

the city of a hundred names VOL. III



CITY OF LIGHT & SHADOW

IAN WHATES

"A born storyteller." – THE GUARDIAN

Cover: Greg Bridges

Praise for THE CITY OF 100 ROWS series

“Born storyteller Ian Whates takes us on a gripping, terrifying trip-of-a-lifetime, through the heights and depths of the exotically grim city of Thaiburley, in this excellent fantasy thriller.”

Tanith Lee

“Adventures in a nightmare citadel – a story that hits the ground running and doesn’t let up.”

Liz Williams

“The elements which constitute this novel may be familiar – a vast, stratified community, a ragamuffin on the run, criminals and officials vying for supremacy – but Whates’s assured prose, slick pacing and inventive imagination make for a gripping read... The work of a born storyteller.”

The Guardian

“Brilliantly inventive.”

SFX

“A fantasy adventure which manages to seamlessly combine some elements of science fiction within the fantasy world. The novel manages to grab your attention from the very start with a sense of style that marks Ian Whates as a true Story Teller. A brilliantly executed novel, perfectly paced, beautifully described and a true joy to read.”

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an excerpt from
CITY OF LIGHT & SHADOW
The City of a Hundred Rows III
by Ian Whates

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ONE

Stu hated this place with a passion; it gave him the creeps. Typically, he'd drawn the short straw and the responsibility of carrying out the day's final inspection fell to him. *Inspection?* Of what, for Thaiss's sake? Weren't nothing here except a load of stiffs. Literally. And it wasn't as if they were going to cause trouble for anyone anytime soon.

Bone flu victims, row after row of them lined up along the floor side by side and then piled up on top of each other when there weren't no more room on the floor; each one as dead as the next.

There was something eerie about seeing a human body encased in a sheath of bone, like some hard-case method of embalming, let alone the couple of hundred that occupied the vast hall Stu was charged with patrolling. Especially when you considered that they'd all been alive just a few days before. And the bodies kept coming; more and more brought in every day.

The one saving grace was that you couldn't see

their faces, which meant you could kid yourself these weren't people at all but just great big dolls or statues or something, newly made and waiting to have their faces painted on. That's what Stu did, that was how he coped.

This late inspection though, when there was no one else around – just him and the stiffs – he didn't like this, not one bit. It was easy to let your imagination run wild, to believe that these ominous figures with their knobbly off-white coatings weren't dead at all but were only sleeping, waiting to catch some poor soul on their own.

If it were up to him the stiffs would have been burned straight away, the lot of them, or buried, or whatever it took to get rid of the breckers. Course, nobody ever asked for his opinion, and the doctors, they wanted all the victims stored so they could study them and try to work out a cure. All well and good he supposed, but did they really need *this* many?

This inspection was going to be a quick one, and to hell with regulations. It was dark. The wan illumination that much of Thaiburley benefited from during daylight hours – thanks to an ingenious system of mirrors, crystals and glass tubes leading from the walls – had disappeared with the sunset, and this area didn't merit electricity, it wasn't posh enough. Nor were there any oil lamps lit here in the hall. What use did the dead have for light? So all Stu could call on was his big black battery powered torch. He hefted it in his right hand, reassured

by its solid weight; a useful weapon if need be.

He strode quickly down the central aisle, swinging the torch from side to side, its beam playing across the dull white surfaces of the bone-encased bodies. Halfway. That was as far as he intended to go. The torch could reach the rest of the way from there. He'd play the light along the back wall, take a quick look to make sure everything was all right, and then get the hell out of there, job done.

Two more steps and he reckoned that was about far enough. So he stopped... which was when he heard the cracking sound. A sharp, loud *snap*, and it had come from his left and a little ahead. He whipped the torch around, cursing as the beam flickered, but it steadied again almost immediately. Nothing. Just the same gnarly effigies of human form; there was no sign of movement and he couldn't see anything obviously out of place. He stood there, conscious of his heart pounding and of his own heavy breathing, too loud in all this stillness. So what was he supposed to do now? Any further investigation meant stepping out among these things, and he was hanged if he was going to do that. Ignore it, that seemed the best option.

No sooner had he reached a decision than the sound came again. He jumped, nerves frayed. It had been closer this time, almost at his feet. Stu shone the torch at the nearest bony cadaver. Had it moved, just as the light reached it? His feet shuffled a few steps backward. Was that a crack? He craned forward despite himself, leaning down for a closer

look. Yes, definitely a crack, running down the side of where the face would be, from the top to the chin.

Then came the loudest sound yet, like an explosion, as the figure split completely, ripping apart. The small crack expanded all the way to the body's groin and the two halves gaped wide. Light streamed from the resulting gap, causing Stu to stumble backwards, shielding his eyes. Squinting and looking through the cracks between his fingers, he watched as something stirred and a figure began to emerge from the calcified body.

Stu hadn't got a brecking clue what this was, but he knew they didn't pay him enough to hang around and find out. He turned and bolted for the door, dropping his torch in the process. But he was too slow; far, far too slow.

Assembly Member Carla Birhoff entered the grand hall and paused, casting her gaze around the room one final time before the first guests arrived. Her aim was not to focus on anything in particular – every detail had been scrutinised and approved according to her exacting standards during previous inspections and she now felt confident that each individual element was as perfect as it could be. No, it was how those components fitted together that concerned her at this stage, the assemblage which she had so meticulously planned. Her gaze, therefore, swept across the room, taking in the whole that was the sum of its many parts.

First impressions were paramount. The entire décor had been chosen with this one view in mind and geared towards maximum impact. She would greet her guests here on the mezzanine level, causing them to pause at the top of the small flight of steps that led down into the room proper. Then, as they turned to descend those steps, the whole vista opened up before them. She was determined that it should wow every single one of them.

And it would. It *would*.

White table cloths – one traditional detail she had insisted on, though the potential starkness was alleviated by fine, wide-mesh, golden-brown gauze which flowed from the middle of each table to cover roughly two thirds of its area. At the very centre sat an arrangement of bright red berries nestled among autumn leaves and pine cones, while flecks of gold leaf had been sprinkled over the web-like gauze, causing it to sparkle. The fanned napkins before each place setting matched the golden brown of the arrangement, and the stylish chairs were wooden framed, boasting deep burgundy upholstery. Small gifts in gold boxes awaited each lady when she arrived at her seat: tiny khybul sculptures – predominantly birds and fish. Simple pieces certainly, mere tokens, but all those in attendance would know the value of khybul and appreciate the cumulative price of so many pieces, no matter their size.

The evening's seasonal theme was picked up again in a display that dominated the long wall

directly opposite the stairs. A cascade of gold, brown and russet veils tumbled from ceiling to floor, transformed by artfully directed air currents and clever lighting into the wild rush of an autumnal waterfall. The illusion was completed by brown drapes gathered and pinned to the wall in imitation of rocks around which the veils flowed.

Another treat awaited guests at the bottom of the stairs. In order to find their appropriate seats, they would need to consult the table plan which stood to their right. Proudly displayed on a glass plinth beside the plan was Carla's latest acquisition: by far the largest, most intricate, and breathtakingly beautiful khybul sculpture she had ever seen. Here, depicted in sparkling crystal, was an exquisite representation of Thaiburley itself. The straight walls of the city seemed to erupt from a base of rugged rocks, shooting upwards to culminate in a dazzling array of delicate spires, chimneys and crenulations. The design cleverly encapsulated the spirit of Thaiburley's wondrous roof, while the walls of the piece were marked with the suggestion of tiny windows and even, here and there towards the top, a balcony or two. And if the ninety-odd floors of the City of a Hundred Rows were not all here, who would quibble? None could dispute that this was an inspired work and that the unknown artist had captured the spirit of Thaiburley in all its grandeur.

The piece had been far from cheap but Carla didn't begrudge a single penny. As soon as she clapped eyes on the sculpture she simply had to

have it. Others might own khybul figures but none had anything in their collection to rival this.

Determined that no one would miss its magnificence, she had arranged for lights to be embedded in the glass stand, which then shone up through the sculpture and caused the whole piece to glow, while the tips of the spires sparkled with fairy light.

On the wall above and behind the crystal city hung a large painting, almost lost against the sculpture's magnificence. It was by the artist Arielle, once feted as the greatest painter of her generation. Completed more than two decades earlier, the picture depicted a ball, a lavish function much like the one about to commence. All present were evidently having a wonderful time. Faces glowed, smiles beamed, pale golden and deep burgundy wines flowed, the women were elegant and beautiful, the men dashing. Vibrant colours leapt from the canvas and it was hard to imagine that anyone involved had a care in the world. As you studied the painting, your eyes were inexorably drawn to the figure at the very centre of the composition: a woman, so young, so beautiful, so unmistakably Carla.

She had always loved this painting, for its vibrancy and the pure joy of life it expressed, as well as the memories it stirred and the emotions it evoked, yet she hadn't looked at it for some fifteen years; not since the scandal. Arielle had once been Carla's closest friend and then her bitterest rival. Look at them now. The once celebrated artist had disappeared, her reputation sullied and her work

forgotten, never to be seen in polite company again, while Carla had gone from strength to strength, becoming a respected member of the Assembly – the administrative body of Thaiburley’s government – and the darling of the Heights’ social circuit.

Carla looked at the painting again. In truth, she would have been hard pressed to explain the whim that had caused her to take it from storage for this, her big night, except that it seemed fitting somehow that the painting should be present as she reaffirmed her position as society’s queen; not as a centrepiece, no, but in the shadow of something even more beautiful, acting as a faded reminder of rivals vanquished and glories past.

Her gaze finally reached the stage to her far right, where the multi-stringed duoharp was already in position, the great chordophone resembling a stylised heart. Its twin opposing soundboards met at the base, where they converged on the central pillar of polished wood and gleaming metal embellishments before sweeping upwards and outward like wings. Identical curved necks connected the rounded shoulders of the soundboards to the pillar’s crown.

The instrument was to be played by the Gallagher Sisters, said to be among the finest musicians in all Thaiburley. The dark haired girl – older and prettier than her sibling – was already in place, studiously tuning her half of the harp, but the seat opposite her was empty. Carla felt a flash of irrita-

tion that both girls weren't ready and she was about to call out when the blonde, sour-faced one hurried over to take her seat, licking her fingers and chewing on something, as if having snatched a bite to eat before the performance.

Carla pursed her lips. She was tempted to take the girl to task but in the end decided to put it down to artistic temperament. Instead she returned her attention to completing her survey of the room, which ended with a glance down at her own dress. Commissioned from Chanice, one of the Heights' hottest designers, the gown featured a beautifully arranged skirt of layered silks graduating from autumnal russets at the bottom to shimmering scarlet at the top, matching the bodice. The dress was so artfully cut that the skirt avoided being billowy while still drawing in tightly at the waist to emphasise her slender figure. Carla had studied herself from every angle before coming here, and was confident that she looked fantastic. Scarlet could be an unforgiving shade, one she probably wouldn't dare risk in another five or ten years, but she felt bold tonight and knew she still retained enough of her youthful glamour to get away with such audacious display. While she could, she would.

Finally satisfied, Carla allowed herself a small smile. Everything seemed in readiness; soon the great and the good of Heights' society would be here to pay her tribute. She would accept their compliments with an appropriate degree of grace and modesty, of course, while privately secure in

the knowledge that she had earned each and every plaudit.

An hour later found Carla in her element, meeting and greeting, sharing a few words with this couple, a sentence or two with another and a joke with the next, before flitting away to greet a late arrival. The Gallagher Sisters were playing divinely, though as more people arrived and the volume of conversation grew louder it was becoming increasingly difficult to hear them unless you were standing right next to the stage. Not that it mattered. The fact that Carla had secured their services when others had failed to do so was reward enough.

She handed a barely touched flute of finest Elyssen champagne to a waiter – she had been holding the glass for far too long and the wine had lost much of its chill and fizz – and took a fresh one, savouring a sip of cool dry effervescence before the customary smile slipped back into place. She laughed politely at the end of someone's anecdote, a tale she'd only half been listening to. The smile was one which had been perfected over many years: the expression of a hostess who knows her evening is a success and is confident that it will only get better. In the corner of her eye she saw white jacketed waiters circulating with what should be the final trays of warm canapés. It would soon be time to usher the guests to their seats for the meal. Glowing comment had already been made about her khybul sculpture, most pleasingly from young

Xyel, a pretty little thing who saw herself as something of an emerging rival to Carla. Poor deluded girl. Her Summer Soirée had been pleasant enough but she still had a lot to learn. Carla reserved a special smile for her.

A ripple of polite applause ran through the section of the room closest to the stage as the Gallagher Sisters finished their latest piece – surely the penultimate one of their set – and Carla noted waiters returning to the kitchen with empty salvers. She looked across and caught the maître d’s eye. He nodded, to show that he was on top of the timings. If things continued to run this smoothly, she might even be able to relax a fraction and enjoy herself during the meal.

It was a little thing really in the context of everything else that was going on: the scream that heralded such a dramatic change of fortune for Carla and all those present. Most wouldn’t even have heard it. The only reason Carla did was because she happened to be at the top of the small flight of steps, at the spot where she’d greeted the guests, and so was close to the door. The scream came from outside; high pitched and unmistakably a woman’s. Conversation on the mezzanine level died and for a second there was a bizarre contrast between the silence to Cara’s left and the continuing hubbub from the rest of the room to her right.

When no further indication of disturbance came, those closest to Carla resumed talking, with a shrug of their shoulders or a knowing rise of the eye-

brows, and muttered comments such as, “Kids!”

Jean, the maître d’, had moved across to speak to the doorman, but nobody seemed concerned and Carla was about to dismiss the incident as a minor glitch soon forgotten, when the doors burst inward and Hell strode through the opening.

The first figure was merely a giant, towering above Jean and the doorman. The latter tried to block the intruder’s way, but the burly man was picked up and tossed into the room in one motion, crashing into a knot of startled guests. The maître d’ was simply brushed aside.

More than one scream rent the air now.

Further figures were pressing through the doorway behind the first. One or two had human features but most seemed composed of nothing more than silver light, dazzling to look upon. All were of similar stature to the first. Carla gaped, unable to rationalise what she was seeing. She couldn’t move, didn’t know how to react. She was supposed to be the perfect party host, ready for any eventuality, but not for *this*.

Several things then happened at once, snapping her out of her paralysis. The tall windows which dominated the wall opposite the stage shattered, seemingly all at once, sending shards of glass raining down on those nearby, and more of the silver light giants strode through the broken windows. This registered only at the periphery of Carla’s awareness, her attention focused elsewhere. She stared in horror at the shimmering figure who

reached out towards Jean while the maître d' was still recovering from his brush with the first giant. As a glowing finger touched him, a cocoon of light enveloped Jean's body and he froze, all except for his face, which took on an expression of wide-eyed horror that swiftly transformed into one of excruciating agony; eyes screwed shut, mouth thrown open as if screaming, though Carla couldn't hear him. It was a moment she would never forget, as if every tortured line of Jean's face burned itself into her retinas and hence into her memory. A second later the expression was gone, vanishing as his face exploded. No, that was wrong, the process was less dramatic. Jean's face, his whole body, seemed to simply drift apart. One moment there was a shape within the glow that was recognisably Jean, the next nothing human stood there at all. In the brief instant before the glow which had surrounded the maître d' faded, Carla watched a cloud of russet flakes drop towards the floor like ruddy brown rose petals.

The glowing silver giant was no longer silver or glowing. It now looked like Jean.

Only then did Carla grasp the full horror of what was happening here; only then did she realise their doom.

She stumbled away in a daze, with no clear idea of where she was going, just the certainty that she had to get away from these creatures. Somebody bumped into her, causing her to stagger, and she was abruptly aware that pandemonium had broken

out and that *everyone* was trying to get away. The thin veneer of politeness, of etiquette, had been abandoned, to be replaced by the drive to survive. Men, women, young or old, it didn't matter; all were screaming, fighting, pushing and elbowing in their desperation to reach the stairs and escape. Never mind that more of the creatures waited below, a whole cordon of them, herding folk towards the stage, instinct still drove people to flee the most immediate threat, and a bottleneck started to form at the top of the mezzanine stairs.

For those at the back there was no hope of escape. The silver giants moved implacably forward, killing with a touch. The ones that had already adopted a semblance of human form simply killed. The crowd discovered new levels of desperation. Carla watched an elderly woman, resplendent in diaphanous gown and diamond jewellery, knocked from her feet and trampled by her fellows, with no chance of recovering.

A small part of Carla's mind remained detached, refusing to accept any of this as real. A symptom of shock perhaps, but that small corner of sanity brought her hope. She realised that the stairs which those all around her were straining towards offered only temporary respite, that even those who reached them would still be trapped. Then her gaze fell upon the door, off to one side, evidently overlooked by everyone. The kitchens, deliberately designed to lead off the mezzanine to ensure that a supply of freshly chilled champagne was always on

hand during greetings and that diners could fully appreciate each new dish as it was paraded down the stairs prior to serving. She started to forge her way in that direction, moving across the flow of panicked people. She prised a woman's chest away from a man's back and inserted first an arm and then her whole self between. Moving against the human tide proved to be an unexpected advantage. While others were faced with a wall of backs and had nowhere to go, she could slip through – with a little persuasion. Somebody dug her in the ribs with an elbow, someone else struck her shoulder with bruising force. She ignored the minor flares of pain and kept going, focussing only on that door.

Doubtless she *knew* these people, many of them would be her friends, yet terror and desperation had converted their faces into those of strangers. She pushed, kneed and fought with the best of them, forcing a passage, closing her vision and her mind to everything else and refusing to think about how close the death-dealing giants were coming.

She was nearly there, with just a few more people to fight through, when it happened. In her eagerness to find sanctuary she overstretched across intervening legs and feet. Somebody trod on her gown, her beautiful gown, tearing it, and she was jostled as she tried to bring her trailing leg through. Carla stumbled and tripped, falling heavily onto a man's knee and then the floor. Desperately she tried to pull herself along, no longer keeping track of the number of bumps and bruises. Somebody

stepped down on her calf and she cried out, barely hearing her own voice above all the screaming and the shouting, which suddenly seemed to intensify.

A woman to her left, oblivious to her presence, looked about to repeat the act of stepping on her but this time in stiletto heels, when she froze and her body began to glow. Carla scrambled away, pulling her legs in frantically, determined not to touch that nimbus. Within seconds the woman imploded, disappearing in a cascade of rusty flakes, some of which fell onto Carla's exposed arms and legs.

She lost it then. All rational thought deserted her as she opened her mouth and shrieked and writhed and kicked, not even aware that she had broken through the crowd of people until the door to the kitchen loomed before her nose. She pulled it open and half-rolled half-crawled inside, to collapse, her body wracked with sobs.

Heat washed over her. The lights were still on but the kitchen was deserted, the cooks and waiting staff having presumably fled. The rich aromas of cooking, which normally Carla would have breathed in deeply and relished, now only made her feel nauseous. She reached up to grip the harsh metal edge of a table, pulling herself to her feet, and stumbled across the empty room towards the service door. Two thirds of the way across, her stomach heaved and she was forced to double over, throwing up onto the floor. It seemed an age before the retching subsided and she could move forward. Not

even pausing to find water and wash the sour taste of vomit from her mouth, she finally reached the door, thrusting it open and staggering into the corridor beyond.

She stopped to draw in fresher, cooler air, amazed at how muted the noise from the ballroom had suddenly become. From out here the shouting, the screaming, the sounds of people being slaughtered, it could almost be mistaken for over-enthusiastic revelry. Almost.

There was nobody else in sight. Part of Carla was glad, conscious even now of what a mess she must look and relieved that there was no one here to see it, but guilt immediately swept such concerns away as the implications sank in. Surely others must have escaped? She couldn't be the only one; but, if so, they were already long gone. Not that she could blame them.

Carla took a deep breath and braced herself. It was time to forget that she was Carla Birhoff, celebrated socialite, and remember that she was Assembly Member Birhoff. Her city needed her.

She wriggled her feet and kicked off the impractical shoes that still somehow clung to them, gathered up the skirt of her ruined gown, and started to run; a somewhat shuffling gait perhaps, but it was the best she could manage – the greater part of two decades had passed since she last attempted to move this quickly. As she ran, she bent over to spit out the taste of sick from her mouth, all decorum forgotten. Such considerations

seemed no more than petty affectations in the light of what she had just been through.

Carla determined to find the city watch, to alert the Kite Guard, to rouse the Assembly, to mobilise the Blade. The people of Thaiburley needed to be warned, they had to be told the unthinkable truth, that the Rust Warriors had returned.

TWO

Tom couldn't breathe. Coldness enveloped him, pressing in on his chest, sapping warmth from his body and strength from his limbs. Bitter chill nipped at his cheeks and hammered at his ears and forehead, to set searing pain dancing behind his temples. He tried to suck in air and found only icy water – more cold, this time drawn inside his body. He was drowning.

Frantically he thrashed, straining to reach the surface which had to be somewhere above him. Yes, there! His head breached the boundary between the elements and he emerged gasping and spluttering, dragging his arms out of the water.

"Tom!" Someone called his name. He blinked, wiping his eyes and face with clumsy numbed hands. A name fell into place: *Mildra*. She was there, wrapping something around his body. Instinctively he grasped it, finding soft warmth which his fingers sank into as they fastened on the swathe. A towel, all fluffy and soft and warm. Mil-

dra was trying to wipe his face with one corner of it.

“Come on,” she said, placing an arm around his shoulders and urging him to stand. “Let’s get you out of there. He was sitting in the water, he realised. Was it really so shallow? Felt much deeper when he first came round. *Of course* it was shallow, this was the ice tank.

He was shivering violently now, his legs mere pillars of ice. In fact, he’d lost all sense of feeling from the waist down and needed to lean on Mildra for support while he half-clambered and half-fell out of the submersion tank.

“Thaiss,” he muttered, forgetting himself for a moment, “Why the breck does it have to be so cold?”

“The cold is an essential part of the process,” said an older, strangely accented woman’s voice. “As you well know.”

Looking a great deal healthier than the gaunt figure that he and Mildra had revived just days before, the living goddess strode towards him. She was moving a lot less stiffly as well. Her long silver-grey hair had been tied back so that it fell past her shoulders in a ponytail, while the pale blue one-piece she’d worn during her centuries-long sleep had been replaced by a much darker black-blue outfit with white trims. Combined with the serious-looking black boots she wore, the effect was very much that of a military uniform.

“Doesn’t m-mean I have to l-like it,” Tom replied,

his teeth chattering as shivers coursed through his body in violent spasms.

“Like?” the old woman said, pausing to stare at him with arched eyebrows. “Whoever said that you or indeed any of us has the luxury of *liking* whatever role life allots us, hmm?”

“No-nobody,” he conceded. Whatever this walking fossil was – aged human, eternal goddess, the living dead, or ancient spirit in human form – she could learn a thing or two from Thaiburley’s Prime Master when it came to teaching methods, that much was for certain.

Tom automatically lifted first one foot and then the other, allowing Mildra to slip soft furred and instantly warm garments over his feet, drawing them up his legs. Realisation of two things struck him simultaneously. The first being that this was a Thaistess waiting on him as if she were some servant girl, the second that he was stark naked.

Fortunately the numbing cold and assorted distractions had prevented the otherwise inevitable reaction to having a woman he was attracted to so close to his exposed genitals – evidently “frozen stiff” was merely a saying, at least in this instance. Even so, he reached down hurriedly to grasp the hem of the soft-furred one piece garment with both hands, his fingers thick and clumsy, still tingling with the return of circulation.

“Thanks,” he told her, “I can take it from here.”

She raised her eyebrows and showed him a hint of a smile, a welcome reminder of the friend he

knew. In recent days such glimpses had become all too rare. Tom didn't really understand what had changed between him and Mildra, but there was no question that she was acting differently towards him. They had grown so close during the long trip from Thaiburley to the icebound Citadel of Thaiss, a closeness that culminated in their intimacy in the meadow of flowers just days ago, a memory which still burned fresh in Tom's mind. A real bond had formed between them, one which had proved strong enough to survive any embarrassment over indiscretions provoked by the flowers' aphrodisiac pollen, but which seemed to have frayed dramatically since they arrived here. And he had no idea why.

Images assaulted his mind's eye as he straightened from pulling up the clothing. A bewildering array of memories not his own, their sudden eruption causing him to stagger, disorientated for a moment.

"Are you all right?" Mildra asked, steadying his arm.

"Yes, I'm fine," he assured her, pulling away, embarrassed by his feebleness and reacting before he considered how this might look to Mildra. "It's just all these things that keep swirling around in my head," he added, suddenly afraid that his actions might distance her still further.

The old woman, whom he still had trouble thinking of as the same goddess to whom so many temples had been raised in the City Below, was

beside him now, looking into his eyes and frowning, though whether with concern or disapproval he couldn't be sure. "Give it time," she told him. "Your subconscious will already be working on coherency, pulling the various fragments of imposed memory together." She was walking away again, saying over her shoulder, "Another session or two, three at the most, and it will all fall into place, you'll see."

Tom didn't bother trying to mask his horror, turning to Mildra and mouthing *three at the most?* This had been his second stint in the ice tank and he'd hoped it might be the last.

The Thaistess grinned and gave Tom's arm a reassuring squeeze before hurrying after her goddess, who had to be the most unlikely, not to mention sprightly, deity Tom ever expected to meet.

Since their arrival and the old woman's awakening – she really did seem to be the Thaiss of legend despite Tom's reservations – they'd been kept constantly busy, driven by the goddess's conviction that Thaiburley stood on the brink of disaster. To Tom it felt as if he were being shunted from one teacher to the next, his life a constant round of lessons. Back in the city it had been the Prime Master, then on the road their self-styled leader Dewar set about teaching him how to use a sword, and now that he'd reached the river's source as instructed a whole new load of lessons were being pummelled into him, even more difficult to understand than the old ones. What was it with everyone wanting

to educate him all of a sudden? He'd done fine with breck-all learning up until now.

The ice tank was part of what Thaiss described as a "crash course". While he was submerged and all but unconscious, information was fed directly into his brain – weeks of concentrated lessons crammed into hours. Quite where the cold came into things he wasn't sure, but Thaiss assured him it was essential, slowing bodily functions and focussing the mind. Who was he to argue with a goddess? She claimed that only by being subjected to the ice tank could he hope to absorb the wealth of intimate detail needed to save the city.

Him? Save Thaiburley? Ridiculous. Yet she insisted that he was the city's only hope. Tom had always found it hard to accept the Prime Master and others telling him he was special back in Thaiburley, but now here he was half a continent away hearing much the same thing. Maybe all these folk really did know something he didn't; though, if so, shouldn't he *feel* special in some way? Instead he continued to think of himself as an ordinary street-nick swept up in events he didn't fully understand, things that someone like him had no right being a part of.

Apparently, one of the Prime Master's motives in sending him on this journey was the hope that Tom might grow into his abilities and responsibilities. He *had* changed, he knew that; maturing in all sorts of ways, though not perhaps in the directions his mentor had intended – memories of the flower

meadow crossed his thoughts again. Therein lay the worry that niggled away at his innermost thoughts and fuelled his self-doubt. Tom was afraid that even after all he and Mildra had been through he was still going to disappoint those who believed in him, that he was destined to return to Thaiburley a failure rather than the saviour people anticipated. He winced as a new montage of images cascaded through his thoughts. He'd be a brecking knowledgeable failure though, that was for sure.

Tom didn't follow after Mildra and the goddess, not immediately. Instead he sat by himself, allowing the last of the cold and the damp to seep from his body, leached away by the wonderfully soft clothing Thaiss had provided, which somehow absorbed moisture while remaining dry and warm against his skin. As he sat there he did his best to assimilate this most recent torrent of knowledge, determined to follow the advice the goddess had given him first time around by relaxing and allowing the memories to come to him rather than chasing after specifics – a habit which experience had taught him brought only frustration.

If he could start making sense of it all now, perhaps he could get away with just one more session in the ice tank rather than the two or three Thaiss had so casually suggested. In a strange way, the bits and pieces he was already able to glean both increased and decreased his awe of their host.

Assuming that all these images and history were true, Thaiss and her brother genuinely *had* been

responsible for building Thaiburley. Tom witnessed vast machines of impossible size straddling peaks and canyons. Monstrous drill bits hewed into the face of a mountain, while beams of raw energy melted and blasted away rock that had withstood the elements for millennia. Tom knew that he was witnessing time compressed, that the work of months passed before his mind's eye in seconds, the years in minutes. As he watched, the city of Thaiburley steadily took shape before him.

It wasn't just machines doing the hard graft. Armies of workers in bright orange overalls swarmed over everything like ants, and there were others: figures in powder blue gowns who were often there, directing and organising. The robes might have been bulkier and longer than he was used to but these could only be arkademics, or their forefathers. On a couple of occasions he saw these blue-robed figures take a more active role. A small group of them would stand together with hands raised, and from their palms energy poured out; blinding light that disappeared into the now honeycombed depths of the mountain. He had no idea to what purpose this energy was unleashed but it was impressive all the same. Was that really an example of what the founders could do? Was that what *he* could do if he only knew how? The idea seemed absurd.

Seeing history compressed like this brought home just what a colossal undertaking the building of Thaiburley had been, and as he watched the city

take form Tom felt awed that anyone would ever attempt such an undertaking, let alone succeed.

He caught glimpses of Thaiss several times, and of her brother; once even, a fleeting view of a Jeradine, its presence a surprise. What part had the bipedal reptilians played in the founding of Thaiburley? Thaiss looked younger – confirming that this was no “eternal goddess”. She aged like everyone else, if a good deal slower.

In the final scenes, as the City of Dreams he recognised began to emerge from the face of the mountain with miraculous speed, Thaiss became a constant feature – an observer in the foreground, overseeing the work, often grasping a staff as tall as herself, the crown of which ended in a cylinder of what appeared to be swirling energy. Never static, the staff’s top broiled and flashed, a stunted pillar of light ranging from gold and orange to red, bound within clasps of silver metal. Beyond these clasps, there was no obvious container to hold this writhing of light.

The intertwining energies were mirrored in a far larger object which Tom witnessed being installed towards the end of construction by two of the monstrous machines working in tandem. With the roof still only half formed, a huge column was lowered with great care into what looked to be the centre of the city. Scale wasn’t always easy to judge, but it seemed to Tom that this column was two or three times as wide as a man was tall and longer than any twenty men put together. He had no doubt that this

was the core, the heart of Thaiburley which the Prime Master had spoken about, the element that the arkademics and the healers and the seers and even Tom himself drew upon when using their talents. Despite the hulking size of the two great lifters involved, there seemed a great delicacy in the way they handled this kaleidoscopic pillar, as if it were something immensely fragile. Looking on, Tom couldn't escape the feeling that the changing patterns of colour and shape the column displayed had some underlying purpose, that they represented communication of some sort, albeit beyond his understanding. It seemed to him that here was something alive, and caged.

The column disappeared in short order, lowered into the heart of the half-sculpted city. Within a handful of breaths Thaiburley was finished. The City of a Hundred Rows stood proud, all new and gleaming and beautiful.

Tom had grown up knowing that his home was vast, and had gained some sense of just *how* huge the night he ascended the walls, but seeing it like this brought home the full scale of the place for perhaps the first time in his life. He felt humbled at the thought of the ambition and effort that had gone into the city's founding, but he was also vaguely troubled. As yet these memories had no context. He still didn't know *why* Thaiburley had been built or how long ago all this had happened. That was the problem with this form of forced but disjointed learning; it lacked logical progression. As a result, the more he discovered the

more the questions mounted, a great heap of them gathering to taunt him.

Chief among these were questions about the goddess. He'd seen Thaiss and her brother enter this world through a great rent in the sky, a slit that glowed with light at its edges, a light that glittered and twinkled like illuminated jewels as the gap widened to accommodate their passage. It was like a long vertical rip in a curtain being prised apart – that was the only way Tom could think to describe it. There had been nothing regal or divine about the appearance of the godly pair, no slow descent on a raft of clouds, no celestial spirits to herald their arrival, no choir singing of their glory, just a stepping through from one place to another. It was obvious that Thaiss and her brother had come from *somewhere* else, but Tom had strong reservations about just how heavenly either their place of origin or they themselves might be.

This wasn't a riddle he was likely to solve here and now. Besides, when all was said and done, he reckoned the pair's divinity or lack of it didn't really matter. After all, they came from another realm, had knowledge far beyond that of anyone in this world, could perform miracles, were worshipped, and had been around for centuries. As definitions of gods went, that would do for Tom. It was only his innate curiosity that made him determined to find out more.

With a flash of insight, Tom wondered whether this might be the cause of Mildra becoming more

distant. Perhaps it had nothing to do with him after all but went deeper than that. If she'd begun to suspect, as he had, that Thaiss and her brother were not in fact the divine, omnipotent beings that religious doctrine painted them, wouldn't that affect her profoundly? After all, it was difficult enough for him to adjust to the idea of their being mere flesh and blood, and he'd never believed in them as gods in the first place. How much harder must it be for someone whose life had been dedicated to serving the goddess?

Was that it? Was she suffering from a crisis of faith? He resolved to try talking to her when circumstances allowed. He knew he'd have to choose his moment carefully and that, even if he did, she might not be willing to discuss the matter, but he had to try.

Tom stood up, reckoning he'd spent enough time collecting his thoughts, and followed in the wake of the two women. If his feet dragged a little, it was only because he knew that his arrival would signal the start of another lecture from the goddess, intended to bring the latest jumble of submerged knowledge into focus. All well and good, but what was the point in cramming his head full of all this history, when whatever threat Thaiburley might face was bound to be in the here and now?

Tom couldn't help but worry about what was happening back home while he was cooped up here in the frozen north. Were things really as bad as the goddess claimed?

"I'm coming with you."

"No you're not."

"I know I might seem old and crotchety to a young whippersnapper like you, but I can still swing a sword with the best of them."

Kat sighed. This wasn't the first time they'd had this discussion. "Shayna, *Shayna*, this has nothing to do with your age or your ability to hack people to death with a sword, I *need* you here." While she'd need the very best warriors the Tattooed Men could field for her trip into the Stain, despite her protestations, that wasn't Shayna.

"Course you do. You're about to go traipsing off into the most dangerous area of the under-City, a wasteland stuffed full of monsters, wild beasts and creatures we haven't even got a name for, oh, and you're intending to beard the most villainous fiend of the lot in its own lair... so naturally you need your *healer* to be somewhere else. Have you any idea how ridiculous that sounds?"

When she put it like that, yes, but Kat wasn't about to be swayed. "It's not my *healer* I need here, it's you. Someone has to take charge while I'm gone, a person the men will look up to and respect; someone they'll listen to without question, someone I can trust to begin carving out the territory the Tattooed Men both need and deserve. If we don't make our move now, when everything down here is still in flux, we'll miss our chance."

"Pfff..." Shayna pulled a face. "You could ask any

one of half a dozen to do that. I'm the only real healer among the lot of us." Kat had rarely seen her so worked up. "Answer me this: what happens out there when one of the men gets their guts torn open or loses a limb? How are you going to feel when you watch one of your friends bleed to death, knowing that I could have saved him if you'd brought me along? You need somebody in charge back here, no question, but you need *me* out there!"

Kat shook her head in exasperation. "Were you this much of a pain to my sister?"

"You bet I was when she was wrong; every single time."

Kat glared at the older woman. She never imagined that leading the Tattooed Men on her own would be so trying. "Out of everyone," she muttered, "I thought I could always count on you for support." She regretted voicing the thought as soon as she'd said it, knowing that what emerged sounded like the frustrated mewling of a petulant child; not exactly the image she was going for.

"You can," Shayna assured her. "In front of the others I'll toe the line and back you up every which way, but, at the same time, when it's just the two of us don't expect me to hold back. I'll let you know whenever I reckon you're making a god-awful mistake and being a stubborn ass about it, like now."

Kat grinned. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

It wasn't as if Shayna didn't have a point, but in

truth Kat *was* worried about her. The healer was the oldest of those who'd survived the Pits and she'd done little fighting since they'd emerged, protected because of her talent rather than her age but protected nonetheless.

The Stain was unknown territory, shunned because it was feared, feared because it was deadly. Kat simply didn't want to put Shayna at risk by including her in the expedition. She was too valuable, to the group for her healing abilities and to its leader as a friend.

She took a deep breath, knowing that what she was about to say might jeopardise that very friendship. "I'm sorry, but no. You're too important, too valuable. You're going to stay and take charge of things this end."

"You're making a..."

"I've heard your arguments and taken them into account, but I've made up my mind."

"Then you haven't been listening closely enough."

"Shayna!"

"I know, and don't worry, I'll behave myself in front of the others as I promised, but you're still making the wrong decision for all the wrong reasons." There followed an awkward pause. "I can see I'm wasting my breath, though. So..."

With that the older woman stood up and moved away, leaving Kat to ponder whether she was right. Maybe, and if so this doubtless wouldn't be Kat's last mistake, but it was hers to make; not Shayna's

and not Chavver's, not anymore. Kat sighed and got to her feet. In the Pits, when she was a kid, it had all been so simple. Leading the men as they fought wild animals or sometimes each other had come naturally. She and Chavver were the best fighters and the best tacticians, with an instinct for how to handle situations that she could never have explained in words. Leadership devolved to them as a natural consequence. Having them in charge meant a better chance of surviving the bouts for everyone. Out here in the real world things were invariably more complicated. There were so many other things to take into account, and Kat was increasingly concerned that she simply wasn't up to the task, not on her own.

She wondered whether her sister had ever suffered from such misgivings. If so, she never showed it, not even in the Pits. Perhaps she had after their falling out, when Kat was banished from the Tattooed Men, but Kat suspected that even then no one would have known.

The two of them might not have been close in recent years but she still grieved for Chavver. She missed her sister's certainty, yes, but above all she missed *her*.

No turning back though; this was a new age. Chavver was gone and the Tattooed Men were now looking to Kat to make the decisions. One of which she was about to announce. Straightening her back, doing her best to project the sort of confidence Charveve had always shown, Kat went to call the

men together, to announce who would be going with her into the Stain and who would be staying here with Shayna. She knew that they'd all be hoping to go, which said something about those who comprised the Tattooed Men; though whether it reflected on their bravery or their foolishness was another matter entirely.

As Kat stepped out of the small room she'd adopted as an office, she bumped into an increasingly familiar uniformed figure. This was the man who had saved her life but she was determined not to allow that fact to rule it. At any other time she might have been glad to see him, but not now. There was business to be done, business that didn't include him; so her response to his unexpected appearance was curter than it might have been.

"You're a day early,"

"Technically, just half a day," the Kite Guard replied, "since we're due off first thing tomorrow."

Was he thick-skinned or just plain thick, she wondered. Surely her tone must have warned him now wasn't the time. "Exactly, which isn't today, so why are you here?"

He shrugged. "Everything's ready my end, so I thought I'd fly over to check on how you were getting on and perhaps have a quick discussion on how we're going to deploy tomorrow."

Kat stared at him in disbelief. "*Deploy?* We're the Tattooed Men, not some unit of your precious Guard. We'll deploy as I say we will."

"All right, I just thought..."

“Well don’t!”

“Fair enough, bad idea, forget I ever mentioned it.” He held his hands up defensively. “Now that I *am* here, is there anything I can do to help?”

“Actually there is.”

“Excellent, just name it.”

“Fly on back to where you came from and make sure you’re not late tomorrow morning.”

He looked startled, as if she’d slapped him. Kat relented, reasoning that the last thing she wanted to do was antagonise the man who’d be leading the authorities’ part of the expedition at her side. Besides, he was kind of cute. “Look, Tylus, don’t take offence, but I’ve got a lot on; Tattooed Men business, you know? And the only thing that’s going to stop us being ready for the morning is interference, no matter how well-intentioned. So for now, just breck off and leave us alone. All right?”

He opened his mouth as if to say something but then shut it and nodded, before trying again. “Understood. I’ll see you tomorrow.” With that he turned on his heel and strode off, a little stiffly.

Kat lingered for a moment, watching him go. She still couldn’t make up her mind about this Kite Guard captain. Her reaction to him was a jumble of conflicting emotions. He was a lot older than her but handsome enough in a clean cut sort of way; dashing even in that dark blue uniform, and she did owe him her life. He was also from the Heights, another world – one she never expected to come

into contact with and was a little in awe of, truth be told – added to which he was an agent of authorities she'd never fully trusted; the people who, ultimately, had sanctioned the Pits. Or at least turned a blind eye to the place for far too long.

She smiled ruefully at her own indecision: part of her was attracted to this Tylus while another part wanted to look up to him, as if he were the older brother she'd never had, but there was a neediness about him that undermined that image and which she found just plain annoying at times. She shook her head in frustration. Perhaps after they'd been in the Stain and she'd seen how he acquitted himself under pressure her opinions and feelings would crystallise into something more certain.

Mind you, she wouldn't be at all surprised if there were a few among the Tattooed Men thinking in much the same way about her own leadership. Now there was a cheery thought.

Tylus left the Tattooed Men's makeshift headquarters cursing himself for an idiot. Why in Thaiss's name had he gone over there? Just because *he* had some spare time on his hands didn't mean that Kat would. Of course she'd be busy. All he'd achieved was to irritate her.

How was he going to look her in the eye tomorrow? Only one way to deal with this: ignore the whole embarrassing incident and pretend it never happened. He'd be formal and polite, making it clear that his interest in her was purely profes-

sional, and the fact that she was the most intriguing package of a bewitchingly pretty, slender, feisty, agile, dangerous and extremely capable young woman he'd ever come across meant nothing to him whatsoever.

Maybe he could even convince himself of that while he was at it.

He'd been intrigued by Kat from the first moment he encountered her – when they'd both been scouring the streets independently searching for the same killer – and his fascination with her had only grown since he'd plucked her from the air by the grand conveyor. He saved her life that night, at no small risk to himself, and it seemed to him that she wasn't always as grateful for that as she might have been. He stopped himself, a little dismayed at the proprietorial nature of his own thoughts. He didn't *own* the girl for Thaiss's sake.

Not being in the mood for petty distractions, he flew high to avoid any stones which a strong arm or a catapult had been known on occasion to launch his way when he strayed too close to the under-City's rooftops. Chasing down and scaring the living daylights out of the nick responsible could be fun when he was in the right frame of mind, but not today.

In brief moments he was dropping towards his destination, cape extended between his torso and outstretched arms, shedding momentum as he adjusted his shape, swinging his body from the horizontal until it hung beneath, ready for landing. His

feet touched the ground, knees bending to absorb the last dregs of momentum.

Tylus stood straight and found himself in the shadow of a towering stadium – the Pits, infamous home of gladiatorial blood sports and birthplace of the Tattooed Men.

The irony of the situation hadn't escaped him. Here he was at the very place that had shaped Kat and made her into the person she was, and tomorrow he would be striding out beside her, leading a dozen of the toughest warriors the under-City had ever known, warriors fashioned by these very same Pits.

Knowing the dark history of this theatre – which is what it had been, in effect – he still had some misgivings about making the Pits his new place of work, but he had to admit that the Prime Master had probably chosen wisely. Training facilities were already in place, as were any number of attendant buildings formerly used for housing the Pit Warriors and all the support personnel required to run the facility. Of course, much of the place needed to be gutted and some of it rebuilt, but work on that had already begun and this was better than starting from scratch. All in all, it was the ideal location for the new Kite Guard Training School. There was a pleasing sense of ironic justice in seeing the site of so many evil deeds turned into a facility for education, an establishment that might actually give something back to the under-City's society.

Tylus' thoughts switched for a moment to his

parents, his mother in particular. Specifically he recalled the bitter sweet moment when he returned to the Heights sporting a captain's stripes. The squeal of delight and look of incredulous joy on his mother's face when he'd spoken of his unexpected promotion would live long in the memory. Not merely a single step up the career ladder, but a leap all the way from mere officer to captain in a single bound. Tylus was quite certain neither parent had ever imagined they'd see the day. His father's chest almost visibly swelled with pride, while his mother immediately began planning a reception at which to announce and celebrate the occasion, insisting he should attend. It was at this point Tylus revealed the second part of his news. He was to be stationed in the City Below. The speed with which expressions changed was almost comical, and the looks of dismay his words evoked were at least as memorable as his mother's initial yelp of joy.

Knowing her, he suspected his mama would still organise her reception, albeit in his absence – he had neither the time nor inclination to attend – and he had little doubt that discretion would come into play, with some judicious editing of his tidings ensuring that only the first part was ever reported and celebrated.

His reveries were interrupted by the approach of a stocky, solidly built figure in the mud and clay uniform of the city watch. Tylus recognised him immediately.

"Everything in order, sergeant?" he called to the

craggy-faced man.

"All on schedule, sir. Had to give one of the foremen a right rollicking over some missing materials, but I think he's learned his lesson."

"Good. You'll keep an eye on him, I take it."

"Of course I will, sir."

Tylus was still getting used to that – being called "sir", particularly by a hard-bitten veteran like Sergeant Able. This was the man who had refused to provide any help when he'd first arrived in the City Below, before grudgingly lending him Richardson, the runt of the department, in what was undoubtedly intended as a joke but proved to be an inspired assignment. Despite that unfortunate beginning, Tylus liked Able. He was essentially honest – well, as honest as any officer of the watch down here was likely to be – hard working, resourceful and, for want of a better word, able. Exactly the sort of man the Kite Guard was looking for.

He beckoned the sergeant to follow him into the cabin which served as his temporary office until the permanent one was fully refurbished.

"Still don't know what I'm doing here," the sergeant muttered once they'd stepped inside.

Tylus didn't reply, instead opening a cupboard and taking out two glass tumblers and a bottle of ten year old Atlean whisky. Not the best vintage, but it would do. He poured two generous measures of the amber spirit and passed one tumbler to Able, picking up the other himself before dropping into his seat behind the desk.

The sergeant grinned – an unintentionally sinister expression – and raised his glass. “I’ve worked for many a worse officer, mind, but that doesn’t alter the fact that I know breck all about flying!”

“That’s not what I want you for,” Tylus assured him. “The Guards will already have been taught everything they need to know about flying and gliding and fighting on the wing up-City. Little point in us bringing them all the way down here only to go over the same old ground again. What we’re aiming for at the new school is a short, sharp shock, a course designed to show them what it’s like to do *real* police work in some place where the streets are dirty and mean, where the miscreants don’t recognise moral codes and won’t show an officer respect simply because he’s sporting a fancy cape and a puncheon.”

Able snorted. “Well, I can do that all right, but do you really think a bunch of toffee-nosed cloud scrapers from up-City are going to pay any attention to the likes of me?”

“It’ll be up to us to make sure they do, sergeant. Don’t worry, I’ve already had a few ideas along those lines.”

“Good, cos I’d hate to think I was wasting my time. Can’t help feeling I should be out there now, helping to rein in the new gangs that are forming and moving into the old street-nick territories rather than kicking my heels watching a load of labourers at work. The watch is stretched thin enough as it is.”

Tylus had to stifle a grin. He knew full well that the canny sergeant was still keeping his hand in, that a stream of officers and runners were constantly coming to and fro, bringing him updates and carrying off his orders. Tylus couldn't blame him. He had learned firsthand just how hard pressed the watch was down here in the City Below, and it wasn't as if any actual teaching would start for weeks yet. There was hardly enough here at the moment to keep both Able and Richardson occupied, so he couldn't begrudge the sergeant his dedication.

"That's one of the things we'll be doing before long – supplementing the watch with Kite Guard patrols. Just imagine it, hunting someone through the Runs with watch officers on the ground and Kite Guards in the air, working together in a coordinated search."

"Now that would be something worth seeing," Able conceded.

"Look, bear with me on this. I know it's a bit frustrating at present, but in a little while I'll have you rushed off your feet. You'll look back on these quiet days with wistful fondness. For now, though, all I ask is that you oversee the building work and make sure there's no slacking while I'm off in the Stain chasing monsters."

"Yeah, well, good luck. I don't mind admitting that I wouldn't swap places with you on that one, not for anything."

Able drained the last of his whisky, placed the

glass down firmly on Tylus' desk and took his leave. "Time I went to check on that foreman again, just in case he thinks I've forgotten about him."

Drinking alone had always struck Tylus as a uniquely morose pastime, and he was tempted to abandon what remained of his own whisky once the sergeant had gone, but after the way he'd humiliated himself in front of Kat earlier, he decided to make an exception just this once.

No sooner had he taken a further sip from his glass than there came a smart triple rap at the door. Startled, Tylus hurriedly cleared the two glasses and the bottle away into a drawer, before calling out, "Come."

Even as he pushed the drawer shut he felt bemused by his own actions. After all, he was in charge here, and if he wanted to have a drink in his own office, why shouldn't he? Yet he still felt like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar, which was ridiculous, particularly as he knew full well whose knock that had been.

Another figure dressed in the brown and orange of the city watch came in, this one taller and considerably younger than the sergeant. Tylus felt a certain degree of pride at how far Richardson had come in a very short time. Oh, he knew the man himself deserved most of the credit, but Tylus felt he'd played his part in giving the young officer a break and inspiring the man's burgeoning self-confidence.

Whereas Able always wore the mud and clay as

if born to it, not so long ago Richardson had looked anything but comfortable in his uniform, as if the collar perhaps chafed a little and the trousers were a tad too tight at the groin. Tylus had seen that awkwardness disappear bit by bit during the time he'd been here, and today there was no sign of it at all as Richardson strode into the office and stood before his captain. This was a man on a mission.

"Yes, Richardson?"

"I wanted to ask you a favour, sir."

Sir? Richardson never remembered to call him sir. "Go ahead."

"Well, ehm... I was hoping you might stand beside me, sir. You see, I'm getting married."

Tylus couldn't have been more surprised if Richardson had declared himself to be a Jeradine in disguise. "*What...?* Congratulations! Who's the lucky girl? No, doesn't matter, I'm not going to know her in any case."

"As a matter of fact you do, well... you've met her at any rate. It's Jezmina, the girl who used to run with the Blue Claw, the one I took away from the station to work for my sister."

"Jezmina? But she's..." *just a kid.*

"Young, I know. But we've been spending quite a bit of time together lately, what with her bein' at my sister's and all, and, well, she's a really sweet girl and... she's just *so* beautiful."

All of which might be true, but when Tylus thought of the girl the image that came to mind was of a manipulative and opportunistic little

strumpet, for all her tender years and innocent expression.

"I'm delighted for you," he said. He managed to keep the smile in place but couldn't resist asking, "How old *is* she, by the way?"

"She doesn't know," Richardson admitted, a little forlornly.

Doesn't know?

"She was orphaned at a very young age, you see, and no one keeps any records of births, not down here. So she might even be older than she looks... I mean she *acts* older than she looks."

No argument from Tylus on that score. Jezmina was certainly far more mature than her physical appearance suggested – she would have needed to grow up quickly to survive on the streets with a pretty face like that – and she knew exactly how to make the most of the elfin beauty the gods had blessed her with. Within minutes of arriving at the watch station she'd had a couple of the officers running around after her with their tongues hanging out. Manipulating men seemed second nature to her, but it never occurred to Tylus that Richardson would fall under her thrall, not to the point of wanting to *marry* her at any rate.

"This is all a bit sudden, don't you think?" he ventured.

Richardson pulled a face. "That's what the *Thaistess* said."

"You've already been to see a *Thaistess*?" How far had things progressed? How much damage was

already done?

"Well, I wanted to check... what with Jezmina being so young, that the Thaistess would be happy to join us before the goddess. If she hadn't been, there are always other temples, other religions, you know."

"And was she?"

"Yes. I mean, she didn't say so immediately, asked me to bring Jezmina in to see her. I left them alone so they could have a chat. Never seen my angel so nervous, I can tell you, but I kept saying there was nothing to worry about, that once the Thaistess saw how mature and sensible she was, there'd be no problem."

It struck Tylus as far more likely that the Thaistess would have realised how far away from being an innocent maiden Jezmina was and what a savvy and worldly-wise creature had been brought before her, that far from *her* needing protection, any prospective husband was likely to; but he limited his response to, "And was there?"

"No, she did brilliantly; must have done, because afterwards the Thaistess said she'd be happy to conduct the ceremony. So, anyway, as I said, I was hoping you would do me the honour of standing beside me."

How could he possibly refuse without offending this man he'd come to regard as a friend? "I'd be delighted to," he said, with a growing sense of impending doom.

"Thank you!" Richardson rushed forward, clasp-

ing the Kite Guard's hand. "That means a lot. It won't be for a few weeks yet, so you'll have plenty of time to get back from the Stain."

Get back from the Stain? What a charming way to dismiss the living hell Tylus was bound for in the morning. He watched the man who'd acted as his assistant since he first arrived in the City Below float out of the office on a cloud of blissful infatuation and sweet delusion. As he did so, resolve hardened. Tylus wasn't about to stand by and let a good man like Richardson be taken advantage of and emotionally disembowelled by a callous and calculating gold-digger, which was all he could think Jezmina to be. It seemed that he would have a very different battle to look forward to when and *if* he returned from the Stain. Wonderful.



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