to quarrel about the Downriver border with Amberlight. I must suppose them salving their losses, straightening their affairs, and digesting Alkhes’ gift of the timber-fief. But the new tyrant can hardly be settled, and the losses at Amberlight will be niggling his purse. I could wish that I was with you—

Just as well this is a draft. How am I to suppose my—ruler—and her husbands, one bred and schooled to River-intrigue, the other steeped in the bitterer stew of Tower-politics, not to mention a Trouble-Head used to fencing with all Amberlight, would take a mere—dangle—and a Dhasdeini, actually a noble dangle—saying they could not manage without him?

Nevertheless, it concerns me most of all, Tellurith. Granted a patrol-boat, cutters, fifteen skilled and subtle folk bred in Amberlight, granted the—putative—assistance of the qherrique. What will that be, against the armed, habitual, roused malignance of a city like Cataract?

I am aware it was a gods’ stick-fork. There was nowhere to take the qherrique, except out of Iskarda. Out of Iskarda, there was nowhere to go except Upriver. Given that, only one goal was legendary enough to justify the expedition.

The Source.

And given that choice, there is no choice but to pass Cataract.

To put your precious burden, the hope of Iskarda, and you three, who are the hope of my new world, the dream for which I renounced the glories of Riversend—down to my fourteen tailors and my perfumier, as she will never let me forget—into its most potent enemies’ hands.

Just as well this is a draft. To what sniveling have I sunk?

I am particularly sensible that this news is of less than use, where you most could use such help. Tender Zuri my especial apologies.

~* * *~

So much for the River. As for Iskarda. . .

The gangs are mostly occupied with the pipeline. Still. As you know, the reservoir was delved by the beginning of last winter, and they had Alkhes' pictures for the valve, the pivotal point which will bear the massive pressure needed to drive water over the reservoir rim. Charras' reports are horrendously technical. I am bidden tell Alkhes that she actually sent to have it forged in the workshop of one Kestishiar, the—smith? engineer? he recommended, in Riversend. It arrived this second spring moon, on one of my ships, and Charras says it seems workable.

There, of course, is the rub. Charras is *not* a Dhasdein army engineer commander, accustomed to every sort of hydraulic work, up—or down—to mounting siege catapults. Any more than the rest of—us—are used to surveying and calculating flows, gradients, water pressures. . . The River Lord aid me, I have commanded campaigns, but as a Viceroy. I did not construct such marvels. I said, "Do thus." And they were done.

We need Alkhes. Just as we need you, Tellurith. As we needed you in that Riversend audience hall, when you plucked me, with the purest thunderbolt of inspiration, out of Antastes' hands.

Do you know exactly how much you matter, Tellurith? I can see the dreams you limn. They can all see them, once they are shown. They cannot produce them. Above all, none of them, even I, even under the spur of panic, can produce those leaps of—of—well, I know what you would call them, even now.

Answers. Vision. The dower of the qherrickue.

Would it surprise you, I wonder, to know that, so far as I can see, that gift is wholly, entirely, within you?

~* * *~

So.

I have fenced round and round it, and every turn brings me to the centre I am trying to avoid.

I know that your next question about Iskarda will be—about me. I am quite aware that I am part of your—construction: a stage, an experiment, a change you probably foresee as inevitable, if not a necessity. I am the first man

expected to make his way in this new world, without the shields of blood-kin or marriage-tie, with nothing but his self and his native wits.

Just so I am a test for the folk of Iskarda. From me they must learn to cope with men in the new way: as neither satellite nor chattel, but as another member of the House.

I have done my best, Tellurith. I have been quiet, and modest, and inconspicuous to the best of my ability . . .

I can see you laugh at that. I am acquainted, intimately as a lover, with the way your lips twitch, then your eyes slit, your brows fly upward—and it bursts out of you, that rill-spring laughter, fleet as a passing bird, impetuous as a girl's. I can see it as you picture me, Tanekhet, Warden of the Crown Prince, Suzeraine of Riversrun, and so on and so on, less notorious for his private amusements than for the extravagance of his raiment, the Court's scandal and lasting cynosure—

Trying to be modest and inconspicuous, in Iskarda.

I *have* tried. I have kept quiet, except when I am questioned. I have been obliged to attend the councils—why am I here, except for the value of my knowledge as they try to ride the River's rapids and keep Iskarda afloat? I have been *obliged* to speak out, to intervene, to argue. . .

Very well, to outrightly circumvent. Especially your cursed village Head-woman. Darthis.

Sooner try to argue round Antastes with a flea in his ear. I swear that woman sets her opinions in harbor-mole cement. She is deaf to pleas and impregnable to flattery. Reason? Better a mallet and sculptor's chisel. The only sure way I can outflank her is to subvert the entire meeting under her.

Hayras and Quetho, on the other hand, have been all I could ask. Attentive, reasonable, intelligent. Susceptible to flattery—

Just as well this is a draft.

At any rate, Ruand, your Craft-heads will usually come round to me. Especially if I can convince Iatha, and Verrith.

Iatha's armor-flaw, I fathomed early. When Darthis has overrun all else, I can always get Iatha to apply the Steward's veto. I need only ask, "How will this affect the Quest?"

They call it that now. A name out of legend, like the Source itself. But for Iatha, all fifteen of you, I suspect the qherrique as well, boils down to a single person.

You, my lady Tellurith.

Be that as it may, Iatha is my best ally, after your temporary Trouble-Head, Verrith. Her pragmatic intelligencer's sense is worth its weight in gold for military matters. Policies are a little beyond her, yet. That has always been Zuri's field. And even now . . .

There is Tez.

~* * *~

Well. I have written it down, at last. But if you wish the full report of my fortunes in Iskarda, lady Tellurith, I must speak of another woman first.

The River Lord succor me. I can picture your expression. I can predict your answer, down to the last barb and snort. "Rot and gangrene you, lord Tanekhet," nobody else can make that honorific cut to the bone, "I pulled you out of Riversend because you cried about the trouble your cock made for you. Do you tell me you've let it ravage among the women—the women!—of Iskarda?"

Allow some defense. *I am not the one responsible. I am not the aggressor. I swear, I have truly tried to be as modest and decent and—and—inconspicuous—as a Kasterian anchorite!*

If you consider that sounds injured, it is. If you consider it to be—embarrassed—and—harassed—and—well, if you wish it, at my downright wits' end—it is.

At first it appeared a welcome diversion. A fortnight—a half-moon, as they say here—after your departure, when I was already bored to yawning by quarry-work, when I had settled matters with the men—there is no problem there, I do assure you. Apart from Roskeran, who shares my suppers with Iatha, I hardly cross another man's path. There are none in the quarry, and none, of course, among the Craft-heads, where my counsel is most often sought. And if I am moved to share the kitchen of an evening—my room, saving your gracious hospitality, is somewhat dank—none of them presumes to address a word to me. If I talk, it is to—

Those with power.

I had not thought that through before. My living-place has always been among those with power.

Even, as you know now, when I was a child. Pursued, courted, harassed, by Dhasdein's own emperor. As much for my bloodline as my—personal felicities.

But at first, it seemed a welcome diversion, when Zariah paused by the tally-shelter, hefting her cutter, wiping her big gloves across her muddy, chip-

scarred face. She gave me one of those neutral nods that your Craft- and house-heads gauge so beautifully, and while I was expecting some complaint about a misjudged block-weight, she said, “There’s something you could do for us.”

“Ma’am,” I said. Naturally I had already got off the tallyman’s stool . . .

Tally-woman’s. I beg your pardon, lady Tellurith. I have let this—distress—take me back to the past.

I bowed, then. Ironic, how the nicety of a Dhasdein courtier’s courtesies is wasted here. If one of those minions saw me, Tanekhet, offering her, Zariah, the courtesy of a landlord to a wealthy tenant, what looks!

Well. I bowed, at any rate, and she nodded again, and said, “We’ve a heap of written stuff in the house there. Came with us.” Meaning, in the exodus. It is the one context where none of them will say the name Amberlight. “It’s cluttering up the steward’s room. We need someone to go through it. See what’s fit to keep.”

If the Court jackals could conceive of *that*. Their eminence reduced by boredom to leaping at a chance to sort a pile of muddled, muddy, out-dated Amberlight ledgers, like the lowest of merchant scribes.

“I’ll ask Charras to find a tally-marker, then.” Give them this, lady Tellurith, your folk can read answers in the turn of an eye. “Go down to the house tomorrow. See Asaskian.”

~* * *~

Because you know she is Zariah’s house-steward. As well as her daughter.
Just seventeen years old.

With looks, as I need not tell you, that would haunt an emperor’s sleep. The handsomeness of Amberlight folk is proverbial the River’s length, and she—

Is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen.

Slim and tall and elegant, grace in every move, with the Amberlight coloring brought to exquisiteness: the tawny skin, the fine-cut features, the great amber eyes, the bronze-copper cloud of breathing, floating hair.

Small wonder she has already been one man’s death.

Saarieq was that age, my lady Tellurith. Seventeen years old, the day before we wed. I recall that she complained how the splendor of the nuptials swamped her birthday feast.

Small and brown-complexioned, with no more figure than a winter-robin. Never showing to less vantage than in the full Court garb of an Earl's heiress. Which she wore the night when, to repay the usual scurrilous debt over some province-broking—it was the Gray Island governorship, as I recall—the family propelled me to make her reputation at her inauguration ball.

For which her mother, who never enjoyed the brains god gave a sparrow, had dressed her in the season's most fashionable style and color, saccharine pink satin ruffled wide as a balloon. The River Lord aid us. As well put Saari in a horse-blanket and be done.

She knew it, naturally. When I walked up to request the first couples' dance, the moment that can make or break a Court maiden, she caught my eye. Bowing over her hand, I felt her spluttering till her laces must have sprung. Straightening up, I fell right athwart her glance, and that look—

That we shared through eight years' childhood, when she had run us into mischief, and sworn, cajoled, outright lied us out again, and she would glance behind the nurses' backs, under a snapped bough or a broken window, across a mud-mired pony, and—

And yet again send me within a hairsbreadth of ruining everything, because it was run or laugh or burst.

No doubt it amazes you, lady Tellurith. Indeed, the black eminence of Dhasdein had a happy childhood. From Riversend to my mother's estate every summer, and from there, half a mile across the stud-paddocks to the little irrigation chute, and a scurry through the sugar-field to the Earl of Assuana's summer residence. And Saarieq.

She could ride anything on hooves. Her ponies, my mother's racing stock. The estate bullock-teams. When we both tried to ride the Earl's majestically humped white stud-bull, it was I who fell off first. It was a crying injustice, she used to say, that she was born the Earl's daughter and not his jockey-boy, because she would be far richer and more famous if she could do it for herself.

I was eighteen then. I had not seen her for six years. Instead I had seen Court. The emperor. My mother's—death. My father's death. And I was two years toward my own emperorship, so when I smiled at them, half the people in that ballroom already cringed.

I made her name, naturally. I made a sensation of her. I made myself a scandal over her. I gave a great many persons who had been feeling the chill breath of personal danger an enormous relief. Look, rumor cried, I was no peril, I was a love-sot after all. Only see what I companied with!

Saari knew that too. I had to explain to her. Had to put aside the—the carapace, that I was already building, the armor of Lord Tanekhet, and tell her—swear to her—beg her not to make me company with some exquisitely

brainless suitable female for my reputation's sake. Not when all that remained of joy, childhood, the unattainable past, was standing between my two hands.

I had to go into a decline, in the end. Spread rumors that I had given up amusements along with machinations, declined invitations, refused food, and taken to my bed, where I would do nothing but lie with the blinds drawn and weep.

She could never resist the entirely ridiculous. She flounced into the town-mansion's master-bedroom, took one look at me languishing amid the bouquets and tonic bottles, and could not control her face.

So I had the best of her, after all.

~* * *~

No wonder so few great lords write reminiscences. It has a way, this writing, of running upon truths that crack the heart. "The best of her." Oh, indeed I had the best. Eight years childhood. Six months courtship. Twelve months marriage—

I wonder, lady Tellurith, what I might be, if that had been twelve years? Twenty years? Perhaps I would have declined into the innocuous. I might never have come here. You and I, lady Tellurith, might never have met.

Had I not taken her hunting, one blowing gray Delta day when she was four months pregnant and plagued me out of good sense because she swore she would die of another day inside the house, and if we had not had Antastes himself as progress-guest, so I was too busy being noble among the entourage to stop the grooms' fall to her blandishments, so we were in the estate woods, waiting for the first covert's draw, before I noticed she was up on her new and utterly witless however magnificent chestnut colt—and if the wind had not gusted that cretin's hat up behind the windrow of fallen trunks—

Haemorrhage. The Court physician told me that. When we—Afterwards.

And Gods be thanked that I made him explain it all, because it was the last link I had with her, and it was something to blot out that afterwards: to keep my mind off the funeral, and the sound of the pyre, and what I should do now until I died myself.

So it was there, that knowledge, when you needed it. And if you lost the child, lady Tellurith—

I did save you.

~* * *~

Dhe's eyes, to steal Saari's oath. This is morbidity turning maudlin, and as useful as on that other morning, when I donned my second-best shirt and wended decorously among the water-carriers to Zariah's house.

They—we—call them houses, and technically, I suppose they are. At least, they are not *the* House—with a capital—which in Amberlight meant both the web of kin and marriage and working ties, and the single building, and which now seems to mean all Iskarda. Rather, they are dwelling-places: a most wonderful hodgepodge of suites and private space and kitchen common-rooms, cobbled from Iskardan family houses or workmen's barracks, studded through the village domiciles, above or below the street.

Which latter level was once reserved for stock-byres and itinerants. So having crossed the road, I descended a newly cobbled path to the men's entrance, through the back-door and washing bay, which in Zariah's house gives on a long passage of cubby-rooms marking the original barrack structure. With the Steward's office, as a passing sweeper told me, at the extreme quarry end.

Here they orient by their own compass-points. Uphill, downhill. Track-end, quarry-end. Turning off the original veranda, I tapped at the open door and murmured, "My lady Asaskian?"

Some dislike the title. I will admit, it gives me sword and buckler, as once, you will remember, I could use a drinking cup. It allows me to set up a barrier. To be decorous

The one thing I never dreamt. That in Iskarda, *I* would need such armor. All over again.

She turned about from a pile of tally-sticks. Too young and delicate for labor, you would imagine, let alone authority. Give me this, I did not crumble the moment I looked in those amber eyes. Thirty-five years in Riversend: I have seen, been courted, by the most beautiful women of the Empire, if the manners did not always match the face. So I bowed quite calmly and said, "You have some papers you wish me to sort?"

They occupied an entire precious cupboard. They had clearly suffered stuffing in a mulepack and possibly sousing in a creek. More than half were ledger-pages. The River Lord knows which conscientious tally-keeper had hauled them from the city's ruin. "Most of it," she explained as I wrestled the heap up on her accounting desk, "can go straight out. But . . ."

But among the tally columns were sheets of word-work. Old sheets, in different hands, on different paper-widths, their series broken, their numbering lost. But cyphers it is impossible to mistake.

“Lady,” I said, and took my hands out of the pile, “I think you need Verrith.”

“They’re old.” The scent washed across me as she shook her head. Chamomile and rosemary, and a spider-gossamer flick of floating hairs against my cheek. “And I think—they may not be about Telluir House.”

I do recall that I turned around and stared.

She touched the pile with one elegant but unpolished fingertip. “Mama thinks this was Archive stuff. But Slianna died in the camp.”

Verrith mentioned Slianna once. Retired troublecrew. Living, the reference inferred, in the central block of Telluir House.

It needs no sage to recognize secrets whose key lay in a living brain. She was probably the intelligence archivist. They wanted more than grandma’s diaries sorted: they wanted decryption, and probably defusing of some dangerous old snares, by an outlander who would not recognize the triggers he undid.

Or they were risking that chance. And testing where my loyalties lay.

It was in her eyes when I looked back to them. Cool eyes, far too old for a beautiful seventeen year old girl.

“Ma’am,” I said. “Where will I be out of your way?”

~* * *~

Be easy, lady Tellurith. The stuff is Trouble-Head records of the Housewars in Amberlight, from your mother’s time, by the few House-Heads given proper names. Archive work, no doubt of it, and encrypted by chance as much as intent. I was a fortnight teasing the handwritings apart, in a cubby-hole off the Steward’s office. They gave me a stool, a pair of planks between shelves for desk, a lamp, the old ledger-sheets for scribble paper. Once started, the cyphers were easy enough. One need only claw out a single intelligible reference point. The rest is patience. One sheet in clear that mentioned Keranshah House was enough.

The first morning, she left me quite alone. By mid-afternoon, the ledger-pages were separated. House-stewards live on the wing. When she flitted through her office I tapped the connecting door and asked what she wanted done with them.

“Oh,” she said, and smiled at me. “That was quick.”

Meaning, efficient. A compliment. A reward?

I bowed. I did not feel my face heat, though I have watched it happen with Iskardan men up to grandsires' age. I do not think she is innocent of the effect. On the other hand, I think she employs it as a good leader would. For its worth, not its own sake.

We riffled through the heap, with me explaining their provenance. "Iatha can settle it," she said, and gathered them up. "Thank you—Tanekhet."

Mostly it is the elder women who hesitate over that possible preface. Those who know what I have been. But I was tired, and my eyes ached, so I took it as the same cause, and asked leave to finish for the day.

~* * *~

She dropped in next morning. Watched at my shoulder a while. Made a suggestion or two. Someone called her out, I thought nothing except a good overseer's check. At midday the kitchen boy set both our food on the Steward's record table, she gestured me to her second stool and said, "Tell me about Riversend."

The River Lord witness my fatuity. I saw all the simpering provincial misses who have begged me to detail the glories of the capital. The River Lord forgive me, I think I actually preened.

She listened a sight more shrewdly than a provincial miss. With my wits about me, I might have properly decoded that intentness, have understood those rare questions' real bent. But being cocooned in my—noble? Dhasdein? male? stupidity, I burbled away her meal-break. And when she called through the doorway at mid-afternoon, asking if I wished to share her tea-spell, what did I do but agree?

The River Lord have patience. I, who have flown half the snares of the Imperial Court, who never yet let a woman lead me into dalliance against my will. Who—

I suppose I may be honest, if only with myself.

I who, before my latest—pastimes—had the blackest reputation as a trifler in the width of Riversend.

That came after Diathan.

My second wife was everything Saarieq should have been. Beautiful, well-bred, royal blood two generations back, all too schooled in noble marriage-politics as well as a Court lady's wiles, and utterly willing, whatever her charades of modesty, to entrust her maidenly virtue to me. When at twenty-five, with seven years as marriage-prey behind me, I was growing vicious in my

play. If they wished to pursue me so mercenarily, so lovelessly, what better revenge, I was coming to think, than to give them what they sought?

It was a most splendid wedding. Everything Saari and I—

It was a Court spectacle. Managed, with consummate timing, a month before the yet more amazing spectacle of Antastes' ceremony with his empress.

The crown of my own emperorship. I who advised her choice, I who oversaw the secret marriage negotiations, I who—shall we say, presided over? the consequent stir in Quetzistan, which saw the older, and inveterately hostile leading clan all but stamped out, and the Empress's Jhuir folk established in the ascendancy, where they have remained ever since. For a twenty-five-year-old Court journeyman, even one raised dodging the Emperor's bedside, quite a master-work.

As was Diathan. Shirran blood, exquisitely trained and groomed to match her birth-born shape, lustrous black hair that went up as superbly under coronets as with artless garlands of fresh flowers. Exquisitely mannered and restrained. Even in bed.

A great noble and his wife can make their excuses. Can, if they choose, live their lives apart in the same house, through the same calendar of Court attendance, summer estate-visits, entertainments, frivolities. With proper discretion, great nobles and their wives can have entirely separate love-lives the length of those same years. So long as any children bear an approximate paternal stamp, who will care?

Saaris bore that stamp. Diathan's hair, if not my eyes; an approximate copy of my chin, if not her lusciously full mouth: something near our closely similar heights.

It is possible she actually was mine. Although *I* know where I was that year, and it was not—often—in Diathan's bed.

It was what she made pretext for the divorce.

Common Court knowledge. Common Court behavior. Given discretion, who would care?

Given any feelings of—anything like what I felt for Saarieq, I would have seen her murdered first.

But I had nothing such, and she had given me a daughter, to be raised in my house, when Diathan took off her magnificent muniment to become a Court star in her own right. One of Therkon's earliest enthrallments, among others. Quite the love-goddess, Diathan.

Varya . . . That was more deliberate. My last essay at family duty: Saaris was a daughter, the maternal uncles had beleaguered me those six years over

the necessity for a proper heir. What wholly uncovenanted pleasure, when the midwife held up a girl instead!

It truly broke Varya's heart. Dynastically obsessed, marrying me, with what was then a thoroughly putrid reputation, solely for the Dhasdeini noblewoman's single justification, as a son-breeder, sure she could succeed where Diathan and—Saari—failed. I took her to bed on the wedding night, which she had set to match her fertile time. The next night, I was in the stews, and the night after . . .

Was the first time I took a—man—into my rooms.

Neither you nor I, my lady Tellurith, needs the details here. You know—I know you know what things I did. My life, my loyalty to you, my presence here, is only because, when Antastes broke that ambush over me, you looked him in the eye, and let him see you not only knew, but understood.

Both of us, no doubt, could rationalize the causes. The Court's true emperor, ten years enthroned, challenged as little as I am now by writing tally-marks: disillusioned, from the end of childhood onward, with the Court, the jackals around him, the masquerade of his life. Turned to cruelty, to torture and perversion. By boredom, and power, and jaded appetite.

The perversion is not that they were men, lady Tellurith. It was in what I did with them.

Well. It appears this is not merely to be a memoir, but a confessional. The Nine-Armed Adversary avoid me; why drag myself through this again?

~* * *~

Again? I hear you say. And no doubt you will upbraid me for this, my lady Tellurith. I assure you, it was more than somewhat out of my control. It was all out my control by then. Which was in the third week of the job, when I broke your long-dead Trouble-Head's worst cypher, and was foolish enough to exclaim aloud.

She—Asaskian was in her room. She came quickly into mine, asking, "What is it?" And what must I do but smile at her, and crow, "Got it!" like the silliest boy.

An Iskardan phrase, in this case both true and merited.

I saw her blink. I actually noticed that. Before she came to my shoulder, saying, "Let me see."

The minutes of some old Head's meeting with Hafas House, their purpose an intrigue against Diaman and Keranshah. She leant closer. So close I felt her

body-warmth. And I—cretinous, imbecile, vainglorious—was still focused on the cypher when she put a hand on the back of my neck.

And ran her fingers, slowly, sensuously, down my fastened hair.

Why did I not cut it as the Iskardan young men do? Why am I stupid enough to value my vanity—lacking fourteen valets and a perfumier—and keep it washed? Even, Gods defend me, pleasant to touch?

It was a mutual misunderstanding. I see that now. Coming to Iskarda, entailed by your vision, lady Tellurith, of a world where women and men might live as equals, in amity, in trust . . . Knowing these women were from Amberlight, with what I understood by that . . .

I imagined, on the one hand, that all of them would share your future-sight, so they would treat me without calculation, cupiscence, or scorn: and on the other that, coming from Amberlight, they would think me beneath noticing.

While—she—Asaskian thought that I, coming from Dhasdein, a great nobleman, would pick up, would have read all her messages. Even as, coming from Amberlight, she took my lack of response for a modest man's interest, and thought her own part as initiator was understood.

"Tanekhet," she said. "You have such pretty hair."

Court reflexes got me off the stool. Found a bow. Gulped out, "Ma'am."

She frowned.

"Lady," I amended, "Asaskian."

Another frown. Softly but quite definitely, she said, "Asaskian."

I have fine eyes and well-cut features and a figure that, by the gods' grace, has not softened with age. My valets have proclaimed the one flaw since I was twelve. My hair is plain brown and must be cut by a master to look like anything. It was that, as much as the—advance—as much as the far worse implications, that graveled me.

She waved a hand and murmured, "I interrupted you. Please, sit down."

I had been misled again, I know now, by her youth, her looks, that I translated as Dhasdeini girlhood, innocent, virginal—the River Lord knows, my own intelligencers have seen she is no innocent, and she may not be virgin either, given your festivals. If I sat down, I could see all too clearly what might result.

Some god saved me. There was a tap on the outer door, an apologetic woman's voice, "What happened about the gutter pipes—are you there, Asaskian?" She frowned, gestured me to be seated, elegantly as a queen, and was gone.

My lady Tellurith, what was I to do? Run screeching to the custodians of modesty? If I could have found one, as modesty is understood in Iskarda. Let alone my ignominy, what would it have done to your dreams? To Iskarda itself?

I doubt her mother would chastise her for harassing servant-boys. If Zariah did not consider *me* a scandal near *her*, she would probably call it an honor to me. Asaskian is unmarried, but not for want of trying, by women or men. Half the boys in Telluir House dangle after her. Half the women have plagued her to carry the blood on, from Darthis and Iatha down. I can—could—feel sympathy.

I confess I ran that afternoon like a virgin myself, and sweated half the night over an escape. An extra stool in Hanni's work-room. A pretext of more light, advice—

She was waiting when I went back. I got through the story with more address than I expected. But when I mentioned advice, her brows straightened in a frown.

“That may not be safe,” she said.

“Ma'am?”

“Asaskian.”

And she held my eyes, hers saying clearly, Accept it, or stop here.

I am Tanekhet. I have stared down Emperors. I did manage, “Could you explain—Asaskian?”

“Those are Archives.” How can a flower-like seventeen-year-old flirt and play Trouble-Head all at once? “Out of code, there are people in Tellurith's cluster who may understand.”

I daresay I looked like a hunted deer. She stepped back, gravely gesturing me past her Steward's table. “But,” she said, “if you feel you cannot go on . . .”

How can looks offer such damnable falsehoods? She should not have known what a cypher was, let alone security. She should have blushed if I looked at her—and there she was, coolly, ruthlessly asking: Is your modesty worth admitting yourself worthless to Iskarda?

I burned my bridges: I brought myself here. I have, implicitly, agreed to accept whatever that choice brings. I did not expect this.

She has been mannerly enough, at least in comparison with the old emperor. She has not tried to trap me in her bedchamber, or fondle me indecently. Corner me in the store-room, yes: lean on my shoulder, touch my cheek, stroke my hair. Keep me, when she chooses, in conversation, by the simple stratagem of standing in the door, when she knows I will not come within reach willingly. She has merely spoken—looked—

How can such a face convey such sensuousness, such—experience—so shamelessly?

I miscall her. It is not shameless. At least, not in the Dhasdeini sense. In the good sense, she is truly without shame. She merely desires me, and has been raised where a woman can frankly, openly—no doubt, she would say, decorously—express her desire.

May the Nine-Armed Adversary fly away with me, lady Tellurith, if I know what I should do.