

# **Sentences of Death**

**Thieves' World, #2**

**by John Brunner, 1934-1995**

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## **Table of Contents**

**Chapter 1 ... thru ... Chapter 6**



# Chapter 1

IT WAS A measure of the decline in Sanctuary's fortunes that the scriptorium of Master Melilot occupied a prime location fronting on Governor's Walk. The nobleman whose grandfather had caused a fine family mansion to be erected on the site had wasted his substance in gambling, and at last was reduced to eking out his days in genteel drunkenness in an improvised fourth story of wattle and daub, laid out across the original roof, while downstairs Melilot installed his increasingly large staff and went into the book—as well as the epistle business. On hot days the stench from the bindery, where size was boiled and leather embossed, bid fair to match the reek around Shambles Cross.

Not all fortunes, be it understood, were declining. Melilot's was an instance. Then years earlier he had owned nothing but his clothing and a scribe's compendium; then he worked in the open air, or huddled under some tolerant merchant's awning, and his customers were confined to poor litigants from out of town who needed a written summary of their case before appearing in the Hall of Justice, or suspicious illiterate purchasers of goods from visiting traders who wanted written guarantees of quality.

On a never-to-be-forgotten day, a foolish man instructed him to write down matter relevant to a lawsuit then in progress, which would assuredly have convinced the judge, had it been produced without the opposition being warned. Melilot realized that, and made an extra copy. He was richly rewarded.

Now, as well as carrying on the scribe's profession—by proxy, mostly—he specialized in forgery, blackmail, and mistranslation. He was exactly the sort of employer Jarveena of Forgotten Holt had been hoping for when she arrived, particularly since his condition, which might be guessed at from his beardless face and roly-poly fatness, made him indifferent to the age or appearance of his employees.

The services offered by the scriptorium, and the name of its proprietor, were clearly described in half a dozen languages and three distinct modes of writing on the stone face of the building, a window and a door of which had been knocked into one large entry (at some risk to the stability of the upper floors) so that clients might wait under cover until someone who understood the language they required was available.

Jarveena read and wrote her native tongue well: Yenized. That was why Melilot had agreed to hire her. No competing service in Sanctuary could offer so many languages now. But two months might go by—indeed, they had just done so without a single customer's asking for a translation into or from Yenized, which made her pretty much of a status symbol. She was industriously struggling with Rankene, the courtly version of the common dialect, because merchants liked to let it be thought their goods were respectable enough for sale to the nobility even if they had come ashore by night from Scavengers' Island, and she was making good

headway with the quotidian street-talk in which the poorer clients wanted depositions of evidence or contracts of sale made out. Nonetheless she was still obliged to take on menial tasks to fill her time.

It was noon, and another such task was due.

Plainly, it was of little use relying on inscriptions to reach those who were most in need of a scribe's assistance; accordingly Melilot maintained a squad of small boys with peculiarly sweet and piercing voices, who paraded up and down the nearby streets advertising his service by shouting, wheedling, and sometimes begging. It was a tiring occupation, and the children frequently grew hoarse. Thrice a day, therefore, someone was commanded to deliver them a nourishing snack of bread and cheese and a drink made of honey, water, a little wine or strong ale, and assorted spices. Since her engagement, Jarveena had been least often involved in other duties when the time for this one arrived. Hence she was on the street, distributing Melilot's bounty, when an officer whom she knew by name and sight turned up, acting in a most peculiar manner. He was Captain Aye-Gophlan, from the guardpost at the corner of Processional Way.

He scarcely noticed her as he went by, but that was less than surprising. She looked very much like a boy herself—more so, if anything, than the chubby cheeked blond urchin she was issuing rations to. When Melilot took her on she had been in rags, and he had insisted on buying her new clothes of which, inevitably, the price would be docked from her miniscule commission on the work she did. She didn't care. She only insisted in turn that she be allowed to choose her garb: a short-sleeved leather jerkin cross-laced up the front; breeches to mid-calf; boots to tuck the breeches into, a baldric on which to hang her scribe's compendium with its reed-pens and ink-block and water-pot and sharpening knife and rolls of rough reed-paper; and a cloak to double as covering at night. She had a silver pin for it—her only treasure.

Melilot had laughed, thinking he understood. He owned a pretty girl a year shy of the fifteen Jarveena admitted to, who customarily boxed the ears of his boy apprentices when they waylaid her in a dark passageway to steal a kiss, and that was unusual enough to demand explanation.

But that had nothing to do with it. No more did the fact that with her tanned skin, thin build, close-cropped black hair, and many visible scars, she scarcely resembled a girl regardless of her costume. There were plenty of ruffians—some of noble blood—who were totally indifferent to the sex of the youngsters they raped.

Besides, to Jarveena such experiences were survivable; had they not been, she would not have reached Sanctuary. So she no longer feared them.

But they made her deeply—bitterly—angry. And someday one who deserved her anger more than any was going to pay for one at least of his countless crimes. She had sworn so ... but she had been only nine then, and with the passage of time the chance of vengeance grew more and more remote. Now she scarcely believed in it. Sometimes she dreamed of doing to another what had been done to her, and woke moaning with shame, and she could not explain why to the other apprentice scribes sharing the dormitory that once had been the bedroom of the noble who now snored and vomited and groaned and snored under a shelter fit rather for hogs than humans the wrong side of his magnificently painted ceiling.

She regretted that. She liked most other companions; some were from respectable families, for there were no schools here apart from temple schools whose priests had the bad habit of stuffing children's heads with myth and legend as though they were to live in a world of make-believe instead of fending for themselves. Without learning to read and write at least their own language they would be at risk of cheating by every smart operator in the city. But how could she befriend those who had led soft, secure lives, who at the advanced age of fifteen or sixteen had never yet had to scrape a living from gutters and garbage piles?

Captain Aye-Gophlan was in mufti. Or thought he was. He was by no means so rich as to be able to afford clothing apart from his uniforms, of which it was compulsory for the guards to own several—this one for the Emperor's birthday, that one for the feast of the regiment's patron deity, another for day-watch duty, yet another for night-watch duty, another for funeral drill... The common soldiers were luckier. If they failed in their attire, the officers were blamed for stinginess. But how long was it since there had been enough caravans through here for the guard to keep up the finery required of them out of bribes? Times indeed were hard when the best disguise an officer on private business could contrive was a plum-blue overcloak with a hole in it exactly where his crotch-armour could glint through.

Seeing him, Jarveena thought suddenly about justice. Or more nearly, about getting even. Perhaps there was no longer any hope of bringing to account the villain who had killed her parents and sacked their estate, enslaved the able bodied, turned loose his half-mad troops on children to glut the lust of their loins amid the smoke and crashing of beams as the village its inhabitants called Holt vanished from the stage of history.

But there were other things to do with her life. Hastily she snatched back the cup she had already allowed to linger too long in the grasp of this, luckily the last of Melilot's publicity boys. She cut short an attempt at complaint with a scowl which drew her forehead-skin down just far enough to reveal a scar normally covered by her forelock. That was a resource she customarily reserved until all else failed. It had its desired effect; the boy gulped and surrendered the cup and went back to work, pausing only to urinate against the wall.

## Chapter 2

JUST AS JARVEENA expected, Aye-Gophlan marched stolidly around the block, occasionally glancing back as though feeling insecure without his regular escort of six tall men, and made for the rear entrance to the scriptorium—the one in the crooked alley where the silk-traders were concentrated. Not all of Melilot's customers cared to be seen walking in off a populous and sunny roadway.

Jarveena thrust the wine jar, dish, and cup she was carrying into the hands of an apprentice too young to argue, and ordered them returned to the kitchen next to the bindery, with which it shared a fire. Then she stole up behind Aye-Gophlan and uttered a discreet cough.

“May I be of assistance, captain?”

“Ah—!” The officer was startled; his hand flew to something stick-shaped under his cloak, no doubt a tightly-rolled scroll. “Ah... Good-day to you! I have a problem concerning which I desire to consult your master.”

“He will be taking his noon meal,” Jarveena said in a suitably humble tone. “Let me conduct you to him.”

Melilot never cared to have either his meals or the naps which followed them interrupted. But there was something about Aye-Gophlan’s behaviour which made Jarveena certain that this was an exceptional occasion.

She opened the door of Melilot’s sanctum, announced the caller rapidly enough to forestall her employer’s rage at being distracted from the immense broiled lobster lying before him on a silver platter, and wished there were some means of eavesdropping on what transpired.

But he was infinitely too cautious to risk that.

At best Jarveena had hoped for a few coins by way of bonus if Aye-Gophlan’s business proved profitable. She was much surprised, therefore, to be summoned to Melilot’s room half an hour later.

Aye-Gophlan was still present. The lobster had grown cold, untouched, but much wine had been consumed.

On her entrance, the officer gave her a suspicious glare.

“This is the fledgling you imagine could unravel the mystery?” he demanded.

Jarveena’s heart sank. What devious subterfuge was Melilot up to now? But she waited meekly for clear instructions. They came at once, in the fat man’s high and slightly whining voice.

“The captain has a writing to decipher. Sensibly, he has brought it to us, who can translate more foreign tongues than any similar firm! It is possible that it may be in Yenized, with which you are familiar... though, alas, I am not.”

Jarveena barely suppressed a giggle. If the document were in any known script or language, Melilot would certainly recognize it—whether or not he could furnish a translation. That implied—hmm! A cipher! How interesting! How did an officer of the guard come by a message in code he couldn’t read? She looked expectant, though not eager, and with much reluctance Aye-Gophlan handed her the scroll.

Without appearing to look up, she registered a tiny nod from Melilot. She was to agree with him.

But—

What in the world? Only a tremendous self-control prevented her from letting fall the document. Merely glancing at it made her dizzy, as though her eyes were crossing against her will. For a second she had seemed to read it clearly, and a heartbeat later ...

She took a firm grip on herself. “I believe this to be Yenized, as you suspected, sir,” she declared.

“Believe?” Aye-Gophlan rasped. “But Melilot swore you could read it instantly!”

“Modern Yenized I can, captain,” Jarveena amplified. “I recognize this as a high and courtly style, as difficult for a person like myself as Imperial Rankene would be for a herdsman accustomed to sleeping with the swine.” It was always politic to imply one’s own inferiority when talking to someone like this. “Luckily, thanks to my master’s extensive library, I’ve gained a wider knowledge of the subject in

recent weeks; and with the help of some of the books he keeps I would expect to get at least its gist.”

“How long would it take?” Aye-Gophlan demanded.

“Oh, one might safely say two or three days,” Melilot interpolated in a tone that brooked no contradiction. “Given that it’s so unusual an assignment, there would naturally be no charge except on production of a satisfactory rendering.”

Jarveena almost dropped the scroll a second time. Never in living memory had Melilot accepted a commission without taking at least half his fee in advance. There must be something quite exceptional about this sheet of paper—

And of course there was. It dawned on her that moment, and she had to struggle to prevent her teeth from chattering.

“Wait here,” the fat man said, struggling to his feet. “I shall return when I’ve escorted the captain out.”

The moment the door closed she threw the scroll down on the table next to the lobster—wishing, irrelevantly, that it were not still intact, so she might snatch a morsel without being detected. The writing writhed into new patterns even as she tried not to notice.

Then Melilot was back, resuming his chair, sipping from his half-full wine cup.

“You’re astute, you little weasel!” he said in a tone of grudging admiration. “Are you quick-witted enough to know precisely why neither he nor I—nor you!—can read that writing?”

Jarveena swallowed hard. “There’s a spell on it,” she offered after a pause.

“Yes! Yes, there is! Better than any code or cipher. Except for the eyes of the intended recipient, it will never read the same way twice.”

“How is it that the captain didn’t realize?”—

Melilot chuckled. “You don’t have to read and write to become a captain of the guard,” he said. “He can about manage to tell whether the clerk who witnesses his mark on the watch-report is holding the page right side up; but anything more complicated and his head starts to swim anyway.”

He seized the lobster, tore off a claw, and cracked it between his teeth; oil ran down his chin and dripped on his green robe. Picking out the meat, he went on. “But what’s interesting is how he came by it. Make a guess.”

Jarveena shook her head.

“One of the imperial bodyguards from Ranke, one of the detachment who escorted the Prince along the Generals’ Road, called to inspect the local guardhouse this morning at dawn. Apparently he made himself most unpopular, to the point that, when he let fall that scroll without noticing, Aye-Gophlan thought more of secreting it than giving it back. Why he’s ready to believe that an imperial officer would carry a document in Old High Yenized, I can’t guess. Perhaps that’s part of the magic.”

He thrust gobbets of succulent flesh into his mouth and chomped for a while. Jarveena tried not to drool.

To distract herself by the first means to mind, she said, “Why did he tell you all this ... ? Ah, I’m an idiot. He didn’t.”

“Correct.” Melilot looked smug. “For that you deserve a taste of lobster. Here!” He tossed over a lump that by his standards was generous, and a chunk of bread also; she caught both in mid-air with stammered thanks and wolfed them down.

“You need to have your strength built up,” the portly scribe went on. “I have a very responsible errand for you to undertake tonight.”

“Errand?”

“Yes. The imperial officer who lost the scroll is called Commander Nizharu. He and his men are billeted in pavilions in the courtyard of the governor’s palace; seemingly he’s afraid of contamination if they have to go into barracks with the local soldiery.

“After dark this evening you are to steal in and wait on him, and inquire whether he will pay more for the return of his scroll and the name of the man who filched it, or for a convincing but fraudulent translation which will provoke the unlawful possessor into some rash action. For all I can guess,” he concluded sanctimoniously, “he may have let it fall deliberately. Hmm...”

## Chapter 3

IT WAS FAR from the first time since her arrival that Jarveena had been out after curfew. It was not even the first time she had had to scamper in shadow across the broad expanse of Governor’s Walk in order to reach and scramble over the palace wall, nimble as a monkey despite the mass of scar-tissue where her right breast would never grow. Much practice enabled her to whip off her cloak, roll it into a cylinder not much thicker than a money-belt, fasten it around her, and rush up the convenient hand- and footholds in the outer wall which were carefully not repaired, and for a fat consideration, when the chief mason undertook his annual re-pointing.

But it was definitely the first time she had had to contend with crack soldiers from Ranke on the other side. One of them, by ill chance, was relieving himself behind a flowering shrub as she descended, and needed to do no more than thrust the haft of his pike between her legs. She gasped and went sprawling.

But Melilot had foreseen all this, and she was prepared with her story and the evidence to back it up.

“Don’t hurt me, please! I don’t mean any harm!” she whimpered, making her voice as childish as possible. There was a torch guttering in a sconce nearby; the soldier heaved her to her feet by her right wrist, his grip as cruel as a trap’s, and forced her towards it. A sergeant appeared from the direction of the pavilions which since her last visit had sprouted like mushrooms between the entry to the Hall of Justice and the clustered granaries on the north-west side of the grounds.

“What you got?” he rumbled in a threatening bass voice.

“Sir, I mean no harm! I have to do what my mistress tells me, or I’ll be nailed to the temple door!”

That took both of them aback. The soldier somewhat relaxed his fingers and the sergeant bent close to look her over better in the wan torchlight.

“By that, I take it you serve a priestess of Argash?” he said eventually.

It was a logical deduction. On the twenty-foot-high fane of that divinity his most devoted followers volunteered, when life wearied them, to be hung up and fast unto death.

But Jarveena shook her head violently.

“N-no, sir! Dyareela!” naming a goddess banned these thirty years owing to the bloodthirstiness of her votaries.

The sergeant frowned. “I saw no shrine to her when we escorted the prince along Temple Avenue!”

“N-no, sir! Her temple was destroyed, but—her worshippers endure!”

“Do they now!” the sergeant grunted. “Hmm! That sounds like something the commander ought to know!”

“Is that Commander Nizharu?” Jarveena said eagerly.

“What? How do you know his name?”

“My mistress sent me to him! She saw him early today when he was abroad in the city, and she was so taken with his handsomeness that she resolved at once to send a message to him. But it was all to be in secret!” Jarveena let a quaver enter her voice. “Now I’ve let it out, and she’ll turn me over to the priests of Argash, and... Oh, I’m done for! I might as well be dead right now!”. “Dying can wait,” the sergeant said, reaching an abrupt decision. “But the commander will definitely want to know about the Dyareelans. I thought only madmen in the desert paid attention to that old bitch nowadays... Hello, what’s this at your side?” He lifted it into the light. “A writing-case, is it?”

“Yes, sir. That’s what I mainly do for my mistress.”

“If you can write, why deliver messages yourself? That’s what I always say. Oh, well, I guess you’re her confidante, are you?” Jarveena nodded vigorously.

“A secret shared is a secret no longer, and here’s one more proof of the proverb. Oh, come along!”

By the light of two lamps filled, to judge by their smell, with poor-grade fish oil, Nizharu was turning the contents of his pavilion upside-down, with not even an orderly to help him. He had cleared out two brass-bound wooden chests and was beginning on a third, while the bedding from his field couch of wood and canvas was strewn on the floor, and a dozen bags and pouches had been emptied and not repacked.

He was furious when the sergeant raised the tent flap, and roared that he was not to be disturbed. But Jarveena took in the situation at a glance and said in a clear firm voice, “I wonder if you’re looking for a scroll.”

Nizharu froze, his face turned so that light fell on it. He was as fair a man as she had ever seen: his hair like washed wool, his eyes like chips of summer sky. Under a nose keen as a bird’s beak, his thin lips framed well-kept teeth marred by a chip off the right upper front molar. He was lean and obviously very strong, for he was turning over a chest that must weigh a hundred pounds and his biceps were scarcely bulging.

“Scroll?” he said softly, setting down the chest. “What scroll?”

It was very hard for Jarveena to reply. She felt her heart was going to stop. The world wavered. It took all her force to maintain her balance. Distantly she heard the sergeant say, “She didn’t mention any scroll to us!”

And, amazingly, she was able to speak for herself again.

“That’s true, commander,” she said. “I had to lie to those men to stop them killing me before I got to you. I’m sorry.” Meantime she was silently thanking the network of informers who kept Melilot so well supplied with information that the



lie had been credible even to these strangers. "But I think this morning you mislaid a scroll...?"

Nizharu hesitated a single moment. Then he rapped, "Out! Leave the boy here!"

Boy! Oh, miracle! If Jarveena had believed in a deity, now was when she would have resolved to make sacrifice for gratitude. For that implied he hadn't recognized her.

She waited while the puzzled sergeant and soldier withdrew, mouth dry, palms moist, a faint singing in her ears. Nizharu slammed the lid of the chest he had been about to overturn, sat down on it, and said, "Now explain! And the explanation had better be a good one!"

It was. It was excellent. Melilot had devised it with great care and drilled her through it a dozen times during the afternoon. It was tinged with just enough of the truth to be convincing.

Aye-Gophlan, notoriously, had accepted bribes. (So had everyone in the guard who might possibly be useful to anybody wealthier than himself, but that was by-the-by.) It had consequently occurred to Melilot—a most loyal and law-abiding citizen, who as all his acquaintance would swear had loudly welcomed the appointment of the prince, the new governor, and looked forward to the city being reformed—it had occurred to him that perhaps this was part of a plan. One could scarcely conceive of a high-ranking imperial officer being so casual with what was obviously a top-secret document. Could one?

"Never," murmured Nizharu, but sweat beaded his lip.

Next came the tricky bit. Everything depended on whether the commander wanted to keep the mere existence of the scroll a secret. Now he knew Aye-Gophlan had it, it was open to him to summon his men and march down to the guardhouse and search it floor to rooftree, for—according to what Jarveena said, at any rate—Aye Gophlan was far too cautious to leave it overnight in the custody of a mere scribe. He would return on his next duty-free day, the day after tomorrow or the day after that, depending on which of his fellow officers he could exchange with.

But Melilot had deduced that if the scroll were so important that Nizharu kept it by him even when undertaking a mundane tour of inspection, it must be very private indeed. He was, apparently, correct. Nizharu listened with close attention, and many nods to the alternative plan of action.

For a consideration, Melilot was prepared to furnish a false translation designed to jar Aye-Gophlan into doing something for which Nizharu could safely arrest him, without it ever being known that he had enjoyed temporary possession of a scroll which by rights should have remained in the commander's hands. Let him only specify the terms, and it would be as good as done.

When she—whom Nizharu still believed a he, for which she was profoundly glad finished talking, the commander pondered a while. At length he started to smile, though it never reached his eyes, and in firm clear terms expressed his conditions for entering into a compact along the lines Melilot proposed. He capped all by handing over two gold coins, of a type she did not recognize, with a promise that he would have her (his) hide if they did not both reach Melilot, and a large silver token of the kind used at Ilsig for himself.

Then he instructed a soldier she had not met to escort her to the gate and across Governor's Walk. But she gave the man the slip as soon as they were clear of the palace grounds and rushed towards the back entry, via Silk Corner.

Melilot being rich, he could afford locks on his doors; he had given her a heavy bronze key which she had concealed in her writing case. She fumbled it into the lock, but before she could turn it the door swung wide and she stepped forward as though impelled by another person's will.

This was the street—or rather alley. This was the door with its overhanging porch. Outside everything was right.

But inside everything was absolutely, utterly, unqualifiedly wrong.

## Chapter 4

JARVEENA WANTED TO cry out, but found herself unable to draw enough breath. A vast sluggishness took possession other muscles, as though she were descending into glue. Taking one more step, she knew, would tire her to the point of exhaustion; accordingly she concentrated merely on looking about her, and within seconds was wishing that she hadn't.

A wan, greyish light suffused the place. It showed her high stone walls on either side, a stone-flagged floor underfoot, but nothing above except drifting mist that sometimes took on an eerie pale colour: pinkish, bluish, or the sickly phosphorescent shade of dying fish. Before her was nothing but a long table, immensely and ridiculously long, such that one might seat a full company of soldiers at it.

A shiver tried to crawl down her spine, but failed thanks to the weird paralysis that gripped her. For what she was seeing matched in every respect the descriptions, uttered in a whisper, which she had heard of the home of Enas Yorl. In all the land there were but three Great Wizards, powerful enough not to care that their true names were noised abroad: one was at Ranke and served the needs of the court; one was at Ilsig and accounted the most skilful; the third, by reason of some scandal, made do with the slim pickings at Sanctuary, and that was Enas Yorl.

But how could he be here? His palace was on—or, more exactly, below—Prytanis Street, where the city petered out to the south-east of Temple Avenue.

Except...

The thought burgeoned from memory and she fought against it, and failed. Someone had once explained to her: Except when it is somewhere else.

Abruptly it was as though the table shrank, and from an immense distance its farther end drew close and along with it a high-backed, throne-like chair in which sat a curious personage. He was arrayed in an enormously full, many layered cloak of some dull brown stuff, and wore a high-crowned hat whose broad brim somehow contrived to shadow his face against even the directionless grey light that obtained here.

But within that shadow two red gleams like embers showed, approximately where a human's eyes would be.

This individual held in his right hand a scroll, partly unrolled, and with his left he was tapping on the table. The proportions of his fingers were abnormal, and one or two of them seemed either to lack, or to be overprovided with, joints. One of his nails sparked luridly, but that ceased after a little. Raising his head, after a fashion, he spoke.

“A girl. Interesting. But one who has... suffered. Was it punishment?”

It felt to Jarveena as though the gaze of those two dull red orbs could penetrate her flesh as well as her clothing. She could say nothing, but had nothing to say.

“No,” pronounced the wizard—for surely it must be none other. He let the scroll drop on the table, and it formed itself into a tidy roll at once, while he rose and approached her. A gesture, as though to sketch her outline in the air, freed her from the lassitude that had hampered her limbs. But she had too much sense to break and run.

Whither?

“Do you know me?”

“I...” She licked dry lips. “I think you may be Enas Yorl.”

“Fame at last,” the wizard said wryly. “Do you know why you’re here?”

“You... Well, I guess you set a trap for me. I don’t know why, unless it has to do with that scroll.”

“Hmm! A perceptive child!” Had he possessed eyebrows, one might have imagined the wizard raising them. And then at once: “Forgive me. I should not have said ‘child’. You are old in the ways of the world, if not in years. But after the first century, such patronizing remarks come easy to the tongue ...” He resumed his chair, inviting Jarveena with a gesture to come closer. She was reluctant.

For when he rose to inspect her, he had been squat. Under the cloak he was obviously thick-set, stocky, with a paunch. But by the time he regained his seat, it was equally definite that he was thin, light-boned, and had one shoulder higher than the other.

“You have noticed,” he said. His voice too had altered; it had been baritone, while now it was at the most flattering a countertenor. “Victims of circumstance, you and I both. It was not I who set a trap for you. The scroll did.”

“For me? But why?”

“I speak with imprecision. The trap was set not for you qua you. It was set for someone to whom it meant the death of another. I judge that you qualify, whether or not you know it. Do you? Make a guess. Trust your imagination. Have you, for example, recognized anybody who came to the city recently?”

Jarveena felt the blood drain from her cheeks. She folded her hands into fists.

“Sir, you are a great magician. I recognized someone tonight. Someone I never dreamed of meeting again. Someone whose death I would gladly accomplish, except that death is much too good for him.”

“Explain!” Enas Yorl leaned an elbow on the table, and rested his chin on his fist ... except that neither the elbow, nor the chin, let alone the fist, properly corresponded to such appellations.

She hesitated a second. Then she cast aside her cloak, tore loose the bow that held the cross-lacing of her jerkin at her throat, and unthreaded it so that the

garment fell wide to reveal the cicatrices, brown on brown, which would never fade, and the great foul keloid like a turd where her right breast might have been.

“Why try to hide anything from a wizard?” she said bitterly. “He commanded the men who did this to me, and far, far worse to many others. I thought they were bandits! I came to Sanctuary hoping that here if anywhere I might get wind of them—how could bandits gain access to Ranke or the conquered cities? But I never dreamed they would present themselves in the guise of imperial guards!”

“They...?” Enas Yorl probed.

“Ah ... No. I confess: it’s only one that I can swear to.”

“How old were you?”

“I was nine. And six grown men took pleasure of me, before they beat me with wire whips and left me for dead.”

“I see.” He retrieved the scroll and with its end tapped the table absently. “Can you now divine what is in this message? Bear in mind that it forced me hither.”

“Forced? But I’d have thought—”

“I found myself here by choice? Oh, the contrary!” A bitter laugh rang out, acid-shrill. “I said we’re both victims. Long ago when I was young I was extremely foolish. I tried to seduce away the bride of someone more powerful than me. When he found out, I was able to defend myself, but ... Do you understand what a spell is?”

She shook her head.

“It’s... activity. As much activity as a rock is passivity, which is conscious of being a rock but of nothing else. A worm is a little more aware; a dog or horse, much more; a human being, vastly more—but not infinitely more. In wildfire, storms, stars, can be found processes which with no consciousness of what they are act upon the outside world. A spell is such a process, created by an act of will, having neither aim nor purpose save what its creator lends. And to me my rival bequeathed... But no matter. I begin to sound as though I pity myself, and I know my fate is just. Shall we despise justice? This scroll can be an instrument of it. Written on it are two sentences.”

“Of death.”

While he spoke, there had been further changes under his concealing garb. His voice was now mellow and rich, and his hands, although very slender, possessed the ordinary number of joints. However, the redness still glowed.

“If one sentence is upon Commander Nizharu,” Jarveena said firmly, “may it be executed soon.”

“That could be arranged.” A sardonic inflection coloured the words. “At a price.”

“The scroll doesn’t refer to him? I imagined—”

“You imagined it spelt his doom, and that was why he was so anxious about its loss? In a way that’s correct. In a way... And I can make certain that that shall be the outcome. At a price.”

“What—price?” Her voice quavered against her will.

He rose slowly from his chair, shaking his cloak out to its fullest; it swept the floor with a faint rustling sound.

“Need you ask, of one who so plainly is obsessed by lust for women? That was the reason for my downfall. I explained.”

Ice seemed to form around her heart. Her mouth was desert on the instant.

“Oh, why be so timid?” purred Enas Yorl, taking her hand in his. “You’ve endured many worse bedfellows. I promise.”

It was true enough that the only means she had found to cross the weary leagues between Forgotten Holt and Sanctuary had been to yield her body: to merchants, mercenaries, grooms, guardsmen...

“Tell me first,” she said with a final flare of spirit, “whose deaths are cited in the document.”

“Fair,” said the wizard. “Know, then, that one is an unnamed man, who is to be falsely convicted of the murder of another. And that other is the new governor, the prince.” Thereupon the light faded, and he embraced her unresisting.

## Chapter 5

SHE WOKE LATE, at least half an hour past dawn. She was in her own bed; the dormitory was otherwise empty. All her limbs were pervaded by a delicious languor. Enas Yorl had kept his promise. If he had been equally skilled when he was younger, small wonder his rival’s bride had preferred him to her husband!

Reluctantly opening her eyes, she saw something on the rough pillow. Puzzled, she looked again, reached out, touched: green, iridescent, powdery—

Scales!

With a cry she leapt from the bed, just as Melilot marched in, red-faced with fury.

“So there you are, you little slut! Where were you all night? I watched until I could stay awake no longer! By now I was sure you’d been taken by the guard and thrown in jail! What did Nizharu say?”

Naked, bewildered, for a long moment Jarveena was at a loss. Then her eye fell on something infinitely reassuring. On the wooden peg over her bed hung her cloak, jerkin and breeches, and also her precious writing-case, just as though she herself had replaced them on retiring.

Seizing the case, she opened the compartment where she hid such things, and triumphantly produced the gold she had accepted from the commander—but not the silver he had allotted to herself.

“He paid this for a false rendering of the scroll,” she said. “But you’re not to make one.”

“What?” Snatching the coins, Melilot made to bite them, but checked.

“How would you like to be scribe by appointment to the governor’s household?”

“Are you crazed?” The fat man’s eyes bulged.

“Not in the least.” Heedless of his presence, Jarveena reached under the bed for her chamberpot and put it to its appropriate use. Meantime she explained the plot she had hatched.

“But this means you’re claiming to have read the scroll,” Melilot said slowly as he tried to digest her proposals. “It’s enchanted! How could you?”

“Not I, but Enas Yorl.”

Melilot's mouth worked and all his colour drained away. "But his palace is guarded by basilisks!" he exclaimed at last. "You'd have been struck to stone!"

"It doesn't quite work like that," Jarveena said, pulling on her breeches, giving silent thanks that she could do so briskly. That dreadful paralysis would haunt her dreams for years. "To settle the argument, though, why don't you bring the scroll? I mean, why don't we go and take another look at it?"

They were in his sanctum a couple of minutes later.

"It's perfectly clear," Melilot said slowly when he had perused the document twice. "It's very stilted—formal Rankene—and I don't know anybody here or in the conquered cities who would use it for a letter. But it says exactly what you said it would."

A tremor of awe made his rolls of fat wobble.

"You're satisfied it's the same scroll? There's been no substitution?" Jarveena pressed.

"Yes! It's been all night in a locked chest! Only magic can account for what's happened to it!"

"Then," she said with satisfaction, "let's get on with the job."

\* \* \* \* \*

Each noon, in the grounds of the Governor's Palace before the Halls of Justice, the guard was inspected and rotated. This ceremony was open to the public—to everybody, in principle, but in practice only to those who could afford to bribe the gate guards. Hence most of the spectators were of the upper class, hangers on of the nobility, or making an appearance at the law courts. Not a few bore a general resemblance, in figure or clothing and in their retinue, to Melilot, who was in any case a frequent visitor when transcripts of evidence were in demand.

Therefore his presence and Jarveena's were unremarkable. Moreover word had got about that today was the last day when the crack imperial guards would perform the ceremonial drill before fifteen of them were ordered back to Ranke. There was a much larger throng than usual awaiting the appearance of the governor, one of whose customary chores this was whenever he was in residence.

It was a warm, dry, dusty day. The sun cast strong dark shadows. Tents, pavilions, stone walls seemed all of a substance. So in a way did people, especially those in armour. Under closed visors, any soldier might have been mistaken for any other of like stature.

Strictly it was not the turn of a guard detachment from the watch-house on Processional Way to take over from the Hell Hounds. But a few bribes, and a sharp order from Aye-Gophlan, and the problem had been sorted out.

Jarveena composed her features and did her best to look as though she were just another casual passer-by impressed by the standard of marching of troops from the capital, rather than a person whose dearest ambition for revenge bid fair to be fulfilled.

But her mouth kept wanting to snarl open like a wolf's.

The relieving guard marched in from the direction of Governor's Walk, exchanged salutes and passwords with the imperial troops, and formed up in the centre of the courtyard. Attended by two armed orderlies. Commander Nizharu formally recognized his successor and took station at his side for the governor's

inspection. As soon as it was over, the departing troops would retire by squads and march away with flying colours—Less than ten minutes later, amid a ripple of applause at the precision drill of the Hell Hounds, the prince was leaving the parade ground arm-in-arm with Nizharu. The latter was being posted back to the capital, but five of his comrades were to establish a bodyguard of local soldiers for the governor, trained to imperial standards.

So rumour said. Rumour had been known to lie.

With some care and ingenuity, Melilot had smiled and shoved his way to the front of the crowd, and as the two approached and all were bowing, he said very loudly and clearly, “Why, commander! What good luck! Now is my chance to return the scroll you dropped yesterday morning!”

Nizharu had raised his visor because of the heat. It could clearly be seen that his face grew pasty-pale. “I—I know nothing of any scroll!” he barked as soon as he could gather his wits.

“No? Oh, in that case, if it isn’t yours, I’m sure the prince will accept it from me with a view to tracing its rightful owner!”

Fat though he was, Melilot could act briskly when he must. He whipped the scroll from under his robe and thrust it into Jarveena’s eager hand. A heartbeat later, she was on her bended knee before the prince, gazing up into his handsome, youthful, and somewhat vacuous face.

“Read, Your Highness!” she insisted fiercely, and almost forced him to take hold of it.

The instant the prince caught its tenor, he froze. Nizharu did the opposite. Spinning on his heel, he shouted for his men and broke into a run.

The knife which Jarveena carried in her writing-case served other purposes than the sharpening of reed-pens. She withdrew it with a practised flick, aimed, threw.

And, howling, Nizharu measured his length on the ground, pierced behind the right knee where there was only leather, not metal, to protect him.

The crowd shouted in alarm and seemed on the brink of panic, but the incoming guard had been warned. Throwing back his visor, Captain Aye-Gophlan ordered his men to surround and arrest Nizharu, and in a fine towering rage the prince bellowed at the onlookers to explain why.

“This message is from a traitor at the imperial court! It instructs Nizharu to assign one of his guards to murder me as soon as he has found someone on whom the charge can be falsely pinned! And it says that the writer is enchanting the message to prevent the wrong person’s reading it—but there’s no difficulty in reading this! It’s the court writing I was first taught as a child!”

“We—ah—arranged for the magic to be eliminated,” hinted Melilot. And added quickly, “Your Highness!”

“How came you by it?”

“It was dropped by Nizharu when he inspected our guardhouse.” That was Aye Gophlan, marching smartly forward. “Thinking it important, I consulted Master Melilot, whom I’ve long known to be loyal and discreet.”

“And as for me ...” Melilot gave a deprecating shrug. “I have certain contacts, let us say. It put me to no trouble to counteract the spell.”

True, thought Jarveena, and marvelled at how cleverly he lied.

“You shall be well rewarded,” declared the prince. “And, after due trial, so shall he be! Attempting the life of one of the imperial blood—why, it’s as heinous a crime as anyone might name! It was a miracle that he let fall the scroll. Surely the gods are on my side!” Raising his voice again. “Tonight let all make sacrifice and give thanks! Under divine protection I have survived a dastardly assassin!”

If all gods, Jarveena thought, are no better than Melilot, I’m content to be an unbeliever. But I do look forward to watching Nizharu fry.

## Chapter 6

“IN VIEW OF how you must be feeling, Jarveena,” said a soft voice at her side, “I compliment you on the way you are concealing your emotions.”

“It’s not difficult,” she answered with bitterness. The crowd was dispersing around them, heading away from the execution block where, according to the strict form, traitor Nizharu had paid for his many crimes by beating, hanging, and lastly burning.

And then she started. The person who had addressed her was nobody she recognized: tall, stooped, elderly, with wisps of grey hair, carrying a market basket...

Where eyes should be, a glint of red.

“Enas Yorl?” she whispered.

“That same.” With a dry chuckle. “Inasmuch as I can ever make the statement... Are you content?”

“I—I guess I’m not.” Jarveena turned away and began to follow the drift of the crowd. “I ought to be! I begged the privilege of writing the authorization for his execution in my own hand, and I thought I might include mention of my parents, my friends, the villagers he slaughtered or enslaved, but my formal Rankene isn’t good enough, so I had to make do copying a draft by Melilot!” She tossed her head. “And I hoped to stand up in open court, swear to what he did, watch the faces of the people change as they realized what a filthy villain came hither disguised as an imperial officer... They said there was no need for any other evidence after Aye-Gophlan’s and Melilot’s and the prince’s.”

“To speak after princes is a dangerous habit,” opined the wizard. “But at all events, it appears to have dawned on you that revenge is never what you hope for. Take my own case. He who did to me what you know of was so determined to wreak his vengeance that he created one spell more than he could handle. To each he was obliged to cede a certain portion of his will; for as I told you, spells have no aim or purpose of their own. He thereby deprived himself of ordinary sense, and to his death sat blubbering and moaning like an infant.”

“Why do you tell me this?” cried Jarveena. “I want to make the most of my moment of satisfaction, even if it can’t be as rich and memorable as I dreamed.”

“Because,” said the wizard, taking her arm by fingers whose touch evoked extraordinary thrills all over her, “you paid a fair and honest price for the service I undertook. I shall not forget you. Scarred and branded you may be without; within you are beautiful.”



“Me?” said Jarveena with genuine astonishment. “As well call a toad beautiful, or a mud wall!”

“As you like,” Enas Yorl answered with a shrug. The movement revealed that he was no longer quite what he had been earlier. “At all events, there is a second reason.”

“What?”

“You read the writing on the scroll, and previously I had described it to you. Nonetheless you’re acting as though you have forgotten something.”

For a brief moment she failed to take his point. Then her hand flew to her open mouth.

“Two deaths,” she whispered.

“Yes, indeed. And I scarcely need to tell you to whom a traitor in the imperial court would apply for a spell powerful enough to drag me into the matter willy nilly. I could make the paper legible. I could not evade the consequences of undoing a colleague’s work.”

“Whose death? Mine?”

“It would be politic to minimize the danger, as for instance by taking employment with a seafarer. Many merchant-captains would be glad of a skilful clerk, and after your apprenticeship with Melilot you’re well equipped for such a post. Moreover, your present master is inclined to jealousy. You are half his age, yet already he regards you as a rival.”

“He dissembles well,” muttered Jarveena, “but now and then he’s acted in a fashion that makes me believe you.”

“He might regard you more kindly were you to become a sort of foreign agent for him. I’m sure you could contrive—for a reasonable fee—to supply him with commercially valuable information. He would scarcely object to adding other strings to his bow: trading in spices, for instance.”

For a while Jarveena had seemed enlivened by his discourse. Now she fell back into gloom.

“Why should I want to make myself rich, let alone him? Ever since I can remember I’ve had a purpose in life. Its gone—carried to the sky with the stench of Nizharu!”

“It takes a very rich person to commission a spell.”

“What would I want with magic?” she said contemptuously.

A second later, and it was as though fire coursed all over her body, outlining every mark that defaced her, every whiplash, every burn, every cut and scratch. She had forgotten until now, but sometime during that extraordinary night when she had lain with him, he had taken the trouble to trace her whole violent life story from the map of her skin.

Now she also remembered thinking that it must be for some private magical reason. Could she have been wrong? Could it have been simpler than that—could it just have been that he sympathized with one whom life had scarred in another way?

“You might wish,” he was saying calmly, “to cleanse your body of the past as I think you have now begun to cleanse your mind.”

“Even ...?” She could not complete the question save by raising her hand to the right side of her chest.

“In time. You are young. Nothing is impossible. But one thing is much too possible. We’ve spoken of it. Now, act!”

They were almost at the gate, and the crowd was pressing and jostling; people were setting their hands to their money-belts and pouches, for these were prime conditions for theft.

“I take it you’d not have spoken up unless you had a new employer in mind for me?” Jarveena said at length.

“You’re most perceptive.”

“And if there were not some long-term advantage in it for yourself?”

Enas Yorl sighed. “There is a long-term purpose to everything. If there were not, spells would be impossible.”

“So there was a purpose behind Nizharu’s dropping of the scroll?”

“Dropping... ?”

“Oh! Why didn’t I think of that?”

“In time, I’m sure you would have done. But you came to Sanctuary so recently, you could scarcely be expected to know that in his boyhood Aye-Gophlan was counted among the smartest dips and cutpurses in the city. How else do you think he managed to buy himself a commission in the guards? Does he talk as though he came from a wealthy background?”

They were at the gate, and being squeezed through. Clutching her writing-case tightly with one hand, keeping the other folded over the silver pin which fastened her cloak in a roll around her waist, Jarveena thought long and long.

And came to a decision.

Even though her main purpose in life up to now had vanished, there was no reason why she should not find another and maybe better ambition. If that were so, there were good reasons to try and prolong her life by quitting Sanctuary.

Although...

She glanced around in alarm for the magician, thinking them separated in the throng, and with relief was able to catch him by the arm.

“Will distance make any difference? I mean, if the doom is on me, can I flee from it?”

“Oh, it’s not on you. It’s merely that there were two deaths in the charm, and only one has happened. Any day of any year, scores of hundreds die in any city of this size. It’s probable that the spell will work itself out locally; when there’s a thunderstorm, the lightning strikes beneath it, not a hundred leagues away. Not inconceivably the other death may be that of someone who was as guilty as Nizharu in the sack of Forgotten Holt. He had soldiers with him, did he not?”

“Yes, they were all soldiers, whom I long mistook for bandits...! Oh, what a pass this land has come to! You’re quite right! I’m going away, as far as I can, whether or not it means I can outrun my death!”

She caught his hand, gave it a squeeze, and leaned close. “Name the ship that I must look for!”

\* \* \* \* \*

The day the ship sailed it was unsafe for Enas Yorl to venture on the street; occasionally the changes working in him cycled into forms that nobody, not with the kindest will in the world, could mistake for human. He was therefore obliged

to watch the tiring way, making use of a scrying-glass, but he was determined to make certain that nothing had gone wrong with his scheme.

All turned out well. He tracked the ship, with Jarveena at her stern, until sea mists obscured her, and then leaned back in what, for the time being, could not exactly be a chair as most people thought of chairs.

“And with you no longer around to attract it,” he murmured to the air, “perhaps luck may lead that second death-sentence to be passed on one who wearies beyond measure of mad existence, sport of a hundred mindless spells, this miserable, this pitiable Enas Yorl.”

Yet some hope glimmered, like the red pits he had to wear for eyes, in the knowledge that at least one person in the world thought more kindly of him than he did himself. At length, with a snorting laugh, he covered the scrying-glass and settled down resignedly to wait out the implacable transformation, a little comforted by knowing that so far he had never been the same shape twice.

