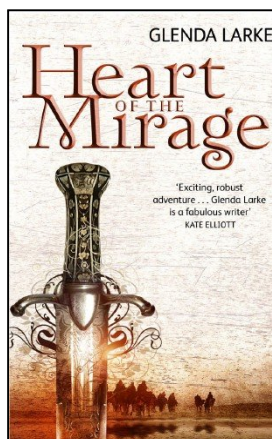


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## CHAPTER ONE



When an emperor laughs about you behind your back, you *know* you are in trouble. When the person speaking to the emperor at the time of his self-satisfied and smug amusement is the Magister Officii, your immediate superior and a man with a cruel sense of humour, well, then you know you ought to find a way to melt into the floor and disappear. If you can't do that, you stride up and down the anteroom to the royal audience hall instead. The carpet, fifteen paces long, showed signs of wear down the centre, so I knew I wasn't the first person to pace while waiting to be called into the august presence of Bator Korbus, Lord of Tyr, High General of Tyrans and Exaltarch of the Tyranian Empire.

If I concentrated, I could feel the Exaltarch's presence in the next room. If I focused my concentration, I could determine his emotions, although once I became aware of them, I wondered if I hadn't been happier ignorant. He exuded a ruthless confidence, like a wily feral dog delighting in its position as leader of the pack. And I knew the topic of his conversation with Magister Rathrox Ligatan was me: why else would I have been called here to wait while the two men chatted? Rathrox headed the civil service, everyone knew that. Not so widely known was his interest in personally directing the Exaltarch's Brotherhood Compeers, of which I was a female agent.

Although I knew Rathrox well, his emotions were harder to divine through the walls of the audience hall. I thought I detected a certain watchfulness, and perhaps an amused tolerance towards his emperor, stopping just short of lese-majesty. Even a civil servant as powerful as the Magister Officii knew better than to ridicule a ruler whose power was absolute.

It was easy to imagine Rathrox, a thin grey man with yellow teeth, using his caustic wit to amuse his emperor. Easy to imagine the sixty-year-old Exaltarch, his handsome face marred by the cynicism of his eyes, being amused by Rathrox's brand of cruel humour. What I couldn't imagine was what they found so entertaining about me.

Even as I speculated, the Exaltarch gave a belly laugh loud enough to carry through to the anteroom. The two imperial guards outside the door affected not to hear; I frowned. I was still pacing up and down, irritably because of the unfamiliar feel of carpet beneath my bare feet, but the laugh halted me. It was the kind of guffaw a person might make if they saw a slave spill soup in a rival's lap. Under the circumstances it was hardly encouraging, although I couldn't imagine what I'd ever done to warrant the mockery of the Exaltarch.

One of the guards gave me a sympathetic look. He had been more appreciative when I'd first arrived, eyeing my bare right shoulder, long legs and the swell of my

breasts with a connoisseur's eye, but his appreciation had died once he noticed the graceless way I walked and sat. Not even wearing a fine silk wrap threaded through with gold could make me feminine enough to please a man like that guard; the stylish wrap of the highborn lacked allure when it was worn as if it were a large, hastily donned bath towel. I had no pretensions to elegance, or even moderately good looks. I'm taller than most women, long-limbed and muscular. My skin is an unfashionable brown, and my hair the burnt-sienna colour of desert earth, although I did keep it curled and highlighted gold, more in keeping with Tyranian notions of beauty and fashion.

I felt someone approach the door and prepared myself for its opening. A slave appeared in the doorway and motioned me inside; I obeyed wordlessly and, eyes discreetly downcast, went to kneel at the feet of my monarch, just managing to suppress my distaste for the feel of carpet beneath my knees. The slave slipped away through a side door and I was left alone with the Exaltarch and Magister Rathrox. 'My service is yours,' I said formally, and touched my hand to the hem of the Exaltarch's robe in symbolic submission. The gold trimming was knobbed with seed pearls and felt stiff and harsh beneath my fingers. I kept my eyes lowered.

There was a long silence and then an 'Ah' that was little more than an expelled breath. 'So you are Ligea, the late General Gayed's daughter. Look up, girl, and let me see you properly.'

I raised my head and ventured to return the gaze of the Exaltarch's assessing eyes. I had seen him at close quarters once before, years ago. At the time he'd been returning to the city of Tyr at the head of his victorious troops and in those days he was lean and hard and arrogant, a politician-soldier about to wrest the last vestiges of political power from the hands of his senile predecessor and a divided Advisory Council. The arrogance was still present, but the hardness had gone from the body into his face. His physique was showing signs of easy living – sagging chest, raddled cheeks, a belly large enough to move independently of the rest of him – but his face said this was a man used to being obeyed, a man who knew how to be ruthless. No overindulgence would ever eradicate the brutal shrewdness of those cold eyes, or the harsh lines around his mouth.

He was lounging on a red velvet divan, at ease, the fingers of one hand playing idly with the gold rings on the other. His nails were manicured and polished, and he smelled of moonflowers and musk. Suspended over his head, a long reed fan swayed to and fro to stir the warm air. There was no sign of the slaves who operated it; doubtless some mechanism enabled them to perform the task from an adjacent room.

When he looked away for a moment to glance at Rathrox, I risked a quick look myself. The Magister leant against the cushions of another divan but his thin, stiff body made no indent on the upholstery, his hands were rigidly still. I was unused to seeing him in the role of a subordinate, unused to seeing him tense. He seemed out of place, like an ugly, foul-smelling insect that had flown into the perfumed boudoir of some highborn lady and didn't know how to escape. Behind him, a marble fireplace dominated the other end of the room, flanked by a clutter of gilded furniture, painted amphorae and too many exotic ornaments. Lion skins, the glass eyes of their heads powerless to express outrage at the ignominy of their fate, were scattered here and there on the carpet. A full-sized statue had its own wall recess, two figures entwined in grotesque embrace: a reminder of the sibling founders of Tyr whose relationship had so repulsed the gods they'd punished the city with the plague.

I wanted to let my gaze wander around the room, to mock the luxury of it, but the one brief glance was all etiquette allowed me. I had to give my full attention to the

Exaltarch. His shrewd eyes lingered on me, speculating. I continued to kneel, awaiting permission to rise, or to speak, but the only sound was the murmur of running water all around us. Tiled fountains set into the walls, or so I guessed. I had them in my own villa. They helped to regulate temperature, cooling the hot air of the desert-season or, once heated, warming the cold air of the snow-season – but I'd heard that in the palace they were thought to perform another function as well. They made it hard for slaves to eavesdrop.

A minute crawled by in silence while we stared at one another.

*What the Vortex was so damned interesting about me?*

I didn't dare let my eyes drop.

'You are not what I expected,' he said finally, in the smooth-accented speech of the highborn. 'You may stand if you wish.'

I scrambled to my feet. 'I was only the General's adopted daughter,' I said. 'If you look for signs of General Gayed in me, you won't find them, Exalted.'

'No,' he agreed. 'And Gayed was ever a man of action. I'm told you have more of a talent for deviousness, and are well suited to the machinations of the Brotherhood. Rathrox tells me you have an uncanny instinct for the truth – or a lie – on the tongue of a prisoner. He says torture is almost obsolete in the Cages since you took on the important interrogations.'

'Lies come easily to the tongues of the tortured, Exalted. They will say anything to ease their pain. My way is better.'

'What is your way?'

'To assess each reply and use, what? A woman's intuition? I do not know, Exalted. It is just a knack I have. And if a man does not tell the truth – well, a lie can sometimes be equally revealing.'

He looked at me curiously, his attention finely focused. 'How long have you had this ability?'

'Since I was a child.' It had always been there, but I'd learned young to hide it. Adults didn't take kindly to having their untruths pointed out to them by a girl not even old enough to wear a wrap.

'A useful ability, I imagine. And we have a mission for you where your skills may be invaluable, Compeer Ligea. You are Kardiastan-born, I believe. Do you remember anything of that land?'

'Nothing, Exalted. I was barely three when my parents were killed in the Kardiastan Uprising and General Gayed took a liking to me and brought me here, to Tyr.'

'Yet I'm told you speak the language.'

'There was a Kardi slave-nurse in the General's household when I arrived. It pleased her to have me speak her tongue.' I thought, without knowing why I was so certain, *And you already knew that.*

He gave the faintest of cynical smiles and glanced briefly at Rathrox. The exchange was worrying, and contained a meaning from which I was deliberately excluded. Once again I sensed their shared amusement. Suspicion stiffened me. The Exaltarch sat up, reaching over to a side table to pour himself a drink from a carafe of green onyx. The heady scent of moonflowers and musk was overpowering, catching in the back of my throat, and I had to subdue a desire to cough. The room was cool enough, yet sweat trickled down my neck and soaked the top edge of my wrap.

As the Exaltarch sipped his wine, I thought, *Now. Now comes the whole point of this charade.*

‘We wish you to go to this land of your birth, Compeer Ligea,’ he said. ‘There is trouble there neither our Governor nor his Prefects nor our Military Commanders seem able to stem. It has its origins in rumour; we wish you to show this rumour to be a lie, trace it to its source and eradicate it.’

‘And if it is true?’ I asked mildly.

He snorted and reverted to the rougher speech of the soldier he had once been. ‘It can hardly be true. Not unless the burned can rise from the ashes of the fire that consumed them. A man died at the stake in the port of Sandmurrum, for treason. There is now a rebellious movement led by yet another traitorous bastard, who the superstitious say is the same man. He is known as Mir Ager. Some say that is his name, others believe it to be a title meaning lord, or leader. Still others think it has something to do with the area of Kardiastan called the Mirage. Perhaps he was born there.’

I inclined my head to indicate I was absorbing all this.

‘As is so often the case where Kardiastan is concerned, there is confusion,’ he added, his tone biting. ‘I want you to find this – this sodding son of a bitch, bring him to justice, and discredit any claim that he is the same bastard as was executed in Sandmurrum.’

I risked a puzzled glance in Rathrox’s direction. All this was hardly a matter for my attention; still less something the Exaltarch would involve himself in personally. I said, ‘But surely, our intelligence in Kardiastan—?’

There was venom in the Exaltarch’s eyes, whether for me or his incompetent underlings or the whole conquered land of Kardiastan I couldn’t tell, but it was unmistakable. ‘If it was possible for them to find this man, or to squash these rumours, they would have done so. This is a job needing a special person with special abilities. Magister Ligatan tells me you are that person. I bow to his judgement, although—’ He allowed his glance to sweep over me, disparaging what he saw. ‘Are you up to such a task, Compeer?’

His scepticism did not worry me; the thought of leaving Tyrans did, but I knew better than to allow any sign of my consternation to show on my face. ‘I shall do my best to serve the Exaltarchy, as ever, Exalted.’

‘Rathrox will tell you the details. You are both dismissed.’

A minute later, still blinking from the abrupt end to the audience, I was tying on my sandals at the entrance to the anteroom and wondering just what it was the Exaltarch had not told me. There was much that had been withheld, I felt sure.

I looked across at Rathrox who was just straightening from fastening his own sandal straps. In the muted light of the hall he appeared all grey; a grey, long-limbed, mantis-thin man, waiting for me. A man of prey. I said, ‘Suppose you tell me what all this is about, Magister?’

‘What is there to say? The Exaltarch asked me to choose someone to send to Kardiastan. When I mentioned you, he was a little surprised at my choice, and wished to meet you before giving his approval. He found it difficult to believe a woman could possess the – the necessary toughness for the job, even though I did tell him you have killed on Brotherhood business, just as all Brotherhood Compeers must at one time or another.’ His face was immobile, as ever. As a mantis is without expression while it awaits its victim. Dedicated, pitiless, patient . . . so very patient, waiting for the right moment to strike. I did not like him, but he was my mentor and I admired and respected him for his commitment and cunning.

Honesty was not, however, one of his virtues. He was skirting the truth, reluctant to utter an outright lie, knowing I would identify it as such, but equally

reluctant to be completely honest. There was something lacking in his explanation. I asked quietly, 'Why me? Why anyone? Why cannot those already in Kardiastan deal with this?'

He looked around. We had moved away from the imperial guards in the anteroom, but apparently not far enough for Rathrox. He took me by the elbow and guided me through an archway into the deserted hallway beyond. Even so, he dropped his voice. 'Ligea, the Exaltarchy is only as solid as the soil it is built on. The situation in Kardiastan is far worse than the public here is given to believe. There we have built on a cracked foundation and, unless something is done soon, those cracks will become canyons large enough to swallow both the legions and the civil administration. Worse still, cracks can spread.'

It was unlike Rathrox to be so frank, and even stranger for him to be so grim about the state of the Exaltarchy. I said, carefully picking my way through the conversational pitfalls of a chat with the Magister, who could be vicious when tetchy, 'I would hardly have thought Kardiastan mattered enough to arouse the personal concern of the Exaltarch. The place produces nothing of essential commercial value to us. The only reason we ever felt the need to invade in the first place was because we feared Assoria might beat us to it, in order to gain ports along the Sea of Iss within striking distance of Tyrans. But we've tamed Assoria since then; it has been our vassal for, what? Twenty years?'

He interrupted. 'If a desert land inhabited by shabby, illtrained peasants can make a mockery of our legions, how long will it be before other subject nations – such as Assoria – sharpen their spears? We must make an example of these Kardi insurgents.'

'Make a *mockery* of our legions? A few peasant rebels?' It all seemed rather unlikely. I recalled the Exaltarch's bitterness when he had spoken of Kardiastan. Rathrox's reason for involving me might be valid as far as it went, but it wasn't all; there was something I was not being told. 'And what about the Brotherhood?'

'There is no Brotherhood in Kardiastan.'

I stared at him in amazement. '*No* Brotherhood?' I'd never had much to do directly with either the vassal states or the provinces, but every Brother knew we were responsible for security throughout the Exaltarchy, not just in Tyrans. It had never occurred to me there was any place where Tyr ruled that was free from the mandibles of the Brotherhood. 'Why ever not?'

'You can't have a Brotherhood where there are no informants, where no one will spy on his neighbour, where no one can be bought, or cowed, or blackmailed.' He gave a thin smile. 'A point the public elsewhere tends to overlook, Ligea. They hate us, but it is they themselves who supply us with our power over them. Apparently the point is not overlooked in Kardiastan. They are . . . different. A strange people we seem to have been unable to fathom even in twenty-five years of occupation.' The cold, speculative look of the mantis staring at its prey. 'Every single agent of the Brotherhood I have sent there has been dead within a year.'

I was chilled by a depth of fear I had not felt in years. Chilled – and stirred by the enticing whisper of danger. I said, 'You think I might have a better chance because I was born a Kardi, because I speak the language, because I could pass for one of them. Because I once *was* one of them.'

'Perhaps.'

His feelings rasped my consciousness, as tangible as grit in the eye. I thought, *Goddess! How he distrusts me . . .* Even after all the years of my service, he could still wonder about my loyalty to him.

We stood in the middle of the marbled hall, both motionless, both wary. Nearby, the life of the palace went on. An anxious-eyed slave scurried past carrying a basket of fruit; a small contingent of imperial guards marched by, their sandals squeaking on the highly polished floor. They escorted a royal courtesan, as thickly painted as a backstreet whore, on her way to the Exaltarch's quarters. She giggled when she caught sight of me, her lack of manners as blatant as the trail of perfume she left behind. Neither Rathrox nor I took any notice.

I asked, 'So I am to be sent to a land said to be so hellish it's akin to the realm of the dead? Without anyone asking if that was what I wished.'

'It is unwise to disobey the order of the Exaltarch.'

'It was your idea.'

'It is only a temporary thing. You will soon be back in Tyrans.'

I stared at him, hearing the lie. 'You don't intend me ever to return,' I said flatly. 'You think I will be too invaluable there.' *You wish to be rid of me . . .*

'Those in service to the Exaltarchy must serve where they are of greatest value.'

I interrupted. 'And that is not the only reason which motivates you, Magister Officii. I think you have come to fear me. I am too good at my job. It worries you that you cannot lie to me, that I know the feelings seething behind that expressionless face of yours. So now it comes to this: a posting without hope of recall. What is it they say of Kardiastan? *A land so dry the dust is in the wind instead of underfoot and the only water is in one's tears.*' I gave a bitter smile. 'Is that how my service to you, to the Brotherhood, to the Exaltarchy, is to be repaid? You wouldn't do this, Magister Rathrox, if Gayed were alive. My father would never have allowed it.' It was five years since his death, yet I felt the pang of loss still.

'General Gayed put his Exaltarch and his nation before all else, as you must. The Exaltarchy has given you all that you own, all that you are. Now you must pay the reckoning.' He shrugged. 'Supply the information that will quell the Exaltarch's rebellious subjects in Kardiastan and he will not forget you. Even now your salary is to be raised to six thousand sestus a year, while you remain in Kardiastan, and you go as a Legata, with the equivalent status of a Legatus.'

My eyes widened. A Legatus was someone with a special mission and they carried much of the status of the official who sent them. If my papers were signed by Rathrox, my power in Kardiastan would be extensive. It was telling that I'd never heard of the feminine form of the word. Such power was not normally given to a woman. 'You must be very afraid of me to have obtained those terms, Magister Officii. They are generous indeed. *If* I can stay alive, of course. Nonetheless, I think I would have preferred to resign the Brotherhood, had you given me the option.'

'No one leaves the Brotherhood,' he said, the words as curt as his tone. 'Not ever. You know that. Besides, what would you do without the intrigue, without the power, without the challenge, Legata Ligea? The Brotherhood is your drug; you cannot survive without it. You would never make a pampered wife, and what other alternative is there for you?' His voice softened a little. 'I'm twice your age, Ligea. One day I'll no longer head the Brotherhood. Take comfort from that thought.'

I hated knowing how well he read me. I turned abruptly, leaving him, and made my way to the palace entrance. The sentries swung open the massive carved doors, then sprang to attention and saluted as I passed. I'd identified myself as one of the Brotherhood on the way in, and they knew it paid to be respectful to a compeer.

Out once more in the dazzling sun, I looked around in relief. I'd never liked needless luxury and the extravagance of the Exaltarch's palace was stifling, especially

when coupled with the emotions still warring inside me even now: anger, bitterness, pride, frustration. I thought I knew now why the Exaltarch had been amused. The idea of sending a Kardi to deal with Kardi insurgents was not without irony, and when the Kardi in question was a woman raised as a highborn Tyranian – oh yes, the situation was amusing. Unless you were the one being banished to a desert hell. The muscles of my stomach tightened in rebellion.

Tyr, capital and hub of Tyrans – of the whole Exaltarchy – was my home; the only home I remembered. It was the centre of the civilised world, the place where everything began, where all decisions that counted were made, where things happened. How could I bear to leave it?

I stood at the top of the stairs leading down from the palace doors and looked out over the Forum Publicum, the heart of Tyr. It was the hour before siesta and the Forum, a mile in length, was crowded in spite of the midday heat. The usual mixed throng: slaves and ambling highborn, merchants and work-stained artisans, strolling scholars debating a theory. Fountains jetted spray into the air in the centre of the marbled concourse and water channels bordered the edges. They even warmed the water when the weather turned cold . . .

*Damn you, Rathrox Ligatan. I am to lose all of this.*

I thrust back the rising bubble of anger and made instead a conscious effort to absorb all I could see, as if by carving a bas-relief of images into my memory, I could ensure that at some time in the future I would be able to recall them to assuage the emptiness of loss.

On the far side of the square, the massive Hall of Justice brooded, its white columns catching the sun. White-robed lawyers were just emerging from a morning session with their lictors, arms full of ribboned scrolls, hurrying behind. Only two days before, I'd stood in the Praetor's chambers there to give evidence in camera at a treason trial; the accused had led a rebellion against tax collection in one of the outliers of Tyrans. Two hundred people had died as a result of his illconsidered revolt. He'd been condemned, as he deserved, and I'd felt the satisfaction of a job well done. Our court system, where even a common man could argue his case, was one of the finest achievements of the Exaltarchy.

The next building along was the Public Library, separated from the Public Baths by the tree-lined Marketwalk. If I entered the quietness of the library reading room, doubtless I'd find Crispin the poet or Valetian the historian working on their latest creations; if I decided to bathe in the building opposite instead, I would be bound to meet my childhood friends, most of them now idle young matrons more inclined to eye the legionnaire officers in the massage room than to spend their time at the baths swimming, as I did. If I wandered down the Marketwalk, I could buy fruit from Altan, or ice from the Alps, or a talking bird from Pythia to the west. Jasper or jade, silk or sackcloth, peppercorns or pheasant livers: there was a saying in Tyr that the stalls of Marketwalk sold everything worth buying in the known world.

On my right, across the square opposite the baths, was the arched entrance of the Advisory Council Chambers, used as gaming rooms ever since the Exaltarch had dismissed his recalcitrant Councillors, never to recall them; and beyond that was the paveway to the Desert-Season Theatre, where two weeks previously I'd seen Merius immortalise himself with his powerful portrayal of the manipulative Cestuous, whose tainted love for his sister Caprice had almost doomed the fledgling Tyr, and whose name was now synonymous with the despised perversion of incest.

I shifted my gaze to the Academy of Learning on my left, where, as a citizen of Tyrans, I had often enjoyed the privilege of listening to the scholars' debates. It had

been an Academy scholar who'd been in charge of my education from my seventh anniversary day until I'd turned sixteen, a privilege not often granted to girls. I sometimes wondered why my father, a man much given to talking disparagingly of 'a woman's place', had allowed – no, had *encouraged* – my formal education. 'You have a mind, Ligea,' he was fond of saying. 'Use it. Rely on it. Your emotions are those of a woman: foolish, unreliable and ruled from the heart. Ignore such stupidities. The heart is the foundation of ill-made decisions; the mind is where victories are forged.' I smiled to myself: I could hear him still, stern tones deliberately softening when he spoke to me. Others may have feared General Gayed, the man they called the Winter Leopard after his snow-season victories quelling the fractious tribes of the Forests of Valur to the northwest, but I never did. To me he may have been firm and intolerant of nonsense, but he was always kind.

I lingered on the steps, remembering him. The pang of grief I felt was a weakness, inappropriate for a compeer, but I didn't care. I decided I would head for his tomb at the other end of the Forum and pay homage to his memory. A long walk, although one I wanted to make. Masochism, in a way, I suppose; not because of the destination, but because all I passed en route would remind me of what I was about to miss. But I wanted those memories. I wanted to absorb the essence of these symbols of Tyr. For they weren't just buildings; they were also the commerce, the learning, the law, the sport, the religion, the arts: they were all the things Tyr stood for. We were a cultured, refined people who respected both the human intellect and the human body.

And Kardiastan? In Kardiastan, the soil was as barren as its cultural heritage. How would I be able to bear it?

*Damn you, Rathrox.*

The Temple of the Forum Publicum was built to honour the deity Melete. Other public buildings were imposing, graceful even, but the temple was surely one of the loveliest structures ever built by mankind. The roof floated above lines of graceful caryatids, each supposedly a likeness of the Goddess in a different mood. The pediments and fascia were decorated with coloured friezes and statuary, the work of several centuries of the Exaltarchy's finest artists. Marbled columns glowed rosy in both the dawn light and the last rays of dusk or, as now, gleamed white with painful intensity in the midday sun.

General Gayed's tomb was not in the temple proper, but along the pilgrim's way leading up to the main steps. There was nothing ornate about it; I had insisted on that. A flat oblong of marble marked his burial spot. A life-sized statue on a plinth engraved with his name was the only adornment. Not a man who liked frivolities, he would have approved of the tomb's austerity. I knelt and prayed there, although my prayer was unorthodox. I spoke to him, not to any god, thanking him for the compassion that had prompted him to take a war orphan under his wing in the heat of battle, for all the kindnesses he had extended to me as his adopted daughter. I blessed him, as I had so often done before. Without him, I would have been a Kardi barbarian, and the thought was the subject of a recurring nightmare I'd had in my younger years. I'd had a narrow escape, and it was all due to him.

After I left Gayed's tomb, I walked on up into the public concourse of the Meletian Temple.

Melete was the city's patroness, the Goddess of Wisdom, Contemplation and Introspection. I always thought her a strange deity for a city ruling all the lands around the Sea of Iss by virtue of armed power. There were over a hundred deities in the pantheon, many more appropriate: Ocrastes, the manyheaded God of War, for



example. Or Selede, Goddess of Cunning. But no, our founders had chosen Melete. People said the Goddess was the reason Tyr became a centre of learning and scholarship; some even maintained the caryatids wept each time Tyr conquered another nation with bloodshed rather than negotiation. I was not given to such fancies, myself.

I bought some perfumed oil from the stalls littering the forecourt of the temple and went on into the sanctum. I gave the oil to the priestess on duty, and she used it to fill one of the votary lamps for me. I lit it and knelt in prayer before the statue of Melete, and then, as countless thousands before me, kissed the cold marble of her feet. My prayers were for the success of my endeavours, and even more for my own safety. I'd long ago decided it was not much use being a hero if you were also dead.

Yet even as I prayed, I wondered if it were any use. The statue appeared lifeless, and so very manmade. A man's vision of the perfect woman: mother, whore, temptress. If deities were so powerful, why did they not visit us in person, as legend told us they had once done? The old tales were full of stories of people who spoke to the gods, but I'd never met anyone who admitted he'd seen a deity face to face. I had a sneaking suspicion the gods had vanished. Or that they were man's invention in the first place. Sacrilege, I knew, for the temple told us we were all the creation of the gods, not the other way around . . .

'Domina Ligea?'

Startled, I turned my drifting thoughts to the woman who stood before me: Antonia, the temple's High Priestess. I had never spoken to her before, and she did not normally chat to devotees. I remained kneeling and inclined my head. 'Reverence?'

I'd heard she was brought to the temple as a young girl, selected because of her great beauty and virtue. Now she was more matronly than beautiful, but regal nonetheless. And powerful. Had she withdrawn the support of the Cult of Melete from the Exaltarch, she could have threatened his power base – although, knowing what I did of Exaltarch Bator Korbus, he would have had her assassinated first.

'The Oracle requests your presence.'

She could not have astonished me more. The Oracle? The Oracle did not speak to Ligea Gayed. In fact, the Oracle rarely spoke, and when it did, it was to kings and emperors or the very rich, not Compeers of the Brotherhood or even a general's daughter. For one mad moment, I even wondered if the High Priestess had mistaken me for someone else.

I stood, still puzzled. 'I am deeply honoured, Reverence.'

'You are indeed,' she said. Her voice was as dry as grape leaves in autumn. She found my summons hard to believe too.

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