

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

THE ASSASSIN OF LAURENTIUM

Clodia Metelli

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

THE ASSASSIN OF LAURENTIUM

By Clodia Metelli

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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[Morning mist background 6](#);

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THE ASSASSIN OF LAURENTIUM

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Photo Description

Photo 1: The first photo shows a beautiful young man with long blond hair reclining in an opulent bedchamber. Naked but for a few folds of light fabric, he wears heavy gold jewellery and has striking scarlet eyes. Beside him are a bunch of grapes and a silver jug.

Photo 2: The second picture shows a muscular man with shoulder-length dark hair reclining on a simple bed with only a blanket covering his loins.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I'm among the most sought-after male courtesans in the land (picture 1). With the body and skill of a dancer, I've been extensively trained in the art of seducing and pleasing men. But known only to a select few, I'm equally skilled in the art of espionage and assassination. You'd be surprised how easily powerful men spill secrets in the bedroom.

I like to think that my assignments have always been on the side of right, but it's still a soul-killing and solitary existence. I was given to the king's spymaster as a youth on the verge of manhood so my parents could feed and clothe my brothers and sisters. I left behind my best friend and first love who occupies my dreams even after all these years. I have yet to find that man who makes me feel as secure and safe.

I'm being given a new guard as I prepare to travel to my next assignment (picture 2). When he comes to my quarters, I'm struck by his physical presence but why does he seem so familiar?

Author requests: I love how rich and detailed the world building can be in fantasy—I'd like to see a little of that here. I'm always a sucker for (a long lost) childhood friends to lovers story—the more UST the better. Please give it a HEA or HFN ending but other than that, just run with it.

Sincerely,

Karl

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: bodyguard, assassin, spy, courtesan, BDSM, slow burn/ust, friends to lovers

Content Warnings: HFN

Word Count: 16,327

Acknowledgement

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THE ASSASSIN OF LAURENTIUM

By Clodia Metelli

List of Characters

Prince Aethelius - a twenty-six-year-old nobleman. Handsome and popular, he is cousin to Ptolemaius, Emperor of Laurentium

Artor - a twenty-four-year-old slave, owned by the Laurentine Emperor and under the direct control of the Clarissimus Florianus, the Emperor's Vizier and spymaster. He has been educated to the highest standard and trained as an assassin and courtesan in the Empire's service. He is originally from Thorium, a place of deep forest and small village communities.

Lady Brynne - a woman of sixty-one years. Chief advisor to Fortingern, Dux of Meringo.

Clarissimus Florianus - a man of fifty years. Vizier and spymaster to the Emperor Ptolemaius of Laurentium.

Fortingern, Dux of Meringo - a man of forty-five years. Ruler of the Laurentine Empire's second city, Meringo.

Gaheris - a man of twenty-seven years. Slave of the Emperor Ptolemaius, appointed by Florianus as personal bodyguard to Artor. To his Laurentine masters he answers to the name of Troilius, not wanting to give them his real name. Formerly of Thorium.

Iason - a man of thirty-four years. Slave of the Emperor Ptolemaius and employed as personal servant to Artor.

Pomona - a woman of forty years. Slave of the Emperor Ptolemaius and employed as personal maid to Artor.

Stephanus Ptolemaius, Emperor of Laurentium - a boy of fourteen years. (Does not appear directly in the story) A ruler mostly in name, he is a shy, unconfident boy, not particularly popular as Emperor. He loyally hero-worships his older, more glamorous cousin Aethelius.

1

Artor was swimming; it was a blazing summer day and he was striking out for the centre of a shady pool that nestled in the overgrown meadow that bordered his village, before the forest began in earnest. The sun shone dappled through the willow branches on his bare wet skin. Sprawled on a sun-baked stone rising from the water's depth, someone was waiting for him, laughing.

There was someone in his chamber. Instantly, Artor left his watery dreamworld far behind, was aware only of his straining senses, of the jewelled dagger that lay under his pillow, of the precise sequence of movements necessary for him to be upright, dagger in hand in the time it took for an arrow to find its mark.

“Good morning, sir. I've brought your breakfast.”

It was Iason, his servant, standing in the doorway holding a tray, his figure greyly delineated by the dull light of early morning seeping through the shutters.

“Why have you disturbed me so early?” Even to his own ears, Artor's voice sounded shrill, petulant. He'd been getting up after noon over the past month, generally passing the remainder of the day moping in his opulent quarters.

“You have a summons from His Clarissimus Florianus. He wishes to see you directly after you've breakfasted.”

Artor bit his lip at this and took the tray in silence. A bunch of blushing grapes, a silver goblet of sweet wine and a platter of soft, hot cakes, sweetened with melting honey made up his dainty repast. He had known it would only be a matter of time before his period of respite came to an end.

A jealous, crazy nobleman, evidently misunderstanding the nature of a courtesan's calling, had broken into his apartments in a distant palace, enraged by the rumour that Artor had taken on a new lover in preference to him. Taken utterly by surprise, Hercle, his guard, had been stabbed in the stomach by the killer as he slept before his door. Nonetheless, Hercle had grabbed his weapon and, despite his injury, managed to fight his attacker to the death in defence of his charge. It was hours later that Hercle died, his agonies barely soothed by the powerful draughts Artor had concocted for him.

Over and over, during the past month, Artor had replayed the event in his mind, thinking of how Hercle had lost his life defending him. At least the

nobleman had acted from foolish jealousy, nothing more. If his attack had been motivated by the discovery that Artor was not merely a faithless lover, but had been sent to spy on him, was smuggling regular detailed dossiers of his words and actions back to Florianus in Laurentium, Artor's guilt and self-recriminations would have been that much sharper. As it was, he could comfort himself that he had not failed in performing his duties, had merely been subject to ill-fortune and the hazards of the courtesan's trade.

Artor sighed, and got to his feet, pulling a silken robe around himself and heading for the bathing chamber that adjoined his bedroom. A conflicted expression crossed the servant's face; Iason would not venture to remonstrate with the young master, yet he was very conscious that his orders from the Clarissimus were that Artor should be brought before him without the delay occasioned by a courtesan's leisurely bath.

The bathing chamber was a round, vaulted room, faced with glittering mosaics of gold and green. The bath itself was a sunken hollow at the centre. At a word from Artor, a loinclothed slave, standing by, cranked a wheel that turned with a grating sound. The faucets, ringing the pool from on high and shaped in the forms of gods and nymphs, fish and sea serpents, began to gush forth, steaming hot water gradually filling the sunken bath.

When the water was at waist height, Artor shrugged off his robe and, naked, descended the marble steps into the bath. Throughout his days of withdrawal from the world he had taken comfort in this heated pool, floating for what seemed like hours in reflective silence, until the sunlight dimmed in the green glass panels above his head and the servants came to light the sconces which cast their uneasy swaying lights over the surface of the water. Now, Artor called briskly for Iason to come and cleanse his limbs and body with scented oils and unguents, to rinse his blond tresses in apple vinegar and honey, massage and scrape until his skin felt alive and glowing, his blood pumping through him with new vigour.

From behind his desk, Florianus looked unamused at having been kept waiting. A tall, greybearded, somewhat emaciated man of around fifty years, he was clad in a thick robe of black velvet. Silently, Artor went to his knees before him, his eyes cast down to the dizzying configurations of the floor tiles. He remembered the dread and shame he had felt when he was first required to perform this act of obeisance, when he was brought before Florianus nine years

ago as a boy of fifteen. Now, he felt only a distanced acceptance at complying with the ancient protocol of the Laurentine court.

“It is good to see you in the land of the living again, boy. The death of Hercle shook you badly.”

“Yes, Clarissimus. He was a loyal protector and a friend.”

“He did what he had sworn to do; to die in your service if need be. We all have our duties to perform, Artor, from the Emperor down to the lowest slave who empties the chamber pots. It is essential to the survival of our great Empire that we all perform those duties, large or small to the best of our ability.”

“Yes, Clarissimus.”

“You have grieved long enough. The time has come for you to resume your service to the Empire.”

Artor nodded his bowed head in acquiescence.

“We have need of your talents once again Artor, a new mission. I will outline the details for you presently, but first I must introduce you to your new bodyguard.” Florianus clapped his hands.

A curtained door, opposite the one by which Artor had entered, opened as though someone had been waiting just on the other side of it.

Two servants entered, wearing tunics dyed in the crimson and gold of the Empire. They escorted a man who towered over them in his brief shirt of undyed cloth; a man of impressive build, yet with a sinewy tautness of muscle which hinted at quickness and agility as much as sheer strength. This feline sense of power was augmented by the mane of dark hair that tumbled down his shoulders in a tangle of ungroomed curls.

Artor had already risen to his feet; the balance of hierarchies in the room had shifted.

“Troilius, this is your new master, Artor. Make your obeisance to him.”

Without hesitation, the man moved forward and knelt in fealty to his slender fellow slave. As he did so, Artor caught his eye and a shock of confused recognition shot through him. Only a momentary flicker in the bodyguard's glance suggested that it had been reciprocated.

“Are you ready to take the oath?”

“Yes, Clarissimus.”

The man's voice was deep, throaty, the accent achingly familiar, bringing back to Artor haunting images of the few dozen round, thatched huts, the strips of cultivated land and vegetable patches surrounded by a high wicker barricade, beyond which lay the immense forest, the edges of which might be foraged and hunted, while the interior contained unknown, mythical terrors that stalked by night. This had been the breadth and extent of his world for the first fifteen years of his life.

“Artor, I dedicate myself body, soul and heart to your safety and protection, in the name of Corwidiane, Patroness of Warriors and Triumpatus, the Laurentine Hero God. I swear that I will put no thought of personal advantage or safety over your preservation, and will gladly sacrifice life and limb if called upon to do so in your service. I vow myself to obedience to you in all things, save only if I believe that obedience would place you in unacceptable danger or would constitute treachery to the Laurentine Empire.”

“Troilius, I accept your oath of fealty and trust you to serve me well and faithfully.”

A strong, callused hand took Artor's fair one. The bodyguard pressed it to his lips, the closing gesture of the rite of consecration, and Artor had to repress his shudder at the hot breath, the graze of stubble on his skin. Again, there was that painful, incredible flicker of familiarity.

“You may both be seated.” Florianus gestured to a couple of wooden chairs. “I need your full attention for what follows.”

When they had taken their seats opposite him, Florianus drew out a large piece of parchment, tilting a polished, carved gem above it to magnify the words for his ease of reading.

“Artor, what can you tell me about the land of Meringo?”

Unconsciously, Artor folded his hands neatly in his lap. He had come to Laurentium knowing only the lore of his people; a wealth of practical skills and the dark tales of the forests. Laurentium had been but a name to him, conjuring up vague images of shiny stone, bright clothing, swords and power. He had heard of writing, but did not really understand how it worked.

Since then, some of the brightest luminaries of the Laurentine court had tutored Artor in literature, mathematics, philosophy, history, geography, rhetoric, high etiquette, and religion, along with all the other graces and accomplishments that made up the Laurentine man of culture, and some which

were very specific to his vocation. He had been thoroughly, ineradicably steeped and dyed in Laurentine culture, taught to forget all that was deemed fit only for forest-dwelling barbarians.

It was readily then that he answered his master's enquiry.

"Meringo, Clarissimus, is a Dukedom that lies beyond the water. It is one of the first and foremost cities of the Laurentine Empire, having been pacified four hundred and ten years before the start of his current Imperial Majesty's reign. The modern city is second in size and wealth only to Laurentium itself, having expanded rapidly in the past century. Meringo's main exports are wine, wheat, slaves, hunting dogs and woven cloth."

"Very good, Artor, and what can you tell me of its governance?"

"Meringo is governed by a Dux, an hereditary appointment ratified by His Imperial Majesty. The present incumbent is one Fortingern, the descendent of Laurentine nobles on his father's side and of the native Meringan Royal House on his mother's. He has ruled for seventeen years, with his Dukedom marked by peace, prosperity and good governance.

"Fortingern was widowed three years ago. His two sons both died as young men fighting in His Imperial Majesty's armies. His daughter, the Lady Clothilde is married to the Clarissimus Pericleon and is resident in Laurentium. Fortingern is generally accounted a loyal subject of His Imperial Majesty."

"Excellent, Artor. I'm glad to see you've kept yourself up to date. All that you say is accurate according to current knowledge. However, disturbing reports have come to me by those who have travelled to Meringo and have had access to the Ducal Court; suggestions that Fortingern may not be as loyal as his record would lead us to believe. They say he boasts inordinately of the greatness of his new city, disparaging the ancient greatness of Laurentium and hinting that the time has come for the balance of power to be shifted, for the ancient to make way for the new—in short, that Meringo should be the first city of the Empire, with himself at its head. He is rumoured to declare that Laurentium's day is done and even to comment upon His Imperial Majesty's youth and character."

Florianus kept his tone carefully neutral as he said this last. It was well known both to him and his protégé that Emperor Stephanus Ptolemaius was not merely but a child of fourteen, but was an awkward, pudgy and ungifted youth, sadly lacking in either the grace or confidence that befitted the sole ruler

of the vast and ancient Laurentine Imperium. The boy lived permanently in the shadow of his handsome older cousin, Prince Aethelius, whom Ptolemaius kept ever at his side.

“Since his wife’s death, Fortingern has openly taken beautiful young men as his favourites though he has no particular pet at this time.

“Your mission, Artor, will be to travel to Meringo, gain Fortingern as your lover and find out whether these rumours have any basis. Should you discover that Fortingern intends any actual treachery to Laurentium, beyond mere boasting of his own fine city, your task will be to see that Fortingern dies in a believably accidental manner. This is very important. If we are to install Clothilde and the Clarissimus Pericleon as his successors, it is vital that the lady has no reason to believe Laurentium had any hand in her father’s death. War with Meringo is absolutely to be avoided.”

Again, there was the unspoken understanding that it was far from certain that the forces of the Laurentine Imperium could still stand up against the barbarian vigour of Meringo.

“I understand my mission, Clarissimus. I will fulfil it without fail.”

“Laurentium expects no less from you. Artor, you will take ship for Meringo in three days time. That will allow you to get acquainted with your new bodyguard and make preparations. You will, of course, be issued with monies and accommodation required to set yourself up as a courtesan of the highest degree once you get to Meringo. Place orders for any new silks, perfumes and what have you, with the supplies department by noon tomorrow and they will procure them before your departure. Any questions?”

“No, Clarissimus. I will send to you if I think of anything.”

“Splendid.” Florianus treated Artor to a rare, thin smile that came and went almost upon the instant. “You may show Troilius back to your quarters.”

It was in silence and with barely a glance exchanged that the two men walked together down the many long corridors and several flights of stairs, until they got to the courtesan’s opulent quarters in one of the older parts of the vast palace structure that was still in use.

Once they were alone together in Artor’s elegant little reception hall, they stood face to face and eyed each other in silence, taking each other in.

“*Gaheris?*” It was Artor who finally broke the silence.

“You remember me then?” The voice was gruff. Gaheris answered in Thori, Artor’s native tongue, which he had scarcely heard for almost a decade. It came back to him in an instant.

“Of course I remember you. You—you’ve changed though.”

The Gaheris he remembered had been a lithe and slender huntsman. Now, he was filled out with hard muscle, his skin, once pale from his life of night expeditions to the forest, now darkly tanned. Faint lines crossed his forehead and radiated from the corners of his eyes. Although he was only a year or so older than Artor he seemed to have sustained a great deal more wear and tear.

Gaheris looked Artor up and down as he stood in his silken raiment. “So have you.”

Artor blushed hotly like the awkward boy he’d been when they last saw each other. A son of peasants, he’d worn a rough brown smock and hide breeches, his startlingly fair locks a tangled crop, his milky skin burned and blotchy from long hours working in the fields.

“How comes it that you’re here? You, you told me you’d rather die than be a slave.”

Artor remembered Gaheris’ look of contempt when he’d stepped on to the slavers’ cart without protest, as soon as the sacks of grain were handed over to his gaunt parents, who couldn’t look at him. His youngest sibling, a girl, Rowena, had perished the night before.

“I was captured raiding cattle from a Laurentine magnate. They sentenced me to die in the arena, but after my first fight, when I’d killed the champion expected to make short work of me, I was brought before the Clarissimus. He took the measure of me with those cold eyes of his, then, when he’d made up his mind, he told me I could either go back and die in the arena or swear myself to his service, have an honourable career.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t prefer an honourable death to treating with Laurentines, accepting slavery.”

Gaheris looked almost ashamed. “I never wanted to give an inch to those greedy, murderous bastards, but to throw my life away seemed wrong too. I felt the will of Corwidiane in it, and you don’t despise the gifts of the Gods. I agreed, then, to whatever it was, as long as it wasn’t to hurt the innocent or guard one of their hellish prisons. I’d rather die than be the bastard who throws someone else to the beasts. The Clarissimus gave his word it would be nothing

like that, but I never guessed it would be,” he waved his hand at Artor in wonderment, “you.”

“My bodyguard Hercle died just over a month ago. I knew they would find me another, but of course I didn't expect...”

“So, is this true what they tell me, that you're a hired killer, a *prostitute*?”

Artor drew himself up, “I am trained in the arts of the assassin and the courtesan in the service of the Laurentine Empire, yes.”

“In the service of the Laurentine Empire.” Gaheris shook his head, “You've really taken to this enslavement, haven't you? Don't you remember who you are? Where you come from?”

“I do remember. I remember an ugly, muddy place where poor, ignorant people lived in wretched huts and scratched at the soil every day of their short, miserable lives. I remember knowing nothing of books, of philosophy, poetry, the cultivation of the body and the mind.

“I know all too well that Laurentium has had to make hard choices over the centuries to flourish, but that's the price of civilisation. Laurentium has taught me the arts of civilisation and those are the values I live my life by. When I remember Thorium, I remember why I dedicated my life to uphold the chance of something better.”

“So you're grateful that slavers came to our village in the midst of famine and took you from your starving parents for a few bags of grain?”

Artor shrugged, “They'd have starved otherwise and so would I. Instead I got the chance to make something of myself.”

“If you'd had the balls for it, you could have joined with me and we'd have taken what we needed from those rich landowners, sitting on their vast acres, feeding the best corn to their thoroughbreds while children perish from hunger. I raided cattle and grain stores so that our village might eat, but buying a starving child for profit? It takes civilisation to come up with that.”

Bruised by the rebuke, Artor's face froze, then he shrugged. “Your fine plan of action brought you in chains to the arena. Forgive me if I didn't jump at it as a solution.”

There was a silence, then there was a short, harsh laugh, rusty, as though it were seldom used. “True enough, I suppose. Your way got you this,” his gesture took in Artor's marble floored apartment, the divans with their silken

cushions, the walls painted with bright frescoes, the ornate fittings. There was more acceptance than contempt in his tone.

“Why do they call you Troilius?” asked Artor, as peace seemed established for now. “I kept my name.”

“I didn’t want mine sullied on their lips so I didn’t give it to them. Troilius was the name they picked for me when they sent me into the arena, dressed in a skin loincloth to fight a fully armoured warrior with a club in my hand. Some kind of Laurentine joke. I turned the joke on them though, so I decided to stick with the name.”

“Troilus is the name of one of our—” Gaheris raised his eyebrows, “of the *Laurentine* heroes, who fought with a club, so they were complimenting you in a way.”

“The kind of compliment I can well do without. Artor, would it be too uncouth of me in these exalted surroundings to point out that I haven’t eaten since early this morning? The Clarissimus had been expecting you sooner.”

“Of course.” Mortified, Artor realised that they were still standing in the hall, staring at each other. “Come into my sitting room.”

Artor had to hide his smile at the look of caution with which Gaheris lowered himself on the divan, as though he feared to be buried alive by the softness of the deep cushions. Settling himself cross-legged beside his bodyguard, Artor clapped his hands in an habitual gesture and almost immediately a servant appeared, bowing low before him. Catching Gaheris’ stare, Artor flushed and tried to recall when it had ceased to be strange that he could summon others to do his bidding with a clap of the hands.

Despite his raised eyebrows, Gaheris was glad enough to avail himself of the luncheon that was put before him: round, fresh-baked loaves of bread, cheese, olives, roast kid and fruit, along with jugs of wine and water. In his turn, Artor tried not to stare when Gaheris took his wine neat.

When evening came, Artor showed Gaheris to his bedchamber: a woven carpet of intricate design on the marble floor, a high, ornate couch spread with coverlets of silk and wool, while tapestries showing scenes of city life depicted in minute detail hung from the walls. The air was redolent with the heady scent of the fresh flowers standing in great vases on occasional tables carved of rare wood and inlaid with gold.

“That’s where Hercle used to sleep.” Artor indicated a truckle bed close by the door. In contrast to the elegantly bedecked couch on which Artor slept, this

was equipped simply with a thick, yet evidently well-worn sheepskin and a straw-filled sacking pillow.

“That will suit me fine.” Without removing his shirt, Gaheris made himself comfortable on the bed with a grunt and pulled the sheepskin up round his shoulders.

Artor's preparations took rather longer. As he peeled off his silken garments and, naked in the lamplight, massaged cream into his face and combed through his golden tresses, he studiously avoided looking in the direction of the truckle bed, refusing to satisfy his fiery curiosity as to whether Gaheris was peeking. Well, if he was, he may as well get used to the sight.

Once the lamps were out and Artor was lying under his silken sheets on the high couch, he could hear Gaheris' deep, steady breathing. A memory came back to him of how one hot afternoon they had stolen away together to a barn; it had smelled of animal dung, hay. Sprawled and hidden amongst high bales of straw, the goats snuffling and calling below in their pens, they had kissed clumsily and put hands inside each other's smocks and skin breeches. After he had spent, Gaheris had fallen quickly asleep, his arm slung around Artor, his head turned towards him, smiling as the sunlight falling through the wooden boards kissed his face.

Artor chided himself for dwelling on such memories. Gaheris surely would have long put it from his mind; they had just been boys messing about.

2

Three days later, they stood on the quayside, preparing to board ship for Meringo. Along with Gaheris, Artor was also accompanied by a small retinue of servants bearing several large trunks of his clothing and other necessities. An agent of Florianus had already secured luxurious apartments for the courtesan and his staff in the most fashionable district of Meringo, from whence Artor would conduct his campaign to seduce the Dux.

Gaheris was now wearing a smart dark red wool tunic in place of his rough homespun. He wore a travelling cloak of black wool and a sheathed sword hung from his new leather belt. The bodyguard had never been so well-dressed before, yet he was decked out essentially as a sign of his service. This gave him mixed feelings.

The harbourside was crowded. Travellers queued to board the passenger ships, milling around and tripping over each other's luggage. Dockers were loading and unloading cargo from massive freight vessels, while goods were auctioned off for market in the great warehouses. The air rang with the cry of seagulls and the shouts of sailors as they readied their vessels.

It was Gaheris' first opportunity to take in the city at relative leisure. Previously, he had only viewed it as a prisoner under guard, being hustled from one location to another.

The island city rose up above the harbourside, the great palaces and temples of white marble and coloured stone reflecting the harsh sunlight. Now though, Gaheris could see that while the centre of the city with the great Imperial Palace, the administration buildings, the elegant parks and museums, was busy and flourishing, further out the city was looking more than a little unkempt and neglected. The buildings were still magnificent, but it was a magnificence of centuries past.

Creepers protruded through the windows of some of the buildings; there were gaping blank patches in the glittering cupola'd roofs of dead palaces. Grand villas appeared to have been deserted and become the makeshift shelters of hundreds of poor families who tacked mismatched, colourful cloths over ornate windows, and sent their ragged children out to play on the stone steps outside. The city showed signs of withering from the outside in.

Eventually, the ship was ready for embarkation. For a handful of bronze coins, sweating porters hoisted up Artor's half dozen travelling boxes and

stowed them in the hold, while the queue of passengers inched its way towards the gangplank.

Once the ship had set sail and the harbour of Laurentium had grown small in the distance, Gaheris, standing on deck, turned his face towards their mainland destination, craning his neck for a first glimpse of the bare rocky cliffs of Meringo. His home of Thorium lay hundreds of miles to the north of Meringo, but it was only when Gaheris had been taken across this short stretch of sea that he'd felt irrevocably torn from his home and his freedom.

Gaheris was aware that Artor, on the other hand, found little about the short voyage to stir his emotions or interest. His retinue had spread rugs and cushions for him on one of the benches and he was sprawled, reading some dense-looking codex with an air of absorption. Of course, Artor must have made this voyage back and forth many times.

By late morning, the bright sunlight glinting off the waves of the sea, the mainland was well in sight. Soon the ship was sailing down the broad River Tamur towards the city of Meringo.

Once again, Gaheris took advantage of his freedom to gaze at leisure. The contrast between Laurentium and Meringo was striking.

Meringo altogether lacked the grandeur and elegance of Laurentium; there were no exquisite domed palaces or stately pillared temples in this landscape. Only the massive stone castle, towering above the town, offered any reminder that this was a city with centuries of history behind it. Everything else seemed shockingly, brashly, new.

Rows of two- and three-storey houses of honey-coloured stone or newly planed wood were arranged on a grid pattern, an alien orderliness after the grand boulevards and impenetrable alleys of Laurentium. Mechanical cranes broke up the skyline, indicating that the expansion of the city was continuing.

The port of Meringo was at least as busy as that of Laurentium. Barques from all over the known world crammed the docks, their goods being unloaded with shouts into the great lines of warehouses, stretching out beyond the harbour.

As soon as they disembarked, Iason summoned porters to take their baggage and conduct them to Artor's apartments. As they made their way through the bustling streets, Gaheris kept his hand close to his sword hilt, alert to any possible threat to the man he'd sworn to protect.

3

The apartments pleased Artor well enough. Situated in one of the oldest and most fashionable districts, close to the castle, his rooms were on the second floor of a fairly grand building, perhaps a century old, whose various suites of rooms were tenanted by wealthy merchants in Meringo on business, foreign dignitaries and the like. Here, Artor would be close to the centre of Meringan society.

Though it was not far off noon, Artor still lounged in his bed, propped on cushions and nibbling at the fruit that had been placed before him in a silver bowl. Iason had opened the shutters, and Artor was watching the comings and goings in the streets surrounding the castle.

“So what’s the plan?” Gaheris was evidently unable to contain himself any longer. He had been up since dawn, his restless pacing around the apartment occasionally jolting Artor from his slumbers.

Now he stood by the window, looking out. Artor noted that his bodyguard assiduously avoided turning his gaze upon him, as he lay sprawled naked in the bed, the coverlet leaving him exposed from the stomach upwards.

“The plan is that we shall be attending the theatre this evening, where I have secured a box that will place me directly in the Dux’s line of sight. At some point in the course of the evening, he will essay to make my acquaintance and the game will have commenced.”

“How can you be so sure he will want to meet you?” There was as much genuine curiosity as challenge in Gaheris’ tone.

“Because, Gaheris, I am very good at my job.”

Gaheris snorted.

Unperturbed, Artor selected a small peach and bit into it, wiping the juicy sweetness from his lips. Soon it would be time for the serious matter of his bath.

The performance turned out to be quite unlike anything Artor would have expected to see in Laurentium.

At the ancient theatres of his beloved city, with their endless circular tiers of stone seating, the fare was almost exclusively composed of the tragedies and

comedies composed in the high days of Laurentine civilisation, almost a thousand years in the past. Only those of advanced education were able to follow the archaic language. The connoisseur went to the theatre in Laurentium knowing the play word for word, prepared to form a judgement on what made the present performance stand out for good or ill, from the fifty versions seen before.

Ordinary people went to cockfights or boxing matches for amusement, or else to the crude farces and song and dance routines put on by the city's brothels.

This play, by contrast, was in contemporary Lauren, the universal language of the Imperium, though peppered with Meringo colloquialisms. A drama set in the present time about the love lives of ordinary people, it was funny, sad, wry and quite absorbing.

Artor, however, could only give the play a fraction of the attention it deserved; his focus was all upon the Grand Box positioned almost directly opposite him, in which sat the Dux with his entourage.

The man was undoubtedly handsome, in a barbarian sort of way. His full beard and long, braided hair were a defiant contravention of Laurentine social norms. Interesting, Artor reflected, that the representative of the second city of the Empire, a place imbued with centuries of Laurentine culture and civilisation, should choose to present himself in public like some outland chieftain.

Beside the Dux sat an older woman, wearing a Laurentine wig of tiered curls. Occasionally, they exchanged brief remarks. From his detailed dossier, Artor identified the woman as Brynne, Fortingern's chief advisor. That was another old-style barbarian trait, having women in positions of power.

The merest flicker of an eye in his direction told Artor that the Dux had noted him, was intrigued. Resplendent in the sheerest of violet silk tunics, equipped with a cloak of rich mauve velvet that fell back to expose his white shoulders and much of his chest, Artor would have been severely surprised and disappointed if he had not. A pendant of twisted gold, inset with glittering jewels circled his neck, and thin gold bracelets jangled round his wrists. Pomona, his handmaid, had teased his blond mane into loose ringlets, infused them with a delicate perfume.

At one point in the play, Artor found himself laughing wholeheartedly; raising his head, he caught the eye of the Dux who had also given way to amusement. The two exchanged a quick smile of complicity.

At the interval, Artor, in all his finery and accompanied by his smartly dressed bodyguard, was admitted without question into the select refreshment room reserved for the more distinguished among the audience. Securing a small table with a good view of the room and its occupants, he accepted a cup of wine from an attentive slave and sipped pensively. Gaheris stood silently behind him as he had throughout the performance.

The presence of this new and ravishing young courtesan did not go unnoticed. Before Artor had drunk a third of a cup, a richly attired gentleman in his fifties had presented himself with a courtly bow. He introduced himself as Berengeris, a prominent wine merchant of the city, and attempted to engage Artor in flirtatious conversation that rapidly became a blunt attempt to negotiate terms.

Keeping an eye always on the corner of the room occupied by the Dux and his entourage, Artor responded graciously with smiles, not discouraging and yet determinedly non-committal. He had only just arrived in the city, was not yet certain of his plans. Soon, the merchant grew importunate, pressing for an assignation, his meaty hand grasping the courtesan's forearm. Artor's response was to broadcast a polite dismay, averting his eyes and withdrawing further back into his chair.

"I do wish you would leave me be." Though his voice was low pitched, it somehow carried across the room.

"You heard him..."

Before Gaheris could react further, someone else was striding across the floor of the salon, a grave looking older man dressed in the livery of the Dux. Coming up to the merchant, he inclined his head and murmured carefully into his ear. The merchant blanched, nodded, then got quickly to his feet and hurried off.

The official gave Artor a brief bow and prepared to depart.

"Many thanks to you, sir, and to your master. My brave bodyguard was here to offer me every protection, should it have become necessary, nonetheless when one is a stranger to a city it is best to avoid being implicated in any unpleasantness. I should be honoured if the noble lord would condescend to take a cup of wine with me that I might offer him my thanks."

The flunkey bowed again, then left.

Artor called for a jug of the best wine. A few moments after it arrived, the Dux announced himself at his table with a polite cough. He had come without his attendants.

A tall man, he wore an embroidered tunic of silk and velvet that would have graced the highest in the Imperial court at Laurentium, save for the fact that it ended just below the buttocks and was worn with a pair of matching breeches. While breeches had become an increasingly common sight in Laurentium amongst working people or for riding, it would have been unthinkable for a respectable Laurentine to be seen at a public function with their legs on display in that barbaric fashion. Artor, of course, was too perfectly bred in Laurentine graces to stare.

At the Dux's arrival, Artor immediately got to his feet and, with a bow and a sweeping gesture, implored him to be seated and to take some wine. The Dux did so and sat regarding the courtesan with an air of friendly curiosity that was far from the slack-jawed leer of the over-eager merchant.

"So what brings you to our fair city?" he asked Artor, once he had taken a sip from his goblet.

Artor smiled. "I had heard many fair reports of Meringo, what a great and flourishing city it is, and I decided to visit and see for myself."

The Dux raised his eyebrows. "Oh! And what are your impressions thus far?"

"Why, that the reports did the place poor justice. Meringo is magnificent, second only one might say, to the splendour of the august capital itself."

The ghost of a moue might have pinched the Dux's mouth for the briefest moment. "You are a Laurentine, I take it?"

"Indeed, I owe to it my education and good fortune; I have a great love of the place."

"Would I be right in guessing that Laurentium is not where you had your birth?"

"You conjecture this from my fair looks, I presume? Yet there are many, fair as I who have lived long generations in Laurentium. It is a citizenry, not a clan."

"Your fair looks, lovely as they are, were not what offered the clue, rather it is the grace and precision with which you pronounce the Lauren tongue that

tells me you studied hard to acquire it rather than imbibed it with your mother's milk. Indulge my impertinent curiosity if you would; is my surmise far off the mark?"

This man is sharp. Artor did not allow his smile to falter. "Your surmise, my Lord, is correct. I was born in the forests of distant Thorium, but my parents, poor as they were, sent me as a youth to those who could provide me with the prospects they could not. I was thus brought to the city and given an education that has permitted me to make my way in the world."

"Forgive me, I believe I have stirred up matters that are painful for you to recall. The interval bell is about to go. I would be honoured if you would attend upon me at my castle at the sixth hour tomorrow morning, if you have no other pressing engagement. There are many fine artworks and other treasures I should like you to see to further your good impression of Meringo and perhaps atone for my clumsiness."

At that moment, the bell did indeed sound the close of the interval. With a nod, the Dux turned and made his way back to his entourage who escorted him to his box.

4

"I liked him." Gaheris sat on his truckle bed, polishing his sword while Artor sat at his dressing table with Pomona busying herself with arranging his hair and delicately outlining his eyes with kohl. She had been summoned the previous evening for an emergency meeting to help Artor decide on his attire for this all-important visit, and the gorgeous flimsy clothes had been laid out, freshly scented, on the bed for him to put on.

"I do wish you would try to speak Lauren, Gaheris. How do you expect to learn if you won't practise?"

Gaheris grinned. "It would take me more than a lifetime, I reckon, to speak it with the necessary 'grace and precision'." He had answered in the Thori tongue except for the last phrase with which he had tried to mimic the refined speech of the Dux but with his own heavily accented Lauren.

Venturing to look up from his blade, Gaheris saw Artor smiling at the incongruity. Artor met his gaze. Absurdly flustered by his master's state of undress, Gaheris hurriedly lowered his eyes once again to his task.

"You didn't like that the Dux could tell you weren't really a Laurentine," he commented after a pause, his eye firmly on his sword, now gleaming silver. "You're ashamed of where you come from."

"I am really a Laurentine and where I come from is irrelevant."

"I don't know how you can say that. At least this Dux seems to have some pride in remembering the old ways."

"Indeed, and part of my job here is to ascertain whether this is mere antiquarian eccentricity on his part or a symptom of a deeper disaffection with our Empire."

"And if it is, your next job is to murder the man in cold blood?"

"I shall be acting in the service of his Imperial Majesty. I would hardly call that murder. It is a matter of duty and professionalism."

"It won't keep you awake at night? Do none of those whose lives you stole under orders ever haunt your dreams?"

There was a silence before the assassin answered, "If they ever do, that is merely one of the hazards of my profession. It is something for me to deal with. Anyway, how dare you judge me, Gaheris? Are you telling me that in your

career as cattle rustler, you never took the life of a herdsman who was defending his master's property?"

"If I did, it was face to face and in fair fight. If any turned and ran, or fell wounded, I spared their lives gladly. I fought only for my own survival."

"So the fact you were fighting for yourself makes it better that you killed people than if you had been serving a greater purpose?"

When his bodyguard remained silent, Artor continued. "Gaheris, imagine I didn't do this work and the Dux was a threat to the Empire—would it be better that there should be a great war in which thousands of ordinary people lost their lives or had their homes and farms destroyed, that mighty cities should be laid in the dust, rather than one man who had proved himself a traitor and oathbreaker should die discreetly at my hand?"

Gaheris grunted, uncomfortable; he had no ready answer but felt that there must be one. Meanwhile, the boy was all but naked as he held forth, standing in front of a mirror, holding a succession of silks and satin tunics against his body as they were handed to him in turn by the seemingly insensate Pomona, who fastened torcs and gleaming jewelled neckpieces round the courtesan's marble neck as though he were indeed no more than a statue. Gaheris bent his head even lower over his, by now, immaculate blade as if he hoped to escape the heady scent of the perfumed oils that had been massaged into the boy's skin.

"To me, I'm saving lives, Gaheris. Yes, at times I am haunted by what I've done. I must become intimate with each one of these people, sometimes get to know their families, the people who love them. There's no anonymity, like striking down a helmeted enemy on a battlefield.

"There are nights when I feel I have glimpsed the abyss, but that is a sacrifice that I make, for the greater good of the Empire, for the sake of peace. I believe that I'm doing what is right. I face nightmares so that the citizens of Laurentium can sleep safe in their beds."

"Hmm, well, I see you do live by your own honour, of a sort. I am sorry if I ever seemed to doubt your courage. I, of course, have sworn to kill and die in your defence and will do so, whatever the rights and wrongs involved, so I too have a compromised sort of honour to uphold."

"What do you think?" Abruptly, Artor turned to stand poised mere inches from Gaheris' knees, giving his bodyguard little option but to lean back and take him in.

Pomona and Iason before her in the baths had done their work well. Artor was attired in a tunic of shimmering blue reaching to his knees. He wore high-fastening Laurentine sandals, the intricate leatherwork drawing attention to his taut calves. A simple gold torc fitted close round his neck, while a golden serpent with sapphires for eyes coiled the length of his left arm. The front of his hair was plaited and fastened back from his face with delicate jade pins, while the rest of his hair fanned out in profuse and gleaming locks scented with cinnamon leaf. His toned limbs and bare shoulders shone with the rare oils with which he had been anointed, while his eyes were lightly kohled, his face otherwise untouched.

This is the boy who exchanged hot clumsy kisses with me in a barn, smelling of clean straw and the roughly tanned leather of his breeches. As his remembered desire for the Artor of long ago collided with his response to the outrageously beautiful man who stood before him, Gaheris felt quite undone.

“I think the Dux is a very lucky man,” he blurted out.

Immediately, Gaheris was overcome with agonies of mortification, both because he had let himself reveal his attraction, unguarded, and because of the crassness of the comparison with the Dux in the light of the preceding conversation.

He would have essayed an apology, but Artor responded with a brief, sharp laugh as though he thought Gaheris had been deliberately indulging in dark humour and appreciated the tenor of his wit.

Pomona helped Artor into his magnificent cloak, and then it was time for them to go to the hired sedan chair that awaited them outside. Gaheris would walk behind it, his impeccably polished sword close at hand.

5

When Artor announced himself at the ancient castle gate, he was quickly received by servants who anticipated his arrival and courteously conducted to the Dux's private apartments, where it was suggested to Gaheris that he could accompany the guards on their patrol of the castle walls by way of an unofficial guided tour. Artor had warned him that they were likely to be separated at that stage and asked him to keep his eyes and ears open.

Artor himself was shown into an elegantly informal sitting room, where the Dux got to his feet to receive him, kissed him on both cheeks and invited him to sit opposite him on a comfortable couch. The Dux wore a long loose robe of fine woven wool of a rich dark purple. He busied himself calling for wine and cakes, seeming keen to put Artor at his ease.

Before coming into the Dux's presence, Artor had experienced the usual flutter of nerves before he began an assignment, but now it had settled to a calm focus as he contemplated the man sitting opposite him, the man for whom he would in all probability be required to play the role of lover and would very possibly be required to kill.

While Artor refreshed himself with a cup of wine, the Dux kept up an undemanding conversation, asking about other cities Artor had visited and the sights he had seen, while being carefully unintrusive about who he had visited them with or the reason for his visits. The visits were alluded to as though they were the aimless sightseeing expeditions of a gentleman of leisure; it was a matter of gracefully unspoken understanding between the two of them that Artor was a courtesan who moved from city to city offering his services to the local elite.

When Artor had finished his wine, the Dux offered to conduct him round some of the more interesting apartments within the castle.

As he was led through suites of rooms, Artor was struck by the contrast between the external structure of the castle with its ancient walls constructed of hewn blocks of stone, many feet thick, the arrow slit windows, and vaulted ceilings, the apparently complete disregard for comfort or elegance, and the interior, refitted with painted plaster walls, tiled floors and low false ceilings which kept in the heat. Wrought-iron braziers full of glowing coals stood demurely and a little absurdly in the middle of great, old fire pits.

Despite all the comforts of Laurentian civilisation imposed on this barbarian stronghold, the Dux had managed to keep the flavour very definitely Meringan. In the place of frescos depicting the legends of the Laurentine gods and heroes, the centre of Meringan public cult for several hundred years, there hung vivid tapestries depicting the old lore of Meringo, the wild gods that were worshipped in the homes of the ordinary folk. Women with impossible flying coils of blood-red hair and bright gowns brandished spears. Crows wheeled ominously under crescent moons, and an old man in a crown with one great staring blue eye looked out at the beholder. The tapestries were bordered with intricate knotwork patterns of writhing serpents and mysterious sigils.

For Artor, the imagery was uncomfortably alien and familiar, their bright colours and wild aspect evoking the painted wooden figures in the shrines of his village, yet in this civilised setting the designs seemed out of place, offensively other to his classically trained ideas of art and beauty.

“These are newly woven?”

“Yes.” The Dux smiled, obviously pleased to be asked about them. “The last of them were finished only five years ago, but they are copied from designs and motifs hundreds of years old. My more recent forbears had devalued the ancient castle tapestries as unfashionable and they were left to fade and become moth-eaten. I had a guild of craftswomen trained and commissioned to create these copies and when they were done, I had the originals packed away in specially sealed boxes, where I am assured they will be preserved for posterity. The Guild continues to thrive, using their knowledge of the old designs to create new artworks based on our ancient traditions. It has provided a respectable livelihood for many widows and paupers of the city who would otherwise be reliant on charity.”

“Upholding tradition is important to you.”

“Absolutely. I think it is very important for the people of Meringo to maintain a sense of their identity as people with an art, language and culture of its own that is worth preserving and keeping alive.”

Artor met the Dux's eyes and nodded with an air of sympathetic interest. “You think the people are in danger of forgetting their old ways?”

“I think that for many years there was a kind of shame in remembering our heritage. We were taught to see ourselves, in a sense, almost as *barbarians*,” he spat the word out as though it were an insult that greatly pained him. “We were so keen to become more Laurentine than the Laurentines.”

“Yet before the Laurentines, this castle would have been a draughty shell, strewn with dirty rushes instead of paved with marble tiles, and thick with smoke from the fire pits.”

The Dux crooked his brows in a manner that suggested he was amused rather than offended by Artor's challenge, as though he had addressed this point many times before. “No one is denying that Laurentine civilisation has benefited us over the centuries. I've no wish to dwell in the past. What I strongly object to is the slavish mentality of seeing ourselves as no more than a little satellite of Laurentium with nothing worth contributing of our own. I think the time is coming for Meringo to emerge from Laurentium's shadow.”

Very interesting. Before Artor could probe further, the Dux laughed easily. “That's enough of me speechifying at you—I forget that I'm not always in the council chamber. Come, let me show you some of the rest of my collections.”

Artor uttered appropriate expressions of polite appreciation as he was conducted round several rooms containing glass cases showing examples of brightly painted Meringan pottery, embroidered cloaks of fine workmanship, torcs and other adornments of cunningly twisted gold and gemwork, and a collection of battered bronze swords and dented helms that framed the face of the wearer with the snarl of a lion or a dragon, relics of long-dead Meringan chieftains.

Despite his enthusiasm, the Dux seemed careful not to drag out the tour too long and soon conducted Artor back to his parlour where he poured them both another cup of wine, not waiting for the hovering servant to perform the office.

“May I speak to the point with you, Artor?” the Dux set his wine back on the table.

“Please do, Clarissimus.”

“Call me Fortingern, if you would. Artor, I am wondering whether during your sojourn in Meringo it would suit you to gratify me with your delightful companionship? I would of course be very glad to remunerate the expenses of your stay as well as other tokens of appreciation.”

Artor permitted himself a smile while holding the Dux's gaze. “My Lord—Fortingern, if my company would afford you any pleasure, I should be honoured to attend upon you.”

The Dux appeared to relax a little, as though relieved in gaining his object. “You are very kind. Now, as I believe reticence would do either of us little

good, let me tell you something of what I might hope from this association and you may let me know if it would be agreeable to you.”

“That seems very sensible.”

“Some years ago my wife died and since then I have frequently been lonely, Artor. Here and there very charming young men such as yourself have been kind enough to offer me solace, yet for all their wit and beauty I still felt alone. Pleasure and amusement are not all I seek. I certainly do not wish you to feign any affection for me, yet if you could be open to such kindness developing between us in the natural way of things, our association might do very well.”

Barely audibly, Artor cleared his throat. “I would certainly hope to develop a liking for a gentleman with whom I had formed a companionship, or my time should be spent badly indeed. Please be assured I know better than to offer false blandishments other than to those who have shown themselves ready to be satisfied with them. I will be always kind, Fortingern, and yet not false.”

Fortingern nodded. “I can ask for no more than that as regards your personal feelings. As to the matter of your being always kind, I have some rather *particular* requests that might challenge your definition of kindness.”

Ah. Artor leant forward, his expression open, attentive and carefully neutral. “I’m listening.”

6

“So how did you get on, Gaheris?”

It was a warm afternoon, so Artor had dismissed his chair and wandered back through the city in company with his bodyguard. They had stopped in one of the many small ornamental parks that graced the city and sat together on a bench watching the activities of the exotic water fowl that populated the small lily-logged pond.

Gaheris grinned. “I had a great time. Nice blokes, the guards. They showed me all round the length of the walls, the defences, told me the history of the place. You know that castle is over a thousand years old and has never once been taken by siege?”

“I didn’t know.”

“They’ve got an old shrine to Corwidiane in the armoury and they let me pay my respects. That’s ancient as well, but they still tend her altar. Corwine, they call her here, but she’s just the same.”

“What else did you see in the armoury? Was it well supplied?”

Gaheris hesitated, and then he spoke with the air of having to speak an unpleasant truth. “It was very well supplied. They were only keen on showing me the antique stuff, big old swords and axes, rusty breastplates and the like, but I told them I needed to piss, and on my way back I had a quick poke round without them, put my eye to a few grilled doors. It looks like they’re stockpiling, Artor. There were storerooms full to the rafters with short swords, iron javelins, slings and bows. There was nothing quaintly Meringan about any of them. They looked fresh forged.”

“Thank you, Gaheris. You’ve learnt more than I have today. The Laurentine Empire has fought no major war for over a century. Why then, is our loyal vassal readying himself for major conflict?”

“Not everyone loves the Laurentine Empire, Artor.”

Artor sighed. “So it would appear.”

7

The following evening, Artor had an invitation to supper at Fortingern's private apartments. Gaheris raised his eyebrows when he saw how he was dressed for the occasion. In place of the shimmering silks he had come to expect, Artor wore a sombre tunic of heavy dark cloth, though cut with narrow fastenings that left his shoulders and much of his back and chest exposed, and tight-fitting leather breeches. Gaheris failed to prevent his eyes from lingering on Artor's delineated posterior before he cloaked himself decently in swirling velvet.

The supper was served in a narrow candlelit dining room, an array of light and delicious dishes: fish cooked in a wine sauce, leeks dressed in vinegar, eggs, olives, cheeses, baked apples and cream. Musicians played from behind a screen, the lyre and the flute a background sweetness.

The Dux was all charm and urbanity, keen to set Artor at his ease, make him smile. Beneath this outward cheer, however, Artor could sense his nervousness. Outside the apartment, Gaheris waited weaponless.

Halfway through the meal, a servant entered and spoke quietly into the Dux's ear. Straining, Artor caught, "The Lady Brynne requests an urgent meeting."

The Dux murmured his apologies to Artor, bowed and left the room. As he heard footsteps fading away down the tiled floors, Artor regretted that there was no way of eavesdropping on the exchange.

When Fortingern returned, there was a new tension about him, a grim set to his jaw.

Artor waited a little for him to resettle himself before speaking. "Is all well, my Lord Fortingern?"

"All would be rather better if so much didn't hang on the dubious mental processes of a fourteen-year-old idiot!"

"A fourteen-year-old idiot?"

"Yes, that marvellous young Emperor of yours, back in Laurentium. We would all be a bit more secure if only—but forgive me, I'm ranting at you. Enough of such tedious matters. I—I have prepared a chamber, if you are ready, Artor?"

He's really on edge. "I am ready if you are, Fortingern."

Standing, the Dux conducted Artor to an antechamber. Though well lit by torches placed in sconces high in the walls, the place seemed dark. In contrast to the rest of the Dux's inner apartments, this room retained the feel of the old castle. The walls were unplastered stone and the floor was paved with flagstones. Exposed beams ran across the length of the chamber. At various points along the walls, solid iron rings had been riveted into the stone and chains hung through them. Chains descended from the beams.

One side of the room was dominated by a great table of old and blackened oak, on which were displayed an array of items. Opposite was a draped couch, the only element of comfort in this unforgiving chamber.

Once the heavy wooden door had closed behind them, the Dux turned to Artor, looked him up and down as though taking in his appearance for the first time that evening.

"You look magnificent," he murmured. "You have dressed exactly right for the occasion."

Reaching out a tentative hand, he traced the line of Artor's tunic from the top of his shoulder, down to his chest. Artor caught the hand, grasped it firmly, heard the Dux's breath catch, then deepen in response.

"Come with me." He led the Dux over to the couch, then putting his arms round his neck he took his mouth in a kiss that was sensual and passionate, but with an edge of aggression. Artor felt Fortingern's body yield against his own and drew him to sit beside him on the couch where he continued firmly kissing and embracing him. The man was too tense; he needed to get him relaxed and aroused if this was to work.

Presently, he released the Dux and sat back, looking him in the eyes. "Let me hear you say exactly what it is you want."

The older man looked down for a moment before meeting his gaze. "I want you to chain me to the wall and flog me with as little mercy as the town executioner would show to a petty thief or other scoundrel."

"Take off your robe."

Fortingern's breath hissed inwards and Artor saw him bite his lip, yet he stood and did as he was told. His body was well muscled and hairy, with sprinklings of silver among the dark fur. A pale shiny line ran across his chest, evidently an old battle wound.

“Sit down again and turn your back to me.”

When the Dux obeyed, Artor paused briefly, letting him feel his breath on his neck, then he ran the flat of his hand down the length of Fortingern's back, the pressure of his palm firm yet calming.

“I don't think you really do want me to flog you as though I were the town executioner or indeed a castle torturer and, judging by the lack of scar tissue here, it is not something you have ever previously experienced. If what you're after is a flogging that will feel convincingly like a judicial punishment inflicted on a common rogue, I can certainly arrange that for you. Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” The Dux's voice was low. He seemed somewhat taken aback at having his request challenged. Artor wondered how his previous playmates had handled him.

“Give me a word that you will use if you need this to stop, a code word so that I know you mean it. I pay little heed to generalised screams for mercy.”

The Dux stiffened, evidently offended by the assumption that screaming would be involved. “I don't intend to request mercy. I expect you to continue until either your arm is too tired to lift the whip, or you honestly believe I couldn't take another blow.”

“I require such a word from you before I raise any whip. Look at it from my point of view—do you think I want to risk facing the public executioner for real for daring to lay hands on the august Dux of Meringo? I need the assurance that I am doing this with your continuing permission.”

The Dux considered this. “If I say ‘Elderflower’, you may take that as a request to stop, but I won't use it.”

Artor smiled slightly at his bullheadedness. “I don't intend that you should have to. Are you ready?”

Fortingern nodded. “Yes, Master.”

“Get up.” Artor spoke sternly, and once they were both on their feet, he hustled and herded the Dux towards one of the rings embedded in the wall.

“The cuffs are on the table.”

Without acknowledging the Dux's helpful interjection, Artor left him standing with his back to the room and wandered over to the table to familiarise himself with its contents at his leisure. When he was ready, Artor came back to where the Dux stood silently.

Taking Fortingern's arms in turn, he fastened his wrists in the heavy leather cuffs, using the attached clasps to affix them to the chains, drawing up his arms till they were above his head, yet with enough give that he could bend them more comfortably at the elbows, rather than pulled rigidly upright. The stance opened up his back more, and did not waste stamina on mere discomfort. Artor handled the Dux firmly and decisively, but without gratuitous roughness.

Moving so that he stood close behind the Dux, Artor briefly brushed his chest against the Dux's bare back, then he stepped away and raised the first whip he had selected from the table, a fairly light implement. Fortingern had requested a brutal beating and Artor was prepared to give it to him, but the courtesan knew well that even the most cherished fantasies could turn out to be not at all what was wished for in reality.

The Dux remained stubbornly still and silent as Artor reddened his shoulders with the first lashes, warming him up. Seeing his level of endurance, Artor presently changed to a heavier implement and laid on with more vigour. Soon the Dux was roaring, not plaintively, but as though it were a great release to have the cries wrested from him. Artor pressed on, always watchful for signs of damage or distress.

Memories came back to Artor of this part of his training, of being required to endure a series of floggings from sensual to severe, delivered by experts. He had greeted each session with a degree of trepidation, but had found the real challenge had come when the whip was finally placed in his own hand. He had adapted however, approached the new skills he was required to learn with the same conscientious dedication he brought to international politics, Lauren elegiac poetry and toxicology.

The Dux's bellowings held a note of defiance, his stance was firm, his shoulders flexed; no sign of a request for mercy so Artor gave him none. When Fortingern started to sob in great heaving pants, Artor paused to ask him if he remembered the code word they had agreed on.

“Fuck you and fuck your stupid code word.”

Artor took the hint, exchanged the heavy flogger for a slender switch and belaboured Fortingern's shoulders until the Dux sagged at the knees, reduced to hoarse, inarticulate moans.

Putting the switch down, Artor placed a hand on the back of Fortingern's neck in a sustaining, steadying gesture while talking to him in a low voice, “It's over. I'm going to get these cuffs off you now. Keep still for me.”

As quickly and calmly as he could, Artor loosed Fortingern's arms from the chains, moving swiftly to clasp the Dux under his arms, offering him support. Slowly, with soothing murmurs, he walked Fortingern back to the couch, his muscles protesting as he bore much of the heavier man's weight.

Once Fortingern had been lowered on to the couch, Artor saw that he was shaky, unfocused, his breath still coming hard. Grabbing a rug, Artor curled his body close against that of Fortingern, pulling the cover over both of them, trying to warm him. When Artor curled his arms round his neck, Fortingern placed his head on Artor's chest. For what felt to Artor like a long time, they lay together like that, Fortingern's breathing slowly returning to normal, the shuddering subsiding.

"Thank you." Fortingern had half-sat up, wincing a little as he did so.

"My pleasure." Artor raised his own head and kissed Fortingern on the lips, lightly but with a lingering tenderness.

"No one has ever dared do more than tap me before."

"I wouldn't have dared disappoint you."

The Dux smiled at this, still too overcome by the intensity of his experience to converse at any length.

Realising that the cathartic effect of the beating was enough for Fortingern and that he was not in a condition to enjoy further sensual stimulation, Artor let the Dux rest beside him for a while. When he showed signs of drifting off, Artor gently roused him and asked him if he wanted to be taken to bed.

"Just take me back to the dining room and ring for a servant. I'll be fine."

"Very well. Fortingern, you do have some minor grazes, but mostly there'll be quite a bit of bruising which will start to show up in a day or so. You're liable to be quite sore and stiff for the better part of the week. You might want to apply compresses which will bring the bruising down quicker. If you like, I can come in and do that, so that you won't need to involve a servant."

Fortingern smiled. "You're very thoughtful. Don't worry, I choose my servants for their trustworthiness and discretion. I don't bother to conceal too much that concerns me personally."

Artor nodded and helped Fortingern to his feet. Fortingern caught his breath raspingly as though suppressing a groan, and refused the arm Artor offered him for support, walking slowly but unaided through the door Artor held open for him.

“Thank you again, my dear.” Fortingern leant forward to brush his lips against Artor’s once again. “You were all I could have asked for. I shall be in touch very soon.”

The Dux rang a gong which hung from the wall and sank into a chair. Taking the hint, Artor bade him good night and left the dining room.

Hardly had he closed the door behind him, when Gaheris came rushing up from down the corridor where he had evidently been pacing. His eyes darted rapidly over Artor from top to toe and he clasped him by the arms, evidently in some agitation. “Are you alright? Has he hurt you?”

“Shh, no, no one’s hurt me. Come, let’s go home, we can talk properly there.”

Lamplight from the prosperous streets and squares that surrounded the palace shone brightly into Artor’s sedan, where he sprawled at rest on rugs and cushions. It illuminated the dark silhouette of Gaheris, marching alongside the chair, maintaining the bearers’ slow, steady pace.

8

Once they were back at Artor's apartment, Gaheris accompanied Artor to his bedchamber, not troubling to lower his eyes as Artor cast off his dark tunic and leathern breeches, leaving them tangled on the floor for Pomona to pick up.

Artor caught his gaze. "See, no injuries." He turned himself round slowly so Gaheris could verify for himself. Gaheris finally reddened and looked away.

"What made you think I was injured anyway? Also, why, if you thought I was in any danger, did you not come to my rescue?"

"I heard noises through the door, sounds of a whip and groaning. I burst into the dining room and found it empty and the other door locked. I listened at the door and realised it didn't sound like you groaning, but I couldn't think what was happening.

"While I stood there, dithering, one of the Dux's guards came and found me by the door. I asked him what was going on and he sneered at me, saying the Dux is amusing himself as he always does with handsome boys, but not to worry, he was sure you'd be in one piece by the end of it. I nearly flattened him, but I knew that if I misjudged this, I'd risk ruining everything."

"Your instincts were the right ones, Gaheris. That guard was just trying to wind you up and I'm very glad you didn't rise to the bait. You heard me flogging the Dux, at his own request."

"But why?" There was such total bafflement in Gaheris' tone that Artor burst into the high, strained laughter of the overtired.

"It pleases some people, Gaheris, quite a lot of people in fact, which is why delivering an expert flogging was an important part of my training."

Gaheris looked curious, perhaps a little repelled. "And did you enjoy flogging him?"

Artor considered. "Up to a point, yes. There is always the satisfaction of displaying excellence in exercising skills one worked hard to acquire. It pleased me to give him what he wanted. I'm a courtesan to the bone, Gaheris, and giving the client what he wants is instinctive to me. I simply entered into the energy and spirit of it. You have to if you're going to be any good. A fake satisfies no one."

Gaheris digested this. "And will it give you pleasure and satisfaction when you exercise your skills by murdering him?"

"No!" Artor was flooded with the recent memory of Fortingern's body curled into his, of how he had squared his shoulders during the heaviest part of the flogging to take more from him, in total trust if not surrender, and of his soft, grateful kiss after. Turning away from Gaheris, he buried his face in his hands.

"I'm sorry." Gaheris had not intended his words to have such effect. "I thought..."

"Of course, I *will* do it, if it turns out he is a threat to the Empire, but if you imagine I would get any pleasure from it..."

"Hey, it's alright." Without thinking about what he was doing, Gaheris moved forwards and drew Artor's unclothed body into a close embrace. Artor returned it, putting his arms round Gaheris' neck and burying his face in his shoulder. Gaheris stroked Artor's back, finding himself marvelling at the softness of his skin, the suppleness of muscle and sinew beneath.

Artor seemed to relax deeply into the embrace, sighing, his body going limp. Gaheris continued the soft stroking. "I've got you. Whatever you have to do, I'll be here. If you wake up with bad dreams, I'll be here. You're not facing any of this alone any more."

Artor took a deep, shuddering breath. "You were the centre of my world once, Gaheris, when we were boys together. When we would go out hunting at night, further into the forest than anyone else dared to go, I felt fearless, invincible because I was with you. I always felt safe with you, Gaheris. When they took me, and for long nights after, I would think of you when I tried to sleep at night, imagine you close, holding, protecting me. I was so afraid and alone then, you can't imagine. But then I would imagine how you must despise me for letting myself be taken, that you didn't care about me any more, and then I knew I had to forget all about home if I was to survive."

"Artor, I never stopped missing you, never stopped grieving. From the moment they carried you away, I vowed I would wage war on the Laurentines to my dying breath. Every raid, every triumph, whenever we brought back bags of grain to the village, robbed from a Laurentine granary. I exulted in your name. I became a warrior to avenge you."

Artor lifted his head, brushed his mouth against Gaheris' lips. There was an intake of breath and then Gaheris returned the kiss with passion.

A moment later Gaheris drew back, looking at Artor with slightly raised eyebrows. "Should we do this?"

"Yes." Artor's breath was coming in quick pants. "I need this—I need *you*."

Gaheris needed no further encouragement; pulling off his own tunic, he drew Artor back into his arms. Without breaking their kiss, they negotiated the few steps back to the bed and then they were falling back on to it, Gaheris lying atop Artor's slender, naked body.

He caressed the boy's beautiful chest, his hands stroking and circling, delicately rubbing and pinching at Artor's hard, dusky-pink nipples. Even as Artor moaned and arched his back in response, his substantial cock straining against his belly, Gaheris strove to put from his mind the thought that he was lying with a man for whom lovemaking was a matter of professional expertise, just like his own skill at arms.

Artor paused from kissing and nibbling the side of Gaheris' neck to crane his neck and whisper hoarsely in his ear, "Do you remember that hot afternoon when we stole away to the haybarn?"

His words transported them both back to that day, to the boys who had grown up together, been everything to each other, before events had interposed to send their lives down such divergent paths. With fevered passion they kissed and moved together, Artor grasping Gaheris' muscular buttocks with both hands and kneading. Their kissing was fierce and clumsy.

"Gods, I want to fuck you!"

"You'll find unguent in the little blue pot on my dressing table, there, by the box of kohl."

Groaning with frustration at the necessary delay, Gaheris got up and went over to the dressing table. He hurried the stoppered glass vial back to the bed, smiling a little at the dainty thing.

"Give it here." Deftly, Artor popped the stopper and poured a little pool of oil on to his palm. Gaheris clutched at the bedclothes and drew in his breath as Artor's firm hand massaged his prick, daubing it thoroughly, before slipping down to wantonly cup and play with his balls.

"Oh Gods," he sighed once again.

Artor presently handed the vial back to Gaheris and rolled on to his stomach, his legs spread and knees slightly bent. For a few breathless moments,

Gaheris could only sit back and admire. Then, starting at the nape of Artor's neck, brushing aside his bright gold locks, Gaheris stroked his way down, appreciating the deceptive strength of his slender back, the narrow and graceful waist and hips, before finally indulging touch and sight in the sheer beauty of his rounded arse. He took his time caressing, then massaging more deeply so that Artor groaned with pleasure. Finally, he gently drew the firm cheeks apart and breathed hotly on the exposed opening, delighted when Artor whimpered softly in response. Lowering his head, Gaheris teased Artor with rapid flicks of his tongue over the tight entrance, so that he squirmed and moaned.

He hitched his breath when Gaheris dripped the oil, letting it trickle between his buttocks before working it in with careful fingers, feeling the muscles quickly relax and loosen in response to the touches.

Artor turned over on to his back and when Gaheris knelt above him, wrapped his long legs around his waist. Gaheris eased the head of his cock inside him, then, grasping Artor's hips, thrust in slow and deep, his pace quickening as Artor pushed back, his breath coming in short pants, his eyes bright. Gaheris leant forward so that they could kiss and embrace as they fucked, looking into each other's eyes as they recovered the intimacy of their past, remembered themselves to each other. Their gaze broke the thin but palpable web of tension they had lived under since they were reunited, a tension of averted looks and words unspoken.

As they moved close to climax, Artor stroked Gaheris' chest, thumbing and tweaking his hardened nipples. Towards the end, Artor reached down and brought himself off, just as Gaheris reached completion inside him with a cry.

Afterwards, the two of them lay together in a sweaty, tangled heap, limbs intertwined. Gaheris nuzzled Artor's neck in a final kiss before they both drifted into deep sleep.

They were awakened early next morning by Iason knocking on the door of the bedchamber. If the servant was surprised to see Gaheris in bed with his master, he betrayed no outward sign beyond perhaps a widening of the eyes. In his arms was a great bouquet of lilies, pink and white and deep purple with long stamens, their powerful scent already filling the room. "A messenger delivered them from the palace just now, along with boxes of gifts in the hallway for you to inspect when you're ready, sir. There is also a note, and the messenger awaits your reply."

Artor took the scroll, cracked the seal and read.

Artor,

I fear I indulged myself rather selfishly in your company last night. If you would care to come to luncheon at noon on the morrow, I should be delighted to endeavour to make it up to you.

Fortingern

“Tell the messenger I would be delighted to attend.”

After Iason had closed the bedroom door behind him, Artor turned to Gaheris. “This will be my opportunity.”

9

Next day dawned bright and sunny, and when Artor arrived at the castle in a light tunic and thin cloak, he was shown not to the Dux's private apartments as before, but through the keep and into a courtyard garden. The garden was enclosed on all sides by the castle's ancient ivy-covered walls. A turreted annexe overlooked the paved walkways, and the neat clipped hedges bordering beds of flowers and fragrant herbs. The paths converged on a square of mosaic paving where couches and a table were arrayed and the Dux reclined, waiting to greet Artor.

Approaching the Dux, Artor leant down to kiss and embrace him, feeling a spontaneous rush of affection at the contact. Fortingern clasped him warmly before Artor took his seat on the adjoining couch.

"How have you been?"

The Dux smiled. "Quite unreasonably cheerful, as it happens. You were right about the bruising and the stiffness, but in twenty-odd years of warfare, sport and hunting, I have certainly suffered worse. Hot baths can do wonders, I find."

"Indeed they can."

At the Dux's urging, Artor filled his plate from the dainty serving bowls of ripe summer fruit, soft cheese, watercress, grilled fish and other light dishes. An attendant filled his cup with wine before the Dux signalled to the staff to leave them. Hardly had the retreating servants closed the door behind them, however, than it was opened once again as another attendant came out into the garden, his garb and demeanour suggesting that he occupied some higher rank than server in the palace hierarchy.

"Apologies for intruding, my Lord, but Counsellor Brynne requires to speak with you on a matter of some urgency."

The Dux cursed. "Forgive me, Artor, I may be detained at this meeting for some time. Will you be content to enjoy the garden until my return? Ask to be shown to my sitting room if the weather should turn inclement."

"I shall be fine out here."

Once he was left alone, Artor got to his feet and moved closer to the castle, wondering if there was some way of getting into the building unobserved and

seeking evidence that the Dux intended any treachery. He cast his mind back to the tour of the castle's interior on which the Dux had conducted him a few days ago. There had been several rooms with closed doors which the Dux had described as "only offices" and not invited him to view. Could Artor find his way back to them, gain entry and search for incriminating documentation?

As he turned the possibilities over in his mind, Artor caught a movement from the upper window of the turret. Taking a few steps back and angling his neck, Artor glimpsed the outlines of the Dux and his advisor Brynne with her distinctive tiers of curls, sitting opposite one another, apparently deep in confabulation.

His heart beating a little faster, Artor assessed the possibilities. There were no servants around, but of course one might appear at any moment to see if he needed anything. The Dux and his advisor were sitting at some distance from the window with only a limited perspective on the outside. The thickly growing ivy that entwined the small tower was testament to Meringo's long years of peace and stability. No castle at risk from enemy attack would allow such convenient means to gain entry.

Having made his decision, Artor cast off his cloak and darted forwards, his nimble hands and feet soon gaining purchase on the sturdy creeper which bore his weight well. The crevices in the crumbling wall offered additional hand and toe holds.

Artor climbed until he was about fifteen feet from the ground, just below the narrow arched window through which he had espied his quarry. He stilled himself, quieted his breathing and opened his ears. The voices of those in the chamber above reached him, low, but capable of decipherment.

"These letters which we intercepted today confirm everything, my Lord. There is little doubt that a coup is imminent."

"And what is our state of preparations?"

"We now have fifty thousand fully trained and armed warriors ready to be deployed at a moment's notice."

The ghost of the Dux's sigh reached even Artor, below. "So much potential waste of life and resources and all because of a witless boy scarce fit to be blackboard monitor, never mind rule a great Empire. If anything were more symbolic than the sad state of old, decaying Laurentium..."

Brynne cleared her throat determinedly, cutting short the Dux's tirade. "Quite, my Lord, but the question remains of how we propose to meet this emergency."

"Ptolemaius still forbids all questioning of Aethelius' loyalty. My daughter Clothilde has attempted to raise our concerns with Florianus for months now, our suspicions that Aethelius is plotting a coup, but the Clarissimus only sighs and says that, lacking incontrovertible proof of his treachery, he dare not bring an accusation against him before the Emperor. Ptolemaius has had several minor courtiers sent to the dungeons for venturing to speak against him."

"But these letters remove all possibility of doubt; they make it clear that Aethelius plans to act decisively; the Empire is in danger of disintegrating into civil war." The exasperation in Brynne's voice was close to despair.

"Unfortunately, Aethelius' many acolytes in the city are equally zealous at intercepting any missives to the Palace which might persuade even the Emperor that his favourite companion in hawking and dice, could possibly mean him harm. There is little chance of our getting the letters safely into the hands of Florianus."

Artor had heard enough. Hand over hand, he scrambled back down the tower, almost losing his footing for one heart-stopping moment in his distractedness. Once his feet touched solid ground, Artor began pacing up and down the paths as he digested the implications of what he had just heard.

Florianus had deceived him as to the nature of his mission. Artor was not there to spy on the Dux at all, but to stumble upon the evidence of Aethelius' treachery that the Emperor's partiality, and Aethelius' numerous spies and supporters, made it all but impossible to obtain or safely bring to light in Laurentium. Even Aethelius' watchers couldn't detect that someone was on their trail if the person, himself, were unaware of it. Artor sighed; he admired Florianus' ingenuity, but he knew now what his true mission was, and that the real danger would come upon his return to the land he called home.

Aethelius he knew well. Scion of one of Laurentium's oldest and noblest families, wearers of the Imperial Crown only a couple of centuries ago, he had been brought up at the palace, close to the Imperial Family.

Ten years older than the young emperor, brilliant, handsome and athletic, Ptolemaius hero-worshipped Aethelius; the rather awkward child was never happier than when his glamorous cousin condescended to play at dice with him,

or go out hunting with hounds or hawks, or tell him lurid and boastful tales of his exploits with war and women.

Artor had always mistrusted Aethelius and sensed that Florianus did too. The proud young man had made himself the darling of the populace, parading around outside the Palace on a magnificently caparisoned white charger, an obvious contrast to the pale, pudgy boy who trotted alongside him on his pony. Who would cut a better dash as Emperor? The question hung in the air unspoken.

Having got his thoughts in order, Artor stopped his restless pacing and returned quietly back to his couch where he poured himself a cup of wine, and tried to settle into the peaceable air of one who has been sunning himself in contented solitude.

Not long after, the Dux returned; his agitation of mind showed in a slight flush to the face and abruptness in his movements, but once he had taken his place on the couch, it was as though his troubles were banished by sheer effort of will. He turned his eyes and smile upon Artor as though no one else could possibly have claims on his attention. In response, Artor felt a rush of warmth and affection for him, strongly intermingled with relief. He would not have to murder this man; he was no traitor, despite his quaint and provocative vaunting of his barbarian heritage.

“I am so sorry for abandoning you for this length of time. You must have been dreadfully bored.”

Artor smiled. “On the contrary, I enjoyed a rather pleasant little doze, but I am very glad you are back.”

Within moments, they were pressed in each other's arms on Artor's couch, kissing with a tender intensity.

“I have ordered all the servants to stay away from the garden the rest of the afternoon, no matter what the emergency,” Fortingern murmured as he raised Artor's silk tunic above his thighs and applied his mouth attentively to his hard cock. Artor lay back on the cushions, eyes closed, and enjoyed the sensations, his mind empty with relief. Later the Dux knelt above him as he reclined, and Artor took him in his mouth, using all his courtesan's art to bring him wave after wave of pleasure as Fortingern moaned and tangled his hands in Artor's curls.

Afterwards, they lay companionably together, the Dux chatting about his future plans for his beloved Meringo, including dramatic festivals and the

restoration of ancient Meringan temples, long neglected over centuries of Laurentian cultural hegemony. He spoke, too, of his daughter Clothilde and how he missed her, since she had moved to Laurentium. Artor enjoyed the embrace and the chatter, and tried not to let his mind stray to the little locked casket that sat casually on his dressing table amongst boxes of jewellery, ribbons, combs and cosmetics.

Inside that box were about a dozen tiny little vials, some of blue and some of clear glass, each containing a little liquid or powder. Had he heard other words beneath that arched window, Artor, on his next visit to the Dux, would have had one of those little bottles inserted into a tiny pouch inside his shirtsleeve. A few drops adroitly scattered in soup or a wine glass and it wouldn't be till some time the next day that the Dux would suddenly keel over, clutching at his chest. Not too rapidly after, Artor would discreetly melt away.

10

Artor waited until he got home that evening before he shared his discoveries with Gaheris, sitting in his lap on the couch, each with a cup of wine. Even then, fearful of possible eavesdroppers, he did not name Prince Aethelius. He told him only that he had discovered all he needed to, that Fortingern was no traitor and there was to be no assassination.

Tomorrow, Artor must face the Dux and confess to him that he was, in fact, a spy sent by Florianus. Somehow, he must then persuade Fortingern to entrust him with those letters to smuggle back to Laurentium.

Artor would be the bearer of documents that would prove treason against one of the most powerful and popular persons in the Empire. Even with Gaheris at his side, even with Artor's dexterity with the tiny jewelled knives that would be suddenly in each hand if he were attacked, Artor's life would be in grave peril.

All this was for the future. Just for this evening, Artor could put it all out of his mind, enjoy the relief that no one was to die just yet, and luxuriate in the embrace of his lover who would be there with him to face whatever lay ahead.

The End

Author Bio

Clodia Metelli grew up in London, spending a childhood largely immersed in books and her own world of make-believe, fuelled by a kaleidoscope of literary and historical obsessions. This has mostly set the pattern for her life so far, inspiring her to spend years studying Greco-Roman society, gaining an MA and a PhD in the process. She now lives by the sea with her boyfriend and a black cat called Achilles, working part-time as a support worker, which leaves her scope to pursue and share her obsessions through reading and writing.

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