

One year before

The youth ran, running as he'd never run before, racing time itself down the beach. White coral sands scudded under his bare feet, muscled arms pumped, breath laboured. He raced, yet his mind screamed at him all the while, *You'll be too late . . . too late . . .* He sailed over the fallen trunk of a coconut palm, leapt the sun-whitened driftwood of a forest giant, splashed through a stream trickling to the sea.

Too late, too late . . .

Out of the corner of his eye he glimpsed the ship anchored in the lagoon, sails furled, prow swinging to meet the incoming tide. His mind refused to consider it. Refused to absorb the significance of the rowing boat drawn up on the sand of the far curve of the beach.

My fault . . . all my fault . . .

At the edge of Batuguli Bay where the coastline was heaped with marbled boulders, he turned away from the sea, his feet flying from sand to forest track as if speed could halt the disaster his foolish words had nudged into motion.

Air rasped into his lungs; pain lanced his side.

Don't give up . . . There's always a chance . . .

The path curled upwards through the trees. The canopy thickened to dim the light and block the breeze. Roots knobbed the path, but his footing was sure. He laboured on, sweat pouring over his bare torso to soak the waist of his sarong.

The burst of a gunshot. A single explosion splintered into tens of echoes, each reverberation a promise of horror. Startled birds rose around him, bursting from the undergrowth and branches, their calls spreading their panic.

He sped up, not knowing until then that greater speed was possible

but taking hope from the lack of any further gunshots. And then, much later, a scream, a human scream of anguish. It crushed him, that anguish, as it disintegrated all hope.

Too late.

Yet still he ran, long past his normal ability to endure. He burst into a clearing ringed with warriors and came to a halt.

Too late.

All my fault.

Raja Wiramulia lay on the ground, blood still seeping from his breast. The regalia proclaiming his ruling rank had been torn from him, part of it scattered on the ground around his body, part of it missing. Plundered. The prize the murderers had sought.

Rani Marsyanda crouched at his side, her forehead bowed to his cheek, her grief a tangible thing spreading around the gathering, scaring them all. The Raja's only son, too young to fully understand, stood at her side, his body trembling with shock. The Raja's warriors, some spattered with blood, stood in a semicircle around them, stunned, disbelieving, leaderless.

Slowly the Rani raised her face, to look not at them, but at *him*. Her glance swept up over his sweaty heaving chest, to linger on his wild look of horror.

Was it you? she asked. *You who betrayed us?*

He knelt, touching his forehead to the ground, acknowledging his guilt, aware that she could order his death, knowing it would be justice rightly dispensed. He heard the rustle of the warriors unsheathing, but when he glanced up, it was to see her stay them with a gesture.

Who better than he to avenge this death? Who better to bring back what was stolen? The questions were asked, but she expected no answer.

They shuffled and glanced away, not meeting her gaze, as she turned to him once more. *You, Ardhi, with your foolish hubris, you will make this right, or die.* She picked up one of the blood-spattered plumes from the regalia now lying on the ground. Glorious in colour and splendour, it had adorned her husband. Now she held it out towards him like an accusation, her gaze implacable.

Helpless, knowing what she was doing, knowing what it meant for him, he took it from her and shuddered at the sticky wetness on the shaft.

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You will go to the krismaker and have a blade wrought. This I command. The hilt – the hilt I will make myself.

He bowed his head.

Then you will bring back all that was stolen from us, no matter if the quest takes you to the end of the world. Do not think of returning until you succeed.

A sigh whispered around the circle of warriors like a flutter of leaves on the wind. They knew what she asked of him. Perhaps they even pitied him, a little. Or perhaps they were just glad she had not selected one of them.

You know why this is necessary. You know the horror this theft can bring. You cannot change what happened. This is the closest you can come to atonement.

Her words faltered and faded, showing how tenuous her hold on her grief was. He wanted to weep. "I know," he whispered. "If I could undo . . ." Pointless words. He halted and said instead, "I know what must be done and I will do it. How – how many were taken?"

Three. Only when you have all three will you return. Now go.

He turned and stumbled away, his shame and grief driving him forward when his legs would have failed him.

When he reached the beach once more, the ship was already unfurling its sails, the sailors just distant spiders in the rigging. And Lastri was there on the shore, watching. Her long black hair shone in the sun, and the sea wind whipped strands across her face. He stopped, arms hanging like lifeless driftwood, one hand clutching the cascading golden feather. She regarded him in silence, her eyes filled with fear. She'd heard the gunshot, she'd heard the birds. Her gaze dropped to the bloodstained feather. She would know that it meant more than a death.

He said, "You – you tried to tell me, but I was foolish and would not listen." *The frog under the coconut shell, thinking it knew the whole world.* "The Rani has bade me leave."

"Then . . . then go with the spirit of the wind, and pray that the same wind brings you back." The words were ritual, but her voice shook with anguish and he saw the tears on her cheeks.

"Will you wait?" he asked. But he was the one who waited, in agony, for the answer she did not give.

Glenda Larke

As she walked away, he knew he'd lost everything. Home, family, love, honour, the life he had led until now. Perhaps even life itself. No way to change anything, only a chance, a sliver of hope, to prevent further wrongs.

He sought the krismaker, knowing he was taking the first steps on a journey that could lead him to the other side of the world.

The Touch of Spice

Saker paused, nose twitching. Good Va above, the *smell*. No, not smell: aroma. The intense, rich aroma of spices saturating his nasal passages and tickling the back of his throat. Gorgeously pervasive fragrances, conjuring up images of faraway lands. Perfumes powerful enough to scent his clothes and seep into the pores of his skin.

He recognised some of them. The sharp tang of cloves, the woody snippiness of cinnamon, the delicious intensity of nutmeg. Saker Rampion, witan priest of the Faith, was privileged enough to have inhaled such fragrances wafting up from manor kitchens, but never had he smelled spices as pungent as these. Never had he been so tantalised by scents redolent of a world he'd never visited.

Crouching on the beam under the slate shingles of the warehouse roof, he inhaled, enjoying the richness of an olfactory decadence. Any one of the bales beneath him could make him a rich man, for life.

Enough of the daydreaming, Saker. Witans are never wealthy . . .

His early-morning breaking and entering into merchant Uthen Kesleer's main warehouse did have a purpose, but it wasn't theft. He'd come not as a thief, but as a spy for his employer, the Pontifect of Va-Faith.

Several hours remained before the city of Ustgrind would waken to another summer's day, but slanting sunbeams already filtered through the ill-fitting ventilation shutters to illuminate the interior. In one corner, ledgers were neatly aligned on shelving behind the counting clerks' desks. The rest of the warehouse was stacked high with sacks and casks from the holds of the thousand-ton carrack *Spice Dragon*, recently docked with a cargo purchased halfway around the world.

Narrow aisles separated the rows of goods. Seen from his perch on the beam, it was as confusing as a hedge maze.

He had already seen – or rather, smelled – enough to glean some of the information he'd been sent to obtain, but he wasn't about to leave without proof.

Tying one end of his rope to the beam, he lowered the other end on to the burlap of the bales. He rappelled down the wall until his feet hit the top bale. Leaving the rope where it was, he crouched to examine the sacking beneath his feet.

He peeled off his leather gloves and tucked them into his belt, then used the tip of his dagger to tease apart the strands of burlap. The hole he made was just large enough to insert the tips of two fingers and pull out a sample. In the dim light he wasn't sure what he had. It felt like wood and was shaped like a star, no larger than his thumbnail. He lifted it to his nose and inhaled. A tantalising smell similar to aniseed, but stronger and subtly mixed with a hint of . . . what? Fennel? A spice obviously, but not one he knew. He slipped several of the wooden stars into his pouch, smoothed over the hole in the sacking and moved on to another bale.

After quarter of an hour he'd extracted samples of eight different spices and done a rough count of sacks, bales and casks. In the interests of secrecy, he'd resisted the temptation to break the seal around the bungs on the casks to see what they contained. His instructions had been explicit.

"Just for once, no one is to know what you are doing, Saker," the Pontifect had said with weary sternness after giving him his instructions. "No adventuring, no brawling, no sword fights, no hair's-breadth escapes. You're supposed to gather intelligence, not be a one-man army."

"Not so much as a bloody nose," he'd replied cheerfully. "I swear it, your reverence. I find out if Lowmeer's merchant traders have found the Spicerie and, if they have, what their intentions are, then I return with the information. No one will know the Pontifect's witan spy was even in Ustgrind. Simple."

"Somehow nothing is ever simple if you're involved." As this was said with a sigh that spoke of a long-suffering patience not far from being shattered, he'd had the wit to stay silent.

Now, however, he smiled wryly at the thought of Saker Rampion

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keeping out of trouble. He seemed to *attract* trouble, swinging towards it like a compass needle pointing north.

A moment later, right on cue, he knew he wasn't alone in the warehouse.

He wasn't sure what had alerted him. A faint inhalation of a breath? The almost inaudible scrape of a shoe against the rim of a cask? Something. While counting the cargo, he'd circled the whole warehouse, walked down every narrow alley between the stacks. *I didn't see or hear anybody*. The hair on the back of his neck prickled.

He eased himself down into a crouch, holding his breath. No one shouted an alarm. The silence remained as intact as the aromas saturating the air, yet every instinct told him he was being stalked. It wasn't a mouse or a warehouse cat. It wasn't the creak of timber warming up as the sun rose. Someone was there, in the building, following him.

Va rot him, he's good, whoever he is.

The warehouse doors were barred on the outside, and the street was patrolled by arquebus-toting guards of the Kesleer Trading Company. His only escape route was the way he'd come in, over the roofs.

Edging down a narrow canyon between stacked casks on one side and layers of bulging sacks on the other, he headed back to the rope. Each step he took was measured, silent, slow. As he moved, he ran through possibilities. A thief? A spy for another trading company? A warehouse guard? The thought of someone skilled enough to stay hidden and quiet all this time sent a shiver tingling up his spine. His hand dropped to the hilt of the dagger at his belt. Confound his decision to leave his sword back in his rented room! He'd feared it would hamper his climb to the roof; now he feared its lack.

He'd almost reached the rope when a soft slithering sound gave him a sliver of warning. Too late, he threw himself sideways. A man dropped on him from the top of a stack of sacks, his momentum sufficient to send them both sprawling. His heart skidded sickly as he tried to roll away, but there was no escaping the grip on his shoulder. Face down, his nose ground into the floor hard enough to start it bleeding, his dagger inaccessible under his hip, he was in trouble.

So much for his promises . . .

He relaxed momentarily, allowing his muscles to go soft. The hand

jamming him down to the floor was powerful, yet the body on top of his felt surprisingly slight.

A *woman*? Surely not. His assailant had the muscles of an ox. A strong smell of salt, though. A sailor, perhaps. Yes, there was the confirmation – a whiff of tar from his clothes.

He arched his body up and over, reaching backwards with his free arm. Clutching a handful of hair, he wrenched hard. The fellow grunted and punched him on the side of his face. He let go of the hair and they separated, rolling away from each other and springing to their feet.

The young man facing him was at least a head shorter than he was, but the real surprise lay in his colouring. Black eyes stared at him out of a brown face, framed by black hair long enough to be tied at the neck. Not Lowmian, then. Pashali? A Pashali trader from the Va-forsaken Hemisphere? He was dark enough, but his clothes were all wrong. He was dressed in the typical garb of a tar straight off a Lowmian ship. In the dim light it was hard to guess his age, but Saker thought him a few years younger than himself. Nineteen? Twenty?

Not much more than a youth, crouching, arms held wide, body swaying slightly. The stance of someone used to hand-to-hand combat. Bare feet. *A brown-skinned sailor and no shoes*. He'd heard about them: skilled sailors from the Va-forsaken half of the globe, but not from Pashalin. They were recruited from the scattered islands of the Summer Seas and their reluctance to wear shoes in all but the coldest weather was legendary.

What did the Pashali call them? Lascars, that was it.

But what in all the foaming oceans was he doing in Lowmeer? Lascars crewed Pashali trading vessels half a world away. They didn't turn up in warehouses in chilly, wet Ustgrind, capital of Lowmeer, though he'd heard they occasionally reached the eastern coasts of his own nation, neighbouring Ardrone. He'd never glimpsed one, though.

He dropped his hand to pull out his dagger, but barely had it free of his belt before the young man sprang at him, turning sideways as he came, his front leg rising in a kick. Confused by the move, Saker hesitated. The man's heel – as hard as iron – slammed into his wrist. The dagger went flying and he was left gasping in pain. Consign the whelp to hell, a wallop like that could kill. And with bare feet too – his heels must be as thick as horn!

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He ducked away and, to give himself time to recover, said with all the calm he could muster, "Can't we talk about this? I imagine you don't want to get caught in here any more than I do."

That was as far as he got. The youth came barrelling at him again, his speed astonishing. Saker reacted without thinking. He slid one foot between his opponent's legs, laid a hand flat to the floor to give himself leverage, and pushed sideways. His legs scissored around the youth's right knee, pitching him over. The lascar fell awkwardly, grunting in pain. Saker threw himself on top, and for a moment they wrestled wildly on the floor.

The sailor might have been small in stature, but he was all sinew and muscle. Worse, he was a scrapper. He head-butted Saker's face, sending fierce pain lancing through his cheekbones. His nose gushed fresh gouts of blood. Only a lucky blow using his knee to jab the fellow's stomach saved him from further ignominy. They broke apart, panting. Saker cursed. His shirt was torn all down the front, so he used it to wipe the blood from his face.

His opponent had scooped the fallen dagger up from the floor and drawn another from his belt. His blade was oddly sinuous. Saker's mouth went dry. Sailors said there was sorcery in blades like that.

Fobbing damn, Fritillary will be furious. Sorry, your reverence, I think trouble has come calling again . . .

Sometimes life just wasn't fair.

He back-pedalled away, fast, relying on his memory of the configuration of the cargo heaped behind. The lascar leapt after him.

Saker grabbed a barrel balanced on top of another and pulled it to the floor between them. The metal rim rolled over his attacker's bare foot. He didn't flinch. Saker tumbled another after it, and then a third, a smaller one, bound around the bulge with cane. The cane broke when it hit the floor, splitting the staves apart to release a cloud of bright yellow powder which billowed up around him. Disorientated, he tripped over one of the staves and fell face down into brightly coloured ground spice. He pushed himself up, blinded, utterly vulnerable, dripping blood and sneezing, blowing out clouds of gold-coloured powder.

He blinked away the spice and found himself looking into twinkling black eyes. His assailant's amusement didn't prevent him from pricking

his ribs with the point of his wavy dagger, or twisting his other hand into his torn shirt to haul him to his feet.

Pox on the cockerel!

Saker could have said any number of things. Instead, he wiped bloodstained powder from his face and selected the most harmless question he could summon. “What *is* this stuff?”

“*Kunyit*. Here, men say turmeric.”

“A spice, I hope, and not a poison.”

The grin broadened. “Maybe you no live long enough to be poisoned, yes?” The fellow jabbed the point of his dagger a little more firmly into his side.

Saker sneezed again, a series of explosive paroxysms. Each time, the point of the dagger jabbed unpleasantly through the cloth of what was left of his shirt. Va help him, he was as helpless as a featherless squab!

The side door of the warehouse swung open with a loud creak. Light and the sound of voices flooded in. Both of them froze, then – as one – ducked down below the level of the stacked cargo. The lascar eyed him warily, keeping his wavy blade at the ready, even as he slipped Saker’s knife into his belt in a deliberate gesture of ownership.

Their danger was now a shared one. If the newcomers wanted to inspect the cargo, there was no way they’d miss the broken cask with its contents spilled. Any man caught in an Ustgrind warehouse could expect no mercy. Lowmian law protected trade and traders, and punishment of transgressors tended to be lethal.

Va-blast, we could soon be as dead as soused herrings in a firkin.

Silently he shrugged at his unwelcome companion. The lascar leaned forward, until his mouth was almost at his ear. “Betray me, my blade stick your heart. You understand, no?”

Saker rolled his eyes to signal his lack of interest in continuing the fight. He glanced at his rope where it hung against the wall. It suddenly looked all too obvious. Carefully he reached for his gloves. The lascar watched, alert, as he pulled them on.

Footsteps rattled floorboards at the entrance. He counted the number of shadows cast across the light as men entered the door one by one: five. Five people. Only one spoke, directing the rest to the desks. Relieved, Saker breathed out. Clerks, then?

No, too early for clerks. This was a clandestine meeting.

Chairs scraped, more murmured conversation. Then one voice, authoritative, irritated, spoke above the rest. "Well, Mynster Kesleer, what's all this about, then? Dragging us out of our warm beds at this Va-forsaken hour! I trust you have good cause."

Kesleer? Kesleer himself? The Ustgrind merchant who not only owned the warehouse, but who possessed the largest fleet in all the Regality of Lowmeer.

The idea that such a powerful man had called a meeting at five in the morning in a dockside warehouse was startling. Saker's astonishment paled, though, under his growing fear. If he was caught and identified as an Ardronese witan working for Fritillary Reedling, the Pontifect of the Faith, he would not only be hanged as a thief and a spy, but his involvement would drag the Pontificate into an international incident. He winced. The repercussions would be horrendous.

He strained to hear the conversation, but the men had dropped their voices to a murmur. Beside him, the lascar peered around the edge of the bales to see what was happening. His frown told Saker he wasn't having much luck either.

The next audible words were uttered by a different man, his tone incredulous. "That's a preposterous proposal! Your skull's worm-holed, Kesleer, if you think we'll agree to that!"

Once again, the reply was muffled. Saker gritted his teeth. What proposal? To do what? Between whom? Without a second thought, he hoisted himself up the side of the bale until he lay flat on top. He was nowhere near the front row of the stacked cargo, and stuffed sacks on top of the bales still hid him from the Lowmians, but there was a gap between them, several inches wide.

A slit he could look through.

He had a narrow view of the counting table near the desks, now scattered with papers and charts, and the face of a man seated there. A lantern on the table provided more illumination, and there could be no mistaking him: Uthen Kesleer. Although they'd never met, the merchant had been pointed out to him on the street, and a bulbous growth on the side of his nose made for a distinctive visage.

A soft scrabbling behind told Saker the lascar had followed him. The young man, baring his perfect white teeth in a grin that might

have been infectious in another situation, burrowed his way between Saker and the sacks, until he was sharing the same view.

One of the men raised his voice to growl, "Profit? Not from this recent venture of yours, I think, Mynster Kesleer. I notice neither of your other carracks followed the *Spice Dragon* up the Ust estuary home to the berth outside."

"Scuttled in the islands. Shipworm. Three in every four men in the fleet died, so there weren't enough to man all three vessels anyway. Those still alive sailed the *Spice Dragon* home. The dead were no loss. More profit for the rest, in fact."

The lascar drew breath sharply and his muscles tautened against Saker's torso. His hand groped for his wavy-bladed dagger, now thrust through the cloth belt at his waist.

He was on board, Saker thought with sudden insight. *He sailed on the Spice Dragon to Ustgrind*. Those poor bastards who'd died had been his shipmates. Scurvy-ridden fish bait, probably, or dying of bloody flux and fever in strange ports.

"Come now," Kesleer was saying, "you know how it is, Mynster Mulden. Since when have any of you rattled your brains about such things? It's the way Va has ordered life. There are always plenty more tars willing to take the risk and seek their cut of the trade. I'm sure Mynster Geer and Mynster Bargveth agree with me."

The shoulder muscles of the youth rippled like a cat about to spring. Saker gripped him, shaking his head. The fellow turned to glare, dark eyes flashing, daring him to say something.

He kept silent.

The conversation mellowed, the softer words unintelligible, but he had gleaned the identity of three of the other four men. Geer, Mulden and Bargveth, all merchant families with shipping interests, families not just wealthy, but influential at the Regal's court. The Geers hailed from Umdorp, the second largest port of Lowmeer. The Muldens controlled the docks and fleets of Fluge in the north, while the Bargveths had a monopoly of trade out of Grote in the far south.

That they were talking to one another astonished him. Competition between ports was a normal part of the country's commerce. Lowmian shipping merchants didn't cooperate; they prattled the whereabouts of rival merchantmen to Ardronese privateers instead.

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Cankers 'n' galls, what's going on? The Pontifect won't like this, whatever the truth. When rich men played their games of wealth, they endangered the independence of Va-Faith and the neutrality of the Pontificate.

He strained to hear more, but caught only fragmented snatches. And he still didn't know the name of the fifth man.

“. . . new design of cargo ship. They're called fluyts . . .” That was Kesleer speaking.

“. . . the Regal will want a privateer's ransom!”

“Well, we can't succeed without him, that's for sure.”

“. . . I have just such a tasty bait . . .” Kesleer again. The words were followed by a short silence, then a rattling sound.

“A piece of wood as a bribe for the Regal?” someone asked, tone scathing.

“This is bambu,” Kesleer replied, “from the Summer Sea islands. It grows like that, with a hole down the middle.”

The lascar jerked, the expression on his face an odd mixture of both pleasure and fierce rage as the conversation murmured on.

Oh, Va save us, what now?

“This hollow stuff is valuable?” someone else asked, incredulous.

“No, no. The value is in the contents.” That was definitely Kesleer again. The next few words were indecipherable. Then, also from Kesleer, “Here, take a look . . .”

Saker couldn't see what Kesleer was showing them. He pulled a face, frustrated.

More muttered words, then, “I agree, they're certainly magnificent, yes, but what value can they have?”

What the rattling pox were they looking at? With a sudden movement the lascar pulled himself away from the crack and hauled himself up on to the bulging sacks to see better.

In horror, Saker leapt upwards to grab his ankle before he'd crawled out of reach. He yanked as silently as he could, trying to draw the young man backwards. What in all the world was he trying to do: get them both hanged?

The lascar kicked, but Saker was below him, well away from his flailing foot. Infuriated, the young man turned back and slashed with his dagger. Saker released his hold before the blade connected and the

lascar wormed his way out of reach, heading across the sacks towards the merchants.

And the Pontifect thought *he* was reckless? He was a model of circum-spect decorum compared to this idiot of a tar. At that moment, he could have cheerfully murdered the fellow. Instead, he slipped down to the floor. Stepping over the shattered cask of turmeric, he headed through the maze of cargo towards the back wall of the warehouse and his dangling rope.

Kesleer was saying, “. . . but Regal Vilmar is a jackdaw, hoarding pretty things. He’ll love the idea that King Edwayn will have to watch and fume while Ardronese court women clamour after goods like these, at our price. Huge profits for Lowmian merchants . . .”

Every nerve in Saker’s body told him that in a moment, the relative quiet of the warehouse would vanish. These men would react violently when they realised their secret meeting had been overheard. What if they were armed with pistols, those new-fangled wheel-lock ones that didn’t need a naked flame to ignite the powder? If he climbed up on the bale to seize the end of his climbing rope, he’d be visible to anyone who looked his way. Worth it, or not?

The Pontifect’s words echoed in his ears. *You’re a spy, not a one-man army. In Va’s name, try subtlety, Saker Rampion!*

Best to wait until the lascar was seen, then escape in the ensuing confusion. No sooner had he made that decision than a child’s voice echoed through the warehouse. “Papa! Papa! Someone’s been here. There’s a broken barrel and yellow footprints! Come see.”

He winced.

The fifth person. A child. At a guess, Uthen Kesleer’s ten-year-old son, Dannis.

He had no choice now. He hauled himself up the wall of bales, gripping with his knees and digging his fingertips into the burlap for purchase. Behind him, chairs scraped, enraged voices shouted. Kesleer called out the boy’s name, but it sounded as if he wasn’t sure where the lad was in the maze of aisles.

And then, a gasp behind him, just as he pulled himself on to the topmost bale. Lying flat, he looked back over the edge.

He’d never seen Dannis Kesleer, but this had to be him. He was dressed in black, a miniature merchant, with silver buckles on his shoes and belt, his broad white collar trimmed with lace.

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They stared at each other. He hesitated, reluctant to use force to stop the boy yelling for his father. But Dannis was silent, staring. Not at Saker's face, but at the medallion around his neck. It had fallen free through his torn shirt and now dangled over the edge of the bale. His cleric's emblem, the oak leaf within a circle. His immediate thought was that the lad would not recognise it, for it was the symbol of an Ardronese witan, not a Lowmian one. Ardrone and Lowmeer might share the same Va-Faith, but there were differences in the way they practised it. The oak leaf was not used in Lowmeer.

Beyond Dannis, he caught a glimpse of the lascar fumbling among the papers on the table on the other side of the warehouse. Their gazes met as the man found and snatched up what appeared to be a wooden rod. The merchants had scattered and were nowhere to be seen.

Saker looked back at the boy to find that Dannis Kesleer knew the oak symbol after all. He was making the customary bow given to all clergy, with both hands clasped under his chin. Saker smiled down on him and raised a conspiratorial forefinger to his lips in a sign of silence. Briefly he thought of directing the lad's attention to the lascar to make his own escape easier, but dismissed the thought. Instead, he made a gesture of benediction. Obediently, the lad laid his hand over his heart in acceptance. Then he turned and walked away.

Saker let out the breath he'd been holding, but his heart refused to stop thudding. He leapt for the rope and clawed his way up. The skin between his shoulder blades tingled as he imagined lead shot ploughing into his back. He scrambled on to the beam and hauled the rope up behind him, frantic.

How can they miss seeing me?

But the merchants were still shouting at one another, their voices coming from all over the warehouse as they looked for Kesleer's son. No one looked up.

Kneeling on the beam, he untied the rope with fumbling fingers, his mouth dry. A movement low on the opposite wall near the desks caught his attention.

The lascar was on top of the ledger shelving. Even as he watched, the youth began to climb. Saker froze. Va's teeth, how was he doing that? He knew sailors could climb rigging in the roughest of seas, but that wall was sheer, built of rough wood planks, and all the man had

were his bare toes and fingers. And his dagger. He was carrying the stolen wooden rod too, which he'd shoved down the front of his shirt so that the top of it poked up over his shoulder. Even that didn't seem to faze him.

That must be the bambu they were talking about.

Fortunately for the lascar, that corner was deeply shadowed and so he remained unseen. Incredibly, he paused to look at Saker, who was keeping an eye on him as he slid back the loose shingles where he'd entered the warehouse. Their gazes met, and the lascar removed the bambu and waved it, grinning hugely, as if to say, "*Look what I found!*"

Saker winced, convinced the overconfident tar would plummet to the floor, or be seen by the traders. Yet his luck appeared to hold. He scrambled up to the top of the wall where he pushed open the ventilation shutter. The gap would be just wide enough for him to squeeze through, but the morning light now slanted in to illuminate him.

Va favours the bold, Saker thought. Still, on the other side there was a sheer wall dropping straight on to a narrow walkway along the canal, and near certainty of being seen by the outside guards.

Saker pushed his rope through the hole he'd made and prepared to wriggle out. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw one of the merchants rush past the table. His action scattered papers and something else lying there, something wispy. Gold-coloured filaments fluttered in the air, as bright as sparks. Yelling, the man pointed a pistol at the lascar, and pulled the trigger. The noise was deafening.

Looking over his shoulder, Saker saw the unharmed sailor one last time through the opening of the shutter. He was outside the warehouse, hanging on to a beam of the overhang. He made some sort of hand gesture just before he swung up on to the top of the roof, as agile as a squirrel.

Saker thought it was a wave of farewell, but then he saw the flash of a dagger blade flying through the air.

Not at any of the men below, *but at him*.

Impossibly, it spiralled through the air, its point always facing his way. It whirred noisily as it came, and the merchants below swivelled to follow its passage. Saker hurtled himself upwards on to the roof.

Something tugged at his trousers and scraped his leg. Grabbing up the rope and the coat he'd left there, he set off at a run up to the ridge

THE LASCAR'S DAGGER

of the warehouse roof. He heard doors crash open below, followed by shouts in the streets. He didn't stop.

He was already on the roof of the neighbouring warehouse when he heard the second pistol shot, followed almost immediately by the bang of an arquebus.

He didn't look back, but he did look down.

The wavy dagger was firmly stuck through his trousers below the knee, and his leg was stinging.

The Lascar's Legacy

“Oi, you! What are you doing here? This here’s Kesleer property! Be off with you.”

Saker, standing on the dockside not far from the warehouse he’d broken into eight hours earlier, turned without haste to confront the guard hurrying towards him. “Pardon?” he asked politely, setting his velvet cleric’s cap firmly on his head to stop it being whisked away by the wind.

After cleaning himself up and snatching a few hours’ sleep in his cheap port-side doss house, he’d dressed in a witan’s robe before venturing out to have something to eat. The long skirt irritated him, but the clerical garb gave him instant respectability – and it could cover a multitude of uncleric-like items, such as the wire hooks and lock picks in its deep pockets, and the sword swinging at his side underneath. An arbiter’s warrant recognising his years of study had earned him the right to dress as a witan; his only lie was the Lowmian medallion around his neck, which he’d just swapped for the Ardronese symbol recognised by the Kesleer boy.

Va only knows what the Pontifect will say, if I mention that incident . . .

He’d been careless, and Fritillary Reedling didn’t like carelessness.

“Pardon, witan,” the guard said. “Didn’t see as you were a man of Va, like. But you’re treading wrong here. This here’s a private dock, and you need permission to gawk.”

Saker took in the wickedly sharp pike the man carried. “Then it’s me who should be apologising,” he said with an assumed accent he knew reeked of the southern Lowmian provinces. “It was just that I heard a heathen lad drowned here this morning at cockcrow.” That was true enough, although the gossip at the pie stall he’d patronised had been confused as to why the man had drowned. “Was I

misinformed? I thought to say a prayer for his unshriven soul. Although blessed is he who dies by water." He fingered the wave-shaped curves of the Lowmian medallion, feeling only mildly guilty. Lowmian faith emphasised connections to water and aquatic life, and Lowmians adhered to the religious precepts they called the Way of the Flow, but they recognised the supremacy of Va the Creator and the religious leadership of the Pontifect, just as he did.

"Was there indeed a drowning here?" he asked.

"Ay. Saw him die with my own eyes. One of them darkish Pashali heathens."

Interesting. They hadn't recognised the man as a lascar. "Then all the more important he is remembered with a blessing."

The guard grunted. "He stealed summat from the warehouse. Bit o' furrin wood, looked like. Tried to escape over the roof. One of our Kesleer men shot 'im and he fell still holding it. Just missed the walkway and went straight into the water. Kept me eye on the body. Watched 'im, floating face down, till he was out of sight. He was a deader, right enough. T'ain't no one can hold their air that long."

"Did anyone salvage the stolen property?"

"Not as I heard. Went into the water clutched in his mitt, and by the time they roused sailors to get a boat after him, both the corpse and the bit o' wood bobbing alongside were out o' sight."

"Alone, was he?"

"Don't rightly know. Some said there was a second fellow, but nobody got a good gander at him."

Saker shook his head in genuine sorrow. "A poor way to end his days, a thief in a foreign land. Still, he deserves a prayer in the hope that Va grants him mercy." Resisting a desire to roll his eyes at his own unctuousness, he raised the medallion towards the estuary instead, murmuring the standard prayer for the dead. He spoke the words, but found it hard to believe the lascar had died. He'd seemed so . . . vital.

I don't even know his name.

If the guard hadn't been there, he would have reached into his pocket for the lascar's dagger, and dropped it into the water in homage.

There seemed little point staying in Ustgrind any longer. He already had the information the Pontifect wanted. The Kesleer Trading

Company had found a route to the spice islands in the Summer Seas of the Va-forsaken Hemisphere.

He sighed as he contemplated the upheaval *that* would cause. *Talk about jiggling a sore tooth . . .*

A map of the Va-cherished Hemisphere had graced the wall of one of his childhood classrooms, and he'd thought the land mass resembled a molar extracted from the mouth of some gargantuan monster. The crown was set in the polar ice. The body of the tooth was cracked by the borders of the five Principalities, otherwise known as the Innerlands because they lacked viable warm-water ports. The two roots of the molar, dangling southwards under the Principalities, were Lowmeer and Ardrone with their ice-free shores and thriving sea trade.

For centuries, trade into the Va-cherished Hemisphere had been at the mercy of the Va-forsaken Pashali caravanners, because only they possessed the mastodons capable of the brutal ice-cap crossing over the North Pole. Now Lowmians had proven it was possible to bypass the Empire of Pashalin via an ocean route to reach the spice islands and the Summer Seas. And the politics of *that* were about to give everyone the commercial equivalent of a colossal toothache.

Ardrone will be wickedly overcharged by Lowmeer, instead of by Pashalin . . .

Ardrone could at least attempt to compete by searching for the sea routes, but what about land-locked Muntorn and the other Principalities? They'd be worse off, and the Pontifect, responsible for the spiritual health of the hemisphere, would not be happy.

Saker sighed and headed along the dock to purchase a berth on one of the coastal flat-boats that plied the western shore of the estuary separating Lowmeer from Ardrone. This one was due to depart with the tide early the next day, sailing for Borage at the head of the estuary. From there, he would take a barge up the River Ard to Vavala, the seat of the Pontifect in the Innerlands, to report his findings.

With the ticket token in his pocket, he headed back to the doss house to catch up on his sleep, but his thoughts were with the lascar. He couldn't dismiss the memory of that broad, mischievous smile, or the way the fellow had so casually swarmed up a straight wall to escape. And why in all Va's world had he thrown that dagger? To kill him?

No, more likely in the mistaken belief that drawing attention to my presence would diminish interest in his own.

And then there was the mystery of the bambu. The lascar had risked his life to obtain it. Or to obtain what was inside it. Well, it mattered little now that the man was dead. He pictured him floating out to sea, face down, the bambu bobbing beside him.

Bobbing . . .

His line of thought was abruptly broken when he turned down a side alley leading to his lodging, to find it blocked by a hand cart. As he came closer, wanting to squeeze past, his stomach heaved in recognition of what it was.

A death cart.

He swallowed the bitter taste that welled into his mouth, prompted by his memories of a spotted fever epidemic when he was a student at the university in Grundorp. For years, the call of the carters had haunted his nightmares. *Bring out your dead!*

As he approached, two men emerged from a nearby hovel, their lower faces wrapped in cloth. They carried a middle-aged man by the shoulders and ankles. With casual indifference, they heaved his body into the cart as if he was no more than a dead rat found on a midden heap. When they turned and re-entered the hovel, a smell of spice lingered in the air. *Nutmeg*, he thought. And yet it wasn't a well-to-do neighbourhood whose inhabitants could afford such luxuries.

He squeezed past the cart as best he could, glancing down at the corpse. A player's grotesque demon mask looked back at him, a face no longer human. Eyes bulged, bull-like nostrils flared. Horns sprouted from a bulbous skull, the sharp tusk-like prongs curling backwards to dig into the top of his head. Not a mask. A man, once, that much was obvious.

Saker stared, his mouth dropping open in his astonishment. *Sweet Va! What botch of nature is this?*

Horror became terror as one of the man's hands shot out and clamped tight around his wrist. Unnerved, he squawked an appalled protest. He tried to jump backwards, only to crack his head and right elbow against the outer wall of a house.

The supposed corpse, very much alive, held him in a crushing grip, pulling him off balance until his face was inches from the slobbering mouth. "Surprise!" the man cried.

Saker reeled from the foul stench of diseased breath.

“Not dead yet, am I? Lookee here, witan. Lookee on the work of A’Va, and despair! Is he not called A’Va the devil? See my devil’s horns?” He gave a demented cackle. “And you thought you was under Va’s protection!” He was still grinning as he vomited copious black bile, before collapsing on to the floor of the cart like an emptied sack. His smile died, his eyes clouded, first with despair, then with the approach of death.

Head spinning, gagging on the smell, Saker wrenched his fingers free. He was still standing there, gasping and trembling with shock, as the death rattle sounded. He ought to have been murmuring prayers for the dying; instead he was thinking, *Thank Va, merciful Va, he’s dead.*

When the two men emerged from the hovel, they carried a second body, a woman this time. She too was growing horns and animal teeth. She was more obviously dead, her limbs already as stiff as planks.

“I’ll be blistered,” he stammered, looking at her face as they laid her in the cart. “What do they suffer from?”

One of the men re-entered the dwelling; the other looked at him, sunken eyes bleak. “Well, well, a witan of the Faith and this is yer first taste of the Horned Death, eh? Get used to it, young’un! You’ll see plenty more, I’m thinking.” He dug into his clothing and brought out a pomander stuck with nutmeg. Holding it up to his cloth-covered face, he inhaled.

The first man returned with a half-grown child. This one was also dead, and he tossed the body into the cart with scant attention to the sickening squelch it made as it landed. Saker wrenched his gaze away, swallowing back the contents of his stomach. He looked instead at the carter. “Treat the dead with respect,” he snapped. “They may no longer be of our world, but their dignity means something to the living!”

“Not this lot,” the man drawled from behind his face cloth. “A’Va got these. The devil’s work now. Your business, I s’pose, brother witan. Not mine, fer sure. But you mark me words, reverend sorr: there’s too many twins being bore. The Way of the Flow is doomed, lest you lot tackle the sprout of evil!”

What the beggary has twins to do with anything? Or A’Va of all things?

The whole question of the existence of a demonic antithesis of Va, a being called A’Va, was moot, and in another situation he might have

argued the point. However, the two men wrapped filthy gnarled hands around the handles of the cart and trundled it away down the alley at surprising speed. Saker gaped after them. "Where are you taking them?" he called out. Neither man looked around or answered.

A tendril of memory brushed his thoughts, something about the Lowmian attitude to twin births, but he couldn't recall it to mind. He sucked in a breath of fresh air and strode after the cart, but by the time he reached the end of the alley, it had vanished into the throngs of people pouring out of the local Va-Faith chapel.

None of his business, he supposed, but the weirdness and the lack of care for the sick bothered him. Pox 'n' pustules, the man hadn't even been dead!

By the time he reached his lodgings, he was almost inclined to believe he'd dreamed the encounter. He was certainly too tired to think about it. Once in his room, he barred the rickety door, hooked his robe and his sword belt over the peg on the back, and lay down to sleep.

When he woke, the sun had already set, the room was dim, and there was something horribly wrong.

He lay still, alert. Moonlight shafted in from the street through cracks and knot holes in the walls, and he could hear the chattering and laughter of passers-by. Both the door and the shutter were still barred. He was definitely alone. But something had . . . changed.

He rose, fumbling for his tinderbox, steel and flint. His fear built as the tinder refused to catch. By the time he finally had the wick of his candle alight and could see what was out of place, he was sweating.

The lascar's dagger. It was lying on the floor halfway between the door and the bed. He stared, his mind trying to make sense of the impossible. He'd left it inside the capacious pocket of his robe. He had, he was *sure* he had.

The evidence said otherwise. He must have been half asleep and careless. He shrugged, picked it up and turned it over and over in his hands. He'd studied it earlier, and it was no different now. Beautifully wrought, the curved handle was crafted of polished horn inlaid with silver filigree. The cross-guard was not part of the handle, but an extension of the top of the blade. Even odder for a throwing blade, the guard was asymmetrical, with a long and a short side. The rest of the blade was double-sided and sinuous, but the curves weren't of even

length. He wasn't sure what metals had been used in its crafting, but they'd been forge-melded – folded and refolded – and patterned throughout with orange-gold filaments he couldn't identify. The overall appearance was of an ornamental work of art, rather than a weapon.

And yet that had to be a faulty assessment. It wasn't designed for cutting or slashing, but rather for throwing or stabbing. He'd seen – and heard – it whirl through the air, spiralling as it went. He'd tried it himself, tossing it at the door. It wasn't easy to throw straight, but it could be done. The workmanship and the balance of the dagger had surprised him. With practice, it might be a formidable throwing weapon. Moreover, he thought if it was used point-first to stab something, it would slide in with the ease of a hot needle jabbed into soft candle grease.

He shook his head, smiling ruefully. *You're an arrogant cockerel, Saker Rampion. Just because something is from the Va-forsaken lands, you want to scorn it, and look for proof that it's inferior.*

He stood and dressed in order to go out. He was starving.

It took the flat-boat three weeks to sail to Borage, where ramshackle buildings clustered around a small bay at the mouth of the River Ard like herd animals gathered to drink at a waterhole. The fishing fleet were out to sea, so the ship crawled into port on a light breeze at dusk and docked at an empty wharf covered in fish scales. In the distance, the last rays of the setting sun bathed an ornate manor house on a distant hill in a golden glow. Saker watched the light fade as the first passengers disembarked.

"That's the Foxheim Palace," a voice said at his elbow. "The Ardronese Prime belongs to the Shenat branch of that family. Rich as oysters, that lot, they say."

Saker turned to find the captain leaning on the railing beside him.

"You can't get to Vavala tonight, so you might want to think about staying on board, witan. There's plague in Borage."

His heart skipped a beat. "Va above, how can you know that?"

The captain pointed over Saker's shoulder. "The plague flag is flying from Signal Hill." He shrugged, indifferent. "Probably the Horned Death. Naught to worry about. The Death pops its ugly head up a lot these days, but never seems to get much of a hold. Some folk blame

A'Va and his twins. Hogs-piddle, I say. I know what happens to twins. Still, you're welcome to stay on board."

He opened his mouth to ask what he meant about the twins, then realised the captain expected him to know. If he didn't, then he might be betraying his disguise as a Lowmian. He could do without the complications. "Thank you," he said, "but I'll stay at the Borage Va-Faith cloister tonight." He'd been dreaming of having access to a cloister bathhouse and their herbal soaps to deal with the infestation of lice he'd picked up on his travels.

If I don't rid myself of this itch, I'll go mad, he thought as he strode down the gangplank a few minutes later.

He should have slept the night through. He was clean and free of vermin, well fed, in a real bed again, not swinging below decks crammed in with snoring travellers. He'd even been reassured that the outbreak of the Horned Death was confined to two families on the outskirts of the port town.

Yet he woke barely an hour after he'd retired. The room was rocking and his head spun as if his body was trying to convince him he was back on the boat. Groaning, he rolled over. He'd forgotten he always felt like this for at least a day after disembarking from a ship.

The room, actually a cell for a Lowmian monk, had a glassless window slit, and moonlight streamed in. A movement on the floor caught his eye, and when he turned his head to look, he felt he'd been turned upside down. His stomach rebelled, and dizziness prevented him from seeing straight. He struggled to regain a sense of physical equilibrium, but had to battle with the idea that he'd just seen a sinuous silvery creature slither across the floor. Like a snake. Or some kind of large worm. No, just a figment of an imagination confused by the giddy spinning inside his head, surely. Yet when the world settled down once more and his vision cleared, he stared at the patch of moonlight in disbelief. There, lying in clear view, was the lascar's dagger. It hadn't been there when he first woke up. He *knew* that. Just as he knew it'd been buried deep in his pack when he went to bed.

And yet there it was, lying on the stone floor.

His mouth went dry. He lay without moving, stilled by his terror of the unknown, unable to wrench his gaze away.

Va-forsaken witchery.

If I look at it, perhaps it won't move again.

If I don't look at it, perhaps it'll kill me.

He sent a prayer for guidance to Va, even though experience told him Va rarely answered prayers.

With his gaze nailed to the dagger, he realised that the gold threads in the metal catching the moonlight glowed as if they were alive. He'd seen something like that not long ago.

Where?

He struggled to remember, then it came to him. On the counting table in Kesleer's warehouse. A heap of charts and papers, the bambu rod and yellow-gold gleaming. Not coins. Not metal. Fluffy, flyaway filaments. Like sparks. Like silken threads. No, not quite . . .

He concentrated, remembering.

They'd been so light, moving in the slightest breeze, like goose-down from a pillow . . .

They'd been feathers. Soft, downy feathers.

What the pox?

He had to have it wrong. Feathers weren't valuable to a man like Kesleer, or the Regal; the idea was ridiculous. And of course, no one put feathers into a knife blade. If they did, the heated metal would frizzle them.

Shivering, he drew the rough wool blanket up under his chin. He would have taken on an intruder without a second thought, but nothing, nothing at all, was going to entice him out of bed to pick up that dagger with its wicked, sinuous blade. Not when he was damned sure it could slither out of his pack and cross the floor like a snake. He'd stay awake till morning, staring at the thing.

Half an hour later, he dozed off.

When he did wake, it was in horrified panic as he realised that the first dawn had already pierced the dark, and the monks were ringing the bell for prayers. He sat bolt upright even before his eyes were fully open. The first thing his gaze sought was the dagger on the floor, but the flagstones were bare. He drew in a deep, calming breath. Obviously it was all some horrible nightmare, none of it real. He chuckled. What an addle-pate he was! The blade was still buried at the bottom of his pack, and always had been.

THE LASCAR'S DAGGER

He stood and went to grope for the piss-pot under the bed. And halted halfway, shocked.

Lying on his pillow, next to the indent of his head, was the lascar's dagger.