

Myrtis

Thieves' World, #9

by Christine DeWees, ...

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“I FEEL AS young as I look. I could satisfy every man in this house if I took the notion to, or if any one of them had half the magnificence of Lythande.”

So speaking, Myrtis, proprietor of the Aphrodisia House leaned over the banister outside her private parlour and cast judgement on the activity of her establishment below.

“Certainly, madame.”

Her companion on the narrow balcony was a well-dressed young man lately arrived with his parents from the imperial capital. He eased as far from her as possible when she turned to smile at him.

“Do you doubt me, young man?”

The words rolled off Myrtis’s tongue with an ease and inflection of majesty. To many of the long-time residents of Sanctuary, Myrtis was the city’s unofficial royalty. On the Street of Red Lanterns she reigned supreme.

“Certainly not, madame.”

“You have seen the girls now. Did you have a particular lady in mind, or would you prefer to explore my establishment further?”

Myrtis guided him back into her parlour with slight pressure against his arm. She wore a high-necked dark gown which only hinted at the legendary figure beneath. The madam of the Aphrodisia House was beautiful, more beautiful than any of the girls working for her; fathers told this to their sons who were, in turn, passing this indisputable fact along to their sons. But a ravishing beauty which endured unchanging for three generations was awesome rather than desirable. Myrtis did not compete with the girls who worked for her.

The young man cleared his throat. It was clearly his first visit to any brothel. He fingered the tassels on the side of an immense wine-coloured velvet love-seat before speaking.

“I think I’ll go a round with the violet-silks.”

Myrtis stared at him until he fidgeted one of the tassels loose and his face flushed a deep crimson.

“Call Cylene. Tell her the Lavender Room.”

A girl too young to be working jumped up from a cushion where she had waited in silence for such a command. The youth turned to follow her.

“Four pieces of silver—Cylene is very talented. And a name—I think that you should be known as Terapis.” Myrtis smiled to reveal her even white teeth.

The youth, who would henceforth be known as Terapis within the walls of the Aphrodisia House, searched his purse to find a single gold piece. He stood arrogant and obviously well-rehearsed while Myrtis counted out his change. The young girl took his hand to lead him to Cylene for two hours of unimaginable bliss.

“Children!” Myrtis mumbled to herself when she was alone in her parlour again.

Four of the nine knobs on the night-candle had melted away. She opened a great leatherbound ledger and entered the youth’s true name as well as the one she had just given him, his choice for the evening, and that he had paid in gold. It had been fifteen years or more since she had given the nom-de-guerre of Terapis to one of the house’s gentlemen. She had a good memory for all those who lingered in the sybaritic luxury of the Aphrodisia House.

A GENTLE KNOCKING on the parlour door awoke Myrtis late the next morning.

“Your breakfast is ready, madame.”

“Thank you, child. I’ll be down for it.”

She lay still for a few moments in the semi-darkness. Lythande had used careful spells to preserve her beauty and give her the longevity of a magician, but there were no spells to numb the memory. The girls, their gentlemen, all passed through Myrtis’s mind in a blurred unchanging parade which trapped her beneath the silken bed-clothes.

“Flowers for you, madame.”

The young girl who had sat quietly on the cushion on the previous evening walked nonchalantly into the boudoir bearing a large bouquet of white flowers which she began arranging in a crystal vase.

“A slave from the palace brought them. He said they were from Terapis.”

A surprise. There were always still surprises, and renewed by that comforting knowledge Myrtis threw back the bedcovers. The girl set down the flowers and held an embroidered day-robe of emerald satin for Myrtis to wrap around herself.

Five girls in their linen shifts busied themselves with restoring the studied disorder of the lower rooms as Myrtis passed through them on her way to the kitchen. Five cleaning, one too pregnant to be of any use, another off nursing a newborn; that meant twenty girls were still in the upper rooms. Twenty girls whose time was fully accounted for; in all, a very good night for the Aphrodisia House. Others might be suffering with the new regime, but the foreigners expected a certain style and discretion which in Sanctuary could be found only at the Aphrodisia.

“Madame, Dindan ordered five bottles of our best Aurvesh wine last night. We have only a dozen bottles left...” A balding man stepped in front of her with a shopping list.

“Then buy more.”

“But, madame, since the prince arrived it is almost impossible to buy Aurvesh wines!”

“Buy them! But first sell the old bottles to Dindan at the new prices.”

“Yes, madame.”

The kitchen was a large, brightly lit room hidden away at the back of the house. Her cooks and an assortment of tradesmen haggled loudly at the back door while the half-dozen or so young children of her working girls raced around the massive centre table. Everyone grew quiet as Myrtis took her seat in a sunlit alcove that faced a tiny garden.

Despite the chaos the children caused, she always let the girls keep them if they wanted to. With the girl-children there was no problem with their earning their keep; no virgin was ever too ugly. But the boy-children were apprenticed off at the earliest possible age. Their wages were garnished to support the on-going concern that was the Aphrodisia House.

“There is a soldier at the front door, Madame.” One of the girls who had been cleaning the lower rooms interrupted as Myrtis spread a thick blue-veined cheese over her bread. “He demands to see you, madame.”

“Demands to see me?” Myrtis laid down the cheese knife. “A soldier has nothing that *demands* to see me at the front door. At this hour, soldiers are less use than tradesmen. Send him around to the back.”

The girl ran back up the stairs. Myrtis finished spreading her cheese on the bread. She had eaten half of it when a tall man cast a shadow over her private dining alcove.

“You are blocking my sunlight, young man,” she said without looking up.

“You are Madame Myrtis, proprietress of this... brothel?” he demanded without moving.

“You are blocking my sunlight and my view of the garden.”

He stepped to one side.

“The girls are not available during the day. Come back this evening.”

“Madame Myrtis, I am Zalbar, captain of Prince Kadakithis’s personal guard. I have not come to inquire after the services of your girls.”

“Then what have you come for?” she asked, looking up for the first time.

“By order of Prince Kadakithis, a tax of ten gold pieces for every woman living on the Street of Red Lanterns is to be levied and collected at once if they are to be allowed to continue to practise their trade without incurring official displeasure.”

Only the slight tensing of Myrtis’s hand betrayed her indignation at Zalbar’s statement. Her voice and face remained dispassionately calm.

“The royal concubines are no longer pleasing?” she replied with a sneering smile. “You cannot expect every woman on the Street of Red Lanterns to have ten gold pieces. How do you expect them to earn the money for your taxes?”

“We do not expect them to be able to pay *the tax*, madame. We expect to close your brothel and every other house like it on the Street. The women, including yourself, will be sent elsewhere to lead more productive lives.”

Myrtis stared at the soldier with a practised contempt that ended their conversation. The soldier fingered the hilt of his sword.

“The tax will be collected, madame. You will have a reasonable amount of time to get the money for yourself and the others. Let us say, three days? I’ll return in the evening.”

He turned about without waiting for a reply and left through the back door in complete silence. Myrtis went back to interrupted breakfast while the staff and the girls were hysterical with questions and the seeds of rumour. She let them babble in this manner while she ate; then she strode to the head of the common table.

“Everything shall continue as usual. If it comes to paying their tax, arrangements will be made. You older girls already have ample gold set aside. I will make the necessary adjustments for the newer girls. Unless you doubt me in which case, I’ll arrange a severance for you.”

“But madame, if we pay once, they will levy the tax again and again until we can’t pay it. Those Hell Hounds...” A girl favoured more by intelligence than beauty spoke up.

“That is certainly their desire. The Street of Red Lanterns is as old as the walls of Sanctuary itself. I can assure you that we have survived much worse than the Hell Hounds.” Myrtis smiled slightly to herself, remembering the others who had tried and failed to shut down the Street. “Cylene, the others will be coming to see me. Send them up to the parlour. I’ll wait for them there.”

The emerald day-robe billowed out from behind her as Myrtis ascended the staircase to the lower rooms and up again to her parlour. In the privacy of her rooms, she allowed her anger to surface as she paced.

“Ambutta!” She shouted, and the young girl who attended her appeared.

“Yes, madame?”

“I have a message for you to carry.” She sat at the writing table composing the message as she spoke to the still-out-of-breath girl. “It is to be delivered in the special way as before. No one must see you leave it. Do you understand that? If you cannot leave it without being seen, come back here. Don’t let yourself become suspicious.”

The girl nodded. She tucked the freshly folded and sealed message into the bodice of her ragged cast-off dress and ran from the room. In time, Myrtis expected her to be a beauty, but she was still very much a child. The message itself was to Lythande, who preferred not to be contacted directly. She would not rely on the magician to solve the Street's problems with the Hell Hounds, but no one else would understand her anger or alleviate it.

The Aphrodisia House dominated the Street. The Hell Hounds would come to her first, then visit the other establishments. As word of the tax spread, the other madams would begin a furtive pilgrimage to the back entrance of the Aphrodisia. They looked to Myrtis for guidance, and she looked out the window for inspiration. She had not found one by the time her guests began to appear.

"It's an outrage. They're trying to put us on the streets like common whores!" Dylan of the artificially flaming red hair exclaimed before sitting in the chair Myrtis indicated to her.

"Nonsense, dear," Myrtis explained calmly. "They wish to make us slaves and send us to Ranke. In a way, it is a compliment to Sanctuary."

"They can't do such a thing!"

"No, but it will be up to us to explain that to them."

"How?"

"First we'll wait until the others arrive. I hear Amoli in the hall; the others won't be long in coming."

It was a blatant stall for time on Myrtis's part. Other than her conviction that the Hell Hounds and their prince would not succeed where others had failed in the past, Myrtis had no idea how to approach the utterly incorruptible elite soldiers. The other madams of the Street talked among themselves, exchanging the insight Myrtis had revealed to Dylan, and reacting poorly to it. Myrtis watched their reflections in the rough-cut glass.

They were all old. More than half of them had once worked for her. She had watched them age in the unkind manner that often overtakes youthful beauty and transforms it into grotes-querie. Myrtis might have been the youngest of them young enough to be working in the houses instead of running one of them. But when she turned from the window to face them, there was the unmistakable glint of experience and wisdom in her eyes.

"Well, it wasn't really a surprise," she began. "It was rumoured before Kittycat got here, and we've seen what has happened to the others the Hell Hounds have been turned loose on. I admit I'd hoped that some of the others would have held their ground better and given us a bit more time."

"Time wouldn't help. I don't have a hundred gold pieces to give them!" A woman whose white-paste make-up cracked around her eyes as she spoke interrupted Myrtis.

"You don't need a hundred gold pieces!" A similarly made-up woman snarled back.

"The gold is unimportant." Myrtis's voice rose above the bickering. "If they can break one of us, they can drive us all out."

"We could close our doors; then they'd suffer. Half of my men are from Ranke."

"Half of all our men are, Gelicia. They won the war and they've got the money," Myrtis countered. "But they'll kowtow to the Hell Hounds, Kittycat, and their

wives. The men of Ranke are very ambitious. They'll give up much to preserve their wealth and positions. If the prince is officially frowning on the Street, their loyalties will be less strained if we have closed our doors without putting up a fight."

Grudgingly the women agreed.

"Then what will we do?"

"Conduct your affairs as always. They'll come to the Aphrodisia first to collect the taxes, just as they came here first to announce it. Keep the back doors open and I'll send word. If they can't collect from me, they won't bother you."

There was mumbled disagreement, but no one dared to look straight at Myrtis and argue the point of her power on the Street. Seated in her high-backed chair, Myrtis smiled contentedly. She had yet to determine the precise solution, but the house madams of the Street of Red Lanterns controlled much of the gold within Sanctuary, and she had just confirmed her control of them.

They left her parlour quickly after the decision was rendered. If the Street was to function as usual, they all had work to do. She had work to do. The Hell Hounds would not return for three days. In that time, the Aphrodisia House would earn far more than those three hundred gold pieces the empire wanted, and would spend only slightly less than that amount to maintain itself. Myrtis opened the ledger, making new notations in a clear, educated hand. The household sensed that order had been restored at least temporarily, and one by one they filed into the parlour to report their earnings or debts.

It was well into afternoon and Ambutta had not returned from placing her message behind a loose stone in the wall behind the altar at the temple of IIs, For a moment, Myrtis worried about the girl. The streets of Sanctuary were never truly safe, and perhaps Ambutta no longer seemed as childlike to all eyes. There was always an element of risk. Twice before girls had been lost in the streets, and not even Lythande's magic could find them again.

Myrtis put such thoughts aside and ate dinner alone in her parlour. She had thought a bribe or offer of free privileges might still be the way out of her problem with the taxes. Prince Kadakithis was probably sincere, though, in his determination to make Sanctuary the ideal city of his adviser's philosophies while the capital city of the empire displayed many of the same excesses that Sanctuary did. The young prince had a wife and concubines with whom he was supposedly well pleased. There had never been any suspicion that he might partake of the delights of the Street himself. And as for the Hell Hounds, their first visit had been to announce the taxes.

The elite guard were men made of a finer fibre than most of the soldiers or fighters Sanctuary had known. On reflection, Myrtis doubted that they could be bought or bribed, and knew for certain that they would never relent in their persecution of the Street if the first offer did not succeed in converting them.

It was gathering dusk. The girls could be heard throughout the house, giggling as they prepared for the evening. Myrtis kept no one who showed no aptitude or enjoyment of the profession. Let the other houses bind their girls with poverty or drugs; the Aphrodisia House was the pinnacle of ambition for the working girls of the Street.

“I got your message.” A soft voice called from the drapery-hung doorway near her bed.

“I was beginning to get worried. My girl has not returned.”

Lythande walked to her side, draping an arm about her shoulders and taking hold of her hand.

“I’ve heard the rumours in the streets. The new regime has chosen its next enemy, it would seem. What is the truth of their demands?”

“They intend to levy a tax of ten gold pieces on every woman living on the Street.”

Lythande’s habitual smile faded, and the blue star tattooed forehead wrinkled into a frown. “Will you be able to pay that?”

“The intent is not that we pay, but that the Street be closed, and that we be sent up to the empire. If I pay it once, they’ll keep on levying it until I can’t pay.”

“You could close the house...”

“Never!” Myrtis pulled her hands away. “The Aphrodisia House is mine. I was running this house when the Rankan Empire was a collection of half-naked barbaric tribes!”

“But they aren’t any longer,” Lythande reminded her gently. “And the Hell Hounds—if not the prince—are making substantial changes in all our lives.”

“They won’t interfere with magic, will they?”

Myrtis’s concern for Lythande briefly overshadowed her fears for the Aphrodisia House. The magician’s thin-lipped smile returned.

“For now it is doubtful. There are men in Ranke who have the ability to affect us directly, but they have not followed the prince to Sanctuary, and I do not know if he could command their loyalty.”

Myrtis stood up. She walked to the leaded-glass window, with its thick, obscuring panes which revealed movement on the Street but very little else.

“I’ll need your help, if it’s available,” she said without facing Lythande.

“What can I do?”

“In the past you’ve prepared a drug for me from a qualis-berry extract. I recall you said it was quite difficult to mix—but I should like enough for two people when it’s mixed with pure qualis liqueur.”

“Delicate and precise, but not particularly difficult. It is very subtle. Are you sure you will only need enough to serve two?”

“Yes, Zalbar and myself. I agree; the drug must be subtle.”

“You must be very certain of your methods, then.”

“Of some things, at least. The Street of Red Lanterns does not lie outside the walls of Sanctuary by accident—you know that. The Hell Hounds and their prince have much more to lose by hindering us than by letting the Street exist in peace. If our past purpose were not enough to convince them, then surely the fact that much of the city’s gold passes through my hands every year will matter.

“I will use the qualis-berry love potion to open Zalbar’s eyes to reality, not to close them.”

“I can have it for you perhaps by tomorrow evening, but more likely the day after. Many of the traders and smugglers of the bazaar are no longer well supplied with the ingredients I will need, but I can investigate other sources. When the Hell

Hounds drove the smugglers into the Swamp of Night Secrets, many honest men suffered.”

Myrtis’s eyes narrowed, she released the drapery she had clutched.

“And if the Street of Red Lanterns wasn’t here... The mongers and merchants, and even the smugglers, might not want to admit it, but without us to provide them with their gold while *respectable* people offer promises, they would suffer even more than they do now.”

There was a gentle knocking on the door. Lythande stepped back into the shadows of the room. Ambutta entered, a large bruise visible on the side of her face.

“The men have begun to arrive, Madame Myrtis. Will you collect their money, or shall I take the ledger downstairs?”

“I shall attend to them. Send them up to me and, Ambutta—”

She stopped the girl as she headed out of the parlour. “Go to the kitchen and find out how many days we could go without buying anything from any of the tradesmen.”

“Yes, madame.”

The room was suddenly empty, except for Myrtis. Only a slight rippling of the wall tapestries showed where Lythande had opened a concealed panel and disappeared into the secret passages of the Aphrodisia House. Myrtis had not expected the magician to stay, but despite all their years together, the magician’s sudden comings and goings still unsettled her. Standing in front of a full-length mirror, Myrtis rearranged the pearl-and-gold pins in her hair, rubbed scented oils into her skin, and greeted the first gentleman-caller as if the day had been no different from any other.

Word of the taxation campaign against the Street had spread through the city much as Lythande had observed. The result was that many of their frequent guests and visitors came to the house to pay their last respects to an entertainment that they openly expected would be gone in a very short time. Myrtis smiled at each of them as they arrived, accepted their money, and asked their second choice of the girls before assuring them that the Aphrodisia House would never close its doors.

“Madame?”

Ambutta peered around the doorway when the flow of gentlemen had abated slightly.

“The kitchen says that we have enough food for ten days, but less of ordinary wine and the like.”

Myrtis touched the feather of her pen against her temple.

“Ten days? Someone has grown lax. Our storerooms can hold enough for many months. But ten days is all we will have, and it will have to be enough. Tell the kitchen to place no orders with the tradesmen tomorrow or the next day, and send word to the other backdoors.

“And, Ambutta, Irda will carry my messages in the future. It is time that you were taught more important and useful things.”

A STEADY STREAM of merchants and tradesmen made their way through the Aphrodisia House to Myrtis's parlour late the next morning as the effects of her orders began to be felt in the town.

"But Madame Myrtis, the tax isn't due yet, and surely the Aphrodisia House has the resources..." The puffy-faced gentleman who sent meat to half the houses on the Street was alternately irate and wheedling.

"In such unsettled times as these, good Mikkun, I cannot look to luxuries like expensive meats. I sincerely wish that this were not true. The taste of salted meat has always reminded me of poverty. But the governor's palace does not care about the poverty of those who live outside its walls, though it sends its forces to tax us," Myrtis said in feigned helplessness.

In deference to the sad occasion she had not put on one of the brightly embroidered day-ropes as was her custom but wore a soberly cut dress of a fashion outdated in Sanctuary at least twenty years before. She had taken off her jewellery, knowing that its absence would cause more rumours than if she had indeed sold a part of it to the gem-cutters. An atmosphere of austerity enveloped the house and every other on the Street, as Mikkun could attest, for he'd visited most of them.

"But madame, I have already slaughtered two cows! For three years I have slaughtered the cows first to assure you the freshest meat early in the day. Today, for no reason, you say you do not want my meat! Madame, you already have a debt to me for those two cows!"

"Mikkun! You have never, in all the years I've known you, extended credit to any house on the Street and now... now you're asking me to consider my daily purchases a debt to you!" She smiled disarmingly to calm him, knowing full well that the butcher and the others depended on the hard gold from the Street to pay their own debts.

"There will be credit in the future!"

"But we will not be here to use it!"

Myrtis let her face take on a mournful pout. Let the butcher and his friends start dunning the *respectable* side of Sanctuary, and word would spread quickly to the palace that something was amiss. A *something* which she would explain to the Hell Hound captain, Zalbar, when he arrived to collect the tax. The trades man left her parlour muttering prophecies of doom she hoped would eventually be heard by those in a position to worry about them.

"Madame?"

Ambutta's child-serious face appeared in the doorway moments after the butcher had left. Her ragged dress had already been replaced with one of a more mature cut, brighter colour, and new cloth.

"Amoli waits to speak with you. She is in the kitchen now. Shall I send her up?"

"Yes, bring her up."

Myrtis sighed after Ambutta left. Amoli was her only rival on the Street. She was a woman who had not learned her trade in the upper rooms of the Aphrodisia, and also one who kept her girls working for her through their addiction to krrf, which she supplied to them. If anyone on the Street was nervous about the tax, though, it was Amoli; she had very little gold to spare. The smugglers had recently been

forced by the same Hell Hounds to raise the price of a well refined brick of the drug to maintain their own profits.

“Amoli, good woman, you look exhausted.”

Myrtis assisted a woman less than a third her age to the love-seat.

“May I get you something to drink?”

“Qualis, if you have any.” Amoli paused while Myrtis passed the request along to Ambutta. “I can’t do it, Myrtis—this whole scheme of yours is impossible. It will ruin me!”

The liqueur arrived. Ambutta carried a finely wrought silver tray with one glass of the deep red liquid. Amoli’s hands shook violently as she grasped the glass and emptied it in one gulp. Ambutta looked sagely to her mistress; the other madam was, perhaps, victim of the same addiction as her girls?

“I’ve been approached by Jubal. For a small fee, he will send his men up here tomorrow night to ambush the Hell Hounds. He has been looking for an opportunity to eliminate them. With them gone, Kittykat won’t be able to make trouble for us.”

“So Jubal is supplying the krrf now?” Myrtis replied without sympathy.

“They all have to pay to land their shipments in the Night Secrets, or Jubal will reveal their activities to the Hell Hounds. His plan is fair. I can deal with him directly. So can anyone else—he trades in anything. But you and Lythande will have to unseal the tunnels so his men face no undue risk tomorrow night.”

The remnants of Myrtis’s cordiality disappeared. The Golden Lily had been isolated from the rat’s nest of passages on the Street when Myrtis realized the extent of krrf addiction within it. Unkind experience warned her against mixing drugs and courtesans. There were always men like Jubal waiting for the first sign of weakness, and soon the houses were nothing more than slaver’s dens; the madams forgotten. Jubal feared magic, so she had asked Lythande to seal the tunnels with eerily visible wards. So long as she—Myrtis—lived, the Street would be hers, and not Jubal’s, nor the city’s.

“There are other suppliers whose prices are not so high. Or perhaps Jubal has promised you a place in his mansion? I have heard he learned things besides fighting in the pits of Ranke. Of course, his home is hardly the place for sensitive people to live.”

Myrtis wrinkled her nose in the accepted way to indicate someone who lived Downwind. Amoli replied with an equally understandable gesture of insult and derision, but she left the parlour without looking back.

The problems with Jubal and the smugglers were only just beginning. Myrtis pondered them after Ambutta removed the tray and glass from the room. Jubal’s ruthless ambition was potentially more dangerous than any threat radiating directly from the Hell Hounds. But they were completely distinct from the matters at hand, so Myrtis put them out of her mind.

The second evening was not as lucrative as the first, nor the third day as frantic as the second. Lythande’s aphrodisiac potion appeared in the hands of a dazed street urchin. The geas the magician had placed on the young beggar dissipated as soon as the vial left his hands. He had glanced around him in confusion and disappeared at a run before the day-steward could hand him a copper coin for his inconvenience.

Myrtis poured the vial into a small bottle of qualis which she then placed between two glasses on the silver tray. The decor of the parlour had been changed subtly during the day. The red liqueur replaced the black-bound ledger which had been banished to the night steward's cubicle in the lower rooms. The draperies around her bed were tied back, and a padded silk coverlet was creased to show the plump pillows. Musky incense crept into the room from burners hidden in the corners. Beside her bed, a large box containing the three hundred gold pieces sat on a table.

Myrtis hadn't put on any of her jewellery. It would only have detracted from the ebony low-cut, side-slit gown she wore. The image was perfect. No one but Zalbar would see her until the dawn, and she was determined that her efforts and planning would not be in vain.

She waited alone, remembering her first days as a courtesan in Ilsig, when Lythande was a magician's raw apprentice and her own experiences a nightmare adventure. At that time she had lived to fall wildly in love with any young lordling who could offer her the dazzling splendour of privilege. But no man came forward to rescue her from the ethereal, but doomed, world of the courtesan. Before her beauty faded, she had made her pact with Lythande. The magician visited her infrequently, and for all her boasting, there was no passionate love between them. The spells had let Myrtis win for herself the permanent splendour she had wanted as a young girl; a splendour no high-handed barbarian from Ranke was going to strip away.

"Madame Myrtis?"

A peremptory knock on the door forced her from her thoughts. She had impressed the voice in her memory and recognized it though she had only heard it once before.

"Do come in."

She opened the door for him, pleased to see by the hesitation in his step that he was unaware that he would be entering her parlour and boudoir.

"I have come to collect the taxes!" he said quickly. His military precision did not completely conceal his awe and vague embarrassment at viewing the royal and erotic scene displayed before him.

He did not turn as Myrtis shut the door behind him and quietly slid a concealed bolt into place.

"You have very nearly undone me, captain," she said with downcast eyes and a light touch on his arm. "It is not so easy as you might think to raise such a large sum of money."

She lifted the ebony box inlaid with pearl from the table beside her bed and carried it slowly to him. He hesitated before taking it from her arms.

"I must count it, madame," he said almost apologetically.

"I understand. You will find that it is all there. My word is good."

"You... you are much different now from how you seemed two days ago."

"It is the difference between night and day."

He began assembling piles of gold on her ledger table in front of the silver tray with the qualis.

"We have been forced to cut back our orders to the town's merchants in order to pay you."

From the surprised yet thoughtful look he gave her, Myrtis guessed that the Hell Hounds had begun to hear complaints and anxious whinings from the respectable parts of town as Mikkun and his friends called back their loans and credit.

“Still,” she continued, “I realize that you are doing only what you have been told to do. It’s not you personally who is to blame if any of the merchants and purveyors suffer because the Street no longer functions as it once did.”

Zalbar continued shuffling his piles of coins around, only half-listening to Myrtis. He had half the gold in the box neatly arranged when Myrtis slipped the glass stopper out of the qualis decanter.

“Will you join me in a glass of qualis, since it is not your fault and we still have a few luxuries in our larder. They tell me a damp fog lies heavy on the streets.”

He looked up from his counting and his eyes brightened at the sight of the deep red liqueur. The common variety of qualis, though still expensive, had a duller colour and was inclined to visible sediment. A man of his position might live a full life and never glimpse a fine, pure qualis, much less be offered a glass of it. Clearly the Hell Hound was tempted.

“A small glass, perhaps.”

She poured two equally full glasses and set them both on the table in front of him while she replaced the stopper and took the bottle to the table by her bed. An undetectable glance in a side mirror confirmed that Zalbar lifted the glass farthest from him. Calmly she returned and raised the other.

“A toast then. To the future of your prince and to the Aphrodisia House!”

The glasses clinked.

The potion Lythande had made was brewed in part from the same berries as the qualis itself. The fine liqueur made a perfect concealing dilutant. Myrtis could taste the subtle difference the charm itself made in the normal flavour of the intoxicant, but Zalbar, who had never tasted even the common qualis, assumed that the extra warmth was only a part of the legendary mystique of the liqueur. When he had finished his drink, Myrtis swallowed the last others and waited patiently for the faint flush which would confirm that the potion was working.

It appeared in Zalbar first. He became bored with his counting, fondling one coin while his eyes drifted off towards nothingness. Myrtis took the coin from his fingers. The potion took longer to affect her, and its action when it did was lessened by the number of times she had taken it before and by the age inhibiting spells Lythande wove about her. She had not needed the potion, however, to summon an attraction towards the handsome soldier nor to coax him to his feet and then to her bed.

Zalbar protested that he was not himself and did not understand what was happening to him. Myrtis did not trouble herself to argue with him. Lythande’s potion was not one to rouse a wild, blind lust, but one which endowed a lifelong affection in the drinker. The pure qualis played a part in weakening his resistance. She held him behind the curtains of her bed until he had no doubt of his love for her. Then she helped him dress again.

“I’ll show you the secrets of the Aphrodisia House,” she whispered in his ear.

“I believe I have already found them.”

“There are more.”

Myrtis took him by the hand, leading him to one of the drapery-covered walls. She pushed aside the fabric; released a well-oiled catch; took a sconce from the wall then led him into a dark, but airy, passage way.

“Walk carefully in my footsteps, Zalbar—I would not want to lose you to the oubliettes. Perhaps you have wondered why the Street is outside the walls and its buildings are so old and well-built? Perhaps you think Sanctuary’s founders wished to keep us outside their fair city? What you do not know is that these houses—especially the older ones like the Aphrodisia—are not really outside the walls at all. My house is built of stone four feet thick. The shutters on our windows are aged wood from the mountains. We have our own wells and storerooms which can supply us—and the city—for weeks, if necessary. Other passages lead away from here towards the Swamp of Night Secrets, or into Sanctuary and the governor’s palace itself. Whoever has ruled in Sanctuary has always sought our cooperation in moving men and arms if a siege is laid.”

She showed the speechless captain catacombs where a sizeable garrison could wait in complete concealment. He drank water from a deep well whose water had none of the brackish taste so common in the seacoast town. Above he could hear the sounds of parties at the Aphrodisia and the other houses. Zalbar’s military eye took all this in, but his mind saw Myrtis, candle-lit in the black gown, as a man’s dream come true, and the underground fortress she was revealing to him as a soldier’s dream come true. The potion worked its way with him. He wanted both Myrtis and the fortress for his own to protect and control.

“There is so much about Sanctuary that you Rankans know nothing about. You tax the Street and cause havoc with trade in the city. You wish to close the Street and send all of us, including myself, to the slave pens or worse. Your walls will be breachable then. There are men in Sanctuary who would stop at nothing to control these passages, and they know the Swamp and the palace better than you or your children could ever hope to.”

She showed him a wall flickering with runes and magic signs. Zalbar went to touch it and found his fingers singed for his curiosity.

“These warding walls keep us safe now, but they will fade if we are not here to renew them properly. Smugglers and thieves will find the entrances we have kept invulnerable for generations. And you, Zalbar, who wish that Sanctuary will become a place of justice and order, will know in your heart that you are responsible, because you knew what was here and let the others destroy it.”

“No, Myrtis. So long as I live, none of this shall be harmed.”

“There is no other way. Do you not already have your orders to levy a second tax?”

He nodded.

“We have already begun to use the food stored in these basements. The girls are not happy; the merchants are not happy. The Street will die. The merchants will charge higher prices, and the girls will make their way to the streets. There is nowhere else for them to go. Perhaps Jubal will take—”

“I do not think that the Street will suffer such a fate. Once the prince understands the true part you and the others play, he will agree to a nominal tax which would be applied to maintaining the defence of Sanctuary and therefore be returned to you.”

Myrtis smiled to herself. The battle was won. She held his arm tightly and no longer fought the effect of the adulterated qualis in her own emotions. They found an abandoned officer's quarters and made love on its bare wooden-slats bed and again when they returned to the parlour of the Aphrodisia House.

The night-candle had burned down to its last knob by the time Myrtis released the hidden bolt and let the Hell Hound captain rejoin his men. Lythande was in the room behind her as soon as she shut the door.

"Are you safe now?" the magician asked with a laugh.

"I believe so."

"The potion?"

"A success, as always. I have not been in love like this for a long time. It is pleasant. I almost do not mind knowing how empty and hurt I will feel as I watch him grow old."

"Then why use something like the potion? Surely the catacombs themselves would have been enough to convince a Hell Hound?"

"Convince him of what? That the defences of Sanctuary should not be entrusted to whores and courtesans? Except for your potion, there is nothing else to bind him to the idea that we—that I should remain here as I always have. There was no other way!"

"You're right," Lythande said, nodding. "Will he return to visit you?"

"He will care, but I do not think he will return. That was not the purpose of the drug."

She opened the narrow glass-paned doors to the balcony overlooking the emptying lower rooms. The soldiers were gone. She looked back into the room. The three hundred gold pieces still lay half-counted on the table next to the empty decanter. He might return.

"I feel as young as I look," she whispered to the unnoticed rooms. "I could satisfy every man in this house if I took the notion to, or if anyone of them had half the magnificence of my Zalbar."

Myrtis turned back to an empty room and went to sleep alone.

