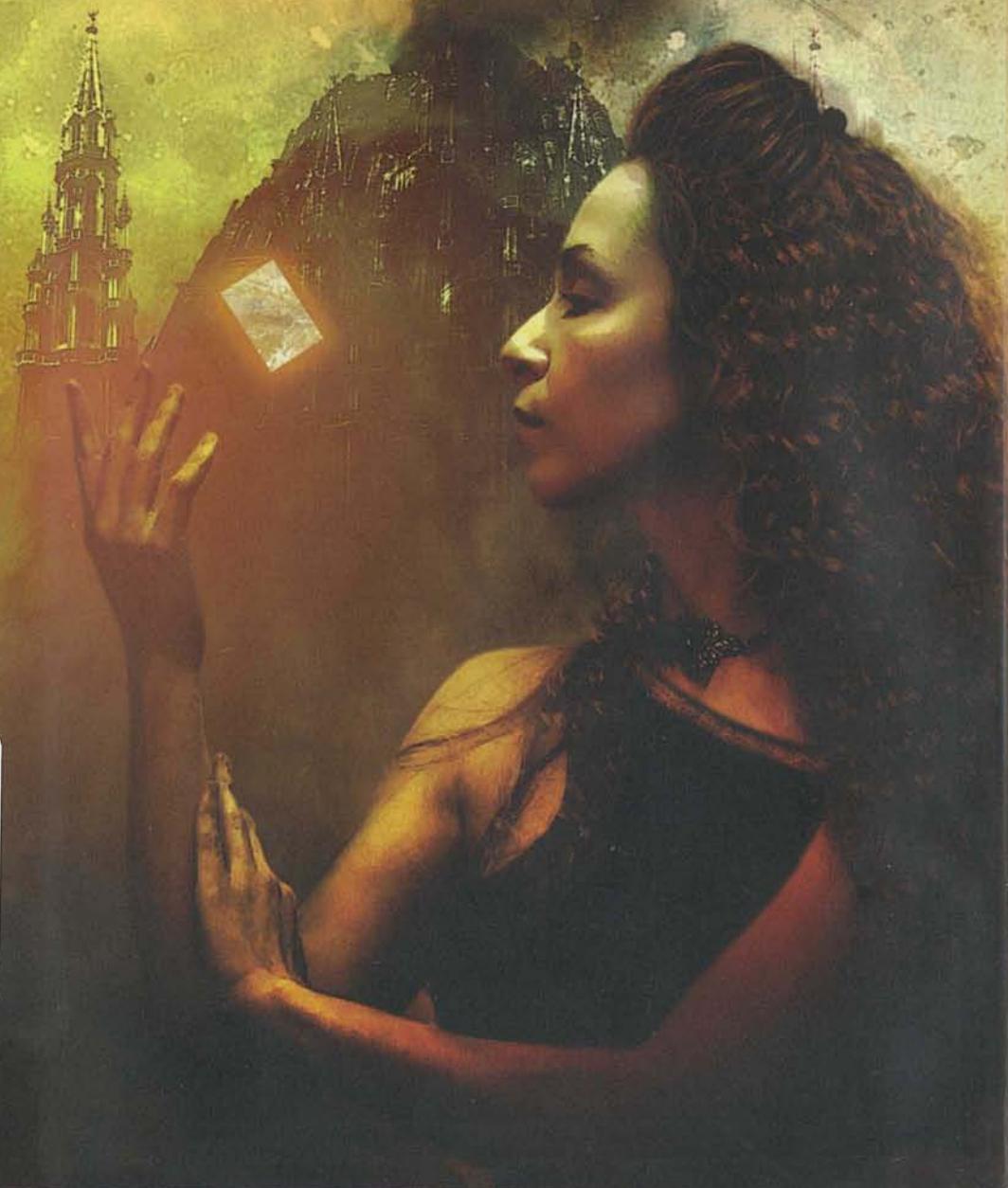


"Amberlight is peopled with vivid characters that stormed up off the page into permanent residence in my mind, in a unique world. If some writers' prose sings, Kelso's is an opera."

—Lois McMaster Bujold

S Y L V I A K E L S O

A m b e r l i g h t



AMBERLIGHT

Also by Sylvia Kelso

Everran's Bane (Book 1 of The Rihannar Chronicles)

The Moving Water (Book 2 of The Rihannar Chronicles)

Riversend (forthcoming)

AMBERLIGHT

Sylvia Kelso



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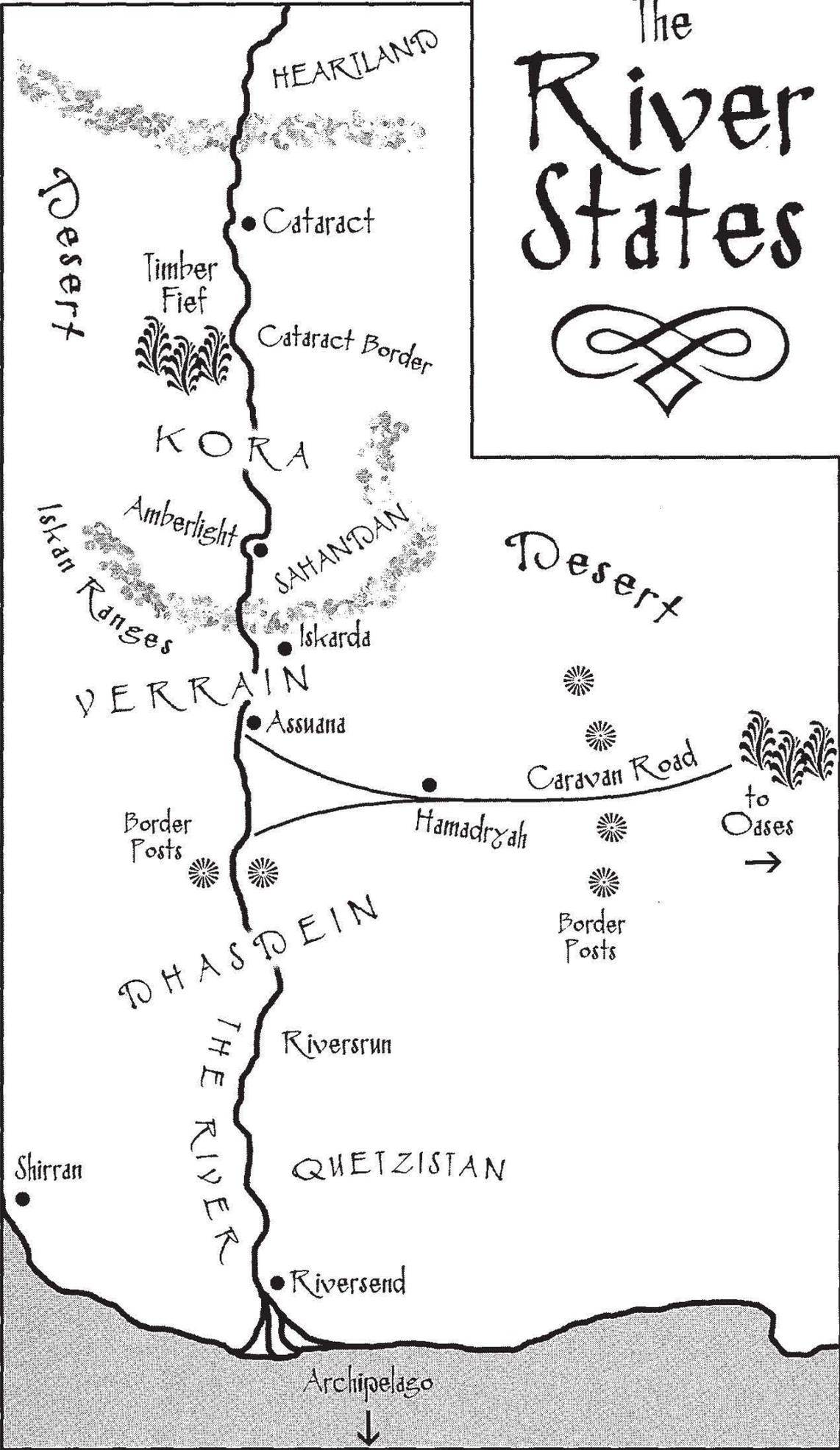
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Helen Merrick and Justine Larbalestier,
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with nostalgic memories of the TC hotline,
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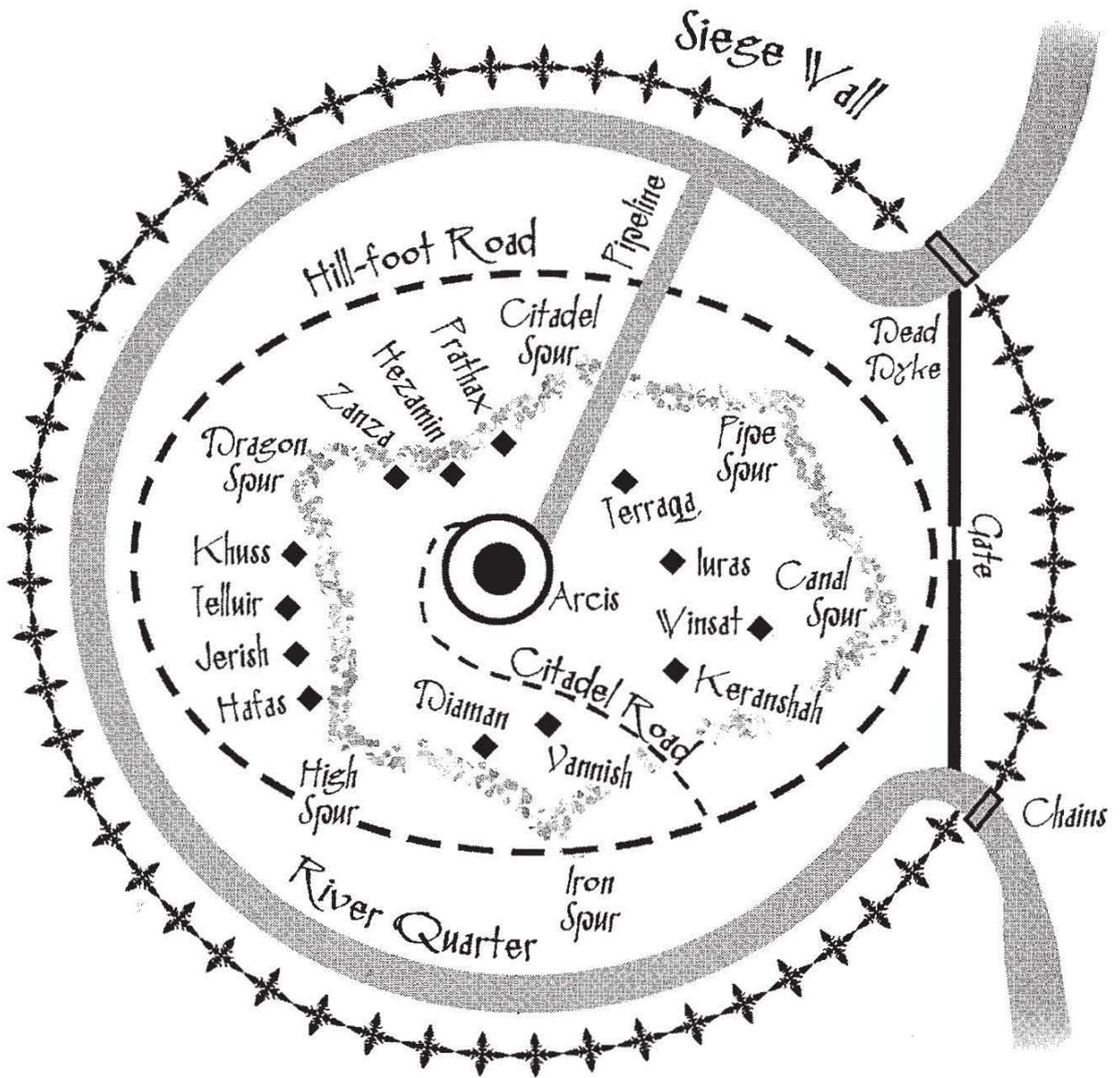
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The River States



Amberlight

City & Houses



Sahandan
↓

PART I
MOONSHINE

“. . . and nothing left remarkable,
beneath the visiting moon.”
~ *Antony and Cleopatra*, IV.15.67-68

I

HIGH MOON OVER AMBERLIGHT, commanding the zenith, radiant, imperial, the city's fretted-ink porticoes and balconies gnawing that torrent of aerial snow. Domes shed it, men's towers drip with it. Under the vertical black rampart of the citadel wall, the qherrique outcrops glow to their depths with it: cabochon slabs girdling the hill's waist, broad as cathedral floors, zones of luminous milk slanted between ragged frames of earth and grass. Qherrique. Pearl-rock. Moon-stone. The core and crown of Amberlight.

Very little moon, though, and certainly no crown where Tellurith has haled her entourage from a wedding in neighborly Hafas House, leaving their guest-honor tarnished, their celebration scanted, by Khey's escape: apprentice shaper, House and cousin-kin: slid off in silk and silver festival gear . . . To drink and dice, shiftless cow, down in River Quarter. Among the thieves and stevedores.

Tellurith fumes as House-heads must, oaths seething behind clamped lips. Her retinue thins to a straggle as moon-snow on fragrant Uphill vines becomes a mackerel stipple of cobbles under the effluvium of cat-piss, river-mud, dockers' sweat. A spot for hand-work, surely. Knives, at courtesy's best. And Khey, petted in the Craft-shops, sib to the qherrique, off here quick as a gutter-bred cat.

"Heugh!" At the fug in the first drinking-hutch Tellurith nearly chokes. "Tender, fetch a light!"

Enough moon spills in that rabbit-door to catch her gold-worked leggings and frosted-pearl coat wings, the orb of a House-

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head's brooch, big as a baby's head, laid like intaglio snow on her breast. The dice-handler runs madly. In the weak tangle of oil-light comes a sudden hush.

"Hold it up."

Bare bronze arms and cropped bronze heads and drink-flushed bronze faces shrink like cockroaches from the revolving yellow shaft. Rickety tables awash, leather bottles careened, hardly a cup in sight, let alone crystal-cut Uphill glass. Dice on the throwing patch, a scatter of copper sequined round them, stevedores on their heels, shoulder to shoulder—sweat-acrid trousers and bare backs, men in with the rest. Only breastbands to show the difference. Tellurith shudders, delicately, and averts her eyes.

No sign, even among scuttlers jammed in the back alley-door, of a Crafter's brocaded wedding gear. Tellurith wheels before she can curse. "Out!"

On to another den, and yet another, alley after alley, down to the heart of the docks. The yowl of River Quarter night is all about them now, and Tellurith feels the procession close up, youngsters feeling for the first time less than invulnerable. Exposed, outside the bulwarks of their House.

Masts curtsy sleepwalker slow, black geometry on pearl-infused sky. From backlit alley ends, through smoky tavern glow punctuated by late-working prostitutes' heads, broad sheens of pearl and gold announce the river itself. As the last night-bird hurriedly clears their way of his hair-plumes and glossily oiled shoulders, Tellurith pulls up.

"Rot and gangrene her!"

Wisely, the rest keep quiet.

If Khey has not surfaced yet, Khey may never show. And they are clear across River Quarter, trailing a far more costly bait through the attentive dark. No single woman, not kin, not Crafter's blood, can justify risking half a House.

"Ahh!"

Spinning on a heel, Tellurith stalks off; away from the river, up toward the business quarter, dead as stone by night. And her folk close up in earnest now, watching the flicker and dart of shadows

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by every barred door and symbol-daubed entryway: for this is the riskiest part of River Quarter. This is the gangland zone.

Tellurith stiffens her back and sniffs. But she is not proud enough for stupidity. She twitches the brooch higher on her breast, and shouts into the street's moon-shoals, "Craft!"

And she has an entourage. With the brooch, it is protection enough.

Warehouse canyons broaden. A traffic divider, a couple of scraggy trees appear. In a breeze off distant water their shadows dance, delicate moon-theorems, on a symbol-spattered wall.

The graffiti subside. A moon sea spreads ahead of them, the polyhedron inaccurately termed Exchange Square. Below a rim of Uphill coffee houses, table umbrellas tilted like giant mushrooms to the moon, a sheet of flagstone slants up to the colonnade whose marble pillars stand pure as sugar-icing beneath its lustrous dome. The Guild-house of the Engravers' Craft.

Islanded in mid-square rise the worn marble seats and tall orange trees of the commerce grove. And halfway between grove and colonnade steps, a black pool marks the stones.

"Blight and blast!"

At Tellurith's heels, the entourage checks.

"Iatha. Your eyes are better than mine. Is that—"

Veteran cutter, impeccable House-steward, Iatha steps up beside her Head. Puckers her eyes into the flooding moon.

Sighs, and answers, "Yes."

The House-folk attend with deepened respect to the ripeness of their leader's oaths.

Not our House. Not our affair. Common ground here, the clan-patrols must pass sometime. Someone, somewhere, must be able to look after it.

Tellurith draws breath for, Let's go. And stops.

Leave Khey, somewhere in River Quarter, her abandonment a burr in the back of a House-head's neck? Perhaps. But then calmly dismiss a drunk or damaged stranger, here in the borderlands, to a passed-out sot's reward, or an innocent victim's further ruin?

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Because even beneath the Guild-house walls, an unconscious woman is not safe at night.

“Rot her cutting ear—whoever she is!”

House-folk stream forward. Tellurith’s long stride takes her quickly to the black puddle, so still upon the candescent stones. As the others press up she begins formally, “S’hur”—worker, fellow Crafter—“are you all ri—”

Nobody wonders at the check. Nobody has to ask. In the ripe moonglow every eye sees what she has seen. The so-still profile caught in the cloak’s throat, whiter than the flags. Black cloak, black night-fall of hair. And the shadow of stubble, black, unmistakable, along the jaw.

This time, Iatha swears.

As profanity ebbs, her Head feels them shift behind her, already sure of her response. Not a woman in distress, were she just a Downhill stevedore. A man. An unknown man. If we would not wait for Khey, those movements say, and we would only salve a woman in this plight with reluctance and profanity, we will certainly not trouble for this.

Fifty paces to the colonnade, the Guild-house. Uphill. Sanctuary. A House retinue at risk. Tellurith gathers muscles for the stride. Looks back to the moon-cut profile, so still, so utterly helpless against that midnight span of cloak.

Grits teeth. Pauses. Works to make it sound cool, ironic, decisive.

“Well, s’hurre. We stopped to play Save-her. Suppose we can’t back off, just because it’s a dangle instead.”

THE SPURT OF RIBALD LAUGHTER quickly checks. Iatha snaps names. Two muscled slab-shifters come forward, ready to heft the victim by shoulders and feet. Tellurith bends warily, sniffing for the reek of Sahandan rice wine or raw barley spirit that would say, Drunkard. Derelict. Expendable. But there is only the acrid, spine-chilling stink of fear and past brutality.

“Hmhmh,” she grumbles. “Must have been dirty business, whoever he is. Did you ever see such a great black horse-blanket of a—”

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And on a punched intake of air, stops.

At Iatha's gesture the porters check. Tellurith stands frozen. Then plumps suddenly on her knees, whispering, "Sweet Work-mother . . ." Her hand creeps out. One finger, reaching to the blackness on the cobbles, dares to touch.

Before she recoils half upright, snapping, "Desho, Zeana, run for a healer, quick! Thanno and Kyris, find something for litter poles—Iatha, come here!"

While the others twitch Iatha goes forward. Looks where Tellurith looks. Sucks in her own breath. But forewarned, she says almost at once, "Rith, hold the messengers—may be no need."

Tellurith grunts. Reaches a hand, quaking, so finely, the great cabochon on her middle finger palpitates like living pearl, under the stubbled jaw.

Feels the faint, faint throb of cold skin against her flesh, catches her breath again and snaps fit to catapult her messengers, "Go, go! He's alive!"

"Mother's love," mutters Iatha, and Tellurith all but slaps her hand from the cloak. "We mustn't try to move him. It could be anything—he could be disemboweled!"

Iatha mutters obscenities to drown Tellurith's. The square, the emptily rising streets resound to the messengers' flight, and more than one among the House-folk sits down with a bump as understanding spreads: that it is blood, dyeing whatever color the cloak had, saturating it, spreading far beyond the hump of body, which has laid that great black penumbra on the stones.

Tellurith does not try to conceive of its worse and worse origins. While Iatha swears she edges closer. At what, she realizes, is the unconscious man's back. Looking down over his shoulder at an incisive profile, long nose, blade-sharp jaw, the shag of a black-avised man's stubble honing it, a surprisingly fine-cut mouth slack now against the back of a hand. Her own hand creeps out.

His flesh is chill. Not death yet, experience with cutting catastrophes tells her: wound-shock. Maybe—her fingers explore the black sheaf of hair—a bludgeon. Almost certainly a street

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gang, robbery and battery, if not worse. There is an oozing lump over his ear. There is a bruise, she realizes now, in his eye-socket. No River Quarter worker, to come up here. No decent house's man, to be out alone. No one from Amberlight, she speculates, reassessing that black, black hair. But something, some impulse of Head-ship or simple human compassion, makes her ease a hand under his temple. Transfer his head, with infinite care though no little distaste, into her lap.

And if he bleeds on the brocaded wool under his cheek, she supposes she will find some recompense, if only in easing the closure of a life.

She is still crouched there when the pound and echo of feet announce her messengers, a stout physician panting, healer's satchel slung between her heralds, at their backs.

"DON'T MOVE HIM!" are her first clear words.

Tellurith elevates her nose. Subtle snub, subtler reminder of rank. The physician ignores it, shouldering her aside to chase the pulse. Then a grunt as stubble grates her palm. "Mff . . ."

"We have a litter." Tellurith glances to Thanno and Kyris, poised with a pair of umbrella shafts threaded through someone's coat. "Shall we—"

"Not yet!"

With a flare of nostrils clear in the moonlight as with gingerly, fearful delicacy, she pries at the margin of the cloak.

"Ah!"—"Ugh!"—"Uh!"

"Gang-work." The physician awards their squeamishness a more forceful nostril flare. "Hereabouts, s'hurre, what'd you expect?"

Tellurith looks up at the Guild-house colonnade. Hands still busy, the physician snorts.

"They've hunted up here last year and more. Take more than a Craft-house to frighten them after dark." Slum-wise, she does not ask, And what is an Uphill House-head doing hereabouts? Tellurith watches those deft hands peel the cloak from a wiry, snow and bruise-mottled back, and does not ask either. Perhaps, still masked by the prone position, he really has been disemboweled.

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“Stripped him, of course.” The weariness of hated custom. “If it’s good, they’ll take the clothes—”

Not this time. Shirt, under-shirt, possible over-tunic are wadded under him, ripped margins of bloody rag. And the ruins of trousers, wound about two very expensive boots.

Tellurith’s stomach is still rolling when the physician shifts place with an almost froggish hop. “Get water,” she growls, slicing some blade between the hobbled ankles. “Take the cloak. Stop spewing, you. Haven’t you ever seen a rape?”

“Mother’s eyes—!”

It has been yanked out of Tellurith. Hunkered close over him, the physician shoots her one sour glance.

“They do it, yes, to a mark that’s pretty. Or fights too much.” Her steady hands ease the wrecked trousers clear. “Probably outland.” A glance at the blood-patched but elegantly soft, buckled—gold-buckled—boots. Another glance up to the lake of darkness that has spread from under the bruised, black-caked thighs. “Maybe not just the men, either. I’ve known them use a mark’s own sword.”

Tellurith feels her shoulders sag. “If he’s past help—”

“For the Mother’s sake! He’s alive!”

And, Tellurith deciphers that savagely outthrust jawline, I am a healer. While he lives, I will try to thwart their butchery. I will fight.

“What can we do?” Tellurith asks.

Hasty footfalls announce Zetho, self-appointed aide with a receptacle alarmingly like the sacred bronze beggar’s bowl from the grove. The physician nods gratefully. Eyes her patient, and hesitates.

“The Mother’s throw, whatever we try. If we wash him and he gets colder—if we try to move him without—if I try to work on him without seeing the damage—”

The household is quiet. The city lies silent round them, Amberlight couched like her gangs, aware and waiting, under the pearl flood of the moon.

The physician stiffens herself. “You, you, you, you. Take his feet—his knees—his shoulders—his arms.” She settles her own

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hands at his hips. "When I give the word, we turn him. Gentler than you ever moved one of your poxed qherrique slabs. Onto his right side."

As those blunt fingers edge under his hip-bone, Tellurith remembers her own position. "What shall I . . ."

"Keep cushioning him. Don't let go!"

More delicately than any new-divided slab of pearl-rock, with infinitely small loosening, supplings of caked blood and rigged muscle, they ease him over, the team working as at a mother-face to the physician's commands. As they steady him while half-a-dozen coats are hastily wadded at his back, the head in Tellurith's lap moves. Faintly, he groans.

"Careful, for Kearma's bloody love!"

The physician's god is invoked again, less frantically, as Iatha drapes her festival coat across his torso, while with oaths at the water's chill, at the flap of a wind-blown torch annexed from the Engraver's House, the physician begins to lave his groin.

"At least," she growls, "they didn't geld him too."

Tellurith shudders at the thought of mutilation atop the rest. The dark head in her lap shifts. Without thought she cups his face, murmuring, as to a daughter, "Keep quiet. Keep still."

"So."

Zetho withdraws the bowl. Tellurith reads, Trouble, from the syllable. One hand on a marble-white, marble-cold haunch, the physician glowers.

"Most of this is a stab. Right in the artery. Hadn't left him spread out, and on top of his clothes . . ." A graphic sickle-sweep of one hand. "I've tight-wrapped that. But there's a mess inside too, Kearma flay them." The hand flicks above that black-cruled haunch. "I need to look. It might . . ." Her lips set tight. "He can't stay here in any case. But if we move him, and that thigh artery opens—or he starts to bleed inside . . ."

Tellurith's mouth is dry. Ridiculous, for some stranger, some unknown, a man. More ridiculous to ask, in surety of an answer, "What can you do?"

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The roll of eyes retorts, I can kill him out of hand. But the lips tighten. Before she says, dourly, "If the inner stuff is—mendable—I can plug him up."

One or two younger women cannot control the laugh. Iatha lashes at them. Undistracted from the silent proviso, Tellurith prods, "But?"

"But I may start a haemorrhage doing it. Or when we move him—that may happen anyway."

Tellurith holds those eyes, colorless in the brow-shadow. Looks away, amid her shadow-and-silver folk. Across the lake of moon-lacquered stone, up to the air-and-silver colonnade, higher. Where the great shields of the qherrique glow, luminous, alive, slabs of breathing moonstone, to the breathing of the moon.

She is House-head for more than inherited rank, more than fifteen years good decision-making, more than a superlative cutting ear. As she learnt in her very first rapport, as she fine-tuned the skill with polisher and shaping-tool, and tempered it in those draining moments at the mother-face, she listens for the oracle whence those decisions came.

And from the life and blood of Amberlight the qherrique's answer comes to her. Sure, inexplicable as the assent of a willing mother-face; the signal no Head, no cutter, no shaper, not the most novice polisher can mistake.

If we do nothing, he dies anyway. And it matters, if he dies.

She drops her eyes to the physician's face and says quietly, "In the Work-mother's hand."

It is the cutter's invocation. The physician's expression says she recognizes more than that. Before she lifts her own hands to re-invoke Kearma, and begins.

They have to ease him on his face again. To mound clothes under his hips. To hold, with profane and breath-held delicacy, his arms, his torso, his re-straddled legs. "If he jerks around he'll bleed for sure." Kneeling between his thighs, instruments in hand, she scowls up his back at Tellurith.

"Keep hold of his head. If he starts to move—talk to him. Just might keep him quiet."

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Tellurith's own breath comes short. Not mere human concern now. Behind her quickened heart-beat she can feel the weight, the focused attention, almost the sentience of Amberlight.

She cups the drowned face lightly as a new-polished statuette. Trying for composure, says, as at the mother-face, "Yes."

Meaning, Go.

When the cold water starts to bite, he does move. Twitches. A gasp. Moans. Stronger flexure of the muscles as cold instruments replace cold water, probing deeper into his vital, his damaged and doubly sensitive parts. The physician mutters. Prayer. Endearment. Curse. The head in Tellurith's lap heaves before she can catch it, his body jerks as he cries out.

"Quiet, quiet, keep still now, it's all right, just hold on . . ." Ridiculous, crooning like a mother with a beloved baby to a complete stranger, a man who may not even use her words. But she catches his head, whispering in the drowned ear, smoothing the pain-tense cheek, wiping sudden sweat from the nameless brow. "Quiet, keep quiet . . ."

And though his body transmits shock, protest, pain atop older pain, though he lets out strangled noises and twists his head spasmodically, violently in her lap, whether of words or her cutter's ability, something must come through.

Because whatever the physician does to him, though he cries out, he does not move.

FULL DAWN ON AMBERLIGHT; Tellurith watches it in from Telluir House-Head's apartment, hands propped wide on the balustrade.

The honey-tinged Iskan marble is icy under her palms; shoulders hunched in mahogany-brown double wool, she is grateful for her festival coat. Fifty miles south, snow bleaches the shaggy Iskan ranges' spine, a drizzle of winter sure as the qherrique dust frosting her lapels. But the sky is celestial blue, freighted with blushing hills of cloud.

"Rith?"

Iatha comes to her side. Qherrique-tough, she has already bathed and changed for the day.

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“He’s out to it. Sleep-syrup should last till noon.”

Tellurith’s eyes lift slowly, sidelong. Across the House frontage, pine-cone finials topping the central block’s four-storey attic roofs, over the green mushrooms of garden treetop, the snake of demesne wall. Native scrub beyond is branded by a line of stony steps. A hundred feet above them, the Telluir qherrique answers sunshine, a moat-wall of back-lit pearl.

Iatha breasts the balustrade. Goes on equably, “If he still won’t take it for anyone else, you could always book a spot—”

“In my schedule! Blast and blind—!”

As she spins from the balustrade Iatha’s eyes go wide. Then she bites off a laugh.

“I’ve noticed,” demurely, “that Telluir carries the Thirteen’s cutting-load . . .”

Tellurith spins again, thumping fist on stone. The men’s tower is tucked behind House block and center court, with the garden as buffer beyond. She could not see the glare of sun on its shutters’ lace-work if she did turn, but it burns her shoulder-blades.

“You block-cracker, you know quite well—!”

“Oh, ah, you’ve set up a week of it. Metal shippers, estate accounts. Moon-meet of the Thirteen. New cutter to try. Three statuettes—and one of ’em a king’s—to tune. Bare compliments’ll take a month. He’s a bit of gangland flotsam. You’re Head of Telluir House. Just tell me, ’Rith—did we pick him up, or not?”

Tellurith’s jaw knots. She stares out over Amberlight.

Under the familiar frontage of distant House-blocks, Khuss and Jerish to the right, Hafas away left, the valley opens between High and Dragon Spurs, fifty-foot windmill vanes just beginning to swing along each crest. Turned on for the day-wind, they blur the squat stone towers. Already, downstairs, the visible veins of qherrique in the House-hall are glossy with new-fed light.

Sharply, Tellurith averts her mind. Stares lower, down past clan demesnes into the business zone. Warehouse, office, guild-house, coffee house. Inn. House of prostitutes.

From here the graffiti and the broken or boarded windows are invisible, leaving the city gem-clear and immaculate for dawn.

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And below the frontier's battle-zone sprawl the huddled humps and gaudy shrines and strangulated alleyways of River Quarter. Workers for the ships that come, upRiver, downRiver, trailing in like water-spiders on that glittering serpentine about the city's base. Hauling the silk and wool, the metal and timber, the multitudinous tribute to its one unique product that sustains, that recompenses Amberlight.

"Rith?"

She tightens her fists on the balustrade.

"No, we couldn't have left him there. Or taken him to a hire-worker's hostel. Or expected the physician to heave him home. So, yes, we do have obligations. Have accepted obligations." A deeper breath. "I have accepted obligations. Tell Hanni. Noon. Fit it in the book." And as Iatha turns, face lost but shoulders grinning, she yells, "And find what he is, you lump!"

"NO, RUAND, troublecrew say, Nothing," Caitha's eloquent nostrils wrinkle, "among the clothes. No money-pouch. No jewelry. Something torn out of his ear. Local clothes. Quite well-worn. Probably a lender's shop." River Quarter is full of them; pawned clothes are orthodox intelligencer's disguise. The senior House physician nods, underlining their own intelligencer's point. "Same for the cloak."

"The boots?"

Caitha inclines her head again, acknowledging her Head's wits.

"First-quality gazelle hide. Gold buckles. New. Cataract cut."

Tellurith's brows mark the double anomaly. Caitha drops her voice a tone. "No sign of—"

"No."

No weapon at the site. Not so much as a broken sword-belt, a table-knife. Which is only absence of confirming proof: Cataract is two hundred miles upriver, just beyond Amberlight's border. Cataract is the River's most turbulent neighbor. And Cataract might pay a mercenary wages to merit those boots.

She and Tellurith eye the man in the bed.

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The quietest bed in the infirmary, empty near a work-moon's tranquil end. In the center of the House-block. Women's ground. No call for Iatha's presence to point the consequence of his vehement refusal to take sleep-syrup from any other hand. Setting the cup down, she can see her steward's grin.

"Though I'm rotted," Tellurith mutters, "to know why."

The stubble is blacker now. Inclined on a snowy pillow, the hair lays a night-wing over the bloodless face. Sharp features burred by bruises, sharpened by loss of blood. Speaking anger. Decision. Arrogance. A very plausible face for a mercenary.

"Not Cataract coloring." Mistaking her silence, Caitha begins to state the obvious. "Any more than he's a Verrainer. And in Dhasdein, nowadays, it could be anything . . ."

With no way to tell, until he recovers consciousness, exactly what, or what provenance he will claim.

And, the physicians agree, he should stay drugged at least another day.

Tellurith lets out breath, an angry hiss. Caitha jumps.

"See Hanni. For sunset, fit him in the book. Midnight—I'll be home first. And," luxury, to pounce on someone, "see he's fed."

"RUAND, I TRIED, we both did, but Caitha said don't upset him whatever you do and he keeps throwing his head—" the novice healer wrings her hands, her companion hovers with an arm-load of soiled sheets. "And you'll give him the sleep-syrup anyhow—"

"Yah." Tellurith sets her lips. Yanks the skirts of another ornate coat aside, threatens inwardly, If you wreck my evening shirt like those sheets . . . Dismisses thought of guests, an entire Uphill function waiting, the knives of long-term malice honing in Vannish House. Takes the soup cup. Works a hand under the tousled head. Murmurs, picking up cutter's intonation, "Come along, you need liquids, drink this."

And, repeated miracle, the pain-thinned lips relax. He mutters drowsily, a hand stirs under the sheets. Before the soup goes down, in small obedient sips.

"Now . . ."

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Two sips of syrup. A demurring noise, a muzzy frown. More impulsion in her tone. Another shift of the head, a sigh. Concession, and slipping back then, into pain-blanked sleep.

“If he makes water from this, you know how to clean up without disturbing him? You know why?” Though they cringe, in truth the irritation is for herself. “I’ll be back.”

“THE MOTHER ROT IT, Iatha, I’ve broken an account meet and held up a Vannish dinner-party, and this girl’s too good a family to insult—if he won’t take it for Caitha, then let him hurt!”

In Tellurith’s workroom the girl is already waiting. Sharp Amberlight nose and copper-gold eyes, squared shoulders that speak Navy louder than the grimly subdued crinkle of Amberlight hair. Bound in a tail, since she does not yet dare the Crafter’s plait.

“Damis.”

“Ruand.”

Maiden. House-head. Inclining her head, Tellurith inclines a mental ear. Into the waltz of formalities, asking after mother and sisters’ command chain on the *Wasp*, in whose seven-sister cluster is the heart of city defense. What man-powered galley can hope to out-strip, out-fight, or slip invaders past those small lethal stingers, driven and armed by the might of qherrique?

“But you feel there’s more?”

“S’hur, the light-gun answers me better than anyone.” She says it without pride. “But every time I power up—I feel—” she looks down suddenly. “S’hur, there’s something in my hands . . .”

It is the proverbial cutter’s phrase: *Something in the hands.*

Tellurith does not sing a jubilee. Just moves to the wall beyond Hanni’s slate-strewn desk, where the deep polished glow of imported redwood yields to panels of apricot-colored stone. Skeined, patterned over with veins of pearl and silver-smoke, their flow knotted and woven like the root-falls of a banyan fig.

“This is House qherrique. Not dedicated to anyone.” She smiles, her House-head, steady-the-panic smile. “Do you think you could reverse the feed?”

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“It’s cooler today,” she adds, to the girl’s dilated stare. “Soon be time to change in any case.”

And therefore easier, as every Craft child knows, to wile qherrique toward its own approaching pattern shift. Less of a shock to Downhill folk, seeing the myth of House systems made real.

“Ruand . . . Uh. I’ll try.”

A deep breath. Centering the mind. In cutter’s parlance, opening the ear. Tentative brush of finger-tips. If she can handle a big Navy light-gun, no surprise that the contact accepts. Touch, then. Awareness ebbing inward, to the secret, the inexplicable connection, flesh and rock-flesh, mind and matter, wits and light, bone and pearl.

The girl’s lips move. The fingers caress. The qherrique glows, brilliant now as in the mother-face at the moment of assent, before the cutter steps forward and stakes her life.

The veins dim back into quiescence. Over Tellurith’s waiting hand a hint, a touch, a steady spread of warmth instead of coolness breathes across the placid air.

Genuinely, Tellurith beams. “You’ve just made the winter change for Telluir House. Well done, damis!

“It was a pied block at worst, you know. House qherrique’s patient. If you’d missed, there’d be no change at all.”

She flexes her arms. The excitement of finding new potential is matched only by its relief. Crafters are the Houses’ bone-marrow; Craft-blood comes down in families, but it can disappear as quickly, as mysteriously as it comes, and its vanishment is the nightmare of Amberlight.

“So I think we’ll try an apprenticeship, next new moon, in the Telluir panel-shop. Good enough? Time enough?”

Straight into shaping, a Craft level higher than engraver or polisher; in the power-shops, the engineer’s side of the House, at a rank only below shaper of statuettes. With half a moon’s space to set her affairs in order. No wonder there is worship in the girl’s eyes.

And in a moon or so, Tellurith tells her back, you’ll be with me in the mine. If only, yet, to look.

THE NEXT MEETING is nowhere near so pleasurable. In the House-head's formal appointment room, down on second level, entombed amid state gifts and ceremonial furniture. Including the Dhasdein water-pipe, bane of Tellurith's lungs. As her visitor exhales a cloud of pungent skau-weed smoke, she grips her silver-worked leggings and tries desperately not to sneeze.

"Most honored, most highest . . ."

The compliments will go for hours here, working up between his aides, her Craft-heads, his private assistant, her secretary, her House-steward, his chamberlain, the phalanxes ranked out beside them on the velvet-covered stools. House-head's cohorts exactly facing those of Mel'eth's kinglet, ruler of Dhasdein's arid western province, prince under the king of kings who rules downstream in Riversend, who trades only by surrogates and only through the Thirteen concerted: Dhasdein's emperor.

Time was, perched stiff-backed on one of those lesser stools, she could be enchanted by Dhasdein garb, the ridiculous narrow trousers, the curled, pomaded hair; by Dhasdein ceremonial, so damnably long in the wind. When she could admire her mother, straight-backed yet graceful as a wind-pine, forbearing so much as a glance at the equally wonderful stew of color and shape amid the entourage. Today it is merely a wearisome ninth-year ritual. The kinglet knows, almost to a grain-weight, their asking price. As well send a shippers' slip upRiver and be done.

Except that statuettes do not come cash-on-delivery.

Nor does a state apartment door open in mid-interview. Her eyes stay fixed, the smile holds on her mouth. The kinglet's private aide—they have progressed that high—holds his own stride. But Tellurith's skin traces the message up from Craft-head to Craft-head, to Hanni, to Iatha—who rises, hiatus unthinkable, to whisper in her ear.

Tellurith does not swear. Go red. Grind her teeth. As the aide finds a pause she inclines her head. Makes obeisance, deep as a River Quarter whore before his phallus-god. "Most estimable. Most splendid. House Telluir is devastated. Obliterated. There

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is a matter—smaller than dust, but wretchedly, mine alone. A personal obligation. Honorable, convey to His Eminence that I am desolated. I must—momentarily—lose the brightness of his face. Deign to grace our house by tasting some meager refreshment.” Her eye snags Iatha, whose grin vanishes in a punished bow. “But I will—I will within instants—return.”

As she swirls in the infirmary door the young healers flee. Caitha bends under the blast, but can still cry, “The syrup’s failed, he’s coming round, we can’t keep him quiet—!”

“The Mother blight—!”

He is conscious already, head off the pillows and struggling to heave himself up. Tellurith lunges, blind to all but images of black-caked thighs, blood’s penumbra on lucent stone.

Caitha pounces too. Pinned, panting, he struggles more desperately, only weakness ceding them control.

“Rot it, lie down!”

Strength fails. He falls back with a gasp. The eyes skewer her, so black that iris and pupil are indistinguishable, the great bruise that lanterns one orbit powering an asymmetrical glare.

“Where am I? What am I doing here?”

Tellurith’s hands drop. She does catch her jaw. And the initiative, demanding with equal cold ferocity, “Who are you?”

“I’m—”

The hauteur implodes.

“I—”

Some impossible sensation squeezes Tellurith’s heart as he goes limp, a hand to the shocked, crumbling face.

“I—I—”

The great black eyes stare up at her, dazed, lost. More pitiable than physical wreck, that disintegration of the self.

“You were attacked.” Tellurith’s mouth speaks before she thinks, in a quiet, a Head’s, almost a cutter’s voice. “Knocked out. Robbed. Badly hurt. We found you. Brought you here. This is Telluir House.”

And almost more appalling, after the look of stunned assimilation, is the pause. Then the equally dazed, “Telluir—House?”

SYLVIA KELSO

Tellurith is House-head because, while her senior physician collapses into consternation, she can reach the sleep-syrup bottle, pour by guess-work, and say, "You need to rest. Drink this."

"No, it's sleep-syrup, it's addictive, I won't—" one feeble but determined hand fending the cup, the ruins of authority in every phrase.

"And you're in my debt and my House and you've interrupted a vital interview. I'll discuss this later. Now drink it and be quiet!"

The whip-crack is not wholly voluntary. But either that or "debt" shuts his mouth on a gasp and flush. And an equally instinctive hand-sign as Caitha re-presents the cup.

Leaving Tellurith to chew, all the way upstairs and through interminable extra apologies, on a patient who has lost his memory but kept the salute of the Dhasdein Imperial guard.

"CATARACT BOOTS? Dhasdein *salute?*"

"And probably no memory." Tellurith jerks her coat into place. "Have Zuri scratch about River Quarter, Iatha. And they can keep him drugged today as well, because the Thirteen wait for no dangle, and neither do I."

The Moon-meets of Amberlight are held in the citadel, which, after two centuries of increasingly solid peace along the River's length, has almost no other use. Indeed, despite the thirteen carven high-backed seats, the clammy old walls veiled in heirloom Verrain tapestries, the wide modern windows open on highest morning air and hawk-inscribed sky, the train of underlings and business paraphernalia behind each Head's place, even the incense burners below the great boss of woken qherrique, from under the shimmering oak table there is an indubitable whiff of mouse.

Taking her place, Tellurith checks moods and faces in a glance. So long the thirteen Houses have held Amberlight, so solidly each is locked to its trove of qherrique, that their equilibrium, however testy, is impossible to shake. Vannish will bicker with Telluir, Jerish will try to snub Hezamin, Zanza and Iuras will ally against Diaman and Winsat and Keranshah. Hafas is president

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this month; Zhee's eyes glitter, ancient as a lizard's, as she eases her rheumatically limbs into the chair.

The agenda is almost a rote matter too: up and downRiver intelligence reports, from Cataract, from Verrain, from Dhasdeini provinces as well as Riversend, a gesture, it appears, worn perfunctory as the citadel itself. And no whisper of untoward activity. No fresh news to settle a queasy House-head's stomach over the puzzle of a stray Outlander; not so much as a clearly emerging threat to affirm the jangle of recalled history down a less complacent set of nerves.

Nor is anything amiss in the estate and trade reports; from the quays, where the wealth lands even from the Heartlands upRiver beyond Cataract, and the Oases cross-desert where only Verrainers go. From the breadth of Amberlight's outer domain, the Kora, where House and city districts mingle with common land. Gifted too, most of it; much from Cataract, in default of other wealth. West of the city, the irrigated levels of the Sahandan that grow the city rice and the cotton that clothes River Quarter. North and east, the open sheep and cattle-lands that graze many a House's herds. Southward, the Iskan marble quarries, northward the newly gifted timber-fief. Cataract was bitterly hurt by that: the cedar-forest is coveted the River's length, Cataract's most valuable resource. With account tallies finished, the Houses bandy thoughts of that grudge between them, till it is lost in internal concerns.

Such as Downhill gangs who drop their flotsam in Telluir House.

"Blighted upstarts," opines Damas of Jerish House, fuming over tales of a warehouse robbed, another burnt. "Running the black-market, picking off travelers, right up under the Engravers' eye!"

"Of course they trade up there." Liony of Zanza smothers a yawn. "Uphill's the best price."

"In our rotted goods!"

"What does Telluir make of the—er—residue?"

Tellurith does not stiffen. But old warning tightens her ribs at the sound of Maeran's voice, Head—old balance, old bane, old

SYLVIA KELSO

sparring-partner—of Vannish House. She steadies her breath before she replies.

“Very badly hurt.”

“Outlander?”

Friends can be more perilous than foes. It is Jura of Hezamin whose wit, usually so agreeable, probes the sensitive point.

“Outlander!” Damas sits up with a jerk. “Tellur, you don’t think this is an agitator? Some trouble—paid or sent—over the borderline?”

Eye-whites show. Nobody has to say the name aloud.

“If Cataract were involved, I’m sure,” Maeran’s drawl has deepened, “Tellur would let us know.”

The one nightmare that can still vex House sleep. And is it new caution or old animosity that makes Tellurith answer, levelly, holding that languid, copper-green stare?

“At present he’s still drugged.”

A pause. A lull. From Damas, a snort. From Jura, a growl. “There’s enough trouble building in River Quarter. Dispossessed clan-folk. Docker brats. Outland jetsam. And the man-balance is out. It’s been out for years . . .”

As many years as Jura’s complaint. Tellurith could almost like Maeran for the raised brows, the silently recited, *I don’t know why the Quarter can’t expose boy babies like the Houses do. They know too many men make trouble. Why can’t they ever learn?*

Zhee moves, folding her gnarled hands on the table. Speaks softly, slowly, as the glide of a passing hawk.

“Does Hezamin advocate that we—the Houses—Amberlight—set the balance right?”

A very awkward silence, growing appalled as the images fill various minds: man-hunts, Navy and House crews hurt, qherrique power unleashed. Lethally. On Amberlight folk.

Zhee re-folds her hands. Just possibly, within its folds, her nearly invisible mouth smiles.

“Is there other business?”

There is a freight-quibble between Prathax and Terraqa; an exchange on price for yet another Verrain Family, a discussion of

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river-heights. The autumn ebb is late. And finally Zhee sits back, intoning, "Praise to the Work-mother," and the meet is over for a month.

But Tellurith has not told her fellow-Houses assembled: I have a man in my infirmary who may be more trouble to Amberlight than all its qherrique is worth.

AND WHEN SHE CLIMBS to her apartments that evening, one blessed evening with nothing ahead but supper, and a glance over some Dhasdein colony offers, and, were she so inclined, a call to a musician—even a visit to the tower—Iatha is posted by her door.

"In," says Tellurith, walking past, and heaves the papers toward her workroom. "Shia! Set for two!"

Only over the wine, an imported Wave Island red that has already cost an Imperial ransom, does she groan and unlace her boots and demand, "What now?"

Iatha scowls. "Caitha wants to check that thigh-wound. Worried about a false clot or something. And the internal stuff. She wants the street-healer back. She wants you too."

"In the Work-mother's name! Can nobody in this House manage that pestiferous dangle without me?"

Albeit wryly, Iatha's grin revives. "Could you make it clearer to everyone in this House that you're the only one who can manage him at all?"

"But—"

In Iatha's silence the image recurs. Moonlight flooding black cloak, black blood, bruise-mottled back. The physician's taut face, the preliminary moment of prayer. The weakness of that hand against the cup.

"I suppose he's still at risk."

"Caitha's double twitchy."

Tellurith groans. "The Mother aid. Well, tomorrow I was doing accounts again. Tell Hanni—"

"I know. In the book."

SYLVIA KELSO

NEXT MORNING she walks in on medical chaos, and the eyes hit her, solid as night. Glowering over tight-clenched sheets, wide open in a rigid face.

“And who’re you?”

“I am Head,” startled into arrogance, “of Telluir House.”

“And I’m the King of Zamba’s daughter. Spin again!”

Then the eyes flick, absorbing local consternation, shouting in their turn: War-maker, agent, power. One too-brief instant off-guard, before he folds his lips. “What are you—”

“They want to change the dressing.” Tellurith snatches control. Blight him, why couldn’t this be a meek, ordinary man? “And check your—other wounds.”

“*What* other wounds?”

“They’ll explain—”

“Explain what? There’s only one!”

The physicians erupt; are curbed by Tellurith’s gesture. His eyes mark that, too.

“There’s more,” she says. Memory stressing it. “Believe me, there is.”

“Then what is it?” There is panic gripped below the disbelief now. “Why don’t I—” Did I, the glare cries, forget that as well?

Tellurith takes two long strides to the bed-side. Says, “You weren’t just robbed. You were raped.”

She has time to regret the baldness, the unlowered voice. Time for remorse, as his lips go white. The eyes glaze, the eye-socket’s bruise comes out like thunder. The hands go slack. Before he drags himself over, burrowing face-down in the sheets

Tellurith cuts off Caitha’s forward surge. Out, says her hand sign. Quiet. And as novices tiptoe, there is time to signal Iatha, hovering half rueful, half amused. To consign accounts yet again to perdition, and know Hanni will get the message: until further notice, the Head is engaged.

A hand comes back round the door. The stout physician tenders a night-watcher’s stool.

Blast him, seethes Tellurith, scrabbling for compunction, as the sand slides in the counting glass. And blast me for being a double

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fool. But to thoughts of intrusion, honor and guilt and instinct all give the same response.

The sheet rustles. A smothered intake of breath.

Very quietly Tellurith says, "It can happen to anyone."

A jerk. A gasp.

Then, low and vicious as a stab, "Get out."

Tellurith does not reply.

"Get out!"

"I can guess your feelings. But if you heave around like that, you could easily start another haemorrhage. And then they'd all be back."

The sheet storm checks.

A House-head's sense of timing makes Tellurith get off the stool. Sit on the edge of the bed. Pin the first furious lunge with a hand on a shoulder point, and say in her cutter's voice, "Quiet."

Coiled under her hand, savage but sapped, muscles plunge in more than revolt. In panic. Buried memory, stark burnt-in fright.

"It's all right, it's all right." Her inner voice has responded instantly, the real message in its tone. "It's only me. You're safe."

Another long, quaking breath. And his body is shaking now, harder and harder, uncontrollably, sobs choked, strangled in the ruck of it, bitten back between his teeth.

At some point in her low-voiced litany she has moved up the bed, and he has turned, and as on Exchange Square, as when they reached the infirmary, his head is in her lap, her hand smoothing the disheveled black hair, a freshly broken lip spotting blood on yet another shirt. Only this time he is clutching it too, applied linen crushed mindlessly, convulsively, in a fist.

To be repudiated the instant the flood subsides.

You shouldn't have told him like that, says stinging reproach. For the Mother's sake, this is an outlander. You know their men's pride. At the very least, you could give him time to recover, learn to live with it . . .

No, retorts instinct, sure as in the mine. Not this one.

"Can you handle the rest now?"

He has curbed the head-jerk before she withholds her hand.

SYLVIA KELSO

More blood runs, generously, as he anchors teeth in his abused lip.

Tellurith lets the silence ask it: Have you nerve enough to face what happened to you? To face that others know? To withstand its aftermath?

If you do, I am here to uphold you, adds her fleeting touch on his cheek.

And after another two breaths he gets out, eyes clamped shut, voice choked but grim, “—handle it.”

He handles it like a Kasterian martyr, the ignominy, the humiliation that undoubtedly burn deeper than the not inconsiderable pain, all without a murmur, without resistance, except the squeezed-shut eyes, the thoroughly bitten lip. And the sweat that Tellurith again wipes away, his head, without either’s asking, back in her lap.

Until at last the interminable delicate operations are over, the physicians’ faces eased, his humiliatingly splayed body refuged under the sheet. This time Tellurith proffers the sleep-syrup, he does not demur.

But as he lies mutely shivering, shut eyes still denying reality as it removes itself from his outraged presence, she brushes fingers across his forehead. And says softly, “That was brave.”

And though he does not move, a hint of easement softens that rigged jaw.

SUNSET ON AMBERLIGHT, grey-veiled under a first winter shower. On the high hill’s lap beyond Dragon Spur, wind-pines roar. Glowering through closed windows, Tellurith tries not to do the same.

“Zuri’s intelligencers have combed the Quarter,” Iatha says patiently. “Either he was cursed clever, or he’d just changed disguises. Or he’d just arrived.”

“If the Mother were so kind!”

Rain hisses at the window; the veins of qherrique glow, rivers of moonlight on a marbled wall.

“We’ve found the gang.” Iatha’s intonation adds, Of course. “They scrap people all the time. He did fight. No weapons. No way to

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ask about the moves.” Cataract’s hand-to-hand school is as famous as its style is recognizable, but curiosity has a limit. Especially round gangs. “The money was forgettable. He had an ear-ring. Plain gold, the lead-girl was wearing that. Could be any sailor’s. Or any Navy hand’s.” Viciously, Tellurith kicks at a priceless Verrain rug. “Seems the rape started because she fancied him.”

“And he said, No? What taste!”

“He said, NO, from the way she talked.” A perfunctory smile. “They got him in the alley by Demas’ coffee-house. Coming up.”

Across the rain-glittering balcony, a fresh onslaught rattles the panes. Glass freighted upRiver delicately as eggshell, its huge sheets only cast in the workshops of Dhasdein’s capital. Riversend.

Iatha casts herself back in the broad brocaded velvet lounging cushion with a grunt.

“Cataract boots, Dhasdein salute—and an Uphill finger in the puddle? Damme, ’Rith!”

Tellurith glowers, pearl-lit, decided chin on thin-fingered fist.

“There’s no word?”

“Wish the roof up. What House would dare play with Cataract, but Vannish or, maybe, Keranshah? And you know what chance we have of knotting Huiza’s lines.” Maeran’s trouble-Head is a consummate intelligencer. “Besides . . .”

Outland: trailing traces of upRiver, downRiver conspiracy. Hinting at the deadliest threat, a coalition between the two. With the encounter site pointing to connivance in the plot, if there is a plot, here in Uphill Amberlight. Whatever its present torpor, the city has not survived five hundred years of River greed, siege, sack, half-a-dozen wars, by waiting for dangers to reveal themselves. But if there is an apostate . . .

Then this is a menace without precedent. And among Houses grown touchiest over each other’s threat, far more dangerous than ignorance will be the knowledge that you asked.

“So we’re back to him.”

Iatha sets her cup down. Hazards a grin. “Tell Hanni? Tomorrow?”

“Put it in the book.”

SYLVIA KELSO

WITH THE MORNING DOSE of syrup omitted, he is awake when they come in, and by his expression, in similar mood. From the bed-foot, flanked by steward and scribe, Tellurith asks moderately, "What do you remember today?"

"I remember a lot of misbegotten, impudent, so-called women doctors digging around in my—"

"That'll do." Tellurith bites back a smile. No amity in that fire to answer her. "Do you remember your name?"

"No."

Fire out. A flat, barely composed stare past them. At the door.

"Do you remember what happened to you?"

The blackened orbit comes into darker relief. With smooth speed Tellurith amends, "What do you remember?"

"I—" the eyes swerve back to her. With that midnight iris, impossible to tell if the pupils dilate. "Where am I? What is—Tellur House? Why did you—why are you doing this?"

House-head's, cutter's instinct spurs her to sit down by him, soothe that raw bewilderment, that belligerent distress. House-head's training retorts, Later. Interrogation first.

"You are here," Tellurith says precisely, "because we found you. Took on the obligation of your care." And feels a stab as the too-sharp cheekbones flush. "It would help us help you, if you could remember—your name. Your origin. What you do. Why you were here."

"Gods, if I *could* remember! *Where* is 'here'?"

Nothing for nothing; which nothing to trade is finally the interrogator's choice. "Amberlight."

"Amber . . ." Sharp alertness, search. Frustration. Aching bafflement. Rubbing his brows, he mutters, "If I could just . . ."

"Don't distress yourself." No mistaking the ragged foretaste of despair. No wasting it, either. "Tell me, were you ever in Dhasdein?"

The hand drops. "If you want to interrogate me, get the serif-juice!"

"Serif?"

And the ghost of knowledge and power is gone. "Oh, gods," slamming the bed, "if I could just *think!*"

AMBERLIGHT

Carefully, Iatha speaks.

“You had a pair of Cataract boots.”

“I always wear Cataract boots, I like the cut . . .”

“Cataract?”

“Cataract . . . gods *damn!*”

He glares at the wall while they all regroup. Iatha and the scribe gather stools along the working side of the bed. Tellurith sits on it, with something like relief.

“The physicians say, with rest and patience, most things should come back.” She cannot resist the hand on his, the shift to calming voice. “Don’t try too hard. You’re still very weak, and you need to rest.”

The eyes pivot. Perennially startling, that live and living blackness in a human face. Patent, the struggle of defiance, of a formidable lost personality, in destruction’s aftermath; and half-knowledgeable fear. “I don’t need rest, I need—” Skill’s caution cuts it off. She finds herself thinking, Thank the Mother we don’t have to tangle with him whole. “I—”

The battered face becomes a mask. Melts again. Nothing for nothing; which nothing to offer is the interrogator’s skill, but this price is from the bowels. “If you try me with—some more names?”

What you give away, I may double in return. And with the choice of offer, the vantage is yours. Palpable as confession of my need.

“Else I’ll just lie here and fume!”

“SO FAR,” snorts Iatha, “the scribe assays a Quetzistani ‘a’—the eastern province of Dhasdein—“a few Cataract ‘r’s, some common River idiom like, ‘Spin again.’ A good helping of Iskan burr, and he may well have been a child in Verrain.”

“Bah!”

“YOU HAD A PAIR of Cataract boots. Very expensive. Do you remember Cataract?”

The accounts have been dismembered, the kinglet’s negotiations extended, a new cutter’s trial looms at moon-end, two days hence.

S Y L V I A K E L S O

Almost a relaxation to walk into the familiar room and watch the small changes to the sharp familiar face: the bruise's rainbow passage in his eye-socket, the softening of too-sharp cheekbones, the simultaneous calming and sharpening of that black, black stare.

"Cataract." Memories tug tide-wise. "Wooden walls. Side-set logs. Cedar—new cut. Catapults. Customs people in armor. A lot of grey—grey-black mud. Dinda—the tyrant—is crazy. I was—told . . ." The brows knot, struggle of need and caution, resurrection of imperatives and secrets from another life. And then the demanding, pleading stare.

"You said you 'always' wear Cataract boots. So you were used to money. A lot of money." Analysis is how Tellurith pays. "And you've seen Cataract first-hand. Did Dinda pay you?"

"No." Too immediate and too decided for dissimulation. "I know about him. But not from him. I mean . . ."

"I understand." Briefed about him, under some other loyalty. "Cataract. Do you see anything else?"

And the eyes turn inward, the mind strains, for that moment that ends, over and over, in a clench-teethed snarl of, "No!"

"THERE ARE SYMPTOMS, Ruand, yes, for memory-loss. We get a couple most years." From, Caitha does not have to add, head injury in the mines. "Vomiting. Delirium. Light-stress. Often we have to bandage their eyes. But without deep brain damage, most of it passes in the first sun-cycle."

During which, she does not have to add, this patient was completely drugged.

"Did he throw up at all?"

"Some retching." Caitha shrugs. "He might not have eaten much that day."

Tellurith glowers at the infirmary door, white-painted and bland as morning-lit qherrique.

"Nothing that would last longer?"

"Headaches. All over the skull. They can last a quarter moon."

"Does he . . ."

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Caitha looks her Head unblinkingly in the eye.

“We gave him sleep-syrup—kept him completely under sleep-syrup—for three days. Headaches can ease well before that.”

Tellurith takes a little breath.

“*Should* they have—with this one?”

A physician’s loyalties are rarely in danger of division. Her patient is usually her House. Now it is Caitha who looks away.

“In my experience—I would think not.”

“And have you asked—has he asked . . .?”

Caitha looks back to her. Amberlight eyes, somber, darkened to unpolished bronze.

“Ruand, if there was head pain—he’s said nothing to us.”

“HAMADRYAH.”

“Verrain. Caravan city. At the desert edge. Halfway to the capital.”

“Caravan?”

“Caravan—I don’t know!”

“WHAT ELSE could cause it? Mother’s name, ’Rith! Caitha said there were no headaches. It can’t be physical!”

Tellurith sets the decanter back, with care, on the gold-embossed stand that protects her dining table. Hearing, instead, that paroxysm of comprehension. Feeling the hand all but rip her shirt front; the tears, strangled in her lap.

“He’s a man. He’s Outland. Physical . . . may not be all there is to it.”

Iatha slams her napkin across the silverware. “Bah!”

“QUETZISTAN.”

“Dhasdein. Eastern province. Bandit country.”

“Who do they raid?”

“Dhasdein, Verrain, whoever pays for them.”

“Did you?”

“I—I—damn!”

SYLVIA KELSO

“WHAT DOES MOTHER mean to you?”

“What does it mean to you?”

He has transgressed, and knows it, but the snap signals she has done the same. He stares stubbornly at the wall.

“Tomorrow, the physicians are due.”

The head comes round in a hurry.

“To check your thigh again. And the rest. If everything looks all right, they may let you start on solid food.”

“Looks . . .”

He says it on a breath. There is sweat on his forehead- bones.

Her tongue aches to say, I know how you dread it, more for the humiliation than the pain. I can make it easier . . . None of it can be spoken, lest it sting that vehement pride.

“I’ll be here.”

The eyes come round to her. Too black, too depthless, to read gratitude, but the loosening of their corners speaks relief.

“SHIRAN.”

“Ships. Oars.”

“Who pulled them?”

“Black men. Chains.”

“Was it in the Archipelago?”

“Archipelago?”

Tellurith sighs.

“Tomorrow, someone else will work at this. And,” as well get it all over at once, “we’ll be shifting you out of here.”

It has been cleared by the physicians. And after tomorrow, they may need the infirmary.

The eyes are wide, all but wild. Arrogance is fragile in an invalid. Physically helpless, psychically shattered; and she has just rocked the foundations of his tiny world.

“What is . . . Why?”

She sits down on the bed-side, puts a hand on his shoulder. That he permits it is a measure of the shock.

“It’s nothing to worry about. I—simply have some work I cannot put off.”

AMBERLIGHT

No work, the wild look says what he is too proud to lay tongue to, should come ahead of *me!* Child's frailty, child's affront. Child's panic. "Where is this? Where am I going—"

"This is the House infirmary. You'll have your own room. In the tower."

"What tower?"

"The men's tower. We—men and women have separate quarters, in Amberlight."

The wildness has intensified. His face is slick with sweat.

"It won't be so different. A new nurse or two, perhaps, but Caitha will visit you."

It is panic now. Stark and white. And under it, the razed foundations of another man's, a redoubtable man's, perhaps a ruler's pride. Which is what clamps the lip in his teeth and the terror behind that harrowed black stare, the cry of a dependent betrayed, abandoned, which haunts her into sleep.