

PART ONE

LEGAL PROCEEDINGS FOLLOWING TWO DEATHS

I

19th June 641 After Landing

Gridor conceded that he was lost, a new experience.

He'd lived forty-two of his forty-eight years in City Qayn, mostly employed delivering rich people's purchases, so he knew that city well, almost every alley. But two hours ago he'd arrived in the town of Sapientia, where he'd never been before. The Lake was *that* side, downhill, and he supposed the Great College would be a big building – or more than one building? – but this knowledge wasn't enough.

The streets themselves were confusingly similar to those at home. Tenement blocks three stories high; churches on patches of green; one big square with gallows, pillory and whipping-post; occasionally wider streets with larger houses set apart. A few of these houses had brightly coloured doors, proclaiming that they belonged to one of the Ten Great Families of Ricossa. All around, the greyness of stone; above him a narrow passage of paler grey sky. People passed by, normal people. Rich and servanted; poor alone or with friends; clergy.

“The north side of the Third Quadrangle,” he'd been told, weeks before, and his old brain had been so excited at the invitation that it hadn't occurred to him to ask what a Quadrangle was.

So now after a longish time of wandering, he tried to ask for directions – politely, smilingly – but the inhabitants of Sapientia were not helpful. They stared, shook heads, or shied off – one man did say, “That way,” and waved a vague arm. Was it his destination they didn't like, or his accent? His appearance, or his reputation?

Both appearance and reputation, Gridor would've admitted, were odd.

He was a brown-faced thin getting-old man, whose wiry black hair and beard were greying. There was nothing strange about any of that, though it was a small shame to be so obviously thinning on top. Over his Sunday-best blue jacket and hose, he wore a grey cloak. Its hood was thrown back on his shoulders, which in itself was also ordinary, for only in the worst weather does a Ricossan cover their hair, and this was June.

But the hood was not ordinary. Inside it he'd asked his nephew to sew a small woven basket, and a flowering plant – a geranium, he understood it was – grew there in its own soil. Its dark-edged green leaves and pink blossoms waved above his head, and sometimes falling petals pattered onto his scalp, or lost themselves irritatingly down his neck. And this was very odd indeed – had been odd for over fifteen years. It also ached his shoulders sometimes. But he'd made a vow.

The vow had brought him to Sapientia, and hope had burned strong in him that this was God's leading, this was the year, he was stepping forward at last. There was fear also, for he might be annoying powerful people, but the hope was stronger, when he set out. But a bumpy day-and-a-half in a goods wagon (beautiful countryside views though, reminding him of his childhood in the northern b'Iri lands) followed by two hours of wandering, had discouraged him. He looked at the high roofs on either side, and they seemed to curve down threateningly, and even waver like tall grass. His head was swimming.

It was starting to rain, and people were leaving the streets.

There was a patter, a murmur, behind him. Or was it a giggle? He looked round, and thought bright cloth flickered behind the last corner, and the patter stopped. It was absurd to be nervous, but his back stiffened, remembering old scars. He walked faster, turned again, and saw what was obviously a tavern ahead. Light shone from unshuttered windows, and a buzz of talk trickled – on a summer evening that might be any house. But this door had a jug hanging beside

it, and above the lintel swung a board with a brightly painted picture of sunrise over the Lake. He hadn't much money, but he'd enough for a cup and a slice of pie, and as a paying customer he'd surely deserve directions.

And the provisions he'd brought for the journey were finished, so he was hungry.

Gridor pushed at the door – too hard, it thumped against the wall – and stumbled in with a blast of cool air. Those inside looked up. Not many of them. A thin woman in an apron stood behind the counter. At one table an old couple sat stroking each other's hands (*ah, Miya, when did we last sit like that?* he thought a little guiltily) and at another three smarter folk, perhaps merchants or craftspeople, were gossiping in low voices. "I hear the messengers are all saddled to ride out, as soon as she goes," one of them said. So they believed here as well that Queen Zinial was dying. *Might that make a difference?*

The tavern had two fires in braziers, and lamps in cressets round the sides. And one wall was actually painted all over with a huge version of the sunrise picture he'd seen outside, with a town in the foreground, and boats on the water, and a large crown at the edge. It was pretty, and the place felt snug and welcoming, as he made a slow path over to the hostess.

"A pleasant afternoon to you. Welcome to The Morning Dream. What's your desire, sir? Are you alone?"

For he'd been peering back at the door.

"Thank you. A cup of ale, if you please, madam. I'm alone, unless – was there someone behind me?" Why had he said that? He glanced behind, blinking in the brightness, head whirling; and the braziers' flames looked taller and more dazzlingly coloured than they surely were. "And if you would –"

She looked up from him as the door opened again. Two young dark-skinned men came in, drawing all eyes in the place.

They were people of importance, people of Family. Their easy, entitled-to-be-here manner would have proclaimed this, even without their clothes. They wore bright knee-length gowns with sleeves in contrasting colours, brown for the red gown, and green for the blue. The red-and-brown man wore his hair combed back in loose ringlets that curled on the shoulders, and his beard was neatly pointed. His companion in blue was less tidy, and had only a boy's beard, but he was the one wearing a sword.

The hostess smiled politely at them, curtsying. The eyes of the smarter one were on Gridor. He murmured something to his companion, before waving the woman permission to carry on, and looking around for a place to sit.

Gridor cleared his throat, resumed, "Thank you," and took his cup. He swallowed. "That is good, my head's sore and my throat. Can you tell me, madam, where I can find the Great College?"

"The Great College? What part of it?" she asked - and then everyone was looking at them.

One of the drinking merchants laughed. "You look like a decent Christian. Why'd you want to go there?"

"I - I am to meet someone."

"Well, beware," she said, leaning back against the wall. Her eyes narrowed in her pale face, and she looked beyond him at the newcomers, the finely-dressed lads. "The College is where they teach the rich how to mix poisons, and they cut up beggar children for entertainment, to see how they're made."

"Shina," said one of the men with her warningly.

The young man with ringlets said loudly, "That is nonsense."

"Is it?"

“I – I only need instructions -” Gridor heard himself bleat.

The young man pushed himself up, and said past him, “I must ask, madam, that you show more respect. Respect.”

“I’m a merchant in this town, and a child of God. Who’s calling for respect? Who are you, *student?*” The woman Shina stood also.

“Yes, I study at the Great College, and we do nothing vile.”

“And you are?”

“My name is Rorash Adam b’Shen,” he answered with a defiant note. *Poor lad*, thought Gridor, whose wife was a daughter of Eve, but the woman laughed again.

“Rorash *Adam?* At least my parents were married, you arrogant drunk bastard.”

The rich boy plunged forward with a shout. His friend was also moving. The woman’s companion grabbed her arm. *These young idiots*. Gridor had stopped many stupid fights in his time. He lifted his hands, said mildly, “There’s no need -” and stepped between.

The young man flung him aside, a forceful shove to the chest, *pain*, and he tipped over backwards.

His head banged hard on the wall. More pain. He was flailing, and falling. He was on his back on the floor, in agony.

People were punching each other above, and someone tripped and fell onto him. The other rich lad. A dark face stared into his own. He heard himself make a noise.

But the pain was too great, and he could no longer see.

And suddenly Gridor wondered in terror if he could possibly be dying – *Lord have mercy on me, a sinner!* – and knew if that were so, he had utterly failed.

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That same evening, thirty miles to the north-east, Riodran, Lord b’Nida, left his home in obedience to an invitation from the Palace. He took two servants with him, Attar in case of attack, and Hridnaya in case he needed a witness to an otherwise secret conversation. The three walked silently along wide well-lit damp streets, across the Square of Silent Remembrance and the Great Square, through the Royal Gate and into the Palace courtyard. Up to this point, all seemed normal, but once they were inside the magnificent doors the clumps of people in the Mosaic Corridor were smaller, more closely huddled, with twitchier looks around them. So probably the rumours were true.

He should be grieved, but sorrow was elbowed out by anxiety. What next, and who next, after she died? He’d been very fond of Zinial, long ago; and when she’d become Queen, he’d been hopeful for good. But over the last seven years she’d disappointed him steadily.

And deathbeds are places of pain and mess, such as he usually tried to avoid.

There were a few calculating stares and whispers from Palace people as they passed.

Riodran’s servants peered eagerly at the pictures made of tiny stone on the Corridor floor, and the portraits on the huge stair. He’d have liked to give them a little time to look around and savour the building, but courtesy forbade. They weren’t here to gawp.

They walked through a white door to the Morning Queen’s private apartments, and here Attar was told to wait.

“Lord b’Nida. Thank you for coming.” A tidy plump man in his fifties waddled up with a grave smile, and bowed. Krothon wore the long plain gown of a secretary – for that after all is what a Chamberlain is. Unlike many of his rank, Riodran respected secretaries, but he had no reason to respect Krothon. People said he spent as much time in Queen Zinial’s bed as at his desk. Moreover, *as* her Chamberlain, he was in part responsible for her neglect of her duties, in particular neglect of the College. Riodran almost preferred the other Chamberlain, the King’s, who never bothered to hide his enmity.

However, only a fool dwells on people he doesn't like, and only a very great fool shows the dislike, so he bowed in return, and said, "I am honoured by the call. How does the Queen?"

Krothon indicated another door with a ringed hand. "She's in her bed, this way. I fear you'll find her much altered." They went through two more doors, the last one guarded, and into a stiflingly hot room with many candles.

Hot and full. As he'd said, the Morning Queen lay in bed, the curtains drawn back. A physician stood chewing her lip on one side; a priest sat praying in a whisper at the other. There were two maids standing with their backs against a shadowy wall, and a Guard to shut the door on the draught. Krothon, Riodran, and his one servant filled most of what space was left.

Queen Zinial was not many years older than her visitor. He remembered her dancing, glowing; cackling at some stupid joke – long ago, before she was a Queen. He stepped onto the blue-and-gold carpet that he'd need to be able to describe to his youngest daughter when he got home, and nobody stopped him taking more and more steps until he was standing next to the bed, looking down and yes, feeling pity.

Her brown face was taut, but her cheeks had sunk in. Both hands were on the blanket, one clutching a crucifix. Her black hair had been combed fanlike over the pillow, but she jerked her head wearily about, disrupting the pattern. "Your Grace," said Krothon behind him, "Lord b'Nida is come, as you asked."

"Riodran," she said in a tired voice, looking up.

She is finally dying, after all these months. It's true.

"Your Grace, I am here."

"Yes," she said slowly, a sigh. Then, in a more energetic tone, almost a squawk, "Yes." She lifted and waved her free hand in a weary but unmistakable gesture. The physician and the priest stood up and moved away. Riodran jerked his head at the woman he'd brought, and she retreated

also. The Queen kept waving until everyone was on the opposite side of the room - except Krothon, who stood, a chunky pillar, in the middle.

Riodran sat down on the vacated chair, and bent forward, smelling medicine on her breath. "How can I serve you?" he asked formally.

Her lips twitched, smile or grimace. "Do you remember, Riodran?" she asked clearly. "Long ago, at Christmas, you and I?"

Oh, that Christmas. Pity mingled with annoyance. *After seven years aloof, have you brought me to your deathbed to reminisce about old times? Yes, I kissed you twenty or thirty years ago – did a lot more than kiss you, before we both married other people, but –*

"I remember," he said, and made himself smile.

"My friend." Her chin jerked and her hand clenched, he guessed with pain. Then, more softly, "My friend." She beckoned him to bend down. "Do you remember Madrasun?"

Madrasun? A much more recent, much sadder, memory. "Of course."

Her free hand was on his, and her mouth was almost touching his ear.

"Speak soft. Secret. Before I die – I'm dying – must warn you. Should've done before. Madrasun. How did he die?"

"I don't – he had a fall. Down the stairs from his room." But there was cold between his shoulder-blades.

"He came to me – worried." He watched her gasp, and realised the effort in every word. "Soon – foreign woman's coming. To your College. Yes?"

"Yes." The envoy from Makkera, bringing Queen Nerranya's gift. A project *their* Queen could and should have taken more interest in. What of it?

"Madrasun thought – trouble was planned. Bad trouble. Mobira – you know her?"

“Of course. What trouble? What are you telling me?” He frowned, trying to remain patient.

“I told him – ‘be calm, don’t fret.’ But then he died. I did nothing. Be careful, Riodran.” She lifted her eyes to the bed canopy above them, patterned with huge flowers. “I told them to fetch you. A fond farewell. So I could warn you. Do my duty. God forgive me.” Then, louder, “Tell me you remember dancing that night in the gardens, in the snow? The best Christmas. Riodran!” Suddenly she was exclaiming in pain, and clutching at him. The physician bustled back.

“Your Grace – I think you need another dose.”

“Yes, yes, hurry!” Her eyes rolled.

Lord b’Nida took her fingers from his wrist. He kissed her knuckle before laying them down. This seemed a bad time for play-acting, but “I will never forget,” he said. “God bless you, Your Grace. Zini. Always.”

Wondering, he stood up and stepped back again. The priest and the maids brushed past him until the bed was surrounded. He was standing next to Krothon now. The other man was very still, but then his right hand moved to cross himself. “May God indeed bless her,” and then he looked up. “Thank you, my lord. I don’t think she has long.” His eyes were glistening. Perhaps there was affection there, after all, not merely pocket-lining.

So this meeting is over. What was she saying – and what was so important, to tell me now? Madrasun, Mobira, the Jaryari visit, the College – what was she warning me of, or asking me to do? Has she only just noticed that Mobira means trouble?

And why so secret? She’s the Queen! Does she think her Chamberlain or her maids are reporting to Aigith? Are things as bad as that?

What is the Evening King doing?

He beckoned for the maid Hridnaya to follow him, and walked out of the room without looking back.