

"ANNE LYLE CONJURES UP *a* MAGICAL ELIZABETHAN
ENGLAND *of* SEEDY GLAMOUR, LONG SHADOWS *and*
HEART-STOPPING ADVENTURE." — *Mark Gladbourne*



The
ALCHEMIST
of SOULS
ANNE LYLE

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The ALCHEMIST *of* SOULS

“In her debut, *The Alchemist of Souls*, Anne Lyle creates an alternate Elizabethan England done right. A world where history meets fantasy in the streets, and where neither emerges unscathed. With a twisting plot, endearing characters, fast-paced action, and truly unique and alien ‘fey’, Lyle steps up and gives notice to the genre. No wilting faerie queens and tortured knights here: this is how historical fantasy gets dirty. A great first instalment in a promising new series.”

Douglas Hulick, author of AMONG THIEVES

“With an effective mix of espionage, backstage drama, and mystery, Lyle provides compelling drama in an intriguing setting.”

Publishers Weekly

“Anne Lyle’s *The Alchemist of Souls* teems with intrigue and magic worthy of the Bard himself, all set against the backdrop of Elizabethan London. The attention to historical detail brings the time and place alive and peoples it with characters I could instantly empathize with. An outstanding debut!”

Lynn Flewelling, author of the Nightrunner series

an excerpt from
THE ALCHEMIST OF SOULS
Night's Masque vol. I
by Anne Lyle

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CHAPTER I

Darkness came early to the streets of Southwark, even in summer. The jettied upper storeys of inns shadowed the great thoroughfares and turned its alleys into foetid rat-runs that hadn't known sunlight since King Henry's time. Mal kept his hand on his dagger hilt, scanning every doorway and alley mouth out of habit, though his thoughts were elsewhere. By his side, his companion continued his own side of the conversation unheeded.

"Hmm?" Mal said at last, looking round as Ned clutched at his elbow.

The younger man's features were indistinct in the gloom, but the irritation in his voice was plain enough.

"I said, it's worth a try. Isn't it?"

"No." Mal quickened his pace, forcing Ned to break into a jog-trot to keep up.

"Fifty shillings, Mal—"

"Fifty-two."

"All right, fifty-two. Makes no odds if it's fifty or a

hundred. Where else are you going to find that sort of money by Midsummer Day?"

"The answer's still no."

They walked on in silence for a while, Ned trailing at Mal's heels like a terrier after a deerhound. Despite the lateness of the hour, the streets teemed with Londoners determined to wring the last drop of pleasure from the evening. Dukes and bishops rubbed shoulders – and more – with sailors, whores, apprentices and players. The noise and stench were enough to deprive a newcomer of his wits, and the suburb's denizens ever ready to deprive him of his money.

"But you'd be good at it," Ned went on, when Mal halted to let a finely dressed woman and her maid-servant cross the street. "You've got such an honest face."

"And I'd like to keep it that way," Mal replied in a low voice. "Getting branded in the ear isn't good for business."

The woman smiled at Mal and fingered the lace around her neckline. His eyes lingered for a moment on the curve of her breasts, then he shook his head regretfully. She pouted and walked off down the street, hips swaying.

"What business? You haven't had a job since Easter—"

Mal stopped dead in his tracks and Ned ran into the back of him.

"What—?"

"Shut up," Mal hissed, clenching his fist, thumb

between first and middle fingers in the sign called “the fig”. An ancient protection against evil, as well as a sign of contempt.

The crowds parted to reveal a group of man-like creatures, the tallest of them no bigger than Ned. They wore tunics of undyed wool, cream and dark brown woven in complicated geometric patterns, over breeches tucked into low boots. Silver-streaked hair hung loose about their shoulders or was braided like a girl’s and threaded with beads. Most outlandish of all were their faces, painted in whorls of blue lines that disguised their not-quite-human features.

As the skraylings walked past, Mal thought he saw one of them turn and look up at him with slit-pupilled eyes. The skrayling’s patterned face was somehow familiar, though his hair was more silver than – No, he was imagining things; these foreigners all looked alike, didn’t they? He raised his hand to make the sign of the cross and his vision shifted; the skrayling was not looking at him at all, was staring straight ahead in fact. Mal finished the protective gesture and shoved his trembling hand into his pocket.

“What was all that about?” Ned asked as the crowds closed behind the skraylings.

“Nothing,” Mal lied.

“They’re not demons, you know, whatever the Puritans say.”

“You think they’re wondrous faery folk of the New World?”

Ned shrugged. "Why not? You've seen their camp; tell me that's not magic."

Mal had no answer to that. He well remembered his first glimpse of the skraylings' stockade at night, lit by lamps of cold blue, violet and yellow that never flickered despite the gusts of icy wind blowing in off the Essex marshes.

"You should be grateful to 'em," Ned said as they set off again. "Since they set a bounty on rats, there's been scarcely a hint of plague in the city."

"You think killing rats made the difference?"

"Something did. Why else would they be paying a penny a tail?"

Because they want everyone to forget that skraylings don't get the plague? He added aloud, "Perhaps they're fond of rat-tail soup."

Ned pulled a face. "Even I'm not that desperate. Hey, that gives me an idea!"

"Another one?"

"We could buy us a terrier and set ourselves up as rat-catchers. They say a good ratter can kill twenty a minute."

"And where would we get the money to buy a dog?" Mal said. "Tom at the White Hart wanted ten-and-six for that scrawny pup the other day."

"It was a little runt," Ned admitted. "My money would have been on the rat. So, where to? The Bull's Head?"

Mal ignored him. He was trying to decide whether or not to pawn his rapier. Not an attractive option,

since his livelihood depended on it.

"Bull it is, then." Ned grinned and rubbed his hands together.

Mal glowered at his friend, cursing himself for letting his mind wander. He had been idle too long. In a fight, carelessness like that would get him killed.

"Anywhere but the Bull, I beg you!" he said. "I have no desire to spend another evening listening to your actor friends reciting interminable speeches and slandering their rivals. I'm for the Catherine Wheel." He set off down the street again.

"And I've no wish to spend another evening listening to your old comrades' tales of death and glory," Ned shouted after him. "At least at the Bull I might earn a shilling or two on my own account."

"Please yourself, but you go alone. I'll not be your pander."

Ned groaned. "All right, all right, you win. But you're buying."

The Catherine Wheel was as busy as a brothel mattress, and twice as pungent. The only difference was, the fleas here had steel teeth. Tucked away in a courtyard off the high street, the Wheel saw few outsiders venturing through its low door. Even if they did, one look told them to step back outside and seek somewhere more congenial. Somewhere the patrons still had the usual complement of eyes and limbs, for a start.

The first empty seats Mal came to were opposite a lone man who was muttering an endless stream of

oaths into his beer, mostly about the French and their filthy sexual practices. Ned rolled his eyes in protest so they moved on, Mal nodding to various acquaintances who inclined their heads in response but failed to beckon him over. They found themselves a table near the back door; the stink of the jakes wafted in whenever someone went in or out, but at least it was unoccupied. Ned said something that was drowned by the sudden roar from a group of dice-players nearby, and stamped off. He returned a couple of minutes later with two jacks of beer, grumbling under his breath.

“Right, you owe me a penny,” he said, sliding one of the beers across the uneven tabletop.

Mal forced a smile. Ned’s remark was too near the knuckle. He needed to earn silver, and soon. The fellow at the next table looked more respectable than most; he was apparently unmaimed and wore a well-cut frieze jerkin. Private armies might have been outlawed, but in a city where the watch was poorly paid and often infirm, a man with money and property to defend always had need of a few stout fellows who knew how to handle themselves in a fight. Mal tried to catch the man’s eye, but he was deep in conversation with his companions.

Ned leaned across the beer-damp table. “Any prospects?”

“None so far.”

“Well we need something to tide us over. And this time of year the city’s full of fools just waiting to be parted from their money.”

"You know what I think of your... devisings."

"Look." Ned lowered his voice. "I'll deal the cards and do all the talking. All you have to do is bet against the gull, and feign drunkenness."

"How can I bet when I have no money?" Mal asked. He took a sip. The beer was no worse than usual. No better either.

"So you'll do it, then?"

"No. And don't try it alone, either." He glanced meaningfully towards the bar, where a man with a belly like a pregnant mare was wiping tankards with a rag. "Sideways Jack has no love for coney-catchers; he'll skin you alive if you ply your tricks in here."

"As if I would," Ned replied, all injured innocence. "Credit me with *some* wits, mate."

The door of the tavern opened, and the taproom fell silent. Four men came in, wearing dark blue livery, scarlet cloaks and steel breastplates and helmets, and bearing pole arms with long blades that glistened in the candlelight. The foremost of the guardsmen, a man of about thirty-five with a broken nose and the bearing of a professional soldier, cleared his throat.

"I am Captain Edward Monkton of the Tower Guard. I seek one Maliverny Catlyn, lately of the parish of St Mary Overie—"

"No one 'ere by that name," Sideways Jack said. "Sir."

Monkton scanned the room. Mal forced himself to sit still and neither try to hide nor catch the man's eye. Long moments passed in which Monkton's gaze

alighted on first one patron of the tavern, then another. All were youngish men with dark hair.

The captain advanced into the taproom, peering into the shadows. Then he looked back at one of his men, who nodded. Mal exchanged glances with Ned. As one they leapt from their seats and ran for the blessedly near back door.

“What in Christ’s name—?” Ned gasped as they raced across the back yard, slipping in puddles of piss left by customers who hadn’t made it as far as the jakes.

“Damned if I know!” Mal replied. “Come on!”

The back gate was padlocked. He rattled it in frustration. Any moment now the guards would come bursting through the back door.

“You go over the fence.” Ned crouched with his hands laced together, ready to give Mal a boost. “I’ll hinder them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, yes! God’s teeth, get out of here!”

Mal scrambled over the rough wooden paling, wincing as a splinter dug into his thigh, and dropped down into the alley. He could hear the shouts of the guardsmen as they slithered around in the muddy yard, and Ned protesting his innocence. No time to hang around. He jogged off down the alley as fast as he dared in the near-darkness, hand on his dagger hilt.

“Hold, sirrah!”

Mal skidded to a halt. A helmeted figure was silhouetted in the lamplight at the end of the alley.

“Goddamn beefeaters!” he muttered.

He turned and ran back the way he’d come, looking for a side turning, but there was none. As he passed the back gate of the Catherine Wheel, it crashed open and two of the other guardsmen cannoned into him, crushing him against the brick wall opposite. He ducked slightly, elbowed the nearest man in the belly and pulled himself free of the mêlée. A moment later a fist like a half-brick impacted with his temple and he slumped against the wall, head reeling.

Someone grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him to his feet. His arms were pinned behind his back, none too gently.

“Maliverny Catlyn?” The captain held up a lantern and shone it in Mal’s face.

“No, I just happen to look like him.”

That earned him a fist in the guts. He gritted his teeth, forcing back the urge to puke up his beer.

“That’s him, all right,” said one of the other guards. “I’ve seen him in the Wheel a few times. When I was off-duty, of course, sir.”

The captain grinned unpleasantly at Mal. “Right, boys, let’s go.”

They stripped Mal of his dagger and escorted him through the streets of Southwark to the down-river side of London Bridge. A sleek skiff bobbed amongst the wherries, with six men at the oars. Mal was pushed into the boat and the captain waved for him to sit.

“What are you arresting me for?” Mal asked, hop-

ing they wouldn't risk upsetting the skiff by laying into him here.

"How should I know?" Monkton replied. "I was just told to bring you in."

Mal opened his mouth to protest again, but the captain shoved him onto the thwart. The skiff rocked alarmingly, and the soldiers laughed as he clutched at the gunwales.

"Enough!" The captain glowered at his men, then turned to Mal. "You, my friend, can squeal all you like once we get to the Tower."

The skiff cast off, and the rowers bent their backs, making slow headway against the incoming tide that threatened to drive it into the treacherous channel between the piers of the bridge. At last they broke free of the eddies and made their slow way downstream, bearing northwards towards the dark bulk of the Tower.

Crouched on the lower slopes of a hill on the eastern edge of the city, the Tower of London dominated the approach to the capital from the sea. Formerly the principal royal residence, the ancient fortress now housed Queen Elizabeth's chief enemies, detained at Her Majesty's pleasure in a style befitting their status. The Queen herself preferred the comforts of her father's palace of Nonsuch in Surrey, to which she had retreated in mourning for her late husband, Robert Dudley.

On the south bank of the Thames, opposite the Tower, a much smaller fortress squatted by the

waterside. Though naught but a wooden palisade surrounded by ditches, it was no less forbidding than its ancient rival. Coloured lamps floated amongst the trees within and eerie piping sounds, like dying seabirds, echoed across the water. The skrayling colony. Mal made the sign of the cross and looked away.

The skiff lurched against the current as they turned sharply towards the water gate. Mal clutched the plank he was sitting on, hoping he didn't look as anxious as he felt. The severed heads of traitors, mercifully no more than silhouettes in the twilight, gave grim testimony to the fate awaiting those who defied their Queen. The splash of oars echoed from the stonework as they passed through a narrow tunnel under the wharf, then the skiff crossed the castle moat and entered the larger archway under St Thomas's Tower, emerging in a dank, shadow-hung pool where a flight of stone stairs led up to the outer ward. Mal was hurried up the steps and four of the guards closed in around him before he could so much as get his bearings.

A yeoman warder in scarlet livery beckoned to the captain, and Mal was taken a short way along the ward, through a sheltered rose garden and thence into a great courtyard with a tower at each corner. The warder unlocked a low door at the base of one of the towers, and Mal was escorted up the spiral stair and through another low door. It thudded shut behind him, and the key grated in the lock.

It was no filthy cell they had brought him to, but

an octagonal chamber perhaps twenty feet across. Opposite him a blackened stone fireplace gaped like a bear's maw, and glazed windows to either side of it let in the last of the dim evening light. A second door, to the right of the one he had just come through, proved to be locked also.

The chamber was plainly furnished with a bedstead curtained in plain woollen stuff, a table and bench, and a padded leather prie-dieu under the eastern window. Only the walls betrayed this place as a prison. His fingers traced the shapes carved painstakingly into the stone: names of former inhabitants, several Jesuitical inscriptions, and an E within a heart. Both Catholics and Protestants had been held here over the years.

He knelt at the prie-dieu and began to pray that whatever mistake had been made in bringing him here, Our Lady would see fit to right it before his captors resorted to torture.

He spent a sleepless night alternately pacing his cell and praying. This was worse than the eve of battle. Death at the hands of the enemy was quick and clean compared to the punishment meted out to traitors. The fact that he had not to his knowledge committed treason was no comfort – why else would they drag him in off the streets and throw him in the Tower without charge? He tried not to think about what it must feel like to be disembowelled alive, and failed dismally.

Some time after dawn the sound of a key scraping

in the lock roused him from his contemplations and he leapt up from the prie-dieu, groping at his side for the absent rapier. A yeoman warder peered into the chamber, bleary-eyed and drunk judging by the smell of cheap wine that preceded him into the room. Mal wondered if he should rush the man and try to make his escape, but without planning or accomplices he doubted he would get far.

The warder limped across the room, burdened by a heavy basket. From it he produced a battered pewter tankard and plate, an earthenware bottle and a loaf of bread. After setting these out on the table the warder left, locking the door behind him.

Mal went over to the table and sat down to eat. The fear of the night before had subsided into a numb determination to face whatever cruelties his captors were planning. A man weakened by hunger would not resist torment for long.

He had not managed more than a few mouthfuls of the dry bread, washed down with a small ale, when the warder returned.

"You're wanted." The man beckoned him through the door.

Mal's stomach flipped over. So soon?

He was taken back along the narrow outer ward, still deep in shadow at this time of day, and through a tunnel that pierced one of the inner towers. A steep cobbled road led upwards between high walls, with the vast bulk of the Norman keep looming to their right. The warder turned left at the top of the slope and directed Mal across the green towards a

handsome timber-framed house built into the angle of the south and west walls. The L-shaped building looked incongruously domestic against the Herculean masonry all around it.

He was shown into a wood-panelled antechamber. Benches stood against the wall opposite the fireplace; above them, portraits of middle-aged men in elaborate armour or outdated clothing stared down at him with the indifference of the long-dead. Mal distracted himself by going from one to another and reading the inscriptions below each: Thomas Grey Marquess of Dorset, Edward Lord Clinton, Sir John Gage.

“My illustrious predecessors.”

The man in the doorway was forty or so, well built and a little above middle height, with fair curly hair and beard and a ruddy complexion. His doublet and hose were of sherry-coloured velvet, and his ruff was dyed with saffron. As if on cue, a lion roared in the Tower menagerie, and Mal had to keep his head down as he bowed, to hide a smile. A lion of a man indeed.

“My lord?”

“Master Catlyn.” The steel in the man’s voice belied his courtier’s finery.

“Yessir.” Mal didn’t quite snap to attention, but his back straightened of its own accord. Old habits died hard.

“I am Sir James Leland, Lieutenant of the Tower. No doubt you are wondering why I invited you here?”

Invited? Well, that was one word for it.

"Yes, sir." Mal swallowed, anticipating the worst.

Leland walked around him in a slow circle, eyeing him up and down as if he were a horse for sale. Mal stared straight ahead. If Leland thought to intimidate him, let him think again.

"Not exactly what I expected," the lieutenant muttered. "But I suppose you'll have to do." He paced some more. "Maliverny. French name, isn't it?"

"My father's second wife – my mother – was Béatrice de Maliverny, from Aix-en-Provence. Being her first-born son, I was named in her family's honour."

"You are half French, then?" Leland frowned at him.

"By blood only, sir. I am an Englishman born and bred." Mal could not help adding, "The French *are* our friends, sir."

Leland muttered something under his breath, then turned to face Mal again. "How old are you?"

"Sir?"

"It's a simple enough question, surely?"

"I am five-and-twenty, sir."

"That dagger you were carrying is of fine workmanship. I fancy it is part of a matched set, a mate to a rapier?"

"Yes, sir." Was that what this was all about? Surely they wouldn't haul him into the Tower over an illegal duel. "I've had lessons from Saviolo himself."

"Hmm. Italian swordplay is all very well, but what about real fighting? I have been told you served

under the Earl of Devon.”

“I was at the siege of Bergen-op-Zoom, and afterwards I fought in Italy against the Turk.”

The lieutenant nodded approvingly. Mal kept his features impassive, trying to follow the course of this interrogation to its logical conclusion. There was none he could see, or none that made any sense.

Leland cleared his throat noisily. “I have a commission for you, Catlyn. From Her Majesty the Queen, no less.”

Mal stared at him.

“Have you nothing to say for yourself, man?”

“I – Thank you, sir.” Mal began to laugh, near drunk with relief, then fell silent. Leland did not look amused. “Forgive me, sir, I... Well, after last night I thought for certain I had been arrested for treason.”

“Arrested? I sent Captain Monkton to find you, certainly, since no one knew your whereabouts. If there has been any misunderstanding, well, that is very regrettable.”

Mal went over the previous evening’s events in his mind. He was the one who had bolted like a guilty thing and thus begun the chase. On the other hand, this Captain Monkton had taken great delight in letting him think he was under arrest. Had the captain misunderstood his instructions, or was he merely brutal and malicious?

“Now, about this commission,” Leland said. “You are to guard a foreign ambassador who will be visiting England later this summer.”

"An ambassador? Of where?"

"Vinland."

"Vinland? But—"

"He is a skrayling, yes. You have an objection to that?"

"N-no, sir," Mal said. His thoughts were racing. Bodyguard to a skrayling? Why had he of all people been chosen for such a task? And how could he get out of it? "I was merely surprised. I didn't know they had an ambassador."

"The savages seem to have taken a while to grasp the idea, but it pleases their fancy to have one now. And of course he must be treated with all the courtesy due a foreign ally."

"Of course."

"The pay is four shillings a day," Leland went on, "also board, lodgings and a suit of livery. You will report here on the twentieth day of August and learn your way around the Tower and the ambassador's quarters."

Four shillings a day. Twenty-four shillings a *week*. That was not a sum he could turn down easily, not the way things were going. But August was a long way off. Too long. He cursed under his breath in frustration.

"Well, what is it?" Leland asked.

Mal swallowed. It was a gamble, but if they really wanted him for this job... "I am, as you undoubtedly know, sir, out of work at the moment. How I shall shift for myself in the next few weeks, I know not, but I doubt I can find a position for so short a

while..."

"You are asking for a retainer?"

Mal lowered his gaze. "Yes, sir."

"Very well," Leland said after a pause for consideration. "Half pay until you start – and of course no board or lodgings."

Two shillings a day – and now it was barely two weeks until Midsummer Day. Nowhere near enough to pay off what he owed.

Leland sighed. "Come on, man, out with it."

Mal could not meet the lieutenant's eye. He feared this was a step too far. "I have some small but pressing debts. I–"

"How much?"

"Three pounds, sir." Or thereabouts. He prayed the lieutenant would not ask what the money was for.

After a long moment Leland began to laugh. "Three pounds. Well, we cannot have His Excellency's bodyguard thrown in the Clink for so paltry a sum. Here." He took out a purse and counted out six gold angels.

"Thank you, sir," Mal said, pocketing the coins. "I am in your debt."

"You are in the Queen's debt, not mine. I'll instruct the purser to take it out of your pay."

"Of course, sir."

"Someone will be along presently to see you out, and return your blade. Until August, Master Catlyn."

The moment Leland left, Mal sank down onto a nearby bench, shaking with relief. He had been so

certain he was condemned to die – and dammit, Monkton had let him stew here all night in that belief. Did the captain know more than he was letting on, or was he judging Mal by his elder brother's reputation? And then there were the skraylings. If Leland found out why the very sight of the foreigners chilled his heart, he would be back in that cell faster than a sixpence into a whore's bodice.

He wondered again why he had been chosen. It had not been Leland's decision, that was clear enough. So whose was it? With the Queen herself in seclusion, any orders most likely came from her advisors, the shadowy members of the Privy Council: Puckering, Cecil, Suffolk, Walsingham, Oxford, Pembroke and Effingham. Mal had the uncomfortable feeling he was being used as a pawn in a game where he could see neither board nor pieces, still less the players making their moves.

CHAPTER II

The cockerel's cry split the cool damp air, heralding the end of another all-too-brief night. Ned groaned and buried his head under the bolster. How much had they drunk last night? Next time he would stick to beer, regardless of who was paying. Speaking of which...

He slid out of bed, wincing at the bruises: a parting gift the other night from a pair of disgruntled Tower guards. Rummaging around in Mal's discarded clothes, he found a familiar pair of worn slops, and in the pocket a purse heavy with gold. He counted the coins out slowly to avoid clinking them together. Almost three pounds, less the few shillings Mal had spent on wine and oysters by way of an apology. Where did he get hold of so much money, and so quickly?

Ned's chest tightened. With that much money Mal could have spent the night with the best whore in Bankside, and yet here he was, back home with Ned. Was it only caution and a desire to be certain of

repaying his debts, or had his feelings changed? Best not to dwell on it. Hope was a treacherous mistress.

Mal muttered something in his sleep. Ned eased back into bed and propped himself up on one elbow, the better to admire his companion's profile in the fragile dawn light. A half-grown-out military crop curled above a smooth tanned brow that led his gaze down to a chiselled nose as perfect as an Italian statue. Black lashes fluttered as Mal's eyes twitched beneath closed lids.

"No! Leave him alone!" Mal tossed his head from side to side, struggling as if pinned to the bed by invisible hands.

"Hush, my lamb," Ned whispered.

His reward was a soft moan and a furrowing of that dark brow. He leant over and kissed the sleeping man's shoulder, savouring the salt sting of sweat – and nearly got his lip split open a second time when Mal sat bolt upright with a cry of fear.

"What is it?" Ned asked softly.

Mal rubbed his face, then swung his legs out of bed and sat with his head in his hands, breathing ragged as if he had been running. Ned reached out a hand to comfort him, then thought better of it. After a moment Mal got to his feet, stretched as best he could under the low rafters, and scratched his groin.

"I can't do this," he muttered, picking up his shirt.

"That's not what you said last night." The words were out of Ned's mouth before he could stop them.

"What?" Mal popped his head through the neck of the shirt and frowned at him.

“Er, nothing.” Ned wriggled sideways into the warm hollow Mal had just abandoned, and watched him dress. Play of muscles under milky skin, tantalising glimpses of tight arse as the hip-length shirt rose and fell with each movement... He sighed. What was the point of an early rising if you didn’t get to use it?

“Going somewhere?” he asked as Mal pulled on his boots.

“Just down to the garden. I need to think.” He took his rapier down from its peg.

Ah, that kind of thinking. “Can I watch?”

“If you will.”

Mal threaded the rapier’s scabbard onto his belt. The matching dagger joined it, then he cinched the belt around his hips. Ned ducked as Mal turned to leave. The long, slender blade was meant for the lofty halls and galleries of noblemen’s mansions, not cramped attics in the backstreets of Southwark.

After Mal had gone, Ned lifted the bed-sheet and peered into its musky depths.

“Never mind, mate. Maybe next time.”

Was that a nod or a shake? With a grunt of effort he climbed out of bed.

“First sign of madness,” he muttered to himself. “Talking to your... self.”

He cast about the room for his own discarded clothing, and remembered the purse. Whatever Mal was up to, he was determined to get to the bottom of it.

Mal drew his rapier and held it up to the light. The rising sun gilded the elegant curves of the hilt and shimmered along the blade. Forty inches of finest Solingen steel, exquisite and deadly.

Mandritta, reversa, fendente, tonda... His fencing master's voice echoed in his memory as he adopted the *terza guardia* stance, blade dipping towards the grass.

He moved through the familiar drills, emptying his mind, becoming the blade. Stepping back and forth along the garden path, the tip of his rapier wove a pattern of glittering arcs above the rows of dew-spangled cabbages, sending butterflies spiralling up like scraps of torn paper.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Ned cried out as the rapier snicked the head off a flowering onion.

"Sorry," Mal muttered.

He wiped the blade on his cuff and sheathed it. Ned looked at him expectantly.

"Yesterday," Mal said, "I was offered – no, *given* – a job."

"But... that's marvellous news!" Ned leapt off the upturned barrel he'd been sitting on. "It is marvellous, isn't it?"

When Mal did not answer, Ned went on: "Are you... Are you leaving London?"

"No." Mal looked north and east, towards the dark smudge of the city on the opposite bank of the Thames. "No, you'll have to put up with me for a while yet."

"Then what's the matter?"

Mal picked up a stone and threw it at a pigeon that was eyeing the cabbages with interest.

"The job is to guard the skrayling ambassador."

"Oh. I didn't know they had an ambassador."

"Neither did I, until now."

"So, what are you going to do?"

"What I should have done a long time ago." He walked back towards the house. "Put on your Sunday best. We're going to Court."

A young Englishman of noble birth could generally be found in one of two places: on campaign in Ireland, or at Court. Fortunately for Mal, Blaise Grey had managed to avoid the former, so he and Ned made their way to Whitehall Palace, on the Thames west of London.

Two enormous gatehouses straddled King Street, guarding the east and west entrances to the palace and its gardens. A constant stream of people flowed in and out under the watchful eyes of the royal guard.

"If anyone asks," Mal told Ned as they neared the gate, "you're my manservant. Keep your mouth shut and your eyes down, even if you recognise someone; this isn't the Bull's Head on a Saturday night."

Whitehall swarmed with courtiers, servants and petitioners, though this hive no longer centred on a queen. Prince Robert took care of much of the kingdom's business, sitting at the head of his mother's Privy Council as *de facto* regent. On the riverward

side of King Street lay the prince's lodging and private gardens. Even if Blaise were there, Mal knew he stood little chance of gaining admittance. In any case, his quarry was far more likely to be found on the other side of the street, in the maze of tennis courts and bowling alleys where the young bloods idled away their hours.

After making several enquiries of servants and getting lost twice, they found Grey in the larger of the palace's two tennis courts. The game was still in progress, so Mal and Ned joined the press of spectators in the mesh-covered galleries running down one side of the court. There was little to be seen without pushing through the throng, though judging by the cries of triumph and anguish from the crowd, the game was reaching its climax.

Mal glimpsed Blaise's dark blond curls for an instant over the heads of the spectators, then the whole court erupted in deafening cheers that echoed off the white stone walls. Money changed hands, and the crowd began to disperse.

Signalling for Ned to hang back, Mal moved forwards, letting the departing courtiers flow past him. Amongst the stragglers was a slight red-headed figure, face flushed, his fine linen shirt soaked in sweat. Prince Arthur, the younger of the Queen's two sons. As the prince passed, laughing at a jest from one of his companions, Mal swept a low bow.

"Catlyn, isn't it?"

Mal looked up to see Grey staring at him. "My lord."

“Come for a game?” Grey asked, wiping his brow with a towel.

“I– Yes, why not?”

He removed his sword belt and doublet and tossed them to Ned, who frowned at being treated in such a peremptory manner.

“Manservant, remember?” Mal hissed.

Someone handed him a racquet and he followed Grey through a side door onto the tennis court. A few of the departing courtiers drifted back, curious to see how long the newcomer would last.

Mal was out of practice and Grey had a good four inches on him, but he managed to hold his ground, at least to begin with. He’s playing with me, he realised after a poor shot gained him a point. He feigned clumsiness on his next return. Grey, falling for the feint, tapped the ball into what should have been empty space – to find Mal there.

“Thirty all!” the umpire announced.

Surprised murmurs echoed around the gallery, and by the sounds of it, bets were placed.

On the far side of the drooping net, Grey twirled his racquet in one hand and shifted his weight from foot to foot. Mal smiled. Impatience: that would be his opponent’s weakness. He strung out the moment as long as he dared then served, sending the leather ball bouncing off the left-hand wall and onto the sloping penthouse above the galleries.

It teetered on the penthouse edge for a moment before falling into the hazard end of the court, and Grey flicked it straight back over the net. Mal

returned the ball in a high arc that sent the other man running sideways until he all but collided with the tambour wall. The spectators roared with laughter, and Grey flushed. He scooped his racquet under the ball as it bounced heavily on the wooden floor and sent it flying back to the service end. Mal stopped it with a neat backhand – too neat. Grey watched, grinning in anticipation, as the ball hopped over the net and bounced once, twice–

“Hazard chase, second gallery!” the umpire announced.

The spectators clapped or jeered according to their allegiance and placed further bets.

“Got money on this one yourself, Catlyn?” Grey asked. “Or perhaps you’re not your father’s son after all?”

Mal bit back a retort. This is no different from duelling, he told himself. Better to keep silent and let the other man’s ill temper work in your favour. He served again, focusing all his attention on the flight of the little leather ball.

“So,” Grey said, “what have you been doing with yourself since you were sent down?”

Mal froze. “I was not sent down, I left.”

The tennis ball whistled past his head, hit the wall with a crack like a pistol shot and ricocheted into the *dedans*.

“Forty–thirty!” Grey smiled. “Change ends, Catlyn.”

From his vantage point halfway along the court, Ned

was paying more attention to the players than to the game, of which he knew little and cared less. Mal so rarely talked about his past, it was easy to forget he was the son of a diplomat, as far above a mere scrivener as Prince Arthur was above a gentleman commoner like Mal. This was a rare window on a part of his friend's life he seldom got to see.

"That's merely what I was told," Grey said, preparing to serve.

"What else did you hear?"

"Nothing." Grey wiped his hand on his damp shirt, which clung to his tall, muscular frame. He was handsome enough, Ned had to admit. If you liked cold-eyed arrogant bastards.

A heavily built young man in a gaudy scarlet doublet slashed with yellow silk pushed in front of Ned, blocking his view of the game. Ned was about to push back when he remembered where he was. Muttering under his breath he stepped backwards until he could go no further. He leant against the condensation-damp wall of the tennis court, eyes closed, wishing he was somewhere else, somewhere he didn't feel like a stranger in his own city.

When he opened his eyes he saw another courtier leaning against the wall not far away, watching him slyly from under lowered lids. The youth was no more than sixteen, thin and with a sickly complexion like something found under a stone. Eyes down, mouth shut, Mal had said. But if he was approached, surely it would be rude to say no? Not that he wanted to say yes to anything this creature might

propose.

“You. Fellow.”

Ned bridled at being so addressed by a mere boy, but ducked his head anyway.

“My lord?”

The youth detached himself from the wall.

“You are Catlyn’s man?”

That was one way of putting it. “Yes, sir.”

“He is the swarthy fellow playing against Grey?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call him swarthy—”

A well-manicured hand slapped him backhanded, rings scraping his cheek.

“Do not talk back to your betters, sirrah,” the youth hissed, lifting a silver pomander to his nose.

Ned ducked his head again, not daring to reply. The crowd applauded: Mal had won another point. When Ned looked back, the boy with the pomander was gone.

It was not hard to let Grey win. Mal’s pride would not allow him to give in without a fight, but the other man’s superior height and reach made him a tough opponent by any standard. Mal hoped he would never have to face him in a duel.

Afterwards they wandered out into St James’s Park, where servants brought flagons of chilled Rhenish wine for their refreshment. Young ladies strolled arm-in-arm under the watchful eyes of chaperones or sat on cushions in the shade of beech trees, fussing over lapdogs and pretending not to make eyes at the young men as they passed. The

stink and crowds of London might as well be a hundred miles away.

Mal gestured for Ned to wait at a discreet distance. The last thing he wanted was for his friend to overhear anything about his not-so-glorious past.

“So,” Grey said at last, putting down his silver goblet, “what is this matter you are so anxious to discuss in private?”

Mal told him about the commission, leaving out the ignominious nature of his arrival at the Tower.

“And you want me to get you out of it?”

Mal hesitated, wondering how best to put it.

“I know we were not close acquaintances at Cambridge, but we have certain... sympathies in common.”

“Go on.”

“I also know you and your father are not close. But – he has the ear of Prince Robert. If there is anything you can do, I would be eternally grateful.”

“We were never the best of friends, I’ll grant you that, Catlyn, but one Peterhouse man looks out for another.” Grey leant forward. “I’ll see what I can do. And since you are looking for work, I have something that might suit you very well.”

“You do?” Mal said, trying to keep the eagerness out of his voice. There was no point getting out of Leland’s commission if he could not pay back the advance.

“After you left Cambridge, I fell in with some fellows from Corpus Christi. Tradesmen’s sons, mostly, but money poured from their purses like Cam water

from a drowned drunk. Well, one that I know of has come home to London and is minded to become a gentleman. I can hardly introduce him at Court, but noblesse oblige...”

“What do you need from me?”

“The fellow needs to be seen in the company of gentlemen, learn a few graces – perhaps the art of the sword?”

“Why does he not hire a fencing-master, if he is so rich?”

Grey shook his head. “I urged him to, but he would have none of it. ‘Filthy swiving Italians’, he called them, and refused to have them in his house. But a stout Englishman like yourself... Shall I write you a letter of introduction?”

Mal was inclined to refuse. It was bad enough that he had to crawl to the likes of Grey; he had no wish to renew his acquaintance with the sort of men Grey favoured as friends. But it appeared he had little choice.

“Thank you,” he said at last. “That would be most generous.”

“’Tis trifling. What are friends for?” He waved away the servant offering to refill his goblet. “Where shall I send it?”

“Address it to Deadman’s Place, Southwark; first house past Maid Lane. I will be lodging there for the summer.”

“You’re living in Southwark? God’s bones, Catlyn, no wonder you’re going nowhere. The sooner you remember who you are and where you belong, the

better. I'll have that letter to you by morning. Swear to me you'll take the job, and get yourself some decent lodgings."

Mal made a vague, noncommittal noise. No work for months, then two jobs come along at once – and both of them an uncomfortable link to his past. The Fates were conspiring against him, of that he was certain.

"All right," he said at last. "I'll see this shopkeeper of yours. But I make no promises. I owe no loyalty to you or your friends."

"Oh I think you do," Grey said. "You can wash the blood away, Catlyn, but the stain will always be there. Always."

Contrary to Grey's promises, no letter arrived the next day, nor the day after. Mal was by turns relieved and annoyed. He considered seeking Grey out, but did not want to appear too desperate. In any case, one did not press a duke's son to hurry with his favours.

A week passed, and the matter of the fifty-two shillings still had to be dealt with. So it was that on Midsummer Day, Mal walked up to the gates of Bethlem Hospital with a heavy heart. Every time he came here, he swore it would be the last. Every time...

He rapped on the door set into the tall wooden gates and waited. After several minutes it opened a crack, and the stubble-jawed porter poked his head out.

“What is it?”

“I have your money,” Mal said, tapping his pocket.

The porter’s eyebrows lifted, and his sneer twisted into an ingratiating smile.

“Come in, sir, come in.”

He unbolted the gate and Mal went through into the courtyard, wrinkling his nose at the smell from the nearby cesspit. It was a wonder the patients hadn’t all died of plague long ago. Judging by the screams coming from the nearby Abraham Ward, however, they were still very much alive.

“You go right on in, sir,” the porter said. “Mistress Cooke will see to you.”

He looked expectantly at Mal, who grimaced but gave the man thruppence from his purse, “to oil the hinges of the gate” as the fellow liked to put it. Much as Mal disliked the fact, he would need to come back here at least once more.

“I have to ask for your blade as well, sir,” the porter added. “New rules, sir.”

“He has become dangerous of late?”

“Lord bless us, no, sir! He’s been gentle as a lamb since you was last here.” He shook his head. “There was this young gallant, see, showing off to his lady in the Abraham Ward, and one of the inmates got hold of his rapier. Nasty mess, it was, sir. We don’t want any more trouble like that.”

Mal drew his dagger and handed it to the porter. He was tempted to point out that anyone who thought taunting the insane was a pleasant way to spend a Sunday afternoon deserved everything he got.

"I trust such visitors are not allowed into my brother's lodgings," he said. "I pay you well to keep him secluded."

"Of course not, sir." The man grinned nervously.

He was lying, of course. The occasional visitors paid for the little luxuries that made the keepers' lives bearable in this vile place. He hoped Sandy had afforded them little entertainment.

The western gatehouse provided accommodation for patients whose families were willing to spend a little extra on their keep. Like the eastern gatehouse it had rooms on the ground floor which opened into the gateway itself, and several chambers above. Originally interconnecting, these had been subdivided to create a corridor with locked doors to either side and a narrow window at each end. The lodgings were a little more comfortable than the main ward where the meaner inmates were kept, but it was a melancholy place nonetheless.

After a few moments Mal's eyes adjusted to the gloom and he spotted a woman of middle years coming out of one of the rooms, accompanied by a pale-faced girl of about fourteen. Their aprons were smeared with filth, and the girl carried a brimming chamber-pot.

"Mistress Cooke?" he called out. "I'm here to see my brother."

"O' course, sir." She fumbled through the bunch of keys hanging from her belt. "I was just in there a few minutes ago, happily for you. All cleaned up, he is, sir."

The chamber was about the size of the one in which Mal had been shut up at the Tower, though without the luxury of a fireplace or glazed windows. The only furnishings were a narrow cot bed against one wooden side-wall and a rickety table bearing a small pile of books. The rushes on the floor had long since been trampled into a layer of matted filth that stuck to the soles of Mal's boots.

"Sandy?"

The pale figure curled up on the cot bed did not move.

"Sandy, it's me, Mal."

He went over to the bed. Mistress Cooke's idea of "clean" was a sweat-soaked shirt which clearly had not been changed in days, and the same breeches her patient was wearing last time Mal visited. Sandy's feet were bare and filthy, the toenails grown long, and his black shoulder-length hair was matted into elf-locks. Well, all of that could be remedied, at least. Having expected no better treatment in his absence, Mal had brought some of his own spare clothes and shoes this time.

"Bring me hot water and towels," he told Mistress Cooke. "And a pair of shears."

The matron looked offended but eventually complied. Neither the towels nor the water turned out to be particularly clean.

"Before you go," he said, "I would also like the keys to my brother's shackles. I cannot change his clothing as he is."

"Oh, you mustn't unchain him, sir. Master Charles

was quite insistent about that.”

“Charles gave him into my care. I pay the bills now, I will do with him as I see fit. And you will give me the keys.”

Grumbling, Mistress Cooke removed a small iron key from the ring and handed it over.

“On yer own head be it, sir,” she said and hurried out, locking the door behind her.

“Sandy?” Mal put the bucket of water down by the bed. “Sandy? They’ve gone now.”

“I’m not here,” Sandy whispered. “You can’t see me.”

He was right, then. The warders had been allowing paying customers in here.

“It’s all right, Sandy,” he said, “there’s no one here but me. It’s Mal, your brother.”

“Brother?” Sandy sat up suddenly. The chains joining the iron manacles slithered into his lap.

“Yes, your brother, Mal.”

He took up the shears and began trimming his brother’s hair and beard, taking care to keep the blades well away from Sandy’s eyes. One sudden seizure and... He drew a deep breath and forced himself to continue. At last it was done. He ruffled Sandy’s hair, sending a last few severed curls tumbling into the rushes.

“There, now you look yourself again.”

Sandy smiled back, his features a gaunt mirror-image of Mal’s own. Same black hair, same straight nose and narrow jaw, same dark eyes – no, not the same. Not any more. It was as if a stranger looked

out at him, a stranger who wore his twin's shape like an ill-fitting suit of clothes. But if he were possessed, it was by no demon any priest had been able to drive out.

Mal unlocked the shackles around Sandy's wrists and ankles, wincing at the sight of the chafed and blistered flesh. He bound the wounds with clean bandages then set about stripping off his brother's filthy clothes. Sandy began to shiver.

"Come on, you big baby, it's not that cold," Mal said with a smile, and dipped a bit of flannel into the tepid water.

"My brother is coming," Sandy moaned, staring past Mal and pointing. "He is coming for me."

"Yes, I'm coming for you soon, to take you away from here." He took the thin, cold hand in his own. "But there's something I have to do first. A job."

"I was all alone." Sandy's eyes focused on him at last. "You're not him. I see him in my dreams. Old, so old..."

"Father?" Their father was dead. If he were still alive, none of them would be in this mess.

"No. I told you." Sandy pulled his hand away. "My brother."

Mal frowned. Their elder half-brother Charles had been no more than thirty when they last saw him. Sandy must be thinking back to his childhood.

"Charlie's gone, Sandy, he left us here in London." You in this hell-hole and me in whatever job will earn me enough to keep you from dying in here. "He's not coming back."

“Not coming back?”

“No. There’s just me now.”

He helped Sandy dress, then gently replaced the shackles. Sandy whimpered as the metal closed around his limbs and Mal feared he would struggle, but after a moment Sandy fell silent and lay down on the bed once more.

Mal sat with him until the bell of nearby St Botolph’s tolled the hour. Sandy seemed to take comfort from his presence, and Mal could think of nothing to say that would not spoil that. If only... He cursed his stupidity. Now he had money again, he could redeem his lute. Sandy always found his playing soothing. Well, there was always next time.

A key grated in the lock, and the cell door opened. Mal got to his feet.

“Goodness me,” said Mistress Cooke, “I can scarce tell the two of you gentlemen apart now. I hope I lets the right one out!” She laughed at her own joke, chins quivering.

Mal was not amused. He counted out the fifty-two shillings under her avaricious gaze.

“That is for this quarter. I will be back every week, to ensure you are keeping my brother in the comfort I am paying for.”

“Of course, sir. Everything will be done as you wish, sir.”

CHAPTER III

Coby brushed the dust from her hands and wiped her brow with the back of her cuff. There, that was the last of the chests from the wagon. Most people assumed a life in the theatre was a life of idleness; indeed she had thought the same, once upon a time. Now she had arm muscles like a washerwoman and more blisters on her feet than a Bedlam beggar.

Realising she was alone for the first time in a month, she bolted the door to guarantee herself a few moments' privacy. She stripped off her doublet, lifted up her shirt, and loosened the upper lacing of her corset, wrinkling her nose at the ripe smell of unwashed flesh. She had managed to keep a couple of spares hidden in the costume trunks, but changing into them – and washing the used ones and herself – was not so easy. Fortunately all the company smelt at least as bad after a warm spring on the road, so no one had noticed. Yet.

She exchanged the foetid garment for a clean one she had left amongst her tailoring supplies, pressing

her breasts downwards as she laced it so they were flattened to boyish proportions rather than plumped up like a whore's. No time for a wash, but most of the stink was in the corset anyway. She put on a clean shirt for good measure, then donned her doublet once more and unbolted the door.

At least she had not started her monthly flows yet. She knew from eavesdropping on the maids' gossip that she ought to expect it very soon, indeed it ought to have happened by now. She was relieved, of course, since keeping her sex a secret was hard enough already, but the waiting was an agony. Without a mother or sister to advise her, she had no idea how women dealt with the business.

No time for gloomy thoughts – there was still work to be done. She unlocked the nearest chest and lifted out the gown that lay inside. She had meant to check all the costumes back in Sheffield before they were packed, but everything had been a great rush as usual. There, the lace around one cuff was loose. She held the gown up to the light, scanning the ornate fabric for other damage.

She wondered, not for the first time, what it would be like to wear skirts again. It had been – what? – five years now. Would she feel awkward and foolish, like the apprentice actors when they first put on a woman's costume? Or would it be like going home?

An appreciative noise from the doorway made her turn. Gabriel Parrish was leaning on the door post, toying with the fashionable blond love-lock that

hung over his left shoulder. At barely twenty he was the youngest adult actor in the company, a former boy player who – unlike most of his kind – had successfully made the transition to male roles.

“Aren’t you a bit old for such ambitions, Jacob?”

“Sir?”

“An apprenticeship. A little late to make a lady of you, I fear.”

“Y-you mistake me, sir. I have no desire to be a player, nor ever did.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I have not the art for it, sir. Pretending to be someone else... I cannot imagine how it is done.”

She looked away, afraid he would see the lie in her eyes, but she could not tell him the real reason: that if once she put on women’s clothes, walked and talked in her true nature, everyone would see she was Jacomina Hendricksdochter, not Jacob Hendricks as she had long pretended.

“A pity,” he said. “You have the fairness of complexion for women’s roles, even at your age.”

That was true enough. Though not as fair as Parrish, she had long been able to rely on her pale colouring to explain her lack of a beard. All the disguising in the world could not put hair on her cheeks, at least none that would bear close examination. Actors, of all people, knew what false whiskers looked like.

He stepped closer and put a hand under her chin, lifting it until her eyes met his own. His breath smelt of violet comfits.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"S-s-seventeen, sir."

His eyes narrowed. "Are you sure? Perhaps your mother miscounted."

"I d-don't know, sir." She blinked back tears. "I have not seen her this past five years. Nor my father neither."

"I'm sorry." He released her. "Think yourself lucky. I never knew my parents."

Coby didn't know what to say. Was he flirting with her, trying to use this similarity between them to forge some connection? Before Parrish joined the company a few months ago, his name had been a byword for the beautiful boy player adored by men and women alike, indulged and showered with gifts and flattery. He also had a well-deserved reputation for preferring the attentions of his male admirers. For both reasons she had avoided his company as much as possible.

"Parrish!" Master Naismith's voice echoed up the stairs like cannon fire.

The actor froze, and Coby took advantage of the moment to slip past him and out onto the landing.

"Hendricks!" Master Naismith shouted up. "Have you seen Parrish?"

"He is with me, sir," she replied, leaning over the banister, "unpacking the costumes."

"Well tell him to get his pretty arse down here. We have a play to read through before the morrow."

Parrish materialised at her shoulder.

"I come, sir, I come!" He patted her on the shoul-

der and headed downstairs.

Coby went back inside. She would have to be more careful than ever around him now. As long as he believed her to be younger than her years, he might think her merely a late bloomer. As for his other interest, the only way to put him off completely would be to tell him her secret, but that she could not do. In a foreign land full of sin and wickedness, a poor, friendless girl had no other way to guard her virtue but deceit.

“Lord Jesu, forgive me,” she whispered.

“Come on, boy!”

“Sir?”

Master Naismith glared at her.

“I have a meeting with Master Cutsnail at noon – or have you forgotten?”

“No, sir, of course not, sir,” she replied, hurrying after him.

“Cutsnail” was not the skrayling’s real name, of course, but most Londoners found the foreigners’ language almost impossible to pronounce, so they warped their names into something more familiar; preferably something bawdy, or at least humorous. Merchant Qathsnijeel was one of the lucky ones.

They walked in silence along Thames Street. Between the houses, Coby caught a glimpse of the river, spangles of sunlight dancing on the green waters. She trudged along behind her employer, wishing they could take a wherry downriver. Behind his back, the actors often said Naismith’s purse-

strings were tighter than a nun's lips.

At last they came to London Bridge, where the traffic condensed into a solid mass of humanity flowing even more sluggishly than the river beneath their feet. Coby could see little of the shops and houses on either side, only the towers of the gate-houses that blocked the thoroughfare at intervals. Master Naismith shouldered his way through the press, leaving her to slip along in his wake.

After what felt like half the morning, they reached the far end and passed through the Great Stone Gate into Southwark. Before them stood the wide road leading south-eastwards towards Canterbury, but Master Naismith turned left along St Olave's Street, parallel to the river. They continued at a quickening pace, and as they neared the far end, the church bells began to toll the hour. Master Naismith broke into a trot.

The last house in the street was a large timber-framed building, much like any other guild-house in the city. The only thing that distinguished this one, at least from the outside, was the sign hanging over the door. The rectangle of wood was carved with a design of dots, triangles and curving lines, all picked out in gold leaf. The abstract symbols meant nothing to Coby, but their very alienness made their meaning clear: here was the Distinguished Company of Skrayling Merchant Venturers.

The actor-manager paused for a moment, hands on thighs, panting like a hound. Sweat ran down his forehead into his bushy eyebrows. Coby pulled a

handkerchief from her pocket and he mopped his face gratefully.

“Never get old, lad,” he told her, wheezing. “’Tis a most grievous business.”

He straightened up, grimacing, and walked up to the front door of the guild house. Coby trailed behind, nervousness at meeting the senior merchant warring with avid curiosity. The skraylings kept to themselves for the most part, and though she had been able to learn their pidgin easily enough in the marketplaces of Southwark, the foreigners were still something of a mystery to her.

Just inside the front door stood two skrayling guards armed with heavy staves, ready to eject anyone not on legitimate business. They seemed to know Master Naismith, however, and waved him inside with but a passing glance at Coby.

The main hall was packed with skraylings hurrying to and fro between the tables that lined the walls. At each table sat a merchant, a painted sign before him. The clack of counting blocks and the sibilant growl of the skraylings’ native tongue filled the air. It was all disappointingly mundane: no invisible servants, no heaps of enchanted gold, no one suddenly appearing out of thin air or disappearing into it.

Master Naismith led her away from the dealing room through a side door and up a flight of stairs to a long corridor lined with identical-looking doors. Naismith turned left and went down to the far end. Pausing before the last door on the right, he knocked

gently.

The door was opened by a young skrayling wearing horn-rimmed spectacles. His silver-streaked hair was tied back in a neat queue and he wore a clerk's plain brown tunic and breeches rather than the patterned garb of a merchant. The tattooed lines on his forehead gathered into a frown.

"Naismith," the actor-manager said. "Cutsnail and I talk trade."

The clerk gestured for them to enter, saying something to his master in Vinlandic.

Master Cutsnail's chamber took up the whole of the upper floor of one side-wing of the building. Three large glazed windows looked across the gardens to an identical wing opposite; the other three walls were lined with tapestries from floor to ceiling. Some were European in design, others bore similar patterns to the merchants' garments. The chamber was stiflingly hot despite its size, and the air was heavy with the musky scent of the foreigners.

The clerk gestured to their feet.

"Take your shoes off," Master Naismith told Coby in a low voice.

"I have a hole in my stocking toe, sir," she whispered back.

"No matter." He cast a meaningful glance at the expensive carpets covering the floor.

Cutsnail was sitting cross-legged behind a low table. He stood as they approached and greeted them in the skrayling fashion, head turned to the right and palms displayed. Master Naismith bowed Eng-

lish-style, and Coby followed suit.

“Sorry us late,” the actor-manager said. Tradetalk was not the most elegant of languages, but it got straight to the point.

Cutsnail grinned, fangs half-bared in an expression that meant he accepted the apology out of courtesy but was still displeased. He gestured for them to sit, and the clerk brought over a pitcher full of *aniig*, a herbal infusion which was as popular with the skraylings as beer was with the English. The liquid clinked and splashed as the clerk poured it into three elegant Venetian drinking glasses, and Coby realised with a start that there were small chunks of ice in it. Ice in June? Now that was real magic, and of a most welcome kind. She thought guiltily of Pastor Jan’s sermons on the subject of witchcraft. Surely there could be no harm in such a useful practice?

Cutsnail raised his glass, and Coby followed his lead, sipping the cold liquid. She knew better than to drink it too quickly. It might not make a man drunk like beer, but it had a potency of its own which might equally lead to incautious behaviour. She did not want to shame her master in front of this powerful foreigner.

Master Naismith’s Tradetalk extended only to the common courtesies and he relied on Coby to translate for him in matters of business. After the obligatory exchange of pleasantries about the latest trade fleet and the state of the Queen’s health, Cutsnail got down to business.

“The theatre building progresses well?” he asked,

eyeing Naismith across his glass of *aniig*.

“Very well. The timbers are all in place and the labourers begin work on the walls this week. And I have the plans you asked to see.”

Naismith passed a leather document-tube to the skrayling, who shook out the roll of paper and spread it on the desk, weighting the corners with sea-polished stones.

“This is to make things rise up from underground, yes?”

“Indeed,” Naismith said. “This is for the trapdoor under the stage; a similar device is used to lower players from above.”

He gestured for Coby to explain further. She gathered her thoughts; this was going to push her grasp of Tradetalk to its limits.

“It uses weights, as you see here,” she said, pointing to the diagram’s counterweight mechanism. “All I do is pull this handle, and the trapdoor slides to one side and the platform rises up to replace it.”

“And this?” Cutsnail stabbed a thick grey fingernail at another part of the diagram, where the rope connected to the counterweight spiralled around a groove cut into a tapered spindle.

“Ah, that is the cunning part,” she replied, suppressing a grin of pride. “The teeth on the wheel make it turn at a constant speed, but because the drum is like so –” she formed a tapering shape with her hands “– it lets out less and less rope as it turns, slowing it down so the platform comes to a gentle stop.”

“And you made this?”

“I designed it, yes. There is none other like it in all London.”

She did not add that the mechanism had been inspired by memories of learning to spin wool at her mother’s knee. Boys were not expected to know such things.

Cutsnail made an approving sound. “How soon will the theatre be ready?”

Master Naismith gazed at the ceiling. “There’s still all the plastering and thatching, and the painter can’t start work on the stage until that’s finished, because of the dust, so I’m afraid it won’t be until September at the very earliest.”

Cutsnail bared his teeth.

“It must be done for August.”

Naismith frowned at Coby and she nodded in confirmation.

“August?” Naismith shook his head. “That will not be easy.”

“It must be done.”

“May I ask why?”

Cutsnail hesitated. “It is not yet widely known, but my people are sending an ambassador to England, and your Prince Arthur has proposed a contest of plays in his honour.”

“A contest?” Naismith smiled. “Then you are indeed in luck, sir. Are not my men the best actors in London?”

Coby rephrased the question as a statement. She did not think her employer would appreciate her

issuing a formal challenge to his business partner.

"That is why I wished to invest in your new theatre," the skrayling replied. "But it must be ready for the ambassador's visit."

"Surely performances of such grandeur will be played at one of the royal palaces?"

"That is not our custom. I am certain the ambassador will wish to see the plays in their rightful setting."

"Still, August..." Naismith shook his head. "If I had known sooner—"

"If the theatre is not ready, it will hurt my standing in the guild. I will have to increase my share of the theatre's profits to four-fifths to compensate for any losses I will make elsewhere."

"Four-fifths?" Naismith looked faint.

Coby suppressed a smile.

"That is fair recompense," she told the skrayling.

"I will do everything in my power to ensure the theatre is ready in time," Naismith said when he had recovered his composure.

Cutsnail smiled, showing off his long eye teeth to full advantage.

"I am certain you will," he said.



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