

# **The Fruit of Enlibar**

## **Thieves' World - Tales From the Vulgar Unicorn, #13**

**by Lynn Abbey, 1948-**

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THE HILLSIDE GROVES of orange trees were all that remained of the legendary glory of Enlibar. Humbled descendants of the rulers of an empire dwarfing Ilsig or Ranke eked out their livings among the gnarled, ancient trees. They wrapped each unripe fruit in leaves for the long caravan journey and wrapped each harvest in a fresh retelling of their legends. By shrewd storytelling these once proud families survived, second only to the S'danzo in their ability to

create mystery, but like the S'danzo crones they flavoured their legends with truth and kept the sceptics at bay.

The oranges of Enlibar made their way to Sanctuary once a year. When the fist sized fruits were nearly ripe Haakon, the sweetmeat vendor of the bazaar, would fill his cart and hawk oranges in the town as well as in the stalls of the bazaar. During those few days he would make enough money to buy expensive trinkets for his wife and children, another year's lodgings for his mistress, and have enough gold left to take to Gonfred, the only honest goldsmith in town.

The value of each orange was such that Haakon would ignore the unwritten code of the bazaar and reserve the best of his limited supply for his patrons at the Governor's Palace. It had happened, however, that two of the precious fruits had been bruised. Haakon decided not to sell that pair at all but to share them with his friends the bazaar-smith, Dubro, and his young wife, the half-S'danzo Illyra.

He scored the peel deftly with an inlaid silver tool meant especially for this one purpose. When his fingers moved away the pebbly rind fell back from the deep-coloured pulp and Illyra gasped with delight. She took one of the pulp sections and drizzled the juice onto the back of her hand, then lapped it up with the tip of her tongue: the mannerly way to savour the delicate flavour of the blood-red juice.

"These are the best; better than last year's," she exclaimed with a smile. "You say that every year, Illyra. Time dulls your memory; the taste brings it back." Haakon sucked the juice off his hand with less delicacy: his lips showed the Stain of Enlibar. "And, speaking of time dulling your memory—Dubro, do you recall, about fifteen years back, a death-pale boy with straw hair and wild eyes running about the town?"

Haakon watched as Dubro closed his eyes and sank back in thought. The smith would have been a raw youth then himself, but he had always been slow, deliberate, and utterly reliable in his judgements. Illyra would have been a skirt-clinging toddler that long ago so Haakon did not think to ask her, nor to glance her way while he awaited Dubro's reply. Had he done so he would have seen her tremble and a blood-red drop of juice disappear into the fine dust beneath her chair.

"Yes," Dubro said without opening his eyes, "I remember one as that: quiet, pale... nasty. Lived a few years with the garrison, then disappeared."

"Would you know him again after all this time?"

"Nay. He was that sort of lad who looks childish until he becomes a man, then one never sees the child in his face again."

"Would you reckon *Walegrin* to be his name?" Ignored, beside them, Illyra bit down on her tongue and stifled sudden panic before it became apparent.

"It might be... nay, I could not be sure. I doubt as I ever spoke to the lad by name." Haakon shrugged as if the questions had been idle conversation. Illyra ate her remaining share of the oranges, then went into the ramshackle stall where she lit three cones of incense before returning to the men with a ewer of water.

"Illyra, I've just asked your husband if he'd come with me to the Palace. I've got two sacks of oranges to deliver for the Prince and another set of arms would make the work easier. But he says he won't leave you here alone."

Illyra hesitated. The memories Haakon had aroused were still fresh in her mind, but all that had been fifteen years ago, as he had said. She stared at the clouded-over sky.

"No, there'll be no problem. It may rain today arid, anyway, you've taken everyone's money this week with your oranges," she said with forced brightness.

"Well then, you see, Dubro—there's no problem. Bank the fires and we'll be off. I'll have you back sweating again before the first raindrops fall."

Illyra watched them leave. Fear filled the forge, fear left over from a dimly remembered childhood. Visions she had shared with no one, not even Dubro. Visions not even the S'danzo gifts could resolve into truth or illusion. She caught up her curly black hair with a set of combs and went back inside.

When the bed was concealed under layers of gaudy, bright cloth and her youth under layers of kohl, Illyra was ready to greet the townsfolk. She had not exaggerated her complaints about the oranges. It was just as well that Haakon's supply was diminishing. For two days now she had had no querents until late in the day. Lonely and bored she watched the incense smoke curl into the darkness of the room, losing herself in its endless variations.

"Illyra?"

A man drew back the heavy cloth curtain. Illyra did not recognize his voice. His silhouette revealed only that he was as tall as Dubro, though not as broad.

"Illyra?—I was told I'd find Illyra, the crone, here."

She froze. Any querent might have cause to resent a S'danzo prophecy, regardless of its truth, and plot revenge against the seeress. Only recently she had been threatened by a man in the red-and-gold livery of the Palace. Her hand slid under the folds of the tablecloth and eased a tiny dagger loose from a sheath nailed to the table leg.

"What do you want?" She held her voice steady; greeting a paying querent rather than a thug.

"To talk with you. May I come in?" He paused, waiting for a reply and when there was none continued, "You seem unduly suspicious, S'danzo. Do you have many enemies here, Little Sister?"

He stepped into the room and let the cloth fall behind him. Illyra's dagger slid silently from her hand into the folds of her skirts.

"Walegrin."

"You remember so quickly? Then you did inherit her gift?"

"Yes, I inherited it, but this morning I learned that you had returned to Sanctuary."

"Three weeks past. It has not changed at all except, perhaps, for the worse. I had hoped to complete my business without disturbing you but I have encountered complications, and I doubt any of the other S'danzo would help me."

"The S'danzo will never forget."

Walegrin eased his bulk into one of Dubro's chairs. Light from the candelabra fell on his face. He endured the exposure, though as Dubro had guessed, there was no trace of youth left in his features. He was tall and pale, lean in the way of powerful men whose gentler tissues have boiled away. His hair was sun bleached to brittle straw, confined by four thick braids and a bronze circlet. Even for Sanctuary he cut an exotic, barbarian figure.

"Are you satisfied?" he asked when her gaze returned to the velvet in front of her.

"You have become very much like him," she answered slowly.

"I think not, 'Lyra. My tastes, anyway, do not run as our father's did—so put aside your fears on that account. I've come for your help. True S'danzo help, as your mother could have given me. I could pay you in gold, but I have other items which might tempt you more." He reached under his bronze-studded leather kilt to produce a suede pouch of some weight which he set, unopened, on the table. She began to open it when he leaned forwards and grasped her wrist tightly.

"It wasn't me, 'Lyra. I wasn't there that night. I ran away, just like you did."

His voice carried Illyra back those fifteen years sweeping the doubts from her memories. "I was a child then, Walegrin. A little child, no more than four. Where could I have run to?"

He released her wrist and sat back in the chair. Illyra emptied the pouch onto her table. She recognized only a few of the beads and bracelets, but enough to realize that she gazed upon all of her mother's jewellery. She picked up a string of blue glass beads strung on a creamy braided silk.

"These have been restrung," she said simply. Walegrin nodded. "Blood rots the silk and stinks to the gods. I had no choice. All the others are as they were."

Illyra let the beads fall back into the pile. He had known how to tempt her. The entire heap was not worth a single gold piece, but no storehouse of gold could have been more valuable to her.

"Well, then, what do you want from me?"

He pushed the trinkets aside and from another pouch produced a palm-sized pottery shard which he placed gently on the velvet.

"Tell me everything about that: where the rest of the tablet is; how it came to be broken; what the symbols mean—everything!"

There was nothing in the jagged fragment that justified the change that came over Walegrin as he spoke of it. Illyra saw a piece of common orange pottery with a crowded black design set under the glaze; the sort of ware that could be found in any household of the Empire. Even with her S'danzo gifts focused on the shard it remained stubbornly common. Illyra looked at Walegrin's icy green eyes, his thought-protruded brows, the set of his chin atop the studded greave on his forearm, and thought better of telling him what she actually saw.

"Its secrets are locked deeply within it. To a casual glance its disguises are perfect. Only prolonged examination will draw its secrets out." She placed the shard back on the table.

"How long?"

"It would be hard to say. The gift is strengthened by symbolic cycles. It may take until the cycle of the shard coincides..."

"I know the S'danzo! I was there with you and your mother—don't play bazaar games with me, Little Sister. I know too much."

Illyra sat back on her bench. The dagger in her skirts clunked to the floor. Walegrin bent over to pick it up. He turned it over in his hands and without warning thrust it through the velvet into the table. Then, with his palm against the smooth of the blade, he bent it back until the hilt touched the table. When he removed his hand the knife remained bent.

“Cheap steel. Modern stuff; death to the one who relies on it,” he explained, drawing a sleek knife from within the greave. He placed the dark-steel blade with the beads and bracelets. “Now, tell me about my pottery.”

“No bazaar-games. If I didn’t know from looking at you, I’d say it was a broken piece of ‘cotta. You’ve had it a long time. It shows nothing but its associations with you. I believe it is more than that, or you wouldn’t be here. You know about the S’danzo and what you call *bazaar-games*, but it’s true right now I see nothing; later I might. There are ways to strengthen the vision—I’ll try them.”

He flipped a gold coin onto the table. “Get what you’ll need.”

“Only my cards,” she answered, flustered by his gesture. “Get them!” he ordered without picking up the coin. She removed the worn deck from the depths of her blouse and set the shard atop them while she lit more candles and incense. She allowed Walegrin to cut the pack into three piles, then turned over the topmost card of each pile.

Three of Flames: a tunnel running from light to darkness with three candle sconces along the way.

The Forest: primeval, gnarled trunks; green canopy; living twilight.

Seven of Ore: red clay; the potter with his wheel and kiln. Illyra stared at the images, losing herself in them without finding harmony or direction. The Flame card was pivotal, but the array would not yield its perspective to her; the Forest, symbolic of the wisdom of the ages, seemed unlikely as either her brother’s goal or origin; and the Seven must mean more than was obvious. But, was the Ore-card appearing in its creativity aspect? Or was red clay the omen of bloodletting, as was so often true when the card appeared in a Sanctuary-cast array?

“I still do not see enough. Bazaar-games or not, this is not the time to scry this thing.”

“I’ll come again after sundown—that would be a better time, wouldn’t it? I’ve no garrison duties until after sunrise tomorrow.”

“For the cards, yes, of course, but Dubro will have banked the forge for the night by then, and I do not want to involve him in this.” Walegrin nodded without argument. “I understand. I’ll come by at midnight. He should be long asleep by then, unless you keep him awake.” Illyra sensed it would be useless to argue. She watched silently as he swept the pile of baubles, the knife, and the shard into one pouch, wincing slightly as he dribbled the last beads from her sight.

“As is your custom, payment will not be made until the question is answered.”

Illyra nodded. Walegrin had spent many years around her mother learning many of the S’danzo disciplines and rousing his father’s explosive jealousy. The leather webbing of his kilt creaked as he stood up. The moment for farewell came and passed. He left the stall in silence.

A PATH CLEARED when Walegrin strode through a crowd. He noticed it here, in this bazaar where his memories were of scrambling through the aisles, taunted, cursed, fighting, and thieving. In any other place he accepted the deference except here, which had once been his home for a while.

One of the few men in the throng who could match his height, a dark man in a smith’s apron, blocked his way a moment. Walegrin studied him obliquely and guessed he was Dubro. He had seen the smith’s short aquiline companion several

times in other roles about the town without learning the man's true name or calling; they each glanced to one side to avoid a chance meeting.

At the entrance to the bazaar, a tumble-down set of columns still showing traces of the Ilsig kings who had them built, a man crept out of the shadows and fell in step beside Walegrin. Though this second had the manner and dress of the city-born, his face was like Walegrin's: lean, hard, and parched.

"What have you learned, Thrusher?" Walegrin began, without looking down.

"That man Downwind who claimed to read such things..."

"Yes?"

"Runo went down to meet with him, as you were told. When he did not return for duty this morning Malm and I went to look for him. We found them both... and these." He handed his captain two small copper coins.

Walegrin turned them over in his palm, then threw them far into the harbour. "I'll take care of this myself. Tell the others we will have a visitor at the garrison this evening—a woman."

"Yes, captain," Thrusher responded, a surprised grin making its way across his jaw. "Shall I send the men away?"

"No, set them as guards. Nothing is going well. Each time we have set a rendezvous something has gone wrong. At first it was petty nuisance, now Runo is dead. I will not take chances in this city above all others. And, Thrusher..." Walegrin caught his man by the elbow, "Thrusher, this woman is S'danzo, my half sister. See that the men understand this."

"They will understand, we all have families somewhere."

Walegrin grimaced and Thrusher understood that his commander had not suddenly weakened to admit family concerns.

"We have need of the S'danzo? Surely there are more reliable seers in Sanctuary than scrounging the aisles of the bazaar. Our gold is good and nearly limitless." Thrusher, like many men in the Ranken Empire, considered the S'danzo best suited to resolving love triangles among house-servants.

"We have need of this one."

Thrusher nodded and oozed back into the shadows as deftly as he had emerged. Walegrin waited until he was alone on the filthy streets before changing direction and striding, shoulders set and fists balled, into the tangled streets of the Maze.

The whores of the Maze were a special breed unwelcomed in the great pleasure houses beyond the city walls. Their embrace included a poison dagger and their nightly fee was all the wealth that could be removed from a man's person. A knot of these women clung to the doorway of the Vulgar Unicorn, the Maze's approximation to Town Hall, but they stepped aside meekly when Walegrin approached. Survival in the Maze depended upon careful selection of the target.

An aura of dark foul air enveloped Walegrin as he stepped down into the sunken room. A moment's quiet passed over the other guests, as it always did when someone entered. A Hell Hound, personal puritan of the prince, could shut down conversation for the duration of his visit, but a garrison officer, even Walegrin, was assumed to have legitimate business and was ignored with the same slit-eyed wariness the regulars accorded each other.

The itinerant storyteller, Hakiem, occupied the bench Walegrin preferred. The heavy-lidded little man was wilier than most suspected. Clutching his leather mug of small ale tenderly, he had selected one of the few locations in the room that provided a good view of all the exits, public and private. Walegrin stepped forwards, intending to intimidate the weasel from his perch, but thought better of the move. His affairs in the Maze demanded discretion, not reckless bullying.

From a lesser location he signalled the bartender. No honest wench would work the Unicorn so Buboe himself brought the foaming mug, then returned a moment later with one of the Enlibar oranges he had arranged behind the counter. Walegrin broke the peel with his thumbnail; the red juice ran through the ridges of the peel forming patterns not unlike those on his pottery shard.

A one-armed beggar with a scarred face and a pendulant, cloudy eye sidled into the Unicorn, careful to avoid the disapproving glance of Buboe. As the ragged creature moved from table to table collecting copper pittance from the disturbed patrons, Walegrin noted the tightly wound tunic under his rags and knew the left arm was as good as the one that was snapping up the coins. Likewise, the scar was a self-induced disfigurement and the yellow rheum running down his cheek the result of seeds placed under his eyelids. The beggar announced his arrival at Walegrin's table with a tortured wheeze. Without looking up Walegrin tossed him a silver coin. He had run with the beggars himself and seen their cunning deceit become crippling reality many times too often.

Buboe split the last accessible louse in his copious beard between his grimy fingernails, looked up, and noticed the beggar, whom he threw into the street. He shuffled a few more mugs of beer to his patrons, then returned to the never ending task of chasing lice.

The door opened again, admitting another who, like Walegrin, was in the Maze on business. Walegrin drew a small circle in the air with a finger and the newcomer hastened to his table.

"My man was slain last night by following your suggestions." Walegrin stared directly into the newcomer's eyes as he spoke.

"So I've heard, and the Enlibrite potter as well. I've rushed over here to assure you that it was not my doing (though I knew you would suspect me). Why, Walegrin, even if I did want to double-cross you (and I doubly assure you that such thoughts never go through my mind) I'd hardly have killed the Enlibrite as well, would I?"

Walegrin grunted. Who was to say what a man of Sanctuary might do to achieve his goals? But the information broker was likely to be telling the truth. He had an air of distracted indignation about him that a liar would not think to affect. And if he were truthful then, like as not, Runo had been the victim of coincidental outrage. The coins showed that robbery was not the motive. Perhaps the potter had enemies. Walegrin reminded himself to enter the double slaying in the garrison roster where, in due course, it might be investigated when the dozens preceding it had been disposed of.

"Still, once again, I have received no information. I will still make no payment." Walegrin casually spun the beer mug from one hand to the other as he spoke, concealing the import of his conversation from prying eyes.

"There're others who can bait your bear: Markmor, Enas Yorl, even Lythande, if the price is right. Think of this only as a delay, my friend, not failure."

"No! The omens here grow bad. Three times you've tried and failed to get me what I require. I conclude my business with you." The information broker survived by knowing when to cut his losses. Nodding politely, he left Walegrin without a word and left the Unicorn before Buboe had thought to get his order.

Walegrin leaned back on his stool, hands clenched behind his head, his eyes alert for movement but his thoughts wandering. The death of Runo had affected him deeply, not because the man was a good soldier and long-time companion, though he had been both, but because the death had demonstrated the enduring power of the S'danzo curse on his family. Fifteen years before, the S'danzo community had decreed that all things meaningful to his father should be taken away or destroyed while the man looked helplessly on. For good measure the crones had extended the curse for five generations. Walegrin was the first. He dreaded that day when his path crossed with some forgotten child of his own who would bear him no better will than he bore his own ignominious sire.

It had been sheer madness to return to Sanctuary, to the origin of the curse, despite the assurances of the Purple Mage's protection. Madness! The S'danzo felt him coming. The Purple Mage, the one person Walegrin trusted to unravel the spell, had disappeared long before he and his men arrived in town. And now the Enlibrite potter and Runo were dead by some unknown hand. How much longer could he afford to stay? True, there were many magicians here, and any could be bought, but they all had their petty loyalties. If they could reconstruct the shard's inscription, they certainly could not be trusted to keep quiet about it. If Illyra did not provide the answers at midnight, Walegrin resolved to take his men somewhere far from this accursed town.

He would have continued his litany of dislike had he not been brought to alertness by the distress call of a mountain hawk: a bird never seen or heard within the walls of Sanctuary. The call was the alarm signal amongst his men. He left a few coins on the table and departed the Unicorn without undue notice.

A second call led him down a passageway too narrow to be called an alley, much less a street. Moving with stealth and caution, Walegrin eased around forgotten doorways suspecting ambush with every step. Only a third call and the appearance of a familiar face in the shadows quickened his pace.

"Malm, what is it?" he asked, stepping over some soft, stinking mass without looking down.

"See for yourself."

A weak shaft of light made its way through the jutting roofs of a half-dozen buildings to illuminate a pair of corpses. One was the information broker who had just left Walegrin's company, a makeshift knife still protruding from his neck. The other was the beggar to whom he'd given the silver coin. The latter bore the cleaner mark of the accomplished killer.

"I see," Walegrin replied dully.

"The ragged one, he followed the other away from the Unicorn. I'd been following the broker since we found out about Runo, so I began to follow them both. When the broker caught on that he was being followed, he lit up this cul-de-sac—by



mistake, I'd guess—and the beggar followed him. I found the broker like this and killed the beggar myself.”

Two more deaths for the curse. Walegrin stared at the bodies, then praised Malm's diligence and sent him back to the garrison barracks to prepare for Illyra's visit. He left the corpses in the cul-de-sac where they might never be found. This pair he would not enter into the garrison roster.

Walegrin paced the length of the town, providing the inhibiting impression of a garrison officer actually on duty, though if a murder had occurred at his feet he would not have noticed. Twice he passed the entrance of the bazaar, twice hesitated, and twice continued on his way. Sunset found him by the Promise of Heaven as the priests withdrew into their temples and the Red Lanterns women made their first promenade. By full darkness he was on the Wideway, hungry and close in spirit to the fifteen-year-old who had swum the harbour and stowed away in the hold of an outbound ship one horrible night many years ago.

In the moonless night that memory returned to him with palpable force. In the grip of his depravities and obsessed by the imagined infidelity of his mistress, his father had tortured and killed her. Walegrin could recall that much. After the murder he had run from the barracks to the harbour. He knew the end of the story from campfire tales after he'd joined the army himself. Unsatisfied with murder, his father had dismembered her body, throwing the head and organs into the palace sewer-stream and the rest into the garrison stewpot.

Sanctuary boasted no criers to shout out the hours of the night. When there was a moon its progress gave approximate time, but in its absence night was an eternity, and midnight that moment when your joints grew stiff from sitting on the damp stone pilings of the Wideway and dark memories threatened the periphery of your vision. Walegrin bought a torch from the cadaverous watchman at the charnel house and entered the quiet bazaar.

Illyra emerged from the blacksmith's stall the second time Walegrin used the mountain hawk cry. She had concealed herself in a dark cloak which she held tightly around herself. Her movements betrayed her fears. Walegrin led the way in hurried silence. He took her arm at the elbow when they came into sight of the barracks. She hesitated, then continued without his urging.

Walegrin's men were nowhere to be seen in the common room that separated the men's and officers' quarters. Illyra paced the room like a caged animal, remembering.

“You'll need a table, candles, and what else?” he asked, eager to be on with the night's activity and suddenly mindful that he had brought her back to this place.

“It's so much smaller than I remember it,” she said, then added, “just the table and candles, I've brought the rest myself.”

Walegrin pulled a table closer to the hearth. While he gathered up candles she unfastened her cloak and placed it over the table. She wore sombre woollens appropriate for a modest woman from the better part of town instead of the gaudy layers of the S'danzo costume. Walegrin wondered from whom she had borrowed them and if she had told her husband after all. It mattered little so long as she could pierce the spell over his shard.

“Shall I leave you alone?” Walegrin asked after removing the pottery fragment from the pouch and placing it on the table.

"No, I don't want to be alone in here." Illyra shuffled her fortune cards, dropping several in her nervousness, then set the deck back on the table and asked, "Is it too much to ask for some wine and information about what I'm supposed to be looking for?" A trace of the bazaar scrappiness returned to her voice and she was less lost within the room.

"My man Thrusher wanted to lay in an orgy feast when I told him I'd require the common room tonight. Then I told him I only wanted the men out—but it's a poor barracks without a flask in it, poorer than Sanctuary." He found a half-filled wineskin behind a sideboard, squirted some into his mouth, and swallowed with a rare smile. "Not the best vintage, but passable. You'll have to drink from the skin..." He handed it to her.

"I drank from a skin before I'd seen a cup. It's a trick you never forget." Illyra took the wineskin from him and caught a mouthful of wine without splattering a drop. "Now, Walegrin," she began, emboldened by the musty wine, "Walegrin, I can't get either your pottery nor Haakon's oranges out of my mind. What is the connection?"

"If this Haakon peddles Enlibar oranges, then it's simple. I got the shard in Enlibar, in the ruins of the armoury there. We searched three days and found only this. But, if anyone's got a greater piece he knows not what he has, else there'd be an army massing somewhere that'd have the Empire quaking."

Illyra's eyes widened. "All from a piece of cheap red clay?"

"Not the pottery, my dear sister. The armourer put the formula for Enlibar steel on a clay tablet and had a wizard spell the glaze to conceal it. I sensed the spell, but I cannot break it."

"But this might only be a small piece." Illyra ran her finger along the fragment's worn edges. "Maybe not even a vital part."

"Your S'danzo gifts are heedless of time, are they not?"

"Well, yes—the past and future are clear to us."

"Then you should be able to scry back to when the glaze was applied and glimpse the entire tablet."

Illyra shifted uneasily. "Yes, perhaps, I could glimpse it but, Walegrin, I don't *read*," she shrugged and grinned with the wine.

Walegrin frowned, considering the near-perfect irony of the curse's functioning. No doubt Illyra could, would, see the complete tablet and be unable to tell him what was on it.

"Your cards, they have writing on them." He pointed at the runic verses hoping that she could read runes but not ordinary script.

She shrugged again. "I use the pictures and my gifts. My cards are not S'danzo work." She seemed to apologize for the deck's origin, turning the pile face down to hide the offensive ink trails. "S'danzo are artists. We paint pictures in fate." She squirted herself another mouthful of wine.

"Pictures?" Walegrin asked. "Would you see a clear enough image of the tablet to draw its double here on the table?"

"I could try. I've never done anything like that before."

"Then try now," Walegrin suggested, taking the wineskin away from her.

Illyra placed the shard atop the deck, then brought both to her forehead. Exhaling until she felt the world grow dim, the wine-euphoria left her

and she became S'danzo exercising that capricious gift the primordial gods had settled upon her kind. She exhaled again and forgot that she was in her mother's death chamber. Eyes closed, she lowered the deck and pottery to the table and drew three cards, face up.

Seven of Ore: again, red clay; the potter with his wheel and kiln.

Quicksilver: a molten waterfall; the alchemic ancestor of all ores: the ace-card of the suit of Ores.

Two of Ore: steel; war-card; death-card with masked men fighting. She spread her fingers to touch each card and lost herself in search of the Enlibrite forge.

The armourer was old, his hand shook as he moved the brush over the unfired tablet. An equally ancient wizard fretted beside him, glancing fearfully over her shoulder beyond the limits of Illyra's S'danzo gifts. Their clothing was like nothing Illyra had seen in Sanctuary. The vision wavered when she thought of the present and she dutifully returned to the armoury. Illyra mimicked the armourer's motions as he covered the tablet with rows of dense, incomprehensible symbols. The wizard took the tablet and sprinkled fine sand over it. He chanted a sing-song language as meaningless as the ink marks. Illyra sensed the beginnings of the spell and withdrew across time to the barracks in Sanctuary.

Walegrin had removed the cloth from the table and placed a charcoal stylus in her hand without her sensing it. For a fleeting moment she compared her copying to the images still in her mind. Then the image was gone and she was fully back in the room, quietly watching Walegrin as he stared at the table.

"Is it what you wanted?" she asked softly.

Walegrin did not answer, but threw back his head in cynical laughter. "Ah, my sister! Your mother's people are clever. Their curse reaches back to the dawn of time. Look at this!"

He pointed at the copied lines and obediently Illyra examined them closely.

"They are not what you wanted?"

Walegrin took the card of Quicksilver and pointed to the lines of script that delineated the waterfall. "These are the runes that have been used since Ilsig attained her height, but this—" he traced a squiggle on the table, "this is older than Ilsig. By Calisard, Vortheld, and a thousand gods of long dead soldiers, how foolish I've been! For years I've chased the secret of Enlibar steel and never realized that the formula would be as old as the ruins we found it in."

Illyra reached across the table and held his clenched fists between her palms. "Surely there are those who can read this? How different can one sort of writing be from another?" she asked with an illiterate's innocence.

"As different as the speech of the Raggah is from yours."

Illyra nodded. It was not the time to tell him that when the Raggah came to trade they bargained with hand signals so none could hear their speech. "You could go to a scriptorium along Governor's Walk. They sell letters like Blind Jakob sells fruit—it won't matter what the letter says as long as you pay the price," she suggested.

"You don't understand, 'Lyra. If the formula becomes known again, ambition will seek it out. Rulers will arm their men with Enlibar steel and set out to conquer their neighbours. Wars will ruin the land and the men who live on

it.” Walegrin had calmed himself and begun to trace the charcoal scratches onto a piece of translucent parchment.

“But, you wish to have it.” Illyra’s tone became accusing.

“For ten years I’ve campaigned for Ranke. I’ve taken my men far north, beyond the plains. In those lands there’re nomads with no cause to fear us. Swift and outnumbering us by thousands they cut through our ranks like a knife through soft cheese. We fell back and the Emperor had our commanders hung as cowards. We went forwards again, with new officers, and were thrown back again with the same results. I was commissioned myself and feared we’d be sent forwards a third time, but Ranke has discovered easier gold to conquer in the east and the army left its dead in the field to chase some other Imperial ambition.

“I remembered the stories of Enlibar. I hid there when I first escaped this town. With Enlibar steel my men’s swords would reap nomad blood and I would not be deemed a coward.

“I found men in the capitol who listened to my plans. They knew the army and knew the battlefield. They’re no friends of a hidebound Emperor who sees no more of war than a parade ground, but they became my friends. They gave me leave to search the ruins with my men and arranged for the garrison posts here when all omens said the answer lay in Sanctuary. If I can return to them with the formula the army won’t be the whipping-boy of lazy Emperors. Someday men who understand steel and blood would rule... but, I’ve failed them. The damned S’danzo curse has preceded me! The mage was gone when I got here and my dreams have receded further with each step I decided to take.”

“Walegrin,” Illyra began, “the S’danzo are not that powerful. Look at the cards. I cannot read your writing, but I can read them and there are no curses in your fate. You’ve found what you came for. Red clay yields steel through the Ore ruler, Quicksilver. True, Quicksilver is a deceiver, but only because its depths are concealed. Quicksilver will let you change this scribbling into something more to your liking.” She was S’danzo again, dispensing wisdom amid her candles, but without the bright colours and heavy kohl her words had a new urgent sincerity.

“You are touched by the same curse! You lie with your husband yet have no children.”

Illyra shrank back ashamed. “I... I use the S’danzo gifts; I must believe in their powers. But you seek the power of steel and war. You need not believe in S’danzo; you need not fear them. You ran away—you escaped! The only curse upon you is that of your own guilt.”

She averted her eyes from his face and collected her cards carefully lest her trembling fingers send the deck flying across the rough-hewn floors. She shook out her cloak, getting relief from her anger in the whip-like snap of the heavy material.

“I’ve answered your questions. I’ll take my payment, if you please.” She extended her hand, still not looking at his face.

Walegrin unfastened the suede pouch from his belt and placed it on the table. “I’ll get the torch and we can leave for the bazaar.”

“No, I’ll take the torch and go alone.”

“The streets are no place for a woman after dark.”

“I’ll get by—I did before.”

"I'll have one of my men accompany you."

"All right," Illyra agreed, inwardly relieved by the compromise.

From the speed with which the soldier appeared Illyra guessed he had been right outside all along and party to everything that had passed. Regardless, the man took the torch and walked slightly ahead of her, attentive to duty but without any attempt at conversation until they reached the bazaar gates where Illyra had to step forwards to guide them both through the maze of stalls.

She took her leave of the man without farewell and slipped into the darkness of her home. Familiarity obviated need for light. She moved quickly and quietly, folding the clothes into a neat bundle and storing the precious pouch with her few other valuables before easing into the warm bed.

"You've returned safely. I was ready to pull on my trousers and come looking for you. Did he give you all that he promised?" Dubro whispered, settling his arms around her.

"Yes, and I answered all his questions. He has the formula now for Enlibar steel, whatever that is, and if his purposes are true he'll make much of it." Her body released its tension in a series of small spasms and Dubro held her tighter.

"Enlibar steel," he mused softly. "The swords of legend were of Enlibar steel. The man who possesses such steel now would be a man to be reckoned with... even if he were a blacksmith."

Illyra pulled the linen over her ears and pretended not to hear.

"SWEETMEATS! SWEETMEATS! ALWAYS the best in the bazaar! Always the best in Sanctuary!"

Mornings were normal again with Haakon wheeling his cart past the blacksmith's stall before the crowds disrupted the community. Illyra, one eye ringed with kohl and the other still pristine, raced out to purchase their breakfast treats.

"There's news in the town," the vendor said as he dropped three of the pastries onto Illyra's plate. "Twice news in fact. All of last night's watch from the garrison took its leave of the town during the night and the crippled scribe who lived in the Street of Armourers was carried off amid much screaming and commotion. Of course, there was no watch to answer the call. The Hell Hounds consider it beneath them to patrol the law-abiding parts of town." Haakon's ire was explained, in part, by his own residence in the upper floors of a house on the Street of Armourers.

Illyra looked at Dubro, who nodded slowly in return.

"Might they be connected?" she asked.

"Pah! What would fleeing garrison troops want with a man who reads fifteen dead languages but can't pass water without someone to guide his hands?"

What indeed?

Dubro went back to his forge and Illyra stared over the bazaar walls to the palace which marked the northern extent of the town. Haakon, who had expected a less mysterious reaction to his news, muttered farewell and wheeled his cart to another stall for a more sympathetic audience.

The first of the day's townsfolk could he heard arguing with other vendors. Illyra hurried back into the shelter of the stall to complete her daily transformation into

a S'danzo crone. She pulled Walegrin's three Ore cards from her deck and placed them in the pouch with her mother's jewellery, lit the incense of gentle-forgetting, and greeted the first querent of the day.

