

# **The Face of Chaos**

**Thieves' World, #3**

**by Lynn Abbey, 1948-**

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THE CARDS LAY face down in a wide crescent on the black-velvet-covered table Illyra used for her fortune-telling. Closing her eyes, she touched one at random with her index finger, then overturned it. The face of Chaos, portrait of man and woman seen in a broken mirror. She had done a card-reading for herself; an attempt to penetrate the atmosphere of foreboding that had hung over the ramshackle cloth-and-wood structure she and Dubro, the bazaar smith, called home. Instead it had only brought more anxiety.

She went to another small table to apply a thick coating of kohl to her eyelids. No one would visit a young, pretty S'danzo to have their fortune told, and

no stranger could enter her home for any other reason. The kohl and the formless S'danzo costume concealed her age in the dimly lit room, but if some love deluded soldier or merchant moved too close, there was always Dubro under the canopy a few steps away. One sight of the brawny, sweating giant with his heavy mallet ended any crisis.

“Sweetmeats! Sweetmeats! Always the best in the bazaar. Always the best in Sanctuary!”

The voice of Haakon, the vendor, reached through the cloth-hung doorway. Illyra finished her toilette quickly. Dark masses of curly hair were secured with one pin under a purple silk scarf which contrasted garishly with each of the skirts, the shawl, and the blouse she wore. She reached deep within those skirts for her purse and removed a copper coin.

It was still early enough in the day that she might venture outside their home. Everyone in the bazaar knew she was scarce more than a girl, and there would be no city-folk wandering about for another hour, at least.

“Haakon! Over here!” She called from under the canopy where Dubro kept his tools. “Two... no, three, please.”

He lifted three of the sticky treats on to a shell that she held out for them, accepting her copper coin with a smile. In an hour's time, Haakon would want five of the same coin for such a purchase, but the bazaar-folk sold the best to each other for less.

She ate one, but offered the other two to Dubro. She would have kissed him, but the smith shrank back from public affection, preferring privacy for all things which pass between a man and woman. He smiled and accepted them wordlessly. The big man seldom spoke; words came slowly to him. He mended the metal wares of the bazaar-folk, improving many as he did so. He had protected Illyra since she'd been an orphaned child wandering the stalls, turned out by her own people for the irredeemable crime of being a half-caste. Bright-eyed, quick-tongued Illyra spoke for him now whenever anything needed to be said, and in turn, he still took care of her.

The sweetmeats gone, Dubro returned to the fire, lifting up a barrel hoop he had left there to heat. Illyra watched with never-sated interest as he laid it on the anvil to pound it back into a true circle for Jofan, the wine-seller. The mallet fell, but instead of the clear, ringing sound of metal on metal, there was a hollow clang. The horn of the anvil fell into the dirt.

Even Haakon was wide-eyed with silent surprise. Dubro's anvil had been in the bazaar since... since Dubro's grandfather for certain, and perhaps longer—no one could remember before that. The smith's face darkened to the colour of the cooling iron. Illyra placed her hands over his.

“We'll get it fixed. We'll take it up to the Court of Anns this afternoon. I'll borrow Moonflower's ass-and-cart...”

“No!” Dubro exploded with one tortured word, shook loose her hands, and stared at the broken piece of his livelihood.

“—can't fix an anvil that's broken like that one,” Haakon explained softly to her. “It'll only be as strong as the seam.”

“Then we’ll get a new one,” she responded, mindful of Dubro’s bleak face and her own certain knowledge that no one else in the bazaar possessed an anvil to sell.

“There hasn’t been a new anvil in Sanctuary since before Ranke closed down the sea-trade with Ilsig. You’d need four camels and a year to get a mountain-cast anvil like that one into the bazaar—if you had the gold.”

A single tear smeared through the kohl. She and Dubro were well off by the standards of the bazaar. They had ample copper coins for Haakon’s sweetmeats and fresh fish three times a week, but a pitifully small hoard of gold with which to convince the caravan merchants to bring an anvil from distant Ranke.

“We’ve got to have an anvil!” She exclaimed to the unlistening gods, since Dubro and Haakon were already aware of the problem.

Dubro kicked dirt over his fire and strode away from the small forge.

“Watch him for me, Haakon. He’s never been like this.”

“I’ll watch him—but it will be your problem tonight when he comes home.”

A few of the city-folk were already milling in the aisles of the bazaar; it was high time to hide in her room. Never before in her five years of working the S’danzo trade within the bazaar had she faced a day when Dubro did not lend his calm presence to the stream of patrons. He controlled their coming and going. Without him, she did not know who was waiting, or how to discourage a patron who had questions—but no money. She sat in the incense-heavy darkness waiting and brooding.

Moonflower. She would go to Moonflower, not for the old woman’s broken-down cart, but for advice. The old woman had never shunned her the way the other S’danzo had. But Moonflower wouldn’t know about fixing anvils, and what could she add to the message so clearly conveyed by the Face of Chaos? Besides, Moonflower’s richest patrons arrived early in the day to catch her best *vibrations*. The old woman would not appreciate a poor relation taking up her patrons’ valuable time.

No patrons of her own yet, either. Perhaps the weather had turned bad. Perhaps, seeing the forge empty, they assumed that the inner chamber was empty also. Illyra dared not step outside to find out.

She shuffled and handled the deck of fortune-telling cards, acquiring a measure of self-control from their worn surfaces. Palming the bottom card, Illyra laid it face-up on the black velvet.

“Five of Ships,” she whispered.

The card was a stylized scene of five small fishing boats, each with its net cast into the water. Tradition said that the answer to her question was in the card. Her gift would let her find it—if she could sort out the many questions floating in her thoughts.

“Illyra, the fortune-teller?”

Illyra’s reverie was interrupted by her first patron before she had gained a satisfactory focus in the card. This first woman had problems with her many lovers, but her reading was spoiled by another patron stepping through the door at the wrong time. This second patron’s reading was disrupted by the fish-smoker looking for Dubro. The day was everything the Face of Chaos had promised.

The few readings which were not disrupted reflected her own despair more than the patron's. Dubro had not returned, and she was startled by any sound from the outside canopy. Her patrons sensed the confusion and were unsatisfied with her performance. Some refused to pay. An older, more experienced S'danzo would know how to handle these things, but Illyra only shrank back in frustration. She tied a frayed rope across the entrance to her fortune-telling room to discourage anyone from seeking her advice.

"Madame Illyra?"

An unfamiliar woman's voice called from outside, undaunted by the rope.

"I'm not seeing anyone this afternoon. Come back tomorrow."

"I can't wait until tomorrow."

They all say that, Illyra thought. Everyone else always knows that they are the most important person I see and that their questions are the most complex. But they are all very much the same. Let the woman come back.

The stranger could be heard hesitating beyond the rope. Illyra heard the sound of rustling cloth—possibly silk—as the woman finally turned away. The sound jarred the S'danzo to alertness. Silken skirts meant wealth. A flash of vision illuminated Illyra's mind—this was a patron she could not let go elsewhere.

"If you can't wait, I'll see you now," she yelled.

"You will?"

Illyra untied the rope and lifted the hanging cloth to let the woman enter. She had surrounded herself with a shapeless, plain shawl; her face was veiled and shadowed by a corner of the shawl wound around her head. The stranger was certainly not someone who came to the S'danzo of the bazaar often. Illyra retied the rope after seating her patron on one side of the velvet-covered table.

A woman of means who wishes to be mysterious. That shawl might be plain, but it is too good for someone as poor as she pretends to be. She wears silk beneath it, and smells of roses, though she has tried to remove perfumes. No doubt she has gold, not silver or copper.

"Would you not be more comfortable removing your shawl? It is quite warm in here," Illyra said, after studying the woman.

"I'd prefer not to."

A difficult one, Illyra thought.

The woman's hand emerged from the shawl to drop three old Ilsig gold coins on to the velvet. The hand was white, smooth, and youthful. The Ilsig coins were rare now that the Rankan empire controlled Sanctuary. The woman and her questions were a welcome relief from Illyra's own thoughts.

"Well, then, what is your name?"

"I'd prefer not to say."

"I must have some information if I'm to help you," Illyra said as she scooped the coins into a worn piece of silk, taking care not to let her fingers touch the gold.

"My ser... There are those who tell me that you alone of the S'danzo can see the near future. I must know what will happen to me tomorrow night."

The question did not fulfil Illyra's curiosity or the promise of mystery, but she reached for her deck of cards.

"You are familiar with these?" she asked the woman.

"Somewhat."

“Then divide them into three piles and choose one card from each pile—that will show me your future.”

“For tomorrow night?”

“Assuredly. The answer is contained within the moment of the question. Take the cards.”

The veiled woman handled the cards fearfully. Her hands shook so badly that the three piles were simply unsquared heaps. The woman was visibly reluctant to touch the cards again and gingerly overturned the top card of each rather than handle them again.

Lance of Flames.

The Archway.

Five of Ships, reversed.

Illyra drew her hands back from the velvet in alarm. The Five of Ships—the card had been in her own hands not moments before. She did not remember replacing it in the deck. With a quivering foreknowledge that she would see a part of her own fate in the cards, Illyra opened her mind to receive the answer. And closed it almost at once.

Falling stones, curses, murder, a journey without return. None of the cards was particularly auspicious, but together they created an image of malice and death that was normally hidden from the living. The S’danzo never foretold death when they saw it, and though she was but half-S’darizo and shunned by them, Illyra abided by their codes and superstitions.

“It would be best to remain at home, especially tomorrow night. Stand back from walls which might have loose stones in them. Safety lies within yourself. Do not seek other advice—especially from the priests of the temples.”

Her visitor’s reserve crumbled. She gasped, sobbed, and shook with unmistakable terror. But before Illyra could speak the words to calm her, the black-clad woman dashed away, pulling the frayed rope from its anchorage.

“Come back!” Illyra called.

The woman turned while still under the canopy. Her shawl fell back to reveal a fair-skinned blonde woman of a youthful and delicate beauty. A victim of a spurned lover? Or a jealous wife?

“If you had already seen your fate—then you should have asked a different question, such as whether it can be changed,” she chided softly, guiding the woman back into the incense-filled chamber.

“I thought if you saw differently... But Molin Torchholder will have his way. Even you have seen it.”

Molin Torchholder. Illyra recognized the name. He was the priestly temple builder within the Rankan prince’s entourage. She had another friend and patron living within his household. Was this the woman of Cappen Varra’s idylls? Had the minstrel finally overstepped himself?

“Why would the Rankan have his way with you?” she asked, prying gently.

“They have sought to build a temple for their gods.”

“But you are not a goddess, nor even Rankan. Such things should not concern you.”

Illyra spoke lightly, but she knew, from the cards, that the priests sought her as part of some ritual—not in personal interest.

“My father is rich—proud and powerful among those of Sanctuary who have never accepted the fall of the Ilsig kingdom and will never accept the empire. Molin has singled my father out. He has demanded our lands for his temple. When we refused, he forced the weaker men not to trade with us. But my father would not give in. He believes the gods of Ilsig are stronger, but Molin has vowed revenge rather than admit failure.”

“Perhaps your family will have to leave Sanctuary to escape this foreign priest, and your home be torn down to build their temple. But though the city may be all you know, the world is large, and this place but a poor part of it.”

Illyra spoke with far more authority than she actually commanded. Since the death of her mother, she had left the bazaar itself only a handful of times and had never left the city. The words were part of the S’danzo oratory Moonflower had taught her.

“My father and the others must leave, but not me. I’m to be part of Molin Torchholder’s revenge. His men came once to my father’s house. The Rankan offered us my full bride-price, though he is married. Father refused the *honour*. Molin’s men beat him senseless and carried me screaming from the house.

“I fought with him when he came to me that night. He will not want another woman for some time. But my father could not believe I had not been dishonoured. And Molin said that if I would not yield to him, then no living man should have me.”

“Such are ever the words of scorned men,” Illyra added gently.

“No. It was a curse, know this for certain. Their gods are strong enough to answer when they call.”

“Last night two of their Hell Hounds appeared at our estate to offer new terms to my father. A fair price for our land, safe conduct to Ilsig—but I am to remain behind. Tomorrow night they will consecrate the cornerstone of their new temple with a virgin’s death. I am to be under that stone when they lay it.”

Though Illyra was not specifically a truth-seer, the tale tied all the horrific visions into a whole. It would take the gods to save this woman from the fate Molin Torchholder had waiting for her. It was no secret that the empire sought to conquer the Ilsig gods as they had conquered their armies. If the Rankan priest could curse a woman with unbreachable virginity, Illyra didn’t think there was much she could do.

The woman was still sobbing. There was no future in her patronage, but Illyra felt sorry for her. She opened a little cabinet and shook a good-sized pinch of white powder into a small liquid-filled vial.

“Tonight, before you retire, take this with a glass of wine.”

The woman clutched it tightly, though the fear did fade from her eyes.

“Do I owe you more for this?” she asked.

“No, it is the least I could do for you.”

There was enough of the *cylantha* powder to keep the woman asleep for three days. Perhaps Molin Torchholder would not want a sleeping virgin in his rite. If he did not mind, the woman would not awaken to find out.

“I can give you much gold. I could bring you to Ilsig.”

Illyra shook her head.

“There is but one thing I wish—and you do not have it,” she whispered, surprised by the sudden impulsiveness of her words. “Nor all the gold in Sanctuary will find another anvil for Dubro.”

“I do not know this Dubro, but there is an anvil in my father’s stables. It will not return to Ilsig. It can be yours, if I’m alive to tell my father to give it to you.”

The impulsiveness cleared from Illyra’s mind. There were reasons now to soothe the young woman’s fears.

“It is a generous offer,” she replied. “I shall see you then, three days hence at your father’s home—if you will tell me where it is.”

And if you do, she added to herself, then it will not matter if you survive or not.

“It is the estate called *Land’s End*, behind the temple of Ils, Himself.”

“Whom shall I ask for?”

“Marilla.”

They stared at each other for a few moments, then the blonde woman made her way into the afternoon-crowded bazaar. Illyra knotted the rope across the entrance to her chambers with distracted intensity.

How many years—five at least—she had been answering the banal questions of city-folk who could not see anything for themselves. Never, in all that time, had she asked a question of a patron, or seen such a death, or one of her own cards in a reading. And in all the years of memory within the S’danzo community within the bazaar, never had any of them crossed fates with the gods.

No, I have nothing to do with gods. I do not notice them, and they do not see me. My gift is S’danzo. I am S’danzo. We live by fate. We do not touch the affairs of gods.

But Illyra could not convince herself. The thought circled in her mind that she had wandered beyond the realms of her people and gifts. She lit the incense of gentle-forgetting, inhaling it deeply, but the sound of Dubro’s anvil breaking and the images of the three cards remained ungentle in her thoughts. As the afternoon waned, she convinced herself again to approach Moonflower for advice.

The obese S’danzo woman’s three children squalled at each other in the dust while her dark-eyed husband sat in the shade holding his hands over his eyes and ears. It was not an auspicious moment to seek the older woman’s counsel. The throngs of people were leaving the bazaar, making it safe for Illyra to wander among the stalls looking for Dubro.

“Illyra!”

She had expected Dubro’s voice, but this one was familiar also. She looked closely into the crowd at the wine-seller’s.

“Cappen Varra?”

“The same.” He answered, greeting her with a smile. “There was a rope across your gate today, and Dubro was not busy at his fire—otherwise I should have stopped to see you.”

“You have a question?”

“No, my life could not be better. I have a song for you.”

“Today is not a day for songs. Have you seen Dubro?”

“No. I’m here to get wine for a special dinner tomorrow night. Thanks to you, I know where the best wine in Sanctuary is still to be found.”

“A new love?”

“The same. She grows more radiant with each day. Tomorrow the master of the house will be busy with his priestly functions. The household will be quiet.”

“The household of Molin Torchholder must agree with you then. It is good to be in the grace of the conquerors of Ilsig.”

“I’m discreet. So is Molin. It is a trait which seems to have been lost among the natives of Sanctuary—S’danzo excepted, of course. I’m most comfortable within his house.”

The seller handed him two freshly washed bottles of wine, and with brief farewells, Illyra saw him on his way. The wine-seller had seen Dubro earlier in the day. He offered that the smith was visiting every wine-seller in the bazaar and not a few of the taverns outside it. Similar stories waited for her at the other wine-sellers. She returned to the forge-home in the gathering twilight and fog.

Ten candles and the oil stove could not cut through the dark emptiness in the chamber. Illyra pulled her shawls tightly around her and tried to nap until Dubro returned. She would not let herself think that he would not return.

“You have been waiting for me.”

Illyra jumped at the sound. Only two of the candles remained lit; she had no idea how long she had slept, only that her home quivered with shadows and a man, as tall as Dubro but of cadaverous thinness, stood within the knotted rope.

“Who are you? What do you want?” She flattened against the back of the chair.

“Since you do not recognize me, then say, I have been looking for you.”

The man gestured. The candles and stove rekindled and Illyra found herself staring at the blue-starred face of the magician Lythande.

“I have done nothing to cross you,” she said, rising slowly from her chair.

“And I did not say that you had. I thought you were seeking me. Many of us have heard you calling today.”

He held up the three cards Marilla had overturned and the Face of Chaos.

“I—I had not known my problems could disturb your studies.”

“I was reflecting on the legend of the Five Ships—it was comparatively easy for you to touch me. I have taken it to myself to learn things for you.”

“The girl Marilla appealed first to her own gods. They sent her to you since for them to act on her fate would rouse the ire of Sabellia and Savankala. They have tied your fates together. You will not solve your own troubles unless you can relieve hers.”

“She is a dead woman, Lythande. If the gods of Ilsig wish to help her, they will need all their strength—and if that isn’t enough, then there is nothing I can do for her.”

“That is not a wise position to take, Illyra,” the magician said with a smile.

“That is what I saw. S’danzo do not cross fates with the gods.”

“And you, Illyra, are not S’danzo.”

She gripped the back of the chair, angered by the reminder but unable to counter it.

“They have passed the obligation to you,” he said.

“I do not know how to break through Marilla’s fate,” Illyra said simply. “I see, they must change.”

Lythande laughed. “Perhaps there is no way, child. Maybe it will take two sacrifices to consecrate the temple Molin Torch-holder builds. You had best hope



there is a way through Marilla's fate." A cold breeze accompanied his laughter. The candles flickered a moment, and the magician was gone. Illyra stared at the undisturbed rope.

Let Lythande and the others help her if it's so important. I want only the anvil, and that I can have regardless of her fate.

The cold air clung to the room. Already her imagination was embroidering upon the consequences of enraging any of the powerful deities of Sanctuary. She left to search for Dubro in the fog-shrouded bazaar.

Fog tendrils obscured the familiar stalls and shacks of the daytime bazaar. A few fires could be glimpsed through cracked doorways, but the area itself had gone to sleep early, leaving Illyra to roam through the moist night alone.

Nearing the main entrance she saw the bobbing torch of a running man. The torch and runner fell with an aborted shout. She heard lighter footsteps running off into the unlit fog. Cautiously, fearfully, Illyra crept towards the fallen man.

It was not Dubro, but a shorter man wearing a blue hawk-mask. A dagger protruded from the side of his neck. Illyra felt no sorrow at the death of one of Jubal's bully-boys, only relief that it had not been Dubro. Jubal was worse than the Rankans. Perhaps the crimes of the man behind the mask had finally caught up with him. More likely someone had risked venting a grudge against the seldom seen former gladiator. Anyone who dealt with Jubal had more enemies than friends.

As if in silent response to her thoughts, another group of men appeared out of the fog. Illyra hid among the crates and boxes while five men without masks studied the dead man. Then, without warning, one of them threw aside his torch and fell on the warm corpse, striking it again and again with his knife. When he had had his fill of death, the others took their turns.

The bloody hawk-mask rolled to within a hand-span of Illyra's foot. She held her breath and did not move, her eyes riveted in horror on the unrecognizable body in front of her. She wandered away from the scene blind to everything but her own disbelieving shock. The atrocity seemed to be the final, senseless gesture of the Face of Chaos in a day which had unravelled her existence.

She leaned against a canopy-post fighting waves of nausea, but Haakon's sweetmeats had been the only food she had eaten all day. The dry heaving of her stomach brought no relief.

"Lyra!"

A familiar voice roared behind her and an arm thrown protectively around her shoulder broke the spell. She clung to Dubro with clenched fingers, burying her convulsive sobs in his leather vest. He reeked of wine and the salty fog. She savoured every breath of him.

"Lyra, what are you doing out here?" He paused, but she did not reply. "Did you begin to think I'd not come back to you?"

He held her tightly, swaying restlessly back and forth. The story of the hawk masked man's death fell from her in racked gasps. It took Dubro only a moment to decide that his beloved Illyra had suffered too much in his absence and to repent that he had gotten drunk or sought work outside the bazaar. He lifted her gently and carried her back to their home, muttering softly to himself as he walked.

NOT EVEN DUBRO'S comforting arms could protect Illyra from the nightmare visions that stalked her sleep once they had returned to their home. He shook off his drunkenness to watch over her as she tossed and fretted on the sleeping linens. Each time he thought she had settled into a calm sleep, the dreams would start again. Illyra would awaken sweating and incoherent from fear. She would not describe her dreams to him when he asked. He began to suspect that something worse than the murder had taken place in his absence, though their home showed no sign of attack or struggle.

Illyra did try to voice her fears to him at each waking interlude, but the mixture of visions and emotions found no expression in her voice. Within her mind, each re-dreaming of the nightmare brought her closer to a single image which both collected her problems and eliminated them. The first rays of a feeble dawn had broken through the fog when she had the final synthetic experience of the dream.

She saw herself at a place the dream-spirit said was the estate called Land's End. The estate had been long abandoned, with only an anvil chained to a pedestal in the centre of a starlit courtyard to show that it had been inhabited. Illyra broke the chain easily and lifted the anvil as if it had been paper. Clouds rushed in as she walked away and a moaning wind began to blow dust-devils around her. She hurried towards the doorway where Dubro waited for his gift.

The steel cracked before she had traveled half the distance, and the anvil crumbled completely as she transferred it to him. Rain began to fall, washing away Dubro's face to reveal Lythande's cruel, mocking smile. The magician struck her with the card marked with the Face of Chaos. And she died, only to find herself captive within her body which was being carried by unseen hands to a vast pit. The dissonant music of priestly chants and cymbals surrounded her. Within the dream, Illyra opened her dead eyes to see a large block of stone descending into the pit over her.

"I'm already dead!" She screamed, struggling to free her arms and legs from invisible bindings. "I can't be sacrificed—I'm already dead!"—

Her arms came free. She nailed wildly. The walls of the pit were glassy and without handholds. The lowered stone touched her head. She shrieked as the life left her body for a second time. Her body released her spirit, and she rose up through the stone, waking as she did.

"It was a dream," Illyra said before Dubro could ask.

The solution was safe in her mind now. The dream would not return. But it was like a reading with the cards. In order to understand what the dream-spirit had given her, she would have to meditate upon it.

"You said something of death and sacrifice," Dubro said, unmollified by her suddenly calmed face.

"It was a dream."

"What sort of dream? Are you afraid that I will leave you or the bazaar now that I have no work to do?"

"No," she said quickly, masking the fresh anxiety his words produced. "Besides, I have found an anvil for us."

"In your dream with the death and sacrifice?"

“Death and sacrifice are keys the dream-spirit gave me. Now I must take the time to understand them.”

Dubro stepped back from her. He was not S’danzo, and though bazaar-folk, he was not comfortable around their traditions or their gifts. When Illyra spoke of *seeing* or *knowing*, he would draw away from her. He sat, quiet and sullen, in a chair pulled into the corner most distant from her S’danzo paraphernalia.

She stared at the black-velvet covering other table until well past the dawn and the start of a gentle rain. Dubro placed a shell with a sweetmeat in it before her. She nodded, smiled, and ate it, but did not say anything. The smith had already turned away two patrons when Illyra finished her meditation.

“Are you finished, now, Lyra?” he asked, his distrust of S’danzo ways not overshadowing his concern for her.

“I think so.”

“No more death and sacrifice?”

She nodded and began to relate the tale of the previous day’s events. Dubro listened quietly until she reached the part about Lythande.

“In my home? Within these walls?” he demanded.

“I saw him, but I don’t know how he got in here. The rope was untouched.”

“No!” Dubro exclaimed, beginning to pace like a caged animal. “No, I want none of this. I will not have magicians and sorcerers in my home!”

“You weren’t here, and I did not invite him in.” Illyra’s dark eyes flashed at him as she spoke. “And he’ll come back again if I don’t do these things, so hear me out.”

“No, just tell me what we must do to keep him away.”

Illyra dug her fingernails into the palm of one hand hidden in the folds of her skirts.

“We will have to—to stop the consecration of the cornerstone of the new temple for the Rankan gods.”

“*Gods*, Lyra, you would not meddle with the gods? Is this the meaning you found in *death and sacrifice*?”

“It is also the reason Lythande was here last night.”

“But, Lyra...”

She shook her head, and he was quiet.

“He won’t ask me what I plan to do,” she thought as he tied the rope across the door and followed her towards the city. “As long as everything is in my head, I’m certain everything is possible and that I will succeed. But if I spoke of it to anyone—even him—I would hear how little hope I have of stopping Molin Torchholder or of changing Marilla’s fate.”

In the dream, her already dead body had been offered to Sabellia and Savankala. Her morning’s introspection had convinced her that she was to introduce a corpse into Molin Torchholder’s ceremonies. They passed the scene of the murder, but Jubal’s men had reclaimed their comrade. The only other source of dead men she knew of was the governor’s palace where executions were becoming a daily occurrence under the tightening grip of the Hell Hounds.

They passed by the huge charnel-house just beyond the bazaar gates. The rain held the death smells close by the half-timbered building. Could Sabellia and Savankala be appeased with the mangled bones and fat of a butchered

cow? Hesitantly she mounted the raised wooden walk over the red-brown effluvia of the building.

“What do the Rankan gods want from this place?” Dubro asked before setting foot on the walkway.

“A substitute for the one already chosen.”

A man emerged from a side door pushing a sloshing barrel which he dumped into the slow-moving stream. Shapeless red lumps flowed under the walkway between the two bazaar-folk. Illyra swayed on her feet.

“Even the gods of Ranke would not be fooled by these.” Dubro lowered his head towards the now-ebbing stream. “At least offer them the death of an honest man of Illsig.”

He held out a hand to steady her as she stepped back on the street, then led the way past the Serpentine to the governor’s palace. Three men hung limply from the gallows in the rain, their crimes and names inscribed on placards tied around their necks. Neither Illyra nor Dubro had mastered the arcane mysteries of script.

“Which one is most like the one you need?” Dubro asked.

“She should be my size, but blonde.” Illyra explained while looking at the two strapping men and one grandfatherly figure hanging in front of them.

Dubro shrugged and approached the stern-faced Hell Hound standing guard at the foot of the gallows.

“Father,” he grunted, pointing at the elderly corpse.

“It’s the law—to be hung by the neck until sundown. You’ll have to come back then.”

“Long walk home. He’s dead now—why wait?”

“There is law in Sanctuary now, peon, Rankan law. It will be respected without exception.”

Dubro stared at the ground, fumbling with his hands in evident distress.

“In the rain I cannot see the sun—how shall I know when to return?”

Guard and smith stared at the steely-grey sky, both knowing it would not clear before nightfall. Then, with a loud sigh, the Hell Hound walked to the ropes, selected and untied one, which dropped Dubro’s *father* into the mud.

“Take him and begone!”

Dubro shouldered the dead man, walking to Illyra who waited at the edge of the execution grounds.

“He’s—he’s—” she gasped in growing hysteria.

“Dead since sunrise.”

“He’s covered with filth. He reeks. His face...”

“You wanted another for the sacrifice.”

“But not like that!”

“It is the way of men who have been hung.”

They walked back towards the charnel-house where Sanctuary’s undertakers and embalmers held sway. There, for five copper coins, they found a man to prepare the body. For another coin he would have rented them a cart and his son as a digger to take the unfortunate ex-thief to the common field outside the Gate of Triumph for proper burial. Illyra and Dubro made a great show of grief, however, and insisted that they would bury their father with their own hands. Wrapped in a

nearly clean shroud, the old man was bound to a plank. Illyra held the foot end, Dubro the other. They made their way back to the bazaar.

“Do we take the body to the temple for the exchange?” he asked as they pushed aside their chairs to make room for the plank.

Illyra stared at him, not realizing at first that his faith in her had made the question sincere.

“During the night the Rankan priests will leave the governor’s palace for the estate called Land’s End. They will bear Marilla with them. We will have to stop them and replace Marilla with our corpse, without their knowledge.”

The smith’s eyes widened with disillusion. “Lyra, it is not the same as stealing fruit from Blind Jakob! The girl will be alive. He is dead. Surely the priests will see.”

She shook her head clinging desperately to the image she had found in meditation. “It rains. There will be no moonlight, and their torches will give more smoke than light. I gave the girl cylantha. They will have to carry her as if she were dead.”

“Will she take the drug?”

“Yes!”

But Illyra wasn’t sure—couldn’t be sure—until they actually saw the procession. So many questions: if Marilla had taken the drug, if the procession were small, unguarded and slowed by their burden, if the ritual were like the one in her dream. The cold panic she had felt as the stone descended on her returned. The Face of Chaos loomed, laughing, in her mind’s eye.

“Yes! She took the drug last night,” she said firmly, dispelling the Face by force of will.

“How do you know this?” Dubro asked incredulously. “I know.”

There was no more discussion as Illyra threw herself into the preparation of a macabre feast that they ate on a table spread over their dead guest. The vague point of sundown passed, leaving Sanctuary in a dark rainy night, as Illyra had foreseen. The continuing rain bolstered her confidence as they moved slowly through the bazaar and out of the Common Gate.

They faced a long, but not difficult, walk beyond the walls of the city. As Dubro pointed out, the demoiselles of the Street of Red Lanterns had to follow their path each night on their way to the Promise of Heaven. The ladies giggled behind their shawls at the sight of the two bearing what was so obviously a corpse. But they did nothing to hinder them, and it was far too early for the more raucous traffic returning from the Promise.

Huge piles of stone in a sea of muddy craters marked the site of the new temple. A water-laden canopy covered sputtering braziers and torches; otherwise the area was quiet and deserted.

It is the night of the Ten-Slaying. Cappen Varra told me the priests would be busy. Rain will not stop the dedication. Gods do not feel rain! Illyra thought, but again did not know and sat with her back to Dubro quivering more from doubt and fear than from the cold water dripping down her back.

While she sat, the rain slowed to a misty drizzle and gave promise of stopping altogether. She left the inadequate shelter of the rock pile to venture nearer the canopy and braziers. A platform had been built above the mud at the edge of a pit

with ropes dangling on one side that might be used to lower a body into the pit. A great stone was poised on logs opposite, ready to crush anything below. At least they were not too late—no sacrifice had taken place. Before Illyra had returned to Dubro's side, six torches appeared in the mist-obscured distance.

"They are coming," Dubro whispered as she neared him.

"I see them. We have only a few moments now."

From around her waist she unwound two coils of rope taken from the bazaar forge. She had devised her own plan for the actual exchange, as neither the dream spirit nor her meditations had offered solid insight or inspiration.

"They will most likely follow the same path we did, since they are carrying a body also," she explained as she laid the ropes across the mud, burying them slightly. "We will trip them here."

"And I will switch our corpse for the girl?"

"Yes."

They said nothing more as each crouched in a mud-hole waiting, hoping, that the procession would pass between them.

The luck promised in her dream held. Molin Torchholder led the small procession, bearing a large brass and wood torch from Sabellia's temple in Ranke itself. Behind him were three chanting acolytes bearing both incense and torches. The last two torches were affixed to a bier carried on the shoulders of the last pair of priests. Torchholder and the other three trod over the ropes without noticing them. When the first pallbearer was between the ropes Illyra snapped them taut.

The burdened priests heard the smack as the ropes lifted from the mud, but were tripped before they could react. Marilla and the torches fell towards Dubro, the priests towards Illyra. In the dark commotion, Illyra got safely to a nearby pile of building stones, but without being able to see if Dubro had accomplished the exchange.

"What's wrong?" Torchholder demanded, hurrying back with his torch to light the scene.

"The damned workmen left the hauling ropes strewn about," a mud-splattered priest exclaimed as he scrambled out of the knee-deep mud-hole.

"And the girl?" Molin continued.

"Thrown over there, from the look of it."

Lifting his robes in one hand, Molin Torchholder led the acolytes and priests to the indicated mud-pit. Illyra heard sounds she prayed were Dubro making his own way to the safe shadows.

"A hand here."

"Damned Ilsig mud. She weighs ten times as much now."

"Easy. A little more mud, a little sooner won't affect the temple, but it's an ill thought to rouse the Others." Torchholder's calm voice quieted the others.

The torches were re-lit. From her hideout, Illyra could see a mud-covered shroud on the bier. Dubro had succeeded somehow: she did not allow herself to think anything else.

The procession continued on towards the canopy. The rain had stopped completely. A sliver of moonlight showed through the dispersing clouds. Torchholder loudly hailed the break in the clouds as an omen of the

forgiving, sanctifying, presence of Vashanka and began the ritual. In due time the acolytes emptied braziers of oil on to the shroud, setting it and the corpse on fire. They lowered the naming bier into the pit. The acolytes threw symbolic armloads of stone after it. Then they cut the ropes that held the cornerstone in its place at the edge. It slid from sight with a loud, sucking sound.

Almost at once, Torchholder and the other two priests left the platform to head back towards the palace, leaving only the acolytes to perform a night-long vigil over the new grave. When the priests were out of sight Illyra scrambled back to the mud-holes and whispered Dubro's name.

"Here," he hissed back.

She needed only one glance at his moon-shadowed face to know something had gone wrong.

"What happened?" she asked quickly, unmindful of the sound of her voice. "Marilla? Did they bury Marilla?"

There were tears in Dubro's eyes as he shook his head. "Look at her!" he said, his voice barely under control.

A mud-covered shroud lay some paces away. Dubro would neither face it nor venture near it. Illyra approached warily.

Dubro had left the face covered. Holding her breath, Illyra reached down to peel back the damp, dirty linen.

For a heartbeat, she saw Marilla's sleeping face. Then it became her own. After a second of self-recognition, the face underwent a bewildering series of changes to portraits of people from her childhood and others whom she did not recognize. It froze for a moment in the shattered image of the Face of Chaos, then was still with pearly-white skin where there should have been eyes, nose, and mouth.

Illyra's fingers stiffened. She opened her mouth to scream, but her lungs and throat were paralysed with fright. The linen fell from her unfeeling hands, but did not cover the hideous thing that lay before her.

Get away! Get away from this place!

The primitive imperative rose in her mind and would not be appeased by anything less than headlong flight. She pushed Dubro aside. The acolytes heard her as she blundered through the mud, but she ignored them. There were buildings ahead solid stone buildings outlined in the moonlight.

It was a manor house of an estate long since abandoned. Illyra recognized it from her dream, but her panic and terror had been sated in the headlong run from the faceless corpse. An interior door hung open on rusty hinges that creaked when she pushed the door. She was unsurprised to see an anvil sitting on a plain wooden box in the centre of a courtyard that her instincts told her was not entirely deserted.

"I'm only prolonging it now. The anvil, and the rest; they are there for me."

She stepped into the courtyard. Nothing happened. The anvil was solid and far too heavy for her to lift.

"You've come to collect your reward?" a voice called.

"Lythande?" she whispered, waiting for the cadaverous magician to appear.

"Lythande is elsewhere."

A hooded man stepped into the moonlight.

"What has happened? Where is Marilla? Her family?"

The man gestured to his right. Illyra followed his movement and saw the tumbledown headstones of an old graveyard.

“But...?”

“The priests of Ils seek to provoke the new gods. They created the homunculus, disguising it to appear as a young woman to an untrained observer. Had it been interred in the foundation of the new temple, it would have created a disruptive weakness. The anger of Savankala and Sabellia would reach across the desert. That is, of course, exactly what the priests of Ils wanted.”

“We magicians—and even you gifted S’danzo—do not welcome the meddling feuds of gods and their priests. They tamper with the delicate balances of fate. Our work is more important than the appeasement of deities, so this time, as in the past, we have intervened.”

“But the temple? They should have buried a virgin, then?”

“A forged person would arouse the Rankan gods, but not an imperfect virgin. When the temple of Ils was erected, the old priests sought a royal soul to inter beneath the altar. They wanted the youngest, and most loved, of the royal princes. The queen was a sorceress of some skill herself. She disguised an old slave, and his bones still rest beneath the altar.”

“So the gods of Ilsig and Ranke are equal?”

The hooded man laughed. “We have seen to it that all gods within Sanctuary are equally handicapped, my child.”

“And what of me? Lythande warned me not to fail.”

“Did I not just say that our purpose—and therefore your purpose—was accomplished? You did not fail, and we repay, as Marilla promised, with a black steel anvil. It is yours.”

He laid a hand on the anvil and disappeared in a wisp of smoke.

“Lyra, are you all right? I heard you speaking with someone. I buried that girl before I came looking for you.”

“Here is the anvil.”

“I do not want such an ill-gotten thing.” Dubro took her arm and tried to lead her out of the courtyard.

“I have paid too much already!” she shouted at him, wresting away from his grasp. “Take it back to the bazaar—then we will forget all this ever happened. Never speak of it to anyone. But don’t leave the anvil here, or it’s all worth nothing!”

“I can never forget your face on that dead girl... thing.”

Illyra remained silently staring at the still-muddy ground. Dubro went to the anvil and brushed the water and dirt from its surface.

“Someone has carved a symbol in it. It reminds me of one of your cards. Tell me what it means before I take it back to the bazaar with us.”

She stood by his side. A smiling Face of Chaos had been freshly etched into the worn surface of the metal.

“It is an old S’danzo sign of good luck.”

Dubro did not seem to hear the note of bitterness and deceit in her voice. His faith in Illyra had been tried but not shattered. The anvil was heavy, an ungainly bundle in his arms. “Well, it won’t get home by itself, will it?” He stared at her as she started walking.



She touched the pedestal and thought briefly of the questions still whirling in her head. Dubro called again from outside the courtyard. The entire length of Sanctuary lay between them and the bazaar, and it was not yet midnight. Without glancing back, she followed him out of the courtyard.

