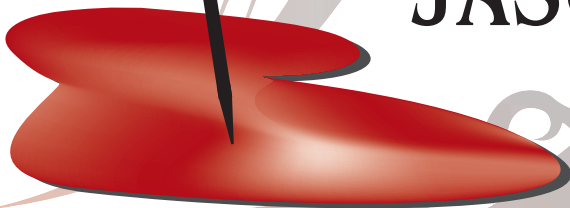


# CRY of JUSTICE

JASON PRATT



*Cry of  
Justice*



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Justice*

**JASON PRATT**

BITTERSEA PUBLICATIONS

*Cry of Justice*

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As for my highest acknowledgments . . . well, those will be in the dedication.

And then—the end begins.

(And now let us see what the future will bring . . .)



# DEDICATION

yuqowç hfu yihhur mua,  
lfuru paw I ko, I favu woh asruaçí kowu?  
Lfuw liss ní musgimfwumm yu çumhroíquç?  
Lfi lam I kivuw, lfah I lam kivuw?  
Lfo lam I kivuw gor?  
Lfhah kooç im hfu folu iw ní fuarh,  
lfipf muubm ihm sigu iw hornuwih?  
Fol preyuç ho bolçur  
nemh ní fuarh yuponu  
yugoru I giwimf çíiwk, Sorç?  
Quh, ass liss vu luss  
or lo Qoe favu bronimuç.  
Wuvurhfulumm:  
gor hfu owum I sovu hfu nomh  
hfu Owu Ayovu awç hfu owu yulol  
I an brubaruç ho yuar hfu folu iw ní fuarh  
goruvur  
ig hfah im lfah Qoe loesç favu og nu  
ashfoetf I twol hfah yoe nemh lawh monuhfiwk noru  
gor nu  
Ní fobu nemh woh yu gor nímusg,  
yeh nemh yu gor hfu owu  
gor lfon Qoe kivu Qoer vurí sigu.  
awç quh  
ig hfim peb  
paw vu bammuç  
lihfiw Qoer liss  
I braí  
hfah monuwu liss yu laihiwk gor nu  
yuqowç hfu yihhur mua

Jason Pratt  
March 27, 2006





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# PREFACE

My wife, my beloved;

I promise.

I can explain.

I can explain where I went. And why.

I can explain why I didn't explain, when I returned.

I didn't explain . . . because I was afraid.

Our duties require us to be apart, sometimes—as you yourself are gone. Always we have kept in touch, even when apart.

But . . . this time I could *not* do so. Not because a power prevented me; but . . . because . . .

*. . . how can I explain . . . ?*

I wanted to tell you. You deserve to know, because you love me. But I couldn't find the courage—and now you are gone.

And you refuse to keep in touch this time.

I deserve no better.

But, how to tell you . . . how to explain . . .

so much pain and horror and death . . .

and I am responsible . . .

I brought back books from that world. I tried to save something.

I needed to find a place to begin.

I met people there. This is their story—the story that I am responsible for destroying.

They never knew that, of course. I never told them.

There is one who suffered most. She *also* was responsible—for terrible things. She also wrote a confession.

I will begin with her story. And I see another I met; who is also part of her story. Good.

I will follow their history, then; using her book and those of others to guide my search. It won't take long, by our standards—I can write it in a day; you can read it in an hour.

I am a coward. I rather would tell you a story of them—  
than simply to tell you the truth.

But, I promise: you *shall* have the truth.

In this life, or in the next.

# INTRODUCTION—TO A WORLD

I will tell you a story, beloved;  
a story of a cradle.

Once,  
there was a world,  
bobbing and spinning within the center of her space,  
infused with life, alit by lights both great and small,  
upon her and above her.  
From the beginning, she had borne her children  
—not to stay, but to leave.

But, the children did not always play well.  
And, they did not always leave well.  
Sometimes they pushed each other out.

Sometimes, they pushed each other hard.

On this cradle lay a vastness of mountains and forests, lakes and islands,  
rivers and valleys and plains. Half the cradle, the children called Mikon; the other  
half was water.

On the land, the children lived.  
The children often grew into monsters.

Fires and floods, storms and quakes, blood and steel and wood and life,  
crackled and *cracked*. This happened many times in Mikon.

And monsters laughed—  
while a mother cried, and a father sighed . . .

I look upon them with my power, beloved—  
with the power that doomed them.  
I look through their space; I see their times.  
I read their words.  
I read their minds.



I will allow them to tell their story, letting them lead where I will look, respecting them.

I will live within them; I will let them teach me.

I will let them speak through me, as they would have spoken.

I will tell what they would have told, had they been able.

I will do no less.

I can do no more.

no more.



And so I look along the line of their time. Three sources gleam as lights to begin my hunt, through the darkness of their history—that they do not know has almost reached its end.

I see a stag, stepping cautiously through the dappled shadows of early night, cropping grass as it moved from place to place, comfortable in its confidence, instinctively trusting its nose and ears in the quiet misty dusk.

Its reactions to food, and brush, and paths of unquiet travel were largely predictable; but, the buck couldn't know this.

So, it was entirely natural for the deer to pass too close to one particular tree.

From behind that tree, now on the deer's left flank, an unnatural shriek erupted.

The deer's heart *surged!*—it leaped away in the other direction, responding precisely in line with its instincts.

Consequently, the deer leaped straight through a wall of brush.

The stag *thrashed* the entangling branches and leaves, ripping with its rack of antlers. The threatened attack had not yet come, but the stag couldn't ponder what this meant. It only struggled, eventually tearing free on the brush's farther side, bleeding from minor cuts, its right eye swollen shut from a poke by a branch.

The stag gasped for air, and gathered itself to leap again—  
—one leg crumpled as weight was applied.

The deer crept through the tiny glade, regressing to cries of infancy.

But, it couldn't bear the physical stress; and so it fell, quietly.

Its ears twitched; its nostrils flared; its neck bobbed, this way and that.

All these movements made it feel more comfortable—slightly. Nothing gave it new signs to fear.

The stag began to relax. The starlight-speckled glade was swirling in the deer's euphoric relief.

The deer felt sleepy.

The deer felt a spike punch through its lungs and heart.

It jerked in response—then spiraled deeper into its relief . . . no leap could save it from such a wound.

The deer felt only its final need—as if to sleep.

The spike stabbed, twice again. The deer felt neither stab.

The dull-black spike, longer than the body of the deer, withdrew: gripped, by a black hand, of a black arm, glistening with sweat, stretching from the nearby brush. A tall, limber creature raised itself on legs with muscles taut as cables.

Unlike the deer, the only hair the creature wore was thin and close on the top of its head.

Unlike the deer, the creature wore . . . *more*—though not much more than hair: short barbadense trousers, harvested from Manavilin Island; woven in Fyzabad City; dyed—black to match the creature's skin.

The deer would have thought the creature a monster, had it been able to judge.

The creature thought of himself as a man.

But he wondered, as he laid his palm on the deer he had pierced, how close he was to being a monster.

The man did *not* gloat over his crafty slaying. He had alerted the deer, not only to make it entangle itself—but to give it a fair running start.

He would have trotted silently afterward, tracking the sounds of flight, the sight of starlight-scattering flicks in the night, even the smell of the blood.

Had it escaped detection, he would have bidden the deer goodspeed.

The deer would not, *could* not, have begun to understand fairness.

Sometimes, the man wished neither could he.

In recent weeks especially.

The man returned through the forest, bearing the body away from the quiet nightly hum, the patchy starlit glades. He returned: to the brightening fires of controlled destruction, by which his species survived—even when at peace.

His species hadn't been at peace for several seasons.

He passed pickets; then paced between the fires at night—a creature who killed: a man of the Guacu-ara . . . the Hunting Cry.

The men and women around him didn't see him, as he carried his catch to the cooks of the camp; or, if they happened to see him, they looked away.

They did not speak to him; because he never really spoke to them.

Because he never really spoke to them, words had boiled his brain for weeks. He had bought a book and pen.

So he returned, to where he had put his small, blank book; through dangerous men who shrank away if they saw him, back to each other and back to their fires, back to polishing swords and axes, back to the safety that lay in numbers.

For this man, Seifas, safety had never lain in numbers; but in movement, in striking first and striking last.

Yet, now, as he slid into his own small tent, he faced an enemy he could no longer avoid, with which he must now do battle—perhaps to the death.

He faced his own despair.

Seifas sat, knelt, lay himself down; turned up his small lantern; and started to write:

“It all has fallen apart . . .”

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*SECTION ONE*

*TURNING POINTS*

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# CHAPTER 1

It all has fallen apart.  
Again.

Sometimes at night I see the glow of another village burning.  
Behind closed eyes, at night, I see that glow again: of coals that shouldn't burn.  
I don't have tears enough, to wash away those fires.  
Why does this always happen?  
Where are the Agents?  
*Where is the Eye??*  
I don't even know why such a war is called a Culling . . .

Matron Cami might have known. But she is gone—the woman who tried so hard to teach us juacuara something other than how to hurl a javelin fifty paces or to knock out a brain with a blade.

She tried to give us poetry for our souls; to help express and judge the events of our lives; to make some sense of the hidden world behind the obvious.

My Matron is gone.  
She vanished one day.

. . . perhaps that was best. Her heart would have broken, in bearing the tragedies afterward.

No . . .

No, not that. She would have led us, and we would have followed her, putting our faith in her wisdom and strength.

Was that why she was taken?  
Was that why she went away?

Other klerosa than Cami have vanished: the indisputable sign of a Culling. All klerosa—the ones allotted true power, true healing—always go, and never are seen again.

Leaving us alone to put our trust in . . .  
. . . what?

My weapon? My body? My peer? My commander? These shall all fail me. I know this distinctly.

Trust in the magi? They surely did *not* disappear all at once! They chose their sides and disbanded the Cadre, and scoured the skies and the lakes and the trees with their wrath!

A year they did this; then, within the slopes of a season, they also fell silent—leaving the wounds they had made.

I remember Qarfax, who claimed four faces guarded him, so that he would *never* be caught by surprise. He had hired a garrison for his private tower: I and some troops from the city of Wye.

His fear drenched the air of his tower.

Whenever a man—moreover a magus—invests his soul within a place, his presence seeps into the stones.

But when we awoke one night for our watch, I knew with some others: the feel was gone. We wouldn't find Qarfax alive.

We found some ash on the floor of his room instead, where he had watched and waited.

We never learned for what he had waited. We left his service that very moment.

We also left his regalia, on the floor, within the ash—no one would touch the remains of a magus.

The students of magic—the dabblers and the apprentices—will soon recover their masters' work. I serve one now: Portunista.

But, I don't trust her either . . .

No, nothing mortal remains to trust. Not even my brethren, destroyed by the wars of the Culling.

I have no home. No family.

No hope.

Some men say they only trust themselves.

I am not so foolish. I know my strengths; and I know my weaknesses. I might as well lift myself into the air by pulling my arms . . . !

No answers. No hope.

No justice.

These thoughts all dart behind my eyes, after the middle of the night, in front of the glow of villages burning, until I spill them onto paper.

I am a soldier. My words are my tears.

They don't wash away the fires.

## CHAPTER 2

From the dark man in his darkness, my beloved, I turn; looking forward seven summers.

On the edge of mountains and plains, a bright clean palace gleams.

Within its halls, a woman walks; slowly, stiffly, smoothly, straight and tall.

Her long auburn hair is dancing with life; her face, however, can no longer show so much expression. Her royal gown of greens and browns, trails behind. Her servants pause to smile and bow.

They love the fragile smile she gives in return; they know she cannot give much more, and wonder about the tears they see on her cheeks. Some of them think they know why.

Some of them speculate wildly.

Some of them are correct.

She wants them to know—more than they know; more than they will be comfortable knowing.

One day, they will learn why they see those tears.

But, that time cannot come, until she takes a first step of hundreds.

Smoothly she glides, stepping out into her quiet garden, which she touches.

Slowly she glides, up the baked stone face of her tower, which she does not touch; although as always she checks it for wear.

She gently steps into her wide upper room, between its narrow encircling columns.

A servant waits, having ascended by stairs curving up through the floor. The servant has brought what she asked, and sets it on a tilted frame.

The woman nods to him, and with a gracious gesture she dismisses him.

He will do the same for her on each first day, each week, for years to come.

The woman carefully lowers her willowy body into a nearby tall-backed chair, billows of hair arranging in comfort around her.

She pulls the frame to her. Upon the frame: a shallow tray filled smooth with clay.

The woman casts her mind back through the years; back to the days when she leaped and crouched and stormed through life.



Then she reaches, and sinks a stylus-tip into the clay.  
 Along with this she sinks her thoughts.



I am the Empress of Mikon.  
 I do not know how long I have, before the next great change.

My people have often represented my body and face; indeed, moreso than any woman's in history. Somewhere a sage is collecting a record of all my public utterances.

But, the paintings and sculptures and statues of me, are only of my body. Even my sayings do not reveal my soul, my mind, my history.

My people deserve to know, to remember, the truth about me.

I remember. I have failed in so many things, and most of my people do not know—or do not remember.

They *should* know. They must remember.

On a day to come, their disillusionment, though divisive, still will serve its place in the fate of the nations.

And, perhaps, this testimony shall also serve historians, helping them piece together events of the past few years. I held a central place in the history of our lands, of Mikon, after the most recent Culling.

I did not know what privilege I had been granted.

Oh, I surely asserted my “privileges”! I thought I snatched them by my will, from the anarchy of that time.

I was a fool.

Already I hear the ardent denials, from people who shout my name with such devotion. I treasure and bless those people in my heart, more than they can imagine. And those paintings and sculptures showing the ground beneath my feet becoming fertile, watered by my eye-closed tears—they are not wrong. No, they are far more right than they know. Yet none of them, nor the songs which call me “meek” and “stern” and “gracious” . . .

None of these tell *why*.

They don't even know from how deep a wound, to myself and others, those tears seep.

I dug my wound, bit by bit, filled with decay and ooze and bile. It swelled with infection.

It had to be lanced.

And even now, I pay the price.

but my price is small, compared to what others have paid . . .  
 for me.



Page by page she scratches her soul along with the clay.

Every week, a new blank tray. A day a week, a page a day; the fine, small letters she cuts in the clay, as if into powdered flour. It doesn't weary her, but emotionally.

Emotionally, and in one other way.

She mustn't write more than one page a week.  
 She still has many things to do, many people for whom she must be strong,  
 before she dies.  
 She will not kill her body through her writing.  
 Not yet.



Whatever use it may be to scholars later, this is a testimony first—of the person that I was.

I am a maga; even though I haven't needed to use those skills in years.

But what I was, still echoes in what I am.

It would be misleading to say that I am no longer a maga. Every study affects the soul. My soul is still here; although my body has flowed away, as every mortal body flows—as the curving of a waterfall.

Scars and all, my soul is still here.

I am *not* against magi—not in principle.

But I was not a good one.

And that makes all the difference.

When I began what I considered to be my self-carved path to glory, I had not long passed my twentieth year; having spent some time already in preparation and training for the magical arts.

I'd always enjoyed my use of power—a habit that wouldn't soon change—and so had devised a clever scheme of revenge against . . . someone I had known as a girl.

I had been certain that I would escape detection.

I had been caught, of course.

This was when I learned true fear.

Had I been properly punished—and I *did* deserve death after some demeaning service—I might have learned wisdom through fear. But, my masters delayed my punishment.

I now suspect that they were debating, whether to risk the loss of my potential—to the world at large, or to particular schemes of their own, the Eye only knows.

Then the Culling began; thanks to fighting among the Cadrists.

I also know the Rogues had a hand in the Culling as well.

All the klerosa vanished; and the nations fell apart; and I was released when the Cadre disbanded. Why, I never found out; and had no wish to discover. I took myself away to survive in obscurity, not to become an expendable pawn: the fate of most apprentices.

That was a terrible year. Fool that I was, I tried to tell myself how exciting my life had become.

Then the fighting began to slacken as one by one the surviving Cadrists also disappeared. Bands of soldiers crossed the land, seeking any advantage, competing simply to live.

I also needed advantages—and resources.

So, I gathered squads; building them into companies. I thought of myself as daring, and innovative, and defiant—swimming against the currents of history!

Hardly. I threw myself headfirst downstream into the river, trying to swim more quickly than anyone else.

and . . . I who am thought an example of virtue today, was once . . . something else.

I was worse than any mere flirt. I enjoyed edging men in that direction, with or without my magic, achieving power for myself at their expense. And if it bothered them, so be it—what were they doing around me at all?!

Fortunately, I was distracted enough by my practical problems: I never gave my full attention to this addictive little hobby.

Yet, even now . . .

I feel such burning shame in my heart, I wonder if steel would quench it . . .

No.

This is only another temptation: to defy the price of what I have done, to pretend that I can make it go away.

What I have done is real—forever.

Further crippling myself will never help me. Adding to my crimes will only add to the burdens I carry beneath the unavoidable Eye.

I can be crushed beneath those burdens.

Or, I can let love to help me to stand—and to walk—and perhaps one day to run.

I do not believe that I shall be running again in this world.

I am grateful, even to walk . . .

Now my thoughts have turned that way, so I will follow the bend in the path I walked so poorly.

But, *not* that far. Not yet.

That cliff must be descended; but not yet.

## CHAPTER 3

Along with this woman, I turn back my gaze, beloved; back to those fateful days: where I find the dark man—and his same dark struggle.

Seifas dips his pen into his ink, and debates of slaying one last man . . .



The final apprentices now are rising from the shadows, trying to claim their masters' power.

My current commander, Portunista, is such a one. She makes it clear, that *she* is her only goal. To that degree, she is honest.

And, as long as her troops stay warm and fed, and have some time for leisure, I suppose they won't complain.

I would complain. I am a subcommander.

But to preserve that authority, I must stifle my conscience.

I hate it.

I can feel my soul eroding away.

I should just leave.

but I have nowhere to go.

. . . I should kill myself—rather than offer a silent assent to the dissolution around me.

*What is my duty?*

Should I risk my soul to chance that I might live, to see the return of justice?

What chance is that?

If I cannot decide—it might as well be *no* chance.

And if justice will not be fulfilled—then there is no hope.

And if the cries in my heart are hopeless . . .

. . . I might as well be dead.

I have a small knife. I bought it for this.

I see it where it lies, awaiting my choice . . .

I do not fear death, as other men do. I am one of the Guacu-ara.

If there is nothing, I shall not know it. If there is something, then I will fight or I will serve; and that is no different from now.

So, shall the cries within me be fulfilled?  
The knife awaits my answer . . .

If the cries are only my wishes, they are not a reliable guide—my wishes are *not* the ground of All. I won't continue my pain for a self-delusion.

If the cries are only induced by the world around me, then they are unthinking urges. Only to fill such hungers would cast my mind into death—or else I am there already. I might as well complete it.

If the cries have only been trained into me by men, then where did *they* receive their notions of justice? From where I have said? Their *own* cries will only be hunger or lies!  
I might as well kill myself.

A shameful act, you say? The act of a coward? Not the mark of a man or warrior?

But, if there is no justice, then why *should* I agree? From *my* own pride? To kill my life is the ultimate pride—the deadliest victory over mere instinct!

Should I agree, because of *your* pride? I might as well prefer my own—and then, to the knife!

Should I agree, for *you* perceive justice? How is *your* mirror then better than mine?? And if I cannot see justice, even the blurriest vision, *your* witness to me must *also* fail!

Even my reason can have no meaning: without true justice, my motives for thinking are only irrational.

So.

I am a cripple, deluded. I should completely free myself.  
A knife to the artery stings but a bit.

A death in battle? What *can* a death *mean*, in a world without justice!?  
I will seek elsewhere, for satisfaction—or else for oblivion!

. . . . . yet, I choose to stay, still.

Why?

Not from lack of nerve or skill to do the deed.

*Why??*

Because, whatever else is real—so is my cry for justice.  
It may not be what I think it is—but it is *something*.

What does this tell me?

To myself I ask: what do I hunger for? Why am I starving inside my mind and soul?!  
*I want to see the return of justice!*

Ah—it is only my instinct, only my training, only . . .

Perhaps. Perhaps. . . . .

Listen, knife. What rests beside you, there in the shadow? You I have known for a day. What is *this* I have known, for years?

This weapon, I say, is my *aasagai*.

No, you say; that is an axe.

Oh? And why should I listen to *you*?

Here is a rigid, finger-thin needle, as long as some men are tall, with sharpened pommel and infighting quillions—I hold it along the shaft of its length, and twirl it around myself for defense, until I punch past the guard of my foe . . . this is an *axe*!

If you were to say “a spear” I might agree. It shares some traits with things called *spear*. It has no likeness to things called *axe*.

Yet, if I mistook, and held an axe instead, you *still* would be absurd to say “*not* an *aasagai*”—unless *you* had some accurate notion of what an *aasagai* *is*; and what it is *not*.

*And I can tell this difference!*

Mere desires of my heart, *are not* justice! Mere training is not of itself *justice*!

I *do* perceive the distinction, the disparity!

Somehow . . . despite any blurrings and flaws and mistakes . . .

*. . . I must have some sight of true justice!*

And, if justice exists . . . then *hope* must exist.

And you, knife, offer no hope at all.

Would Matron Cami be proud for me . . . ?

how I miss her

We of the Guacu-ara never were told of our parents. Our ranks were our brothers; our Matrons our mothers. But Cami *loved* us: the children she never would bear, whom she had forsworn for our sake.

I do not know where my birth-mother is; nor the only mother I ever have known.

But now I am sure that someday, somehow, my cry for justice *will* be answered.

And with that knowledge, I find I can sleep.

For tonight.

## CHAPTER 4

The following day, Seifas assigned himself to scouting—again.

The sun threw shadows through forests, as he loped around close hills and quiet coves of lakes. The shadows and light lay patchy on him. Seifas embraced and used the shadows, sent by sun or stars; but even after the night before, the shadow of his life still lay on him.

He didn't embrace that shadow. He bore it in shame.

While on patrol, he wouldn't be fighting a losing battle against his commander's selfishness.

Yet, he also knew that by his absence the battle was lost.

Still, out all alone, he could forget the shadows in his life—

until he chanced on a forest glade, where a girl sat watching a flock of sheep.

Eighteen hours later, Seifas would record what happened—and so commit his journal to an empire not yet born:

“The midsummer sun glares into the glade—reminding me, that what I do will be seen by the Eye. I can feel myself, there in those shadows once more, wondering what to do.

“Should I tell the brigade?

“Should I warn the girl and her family, to protect their precious flock?

“Should I simply leave, saying nothing to anyone?

“I . . . *we* . . . should be helping this girl!

“But, we also need to eat.

“Yet—if we take the sheep, then how do we differ from brigands??”

Weighed by his doubts, Seifas waited.

He wanted to pray to Macumza, the Agent who guarded the paths of the Hunting Cry. But only a Matron could have that communion—and now the Matrons were gone.

He would have even prayed to the Eye for guidance. But the Eye seemed far beyond every star in the sky.

Waiting was easier, and doing nothing.

So, he did.

The soldiers he soon was seeing, slipping through the trees, didn't wait.

They acted. Although, like many men, they couldn't even stalk a sheep.

The animals scattered; and in their distress, the shepherdess jumped from her rock in fright.

A woman and man, both in light armor, leaped from thickets, into the path of the girl.

"Gotcha now, my—aaaow!" yelped the man; the girl had smashed his head with her staff.

"Pike, really, you *are* impossible," muttered the woman, who reached and snagged the girl by her hair. The shepherdess shrieked and flailed with her crook; but the woman walked, steadily pulling the girl off balance. "Long hair; bad idea my dear," she mused. "Then again—keep it. You may find it useful in other ways . . ."

"Get a move-on!" snapped the sergeant to the others, who had paused in their chasing to watch and laugh. They returned to killing the scattering sheep.

Seifas was already moving.

The juacuar crept, outside the glade's wide edge, his belly low, his aasagai across his back. The girl might not be in danger, yet; surely the woman would remind them, Seifas thought, that they were men not beasts.

Still, the girl would be the key. If he attacked immediately, they might attempt to use her against him. If they didn't take her, he would follow them to find their camp.

If they *did* take the girl, then first he would kill her guards. Although he would spare the woman's life, if possible.

Seifas was a soldier—and he was of the Hunting Cry. He knew all plans were uncertain; and no one knew more than the Guacu-ara how an uncertainty could lead to death.

However well he planned his attack, he might be slain this afternoon—over a handful of sheep, and one poor girl.

Still; a better reason to die, than any he'd recently had—or could reasonably hope to ever have again . . .

"So, good friends!"

Seifas froze, balanced on fingers and toes.

He and the others stared with shared amazement as a fair-skinned, bearded man strode out of the trees.

The man was dressed in simple clothes—though something about them itched the back of Seifas' mind—and he carried a flutewood stalk.

This unexpected apparition calmly paced across the glade.

"I see, young miss, the market has come to your family," chuckled the stranger. "Did they offer you fair price?"



Even the girl had no idea, whether or how to answer! Not knowing what else to do himself, Seifas resumed his meticulous crawl around the clearing. Securing her freedom had now become more pressing—or, perhaps Macumza *had* sent help after all . . . ?

The sergeant tried some bluster: “Who’re you?! And why’re you here?!”

“I am merely someone seeking service, like yourself,” bowed the smiling man, solidly settling near a slaughtered sheep. “I think that covers both your questions admirably! May I ask the price you promised to her?”

Seifas continued flicking glances back and forth between the glade and his chosen path, carefully picking obstacles out of his way.

“None of yer business,” growled the leader.

Seifas could no longer see the stranger’s face, but the man still sounded like he was smiling . . .

“That tells me these sheep, and this young lady, are none of *your* business. *If* that is the case, and if she requires, then I am prepared to *make* it my business.” He chuckled again, and gave a slight bow to the girl.

Seifas would relive this moment, in his journal.

In some ways, he would relive it the rest of his life:

“I feel my heart pound—with emotion? No, more! Something I’ve lacked, for so many seasons, threatens to blind and to suffocate me!

“It is *hope*.

“I am snarling now, blinking away the tears my heart is crying. I will *never* live without hope—never again!

“I will find the hope to have, or seek my death in finding it!!

“I can see the girl; she doesn’t dare to hope; she *wants* to dare to hope . . . My heart is bleeding—its scabs fall away!

“I promise her: I will share the hope I find, or seek my death in sharing it!!”

The soldiers didn’t know of this doom, creeping toward them around the glade. They kept attending to the smiling stranger.

“An admirer, eh?” the sergeant snickered. “What, no ladies your own age to play with, out here in the hind end of nowhere?” The other soldiers chortled.

The woman whispered loudly to the frightened girl: “I’m sure you *can* do better than this peasant, my dear! In fact, I guarantee it: from these fellows here as well as their friends!”

Seifas felt his fingers digging furrows in the ground.

This woman, who would murder the hope of her common sister, would *not* escape him while he lived . . .

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. “I can listen all day long to your baseless slander. Eventually, her family will wonder where she is. In any case, I think you soon will be facing someone *far* more wrathful than I!”

“Well, then,” retorted the sergeant, “we had better run away with our meal and our fun, if we want to live!”

You cannot *possibly* run away quickly enough, Seifas assured him silently . . .

“Come and stop us if you dare, you lone buffoon,” the sergeant challenged. “Let us see that weed you carry parry steel! Clov, you get the sheep!” The youngest soldier began to move.

“You will be quite embarrassed, if I brought some reinforcement,” smiled the stranger.

Seifas and Clov both jerked to a stop at this!—though Seifas instantly forced himself onward. Clov glanced around uncertainly.

“Look at the girl,” continued the stranger, “then at me, then at yourselves. Who doesn’t belong?”

Indeed, he looked as different from them as Seifas himself—although in an opposite fashion! Now, only one straight line through trees and brush divided the juacuar from his striking point . . .

“So, I am not from the area; therefore, cannot be here to see the young lady; who certainly is—my apologies, miss—a little too young to be courting.”

Sweat ran down the sergeant’s face. Was the stranger a scout for a squad? Or . . . was he perhaps a magus?

Seifas could feel the sergeant breaking beneath the strain; and knew his time had run too short. He wouldn’t be able to strike the first blow . . .

“Clov!” the sergeant shouted. “Get the bloody sheep!”

The brigands tensed themselves as Clov edged forward, twitching his eyes from tree to bush to rock. He paused at the body nearest the stranger, trying to think what to do.

“I truly am sorry,” the fair man said. “You *know* you shouldn’t be taking that sheep.”

Clov looked back at his fellows.

“Go on,” the woman coldly ordered. “Let us see what happens.”

Clov stooped, and reached a hand.

With a whistling crack, the flutewood *snapped* against his other wrist. The startled brigand reflexively dropped his sword.

“Tsk,” the stranger chided; then, *whoop!* as Clov dove forward from a crouch, attempting to grapple. The fair man spun, without much grace—the flutewood cracked through the air again, flattening the brigand’s neck between his helmet and studded jacket. The soldier fell, unmoving.

Seifas scurried, no longer worried about being heard.

“Oh, well,” the stranger sighed, as the sergeant and the third of the brigands launched themselves into action.

The third man closed into striking range first. The stranger dodged his poorly-timed swipe by simply backstepping; then darted left and ahead, as the

soldier swung a backstroke. But the stranger, inside the soldier's reach, blocked the stroke by raising the staff at a crossing angle.

After a pausing thought, the fair man punched the brigand.

A clever move for an amateur, Seifas thought: the stranger's hand had been held high to pull his staff on guard against the counterstrike—

—but the brigand's bulky helmet blocked the still-clutched flutewood, keeping knuckles from meeting the nose!

The fair man grunted; then flicked a finger into the eye of the brigand.

The third man *yelped* and threw his hands to his face—punching himself with his own guard!

The stranger's sudden dash a moment ago had put this man between himself and the sergeant. Now the two unwounded antagonists circled around the staggering third.

The stranger now kept quiet. Seifas watched, unmoving, filled with curiosity. The fair man shifted grips on the pole, his pale face pursed in thought.

Then with a grin, he glided in behind the central man, whirling his pole in a striking loop to harmlessly thump his enemy's chest.

"Char take ya!" cursed the still-blinking man, lunging a countermove—right into his leader!

"Fool! It's me!" the sergeant cried, and parried the strike. The stranger, rebounding the flutewood, pulled it around and thrust it over the middle brigand's shoulder. This creative gamble *paid*: the pole-tip pounded the sergeant, driving the nosebone deep in his skull.

"Sarge!" the man in the middle screamed, as his officer sank to his knees.

The stranger jumped back into a pre-lunge stance; and then, his hands neck-high, he thrust again—at the vulnerable gap between the vest and the helmet: *snap!*

The last man shouted and finally leapt to attack from where he was guarding the girl—but:

"Pike! Stop!" the woman barked. "Get back here!" The thin man yanked in his tracks; he backpedaled, twisting his face in rage. The stranger, who still was smiling, heartily twirled his weapon back to a hiking position, as he turned to face the guards.

"Enough of this," the woman muttered; she jerked a knife from its sheath and held it out to the throat of the girl. "Drop that stick and submit to the mercy of Pike, here—or else she dies."

Her tone was level and deadly.

The smile of the stranger finally faded.

"There will be little mercy," he said, "coming from *your* direction, I think."

Indeed.

A collapsed-carbon spike punched through the woman's knife-arm just above her wrist. Her hand popped open, dropping the knife, as the pick was yanked from her arm. Pike heard her gasp, and twitched his head in time to see a dark blur whirl in a three-quarter spin around the side of the woman. The blur became a blood-bespattered spectre—ebony-skinned, ivory-toothed, gripping a devilish tool, the sharpened pommel driven through bone, between her ear and eye.

The woman wasn't even looking at her fiendish slayer; yet she dropped from the pommel-spike with infinite horror in her eyes . . .

Pike tried to scream and turned to run.

He couldn't run fast enough.

"Afterward," Seifas would write, "we watched each other, black and white, at a cautious distance.

"The girl had long since run away to find her father and family—I am afraid I frightened her.

"But, I didn't frighten *him*.

"I do believe I impressed him, though: he didn't smile at me, at first.

"After a time, he spoke.

"'Well,' he said.

"'Well,' said I.

"'All manner of things shall be well,' he murmured. The ghost of a smile appeared on his face.

"'I am Seifas.' I did not add, 'of the Guacu-ara.' He wasn't blind.

"'I am . . . ' and he hesitated.

"Then he said, 'Jian.' And smiled a little more.

"'Well met, Jian.' I did not know the name. 'You carry yourself with honor.'

"'I like to speak a little softly,' he said with a chuckle.

"'Your stick won't last very long,' I warned. 'Perhaps I can find some steel for you.'

"'Perhaps,' he agreed.

"And then:

"'Would *you* know someone willing to pay fair price for slaughtered sheep?'"

## CHAPTER 5

A windy morning threatens rain, outside the upper room.

The woman doesn't mind. Any rain blown in, between the columns around the room, won't hurt the clay; nor hurt the ink with which she etches—nor anything else in the barely furnished room.

She *would* prefer a little rain today, she thinks. A little sun, to be sure; but rain would suit her better . . .

The imperial woman begins the wide new page . . .



And so, I let Seifas play the part of a menial scout, as often as he wished. I hadn't intended for him to actually *lead* his company anyway. I didn't want the competition.

Neither did I want to lead. I much preferred to command.

I tolerated the two real leaders among my subcommanders, because they weren't ambitious. And for other reasons.

I do not care to speculate on what I would have otherwise done to them.

I have no need to speculate.

I know what I *did* do . . .

. . . those memories sear me still.

But, these things had not yet come about, when Seifas returned to camp one day with a stranger.

"I need thirty krana," Seifas announced, ducking lean and tall into my command tent. "I have purchased some sheep."

In fact, he had already ordered a squad to retrieve the carcasses. A rather high price for the lives of mere sheep; worth a week's wage for two squads. And this money would not be returning through company vendors for recirculation.

Yet, we did need the sheep.

I almost ordered Seifas to just *take* the stupid sheep . . . !

. . . but—something distracted me.

He looked . . . different . . . from when I had seen him last.

I nodded to Hud, the frail young man from Keryth who kept my books. He answered my nod with his own, sparely, gravely; and went to the chests to retrieve some silver.

After all, I *could* always countermand the order later.

Seifas continued his report: how he had found the unexpected herd; how soldiers from an unknown brigade had tried to take the sheep for themselves; and how a strange, fair man had faced them down.

Seifas underplayed his own contributions to the fight. That was nothing new.

He also, however, was standing straight and tall, with a vigor in his eye and voice that he had never shown before.

Wonderful, I sourly mused—the juacular had found a friend.

By himself, Seifas was only an irritant. He helped to keep unruly soldiers in line; but he couldn't sympathize with his troops. Which surely was fine with *me*—it meant he wouldn't build a following.

He probably would have been happier, as a permanent scout.

But I didn't want him happy.

He irked me.

I told myself that Seifas was a tool, thoroughly molded by his teachers in the Hunting Cry.

This is what I told myself—but still his presence pestered me; for he had something I lacked.

Seifas had a purpose greater than himself.

I wouldn't have minded, had his purpose been *me*. But, I knew I wasn't his highest authority.

Neither the Eye nor the Agents cared about us—this was clear enough in all that I could see. It even was clear in what I *couldn't* see: for the klerosa were gone, and new ones were not being raised! *Had* their masters ever cared about us?—then where were the servants?!

Gone, to the unseen—abandoning us to fight and die alone!

Gone, and good riddance. I never had liked them anyway. Justice had to begin and end with *me*; or else I became a tool in the hands of another.

But Seifas kept his sight on that unseen.

And I, in turn, had kept him near me, in my twisted fretful way. Resenting him, and scheming.

I would condition him to suit my self.

I could have ensorcelled him to sleep with me—*that* would have been conditioning indeed!

Yet—I always found excuses not to do it.

I wouldn't admit my doubts to myself. Could I set my teeth into his soul? Or if I tried, would he draw *me* into that other world—where I refused to go?

*I* might be mastered instead—to a man I did not understand, who would not *ever* try to understand *me*.

Other men were willing to barter themselves to me.

He would not. I feared that gravity, and that anchor.

It is easy to say, the beast is not under the bed.

It is not so easy, to prove it by sleeping there.

How much more terrible is it: to deny and to test the things of light whose spears might slay one's self—even with joy.

I did not want to die. And his soul, which threatened to crush me if I prodded, I did *not* want to live.

So.

I had tried subtler things.

Some simple words, here and there; a mention of this atrocity or that. Look, on the horizon—another village burning! How long, would you say, from the color . . . ?

And I had fancied I was succeeding, etching his soul, little by little, day and night, inducing him to compromise, to look the other way.

To despair.

I hadn't known how successful I had been—until that afternoon, when he stood straight and tall in my tent, brokering foolish sums for stupid sheep.

Now my hateful game was blown away!

—and through my mind it flashed, how treacherous and how petty I had been . . .

I swatted that perception firmly.

Now the fool had a friend. I would have to nip this in the bud to start again.

Then, Seifas stepped forward.

I jerked in my seat, startled by my feeling, that he had heard my spite and meant to punish me—and frightened by my impression, that he would be right to do so . . .

But, he had only drawn a small, flat purse, from a pocket on his belt. Out of it, he tapped some silver krana onto the table, where Hud was entering sums into the ledger. The younger man's face didn't change; but, I saw the respect in his eyes when he nodded sparely again.

"Here!" I snapped. "Let us see this champion." And I stomped to the flap—although not quickly enough to keep from seeing Hud, adding a couple of krana of his own into the pile.

I snorted—and decided where this stranger would be put: gathering fuel from the pens. If he enjoyed the company of sheep so much, then let him try cattle as well! And let him discover, thereby, how fickle shepherdesses can be!

Yes; I taught him that lesson well enough.

But not yet.

That sharp cliff must be descended; but not yet . . .

## CHAPTER 6

I charged from my tent, already hating a man I hadn't seen.

I cannot see him now.

But, I remember how I saw him, then.

As Seifas had said: a fair man.

He stands halfway downhill, surrounded by soldiers who seem to be wandering into position as they pass. They watch him, staring, unspeaking; he smiles to them in return, resting upon his flutewood staff, meeting them each with a nod.

Certainly he is fair of coloring. Curly, sandy-yellow hair; a short curly beard; a brief moustache. His skin is paler than any I've seen; compared to Seifas, simply snow. He wears a tunic of humble wool, very clean—which raises further suspicions in me: any mere peasant would *not* have clothes entirely unworn by rain and mud.

I stop at a distance to watch. A boy has pushed to the circle's edge, unlike the other nearby vendors' children.

The stranger turns precisely to the boy, squinting in thought a moment.

Then he squats to eye-level with the boy, and says:

"I see you have a sword-jumper!"

He sounds like Seifas, somewhat; though a higher baritone, befitting a smaller man.

"So, can you jump a sword with it yet?" he asks.

The boy is holding a ball, covered in elonggrass netting winding into a line of strands.

I haven't the faintest notion what he means—jump a sword with *that!*—and neither does the boy, who had begun to shrink away from the man's attention. But, his curiosity now has much increased!

I see some soldiers nodding; everyone seems to relax a little, yet grow more alert.

"*Did* you know your ball can jump a sword?" the stranger gently asks.

The boy is darting his eyes toward his elders.

A soldier mutters, "S'alright, lad. Speak up."

He gulps, then edges further in.

"What do you mean . . . sword-jumping?"

"Well! Sometimes a fighter must dodge a swipe by jumping something swung at him! Imagine! Here—" the stranger has leaped to the right, facing left in an on-guard stance. "Here is our hero, taunting his foe to a towering rage. 'Where shall I skewer my peacock again?!"

The boy's eyes widen in wonder. Several soldiers are smiling now, but not in mockery.

"So, the villain," continues the stranger, leaping across to the opposite side, "snarls and savagely swings his axe or halberd, thus!" And with a looping whistle, he brings his pole around



in an arc. “Striking here!” he points, and then steps back along his staff to put his legs within the arc. “But!—our hero *jumps*,” and once again he leaps, inventively whirling the staff beneath him, “clearing the blow—or even pinning it down! Ha-HAAA!”

He flourishes, standing proud and straight upon the staff, flushed with exertion and grinning broadly.

“Well,” he adds with a shrug, “any professional soldier could do it better. But, you have a lead on me,” he points to the boy and his ball, “for *you* can begin to learn it early!”

The boy now shifts his excited attention, between his ball and the stranger.

“It *does* work a little bit differently, with a ball,” the man allows. “I would be glad to show you.”

And, he holds out his hand.

The boy is hesitating. “G’wan, lad. Let’im try,” advises another soldier. I ruefully shake my head; to my surprise, I am smiling, too! The man must be a clown . . .

“I understand,” the stranger nods, with a different smile. “You *do* have every reason to believe me. Yet to *act* on that belief, even once you have your reasons . . . it *can* be hard to step out onto a bridge, even when we have built the bridge ourselves.”

I blink so sharply, my eyelids click.

This man is not a clown! He is—! What he is, is a . . . !

*Don’t listen to him!* I want to shout, through my clenching throat. This is a *trick* of some sort! Can’t they *see*? Why are they *all* smiling now?!

I don’t know whether the boy understands the man—but, he understands the surrounding smiles.

With only a tremor of hesitation, he gives the man the ball.

I force my muscles to twist into action: enough of this farce!

A hand falls gently on my shoulder.

I whirl, spitting, to face the threat . . .

. . . Seifas is standing calm and tall beside me.

“Watch,” he murmurs.

He isn’t looking at me. *He isn’t looking at me!*

My fury floods my mind, as I turn back to the gathering crowd—

. . . the stranger is jumping the sword!

Having fastened the end of the twine to his ankle, he is swinging the ball on its leash through the air, near to the ground, jumping in a stuttering step to avoid the slinging cord.

“It works much better with a friend!” he shouts. “Then you can jump both feet! Come on and try!” And in a frolic, the boy and his friends all fling into the circle, leaping to clear the arcing ball.

I cannot move; the sight is incredible. Whenever the children stumble, they and the man all tumble down; and then they bounce right up to try again. The children shrill and giggle; the vendors can hardly wipe the tears from their eyes for laughing so hard;

the soldiers regale one another with yarns of war. Now the ring is clapping, and as the cord completes an arc, they raise a counting shout: “Ahoy! Bahoy! Chahoy! Dahoy! Eeoi!” Seifas, his long lean face the perfect picture of dignity, is laughing boisterous roars, his bright white teeth all shining . . .

I didn’t laugh.

I seethed, and was seized with a burning itch to fly down the hill, to rend the joy of those people.

The force of that joy quelled me instead.

I didn’t want to face it.

I was afraid to face it.

So I turned, and skulked to my tent.

As far as I know, no one even watched me.

I told myself I wasn’t retreating. Let them have their fun. I was practical. I was pragmatic. Wasn’t this partly what vendors were for?—to entertain the troops?

I didn’t entirely succeed in ignoring the differences, of joy and fun and pleasure. But I managed not to think of it.

No . . . I managed to think *away* from it.

I strode into my tent, and poured a mug of mead, and sat and stewed. Even Hud had gone to join the escalating party. Fine. Whatever.

. . . and then to my mind, there sprang an image of me, dancing and singing.

How ridiculous! I had never once sung in my life . . . !

—but I remembered now, that I had *danced*, long ago.

I remembered: how I had danced the dances of little girls who wanted to dance the dances of women; how I enjoyed my play, how I had looked with a clean admiration—that which poisoned turns to envy—upon the girls who were finally ready to dance the very best dances.

I had wanted so badly to dance those dances . . .

I wept unblinking tears; refusing to admit that I was weeping, wanting to murder those memories.

I hated them.

I loved them.

I missed them.

But I refused to close my eyes and cry.

## CHAPTER 7

The sun was gleaming like a beacon, my beloved; setting the air afire with glory through the western mists. Bands of men and women competed in chorus, rising in power every moment, until the sun departed to their gladful roars and answering cheers among the watching crowd.

Then lantern-poles were set; watch-fires lit. Vendors and soldiers together worked to bring out meat and mead and fruit.

Seifas had left a sullen muddle of mercenaries, in the morning; now a happy hamlet bustled, singing, dancing, kissing, jumping, playing, strumming, declaiming, feasting.

Seifas, while trying to find and assign some picketscouts, lost his sight of Jian. He expected to find the popular stranger at the festival's center—but, he couldn't decide where the "center" might be!

Eventually, an elderly potter, tottering to the meaders, gave the juacuar a solid clue.

Away from the main festivities, Seifas found an impressive knot of old campaigners, lounging near some short-flamed coals—a hot fire being unneeded in midsummer, but their bones appreciating the local warmth. Besides, even a minor fire would keep the punkie-gnats from swarming out of the ashes.

Jian leaned back against a log, mugs of water and cinnamon mead nearby, from which he drank in alternate sips. Also near was half a loaf of longbread, and some sticks of pounded quail.

He didn't speak, but only listened, quietly chuckling at the stories. No one seemed to notice him; each was enheartening every one with tales of high adventure.

Seifas saw that Jian could see him.

Jian saluted the juacuar with mead; then he placed that mug behind his reclining-log.

Smiling to himself, Seifas circled the gathering from a distance, approaching from behind, not to disturb the tellers. He swallowed some mead from the mug, then leaned across the log to hear the end of a knee-slapping tale involving mice and figs.

“I’m glad to see you again,” said Jian, softly as another story started. “I had *thought* I would meet your commander, but—” Glancing over his shoulder he winked. “Seems I’ve arrived for a holiday!”

“We had no holiday planned,” admitted Seifas. It took him a moment to understand how *odd* that admission sounded: yet Portunista hadn’t made preparations to be celebrating Midsummer’s Eve! Besides, he would have said the troops were not in the mood.

Nearby, women from the red-lamp tents were happily dancing, swirling in rings from one to another fire; they seemed in no particular rush to capitalize on compliments.

An altogether different mood, for everyone!

Almost everyone.

Seifas recalled his commander’s face as she had returned to her tent; and tried to be diplomatic.

“Commander Portunista decided to spend some time alone, while she had a chance, in order to consider . . .” His invention failed. “. . . issues,” he limped to an end.

“Is it time to meet her now?”

Seifas honestly wasn’t sure. “I think she *should* meet you,” he carefully answered, “and it might as well be now.” Some time had passed. Perhaps she might be calmer.

Jian slid back, over the log, not standing into the firelight.

Seifas watched as Jian assumed the lead, beginning the way uphill; moving, not *exactly* from shadow to shadow, but from zone to zone of least attention. He did give a ready smile, to anyone who saw him, but: a slight of movement in the corner of the eye—*Was that the stranger?*—and he was gone, leaving behind a minimized ripple of speculation.

These odd impressions faded, as they neared the top of the hill; and Seifas began to worry: would Jian march into the tent headfirst?! Portunista’s expression slashed through Seifas’ memory: this needed delicate handling.

His fears came partly to nothing. Jian stepped briskly to a halt well-short of the tent, and rested on his flutewood pole, looking back across his journey in satisfaction.

The juacular discreetly coughed. “Let me ensure that she can receive you.”

Jian nodded once, and faced the tent. He seemed to be composing himself—and that struck Seifas a little strange, although he didn’t know why.

The subcommander firmly rapped the wide tent-flap.

No answer.

He edged his head inside, incrementally.

Portunista sat in her chair, behind a table, studying documents and a map. Her eyes seemed reddish and squinty—as if she had been crying!

But Seifas firmly dismissed *this* fancy: studying maps in dim lamplight would easily make her eyes look bleary. On the other hand, he mused, that *did* bring up the question of why she hadn't properly trimmed her lamps, or even jotted wisps . . .

“Well?!”

Seifas restrained a wince; and then he stepped into the tent.

“At your request, Commander, I have brought the stranger to see you.”

She hadn't really requested this; but Seifas hoped his respectful tone would calm her a little further.

Portunista stood, moving away from the map, and seemed to compose herself. Hadn't he seen something similar—?

An unexpected image flashed across his mind: himself, in matchmaking garb, arranging a noble couple's introduction—and with one of them stewing in a wretched temper!

Seifas rapidly spun to the flap, hiding a smile, just as Portunista ordered Jian to be brought in.

“*This* seems a good omen!” The no-longer-quite-a-stranger doubtless referred to the grin of the juacuar. Seifas coughed and regained his own composure.

“Commander Portunista now will see you,” Seifas tried to announce—when Portunista herself strode out the flap!

Jian bowed low, with a respectful “Commander,” as the juacuar moved to stand behind her.

“So,” said Portunista frostily. “Thanks for helping my subcommander obtain some food for my brigade.” Seifas couldn't clearly see her eyes from where he stood, but he suspected she flicked a glance toward the festival strewn about the hill below. So much for the sheep—indeed, so much for a sizable fraction of their supplies!

“The herding family thanks you, too, for such a generous compensation,” Jian returned, and shortly bowed—the bag still hung on Seifas' belt, of course.

“Where are you from?” Portunista demanded to know.

Seifas' ears pricked up, and he focused intently on watching the man; who narrowed his eyes a little, and then so slightly pulled back his head, while shifting his grip on the flutewood staff.

“I come from a faraway land, as you can see—”

“Not necessarily,” Portunista interrupted. “Seifas looks as different from most of us as you—and yet a few of his kind are born each year in every nation.” Her triumphant smile was spread so wide, Seifas could see it from behind.

And then, in turn, he saw a startlement, even worry, on Jian's face. The pale man sighed and tried again.

"I apologize; but I am under an obligation, even the nature of which I mustn't reveal. I *am* a stranger to these parts, and I will need a . . . sponsor, of sorts."

"And you believe it should be us."

"I don't know why it shouldn't be."

"But you won't tell us where you are from."

"No."

"Nor who, if anyone, sent you."

"No."

"Nor why you are even here."

"Not at the moment, no."

"And if I handed you over to my interrogators?" Portunista asked with a sharpening edge to her flattening tone.

"It would hurt." The fair man matched her flatness, and her sharpness.

Seifas was disappointed at the hostility. But he couldn't fault his commander; she was only being prudent. Besides, after tonight, would *anyone* in the brigade agree to torture this man . . . ?

"I understand this looks suspicious," Jian continued. "If you wish, then I will leave."

"And what would you do if you stayed?!" retorted Portunista.

Jian bowed shortly once again. "I would commit myself to serving you, in every way that you deem proper—with the reminder that I have loyalties which may supersede your authority."

Portunista laughed unpleasantly. "Well!—*you* are an arrogant scamp! And if I told you to gather fuel from the pens? Would your loyalties supersede *that*?"

"As far as I know . . . no they would not." For a moment the man's face tightened; but then with a sigh of resignation, he grinned instead.

His confidence set her back on her heels.

"And you, Seifas!?" She turned and shot the juacuar a glance.

"I prefer to gather sheep and the heads of villains, rather than droppings," he gravely replied. "If *that* is what you are asking about. Otherwise," he continued, over her narrowing glare, "whatever you have him do, if you accept his offer of service, he *should* be required to help in defending our camp against attack."

Snorting at this, Portunista strode downhill and to the left, away from both the men. Sharing a glance and a shrug, they followed. This time Jian paced Seifas as a proper subordinate, two steps left and two behind.

Portunista breezed into an armorer's tent. A weaponbrace along one side held several swords.

“Here!” Portunista pulled a short and very plain sword from the brace, handing it to Jian. “We can spare you nothing better than a common battered weapon which has only failed a hundred faceless soldiers!”

The fair man carefully set aside his flutewood staff—not without some fondness, but with a definite air of finality.

Seifas swallowed a lump in his throat; and decided the boy with the sword-jumping ball would be given the staff for a keepsake.

Turning away from the staff, Jian accepted the sword.

Flexing his wrist, he tested the balance, twisting a few slow cuts through the air.

“No matter,” he smiled to Portunista. “Any sword will do.”

A moment of silence followed, while they watched each other.

Then he humbly asked,

“May I also be sheathed?”

Portunista blinked, then tossed him a worn but serviceable sheath, sewn from softened leather; and then not altogether meeting her officer’s eye, she growled as she plunged from under the covering tent:

“Find him a place to sleep . . .”

Seifas could no longer hold in his mirth, but prudently softened his laughter. Seven minutes later, a hundred and eighty-four men were dead.

## CHAPTER 8

Portunista told herself she wasn't fleeing the forge; but she couldn't get rid of the feel of defeat. This "Jian" had met her stroke for stroke. She'd hoped to dislodge some useful information—or else to drive him away—but he seemed to have no pride to inflame or burst.

And so she stomped uphill, unsure of what she would do when she returned to her tent, other than pore once more over maps and rumors and figures. And drink, of course; the night was warm, the forge-tent had been hot—*that* was why she was flushing . . .

But she didn't want mead.

What she really wanted, was . . .

She altered her route, heading north across the top of the western slope and then downhill, into Gaekwar's side of camp. She had brought her only bottle of vania, whenever she last had visited him. He hadn't returned it, so probably kept it, while the brigade was on the move. He wouldn't be there now, but to the west downhill with most of her brigade, keeping a watch on his company-soldiers and muttering cutting remarks about cows.

She hadn't felt like visiting him for weeks, and didn't feel like seeing him now.

She only wanted a drink; of something that wasn't mead. Something she *enjoyed*.

*That* was what she wanted—that was *all* she wanted . . .

She ground her teeth in baffled frustration. What she *really* wanted—was to strike and smash and—!

And, she got her wish.

With a hooting roar, a monstrous form crashed out of the trees—not far in front of Portunista!

A line of hollering humans also poured into the clearing.

Portunista blinked in confusion, as the enemies charged the hill, swatting aside the empty tents—the creature's roars seemed to echo out of phase, downhill to her left, where the enemy line stretched out, charging upon her shocked brigade.

Then with a curse she remembered the squad, reported by Seifas. *That* had been to the north: *this* must be a retaliation. They would have *easily* found her camp, especially once the festival started.



The damned midsummer's celebration . . .

Portunista had wanted a target.

Here a target was.

The maga slashed her fingernails across her other palm, hissing from the back of her mouth with a rising pitch. The mystical pain increased the elemental Yrthen force she violently infused beneath her enemies.

The natural earth exploded—long rough parallel furrows, peeling back at the speed of sound, throwing men in the air, sharply slamming the monstrous mammal, leaving soldiers stunned and bleeding as the battle line behind them stumbled into the shallow trenches—their momentum broken.

Portunista smiled. Very satisfactory.

But she doubted that she would be able to use her personal variation of the Yrthrip skill again—unconsciously she flicked her hand, slinging blood upon the ground, as she squinted in the starlit night.

The creature was a shoulderbeast; ten wristlengths to foreleg top. Four men rode in wicker baskets: one each side, one upon the back, and one set in-between the topmost basket and the mahout who was guiding from a saddle on the neck.

The topmost basket held the commander. And the others . . .

. . . were jotting! She could hear them clacking away at some effect she couldn't recognize with all the noise.

Three magi. Only apprentices, or else she would have been dead already, but still—

The commander shouted a code, and pointed at her. His shortbowmen, near at hand behind the line, nocked their shafts.

Portunista craned her neck, as she trotted briskly to her left, wanting a better view of the fighting down the hill, while keeping an eye on her proximate threat: half a brigade and a magi-reinforced shoulderbeast. She still didn't know what those men were chattering, but most jottings required a line-of-sight—and now those bowmen were wending their way through the battle line!

Some cover, some cover, she told herself, her skin now prickling in panic . . . *any* cover!—well, *those* would have to do—

She slid feet first behind a stack of empty casks, as the shortbows sang, their missiles thunking oakwood slats, and otherwise whistling past her.

Good enough as shelter for the moment; but she'd easily be outflanked—besides, a waist-high pile would *not* be stopping a shoulderbeast! And *what* were those magi *doing* . . . ?

Portunista ground her teeth: she could not hold the line. She *must* escape downhill. If, she amended acidly, she could do it while flat on her back, before those men regained enough of their balance to . . .

. . . ah, wait; *that* might work . . .

She closed her eyes, and jotted an Yrthescrution.

Binding her scrution behind her lids, she ‘saw’ the nearby surface-pressures of the enemy line. Only a very few moments had passed—they were regrouping and picking their way across the scars.

Good.

Chuckling deviously, Portunista jotted an Yrthepool; letting the contours of her earlier ripping be her guide, for infusing just the right proportions of materia.

Guided by her will and skill, the Yrthe changed a prism of ground, five paces wide, knee-deep, and forty paces long, into a liquid consistent with water—but vitally reactive.

Even the shoulderbeast stumbled again, as its mahout drove it forward trying to reestablish the line. Its escape annoyed the maga; still she laughed while most of the upper line abruptly washed downhill in a tumbling roll of vitalized earth!

The enemy commander now was shouting for his mahout to be crushing her with the shoulderbeast.

Good. That fit *perfectly* into her plan.

She could feel the beast approaching, for she hadn’t released her Yrthescrution yet. Portunista jotted again, pooling another forty-pace trough; but this time only inches deep—and wide as a shoulderbeast!

She set it several paces uphill of the creature, running it through her own position, pointing down the hill behind her soldiers’ battle line.

Releasing the bind upon her scrution, Portunista rapidly blinked, rubbing her eyes and flushing away the microthin materia layer. The Yrthescrution’s annoying aftereffects were more than compensated by the exhilarant rush downhill on a river of earth, much like a child on a slide: an escape while flat on her back!

The wave of vitalized earth didn’t end with the trough. Portunista kept her concentration and her balance through her enjoyment, lying back and banking the rushing river with her will, tacking left and right, avoiding tents and such.

She fetched up moments later near the bottom of the hill; her soldiers steadily struggling in a battle-line to her right.

Releasing the earth around her, she staggered with relative grace to her feet, and hopefully looked back up the hill . . .

The creature had only suffered another stumble, hopping out of the earthen stream to better footing.

Portunista ineffectively wiped some mud from her face, spitting to clear her teeth, growling her disappointment.

But she had gained some time, to oversee her situation—although she hoped her opponent would urge an immediate chase, rather than charging her line or jotting down a strike upon them.

Here, at the bottom of the hill, she could see more clearly what was happening. Her troops had splendidly met the surprise attack, rushing against the invaders with high morale.

She couldn't see Seifas in the campfire-lit confusion; but she figured he wouldn't be among the front-line anyway. He would be somewhere uphill, striking out of the darkness like an ebony razorwurm. She smiled possessive pride: these imprudent fools had called down on themselves the wrath of one of the Guacu-ara! She could safely leave the remains of the enemy's upper line to him and to his *aasagai*.

She *could* see *Othon* easily, though: Othon the Implacable indeed! He should have been mowing her enemies like a hailstorm scything grass. But the giantish subcommander hadn't been wearing his armor—now some soldiers from his company guarded his flanks, while he restrained his edged mace, lest he sweep his own men from the field. The fight was settling round him on both sides, like metal filings near a magnet; but with a balance as tenuous as a bubble.

Yet with half the enemy floundering to their feet, after tumbling down the hill, the chaos on the lower line was shifting decisively in her favor—and neither side was strong enough to prolong the battle's breaking point. Without *klerosa*, soldiers now were much less willing to risk themselves in battle.

The break would happen soon. As far as she could tell, by carefully checking the flows of the skirmish, she *would* have won already, if she hadn't needed to fight those magi and their shoulderbeast. Her soldiers' morale was *remarkably* high . . . probably thanks to . . .

Her mouth twisted.

. . . probably thanks to being inspired to celebrate Midsummer's Eve with so much gusto.

She doubted Jian was helping to hold the line, however—he didn't look the type. Probably he had run for cover the moment that he had heard the roar from . . .

Wait—hadn't she left the shoulderbeast *behind* her . . . ?

Her heart froze—she scampered leftward, trying to see more clearly. She had *thought* she'd only been hearing an echo off the nearby tentsides; but—  
—there were *two* shoulderbeasts!

One of them was behind her line this minute!

She had lost after all—she wouldn't be able to stop it in time, before it tromped her defensive—!

Portunista's feet, and her thoughts, skidded to a stop. Now that she had a clearer view, she could see the truth.

Jian was playing with it.

"I simply cannot describe what I was seeing any other way," she would write years later. "And, he and the beast both seemed to be enjoying their 'game' immensely!"

“Later I learned that Jian had raced downhill, to help to gather the children away from the fight. Seeing my soldiers engaged along the line, the young and inexperienced beast had whooped and challenged them; while its mahout tried to goad it into position for charging up our line. And Jian had been the only man who was free to answer the threat.

“So he’d jumped and whooped in kind, waving his arms, calling the shoulderbeast’s attention.

“Jian had drawn the beast—which remained oblivious of its mahout—into an open patch of ground behind the line; and he was speeding back and forth, jinking and janking, swatting the legs of the beast with the flat of his blade. The shoulderbeast plunged and spun, rearing and hooting, as in a primal dance, billowing clouds of summer dust in the flickering bonfirelight.

“And the purblind *fool* of a man, was laughing fit to burst!”

Then the situation changed.

Other adults had been gathering children into groups, but hadn’t yet hustled them into the relative safety of the forest, lacking a definite order. Not being far away, the children were cheering Jian—and the shoulderbeast as well!

It didn’t take the creature and its mahout long to recognize the sound.

The shoulderbeast jerked to a stop, facing the clusters of clapping children. The mahout, seeing a way to distract the defensive line, spurred his mount, shouting commands to which the beast was trained to respond.

Jian, no longer laughing, darted in front of it.

“No!!” he cried. “Not the children! Not the children!”

He stood his ground, waving his arms insistently.

The mahout pointed, and spurred his mount again, calling down a cursing taunt upon the fool in front of him.

The shoulderbeast, reacting to commands and goads, surged ahead, toward its ‘playmate’—and toward the children beyond.

Jian continued to wave his arms, shouting: “No!!”

He wouldn’t dodge again.

The children no longer were laughing and clapping.

The mahout, sensing victory, struck even harder with his goad—

The beast *plowed* to a halt, spraying Jian with dirt and grass.

One last time the mahout spurred his mount, shrilling commands to strike! Snorting in annoyance, the creature rolled on its back.

“It was not,” the maga will later write, “that the children in those days were barbarous. They simply hadn’t expected to see this—yet, somehow they also had. So they responded like children.

“They could see the astonishment on the face of their persecutor—and thought it the funniest thing in the world!

“And when the shoulderbeast happily grunted, and wriggled on its back, as if scratching a spot that was hard to reach, the children literally rolled on the ground with glee—despite the sinister scrunching sounds!

“Even Jian stood frozen in bemusement.

“Then I saw him recover, shrug, and mouth the words, ‘Oh, well . . .’”

The adolescent creature quickly rolled upright again, regaining its feet with a glorious sigh. It squinted in curiosity at the rejoicing children, whose guardians stood in confused relief.

Leaning on his sword, Jian flourished a courtly bow to the beast, inspiring another round of applause. Giving a grunt, the creature ambled away on a shallow tangent, settling to the ground between one group of children and the defensive line.

Portunista couldn’t pull herself away from this fantastic sight. A few unruly children scampered to its flanks, shouting a combination of names, resolving into “Tumblecrumble.” The creature practically preened beneath the praise—

A mother shrieked.

Jian whipped round to find the cause; even Tumblecrumble jerked his head in alarm.

One of the foes had broken through the line.

A heavyset lump had somehow survived the onslaught; he had decided not even to risk an attack on his enemies’ backs, but instead was floundering full-speed toward the children!—seeing some helpless targets, and one distracted defender.

No one had noticed, before he had covered half the distance.

Portunista disentangled her thoughts and leapt into a run—*knowing* she would arrive too late.

The shoulderbeast heaved upright; but couldn’t safely move with children underfoot—*he* would arrive too late.

Jian burst into a vicious acceleration, smiling no more . . .  
he would arrive too late.

“I still can see the developing tragedy, in my memory,” Portunista will write in her testimony . . .



One boy jumps from the nearest pack, scampering up a nearby crate and thumping his nose at the charging brigand; who alters his course accordingly. Jian is straining for speed . . . but now he will be even later, by more fractions of a moment.

The infantryman must pull to a halt to stab at the boy, spears not being the best for passing strikes, and the brigand not being a model of skill.

The boy is crouching on the crate, making himself as small as he can—but even this lout will be able to hit him. The boy sticks out his tongue, blowing in rude defiance.

As I race on, I give the highest epitaph I can:

*I could have used a man, with the courage of this boy.*

The brigand bugs his eyes and howls, combining with the rising roars of Jian and of the shoulderbeast, plunging the spear ahead and down to spit the boy, under the chin, between the knees, through the chest and out the back—

—except, instead, the boy leaps up, as the villain commits his thrust, heaving his legs and body above the spear, staggering slightly in midair—then *stomping* the shaft, pinning it to the crate!

“Ha-HAAH!!” the child is trumpeting, planting his hands upon his hips. The villain’s expression is priceless.

“Ha-HAAAAHH!!!” echoes Jian, charging past behind the foe, slicing his sword entirely through the back of his neck.

“HAWWRRRRR!!!!” Tumblecrumble roars, punting the remnants across the ground, and dancing on the pieces.

I stumble to a stop, laughing at the scene. Jian has slid to a halt himself, and spins once more to face me . . .

. . . but, his face then flashes from grin to grim; and he charges—straight at me!

What am I supposed to make of *this*?!

He hurtles toward me, his body lowering, fully striving—the earth itself is thundering, with encroaching mass as he approaches; and as he throws aside his sword I think:

. . . does he intend to *smother* me??

The past few moments have been too bizarre . . . I calmly watch my fate, trying to sort the meanings, to take the proper action.

But as he hurls himself, I’ve only managed to think:

*Let him come—he shall find me no easy prey!*

and . . . why is the ground still shaking?

Then he has wrapt me, indeed with force but gently, enfolding me and twisting, the thunder rising in crescendo, puffs of air buffeting us, and he grunts as I land on top, our momentum rolling us over until I come to rest beneath him . . .

How must my wounded pride have appeared!—eyes still wide; face still frozen in amazement; gulping air like a fish. Jian is finally face-to-face with me; his eyes are shining with mirth and success.

And then he kisses the tip of my nose!!

The effrontery! I cannot slap, or even sputter, before he spryly states: “You are *more* than welcome!” and with a spin he has rolled away, rising to stand with a shake of his head, perhaps to clear some dizziness.

Without much grace, I scramble backward to my feet, trying to reckon my situation . . .



Portunista’s brigade, meanwhile, had not been idle.

Seifas had now subdued—or otherwise removed—any remaining enemies scattered uphill. Othon and others had counterstruck their blows, driving hard

against their enemies—who lacked expected shoulderbeast support and had to stumble through a pile of their own fellows.

The enemy commander *had* slain two of the northern pickets during his infiltration of troops into the area; but surviving picketscouts, having flanked the fight around the clearing, now were setting up positions just inside the northern treeline, cutting off retreat.

Consequently, as the attackers attempted a rout, whistlefletches flew in their faces.

Yet their commander, the magus Gemalfan, remained unchecked.

Having failed to trample Portunista with his shoulderbeast—despite her being distracted by the battle's oddities—he now could read the writing of his fate upon the field.

So, Gemalfan madly urged his beast—onward toward the children!—the shortest line to safety for him lay across their mangled bodies . . . !

—one of his sub-apprentices hastily scrambled up the shoulderbeast, almost smeared across its side within his lacquered wicker-rider—  
when an outraged Tumblecrumble intercepted Gemalfan's charge!

The impact staggered the older shoulderbeast, which bellowed and spun to counterattack.

An eardrum-rattling duel erupted: the mammals swiped and butted, trying to break the other's trunk-wide forelegs, pummeling chests and jaws and sides.

But Tumblecrumble lacked experience; also his elder's power and size—who, himself, was lacking resolve to defend the guarded helpless . . . unless perhaps he counted the screaming men upon his back!

On the other hand—one of those men was Gemalfan: a former Cadre apprentice.

Leaning forward, he jotted outward shot after shot of pentadarts.

The materia streaked in short sharp bursts to seek the heart of Tumblecrumble.

The mammal's leather hide, however, thick and tough and nonconductive, made for *some* defense.

They only hit with hammerforce—instead of blowing apart his innards.

Both onslaughts, mundane and magical, drove the younger shoulderbeast to his knees, his breath torn loose in gasps.

. . . and Portunista found that she was *not* prepared to let the creature die!

Each new burst of raw materia seemed to float quite leisurely from Gemalfan's fingertips, as Portunista watched with racing mind . . . sinking the enemy shoulderbeast to its knees in vitalized earth would hardly stop the pentadarts . . . time was slipping, *life* was slipping . . . !

Portunista felt her limitations settling chainlike down upon her—together with the implications of this single fight: her first real duel against a rival mage.

Over the year, she'd skirmished against some squads, even against a company once or twice; always letting her subcommanders lead the troops while she safely stood behind the lines, jotting a few effects.

Now she was fighting a *rival*: a magus with his own brigade.

And . . . she had done *well!* So well, she had forgotten she had never done the like before.

So well, she had forgotten that her rival might know more than her; might *be* more clever than she was . . .

*might take something from her after all . . .*

Every sickening thud of energy into the hide of the shoulderbeast, became a personal insult to the maga.

Tumblecrumble needed a shield.

Portunista gave him one—the only one that she could give.

Focusing her intent, the maga whistled as she inhaled, the cool air slipping between her lips and through her teeth—fusing Aire and raw materia needled in a ball-sized globe.

The wisplight drenched the beasts in bluish-white suffusion, mirroring the maga's chilling fury.

She bound the sphere into existence; with her will she *threw* it into the line of sight between the magus and his target.

Right in line with his—

—her head rocked back—*punched* above her eyes!—

The shock snapped Portunista's time-perception back to normal—but the wisplight hadn't failed.

It had been kicked aside.

She angled it back into the line, bracing for the impact—!

And again. And again. And *again* . . .

A corner of her mind protested: *how* long could she bear the backlash . . . *how* long 'til her willpower cracked . . . *how many* darts was she even *stopping* . . . ?!

But, she *did* stop *that* one. And *that* one.

And she *refused* to lose this duel!

If only she could hold on . . . maybe the infantry-line behind her could find a way to help . . . Feeling stronger even as her strength wore thin, she threw the



wisplight in defiance at the face of the larger beast, driving the creature back through bluff, bouncing another dart.

Gemalfan, meanwhile, found this feat a rude surprise! He had never seen a pentadart defense—never had imagined one existed!

In his own near-panicked focus on the creature attacking him . . . he had forgotten the maga he had failed to trample.

The maga who had single-handedly ruined the charge of his upper line . . . If *she* could do *this* . . . what *else* could she do . . . ?!

Gemalfan spat a command, ceasing to clatter his pentadarts; his sub-apprentices started jotting again.

Portunista felt her intention *snap!* apart like a strand of elongrass, winking out the wisp. She ground her teeth, in frustration, even with the strain relieved.

Now she knew what those servants had been doing: jotting dissipation spheres.

They couldn't intently bind into place a sphere impervious to intention; but so long as they chattered, their master and his shoulderbeast would be immune to direct attack from magic.

Gemalfan *could* jott out, *if* his sub-apprentices heard his percussive effects and stopped their own in time. But his lackeys still were near to panic, unlikely to register subtleties; and he certainly *wouldn't* command them directly to cease, where his vicious and clever rival could hear!

But, Gemalfan believed he still could slay *one* enemy.

He told his mahout to gain the flustered attention of their shoulderbeast. It rose upon its hind legs once again—for the finishing blow on the fallen Tumblecrumble.

And Portunista was out of plans.

Reluctantly sighing, she gave up the shoulderbeast for lost.

She had failed.

But, she would devote the pain of this loss, to removing that man from the face of Mikon—!

And then—with a leap of her heart . . .

. . . she saw that others had *not* given up on Tumblecrumble!

There, around the side of the lumbering animals, darted Seifas!

Here, on the other side of the pair, stood Jian!

And the fair man was holding . . .

the sword-jumper ball!

While Portunista stared in blank amazement, the fair man tossed the elongated ball up-over the pawing trunk-like legs of the older shoulderbeast, holding the other end, to which he'd tied an empty kettle of roughly equal size. Seifas caught the ball midair, and in a pre-planned move the two men ducked a crisscross run beneath the creature's stomach, pulling the fibers to fullest tension—releasing the weighted ends with a flip, back under the shoulderbeast.

The spinning bands were humming, as the ball and kettle flew into a twining knot between the animal's two front legs; not enough to trip, but hampering it, confusing it further, while it entangled itself, instinctively trying to guard its somewhat vulnerable underbelly.

And as it stumbled and thrashed—Portunista suddenly shouted in victory, recognizing a path to her vengeance!

She converted her cry to a boiling growl, focusing several wristlengths into the ground below the animal; then she struck her fist into her bleeding palm: the conventional Yrthrip technique.

The earth *did* ripple beneath the shoulderbeast!—globbing undulations, supercharged by Portunista's emotion and will.

The dissipation spheres could only block intention of effect; they couldn't block mere physicality.

With a mewling hoot, the older shoulderbeast fell over.

The magi and the mahout had a moment and a half, to throw themselves to safety as the massive mammal keeled—

—whereupon they learned a lethal physics lesson . . .

## CHAPTER 9

Tumblecrumble soon regained his balance, having been caught in only the edge of Portunista's concentrated earthen ripple. Quickly he crushed the elder animal's head—providing meat, in passing, for the feast the humans would surely enjoy on the morrow.

Gemalfan and his sub-apprentices *almost* leaped to safety from his mount: throwing themselves in the natural direction—

but not accounting for the momentum transferred by the falling shoulder-beast.

Any leap still landed them beneath the animal.

Seifas paced around the twitching mound of flesh as Tumblecrumble crunched the blocky, bony rectangular skull a few more times. Gemalfan had been a little more successful than his minions—the children were hurriedly being escorted away from the area, so that they wouldn't see him.

They could hear him, though.

He lay, screaming, from the pain of both his flattened legs.

Jian stood, arms folded, feet apart, between the children and the incoherent writhing magus. In the shifting bonfire glares, Seifas couldn't read that backlit face.

He knew his *own* heart's resolution, though.

His *aasagai* *pierced* Gemalfan's head, twice in rapid thrusts, through the eyes, into the brain, ending his cries and life.

"Hmmp," grunted Jian.

"Now he sees the All-Seeing," Seifas explained. "And his journey there was quick."

"Indeed," murmured Jian; and then, "How clearly they see, whom your sword instructs!" He began to laugh, a little shakily; Seifas didn't think the joke was worth the humor.

Portunista strode up then, demanding to know why Seifas had slain the magus without her permission.

"I didn't care to explain to her that I find torture distasteful," Seifas would write in his journal a few hours later . . .



“His droning became annoying!” I retorted; and saw her settle upon her heels.  
Some might say my action meant nothing; that Portunista now held dozens of captives, and I couldn’t save them all.

But I could spare Gemalfan—enemy though he was to me.

Besides, I doubt that we’ll be wringing information from Gemalfan’s men; all of whom have freely spoken of his dispositions.

And, if I read the signs aright, perhaps we might not ever be resorting to such cruelty again.

But quite a bit remains along that line, to be accomplished.

Altogether, circumstances favor us for now. We have assimilated a rival brigade, increasing our strength and seasoning our men. We have acquired a shoulderbeast, which—or who?—may be of help in later engagements. We should be able to easily find Gemalfan’s vendors and supplies; and Portunista may discover information in the magus’ texts. Morale runs high. Tomorrow I can pay a shepherd family for their loss, without a single worry.

yet . . . I wonder . . .

The Eye does seem to be smiling on us; but when my Matron Cami favored my brethren, she also was strengthening us for further service.

So—what are we being strengthened for? And why?

Or, is my perception of plan only illusionary?

If I believe He plans, then *this* may be a part of one.

But what if the Eye cares little for us, being so mighty and far away? What if we are beneath His notice, except for a casual whim of entertainment? The chaos of a Culling puts the teachings of our tutors in a new and frightening light . . .

No . . . I decided *before* today’s peculiar events: the cries in my heart, are truly hope for justice.

Small as we are, we cannot be too small for the All-Seeing.

And our Matron taught us:

the Eye Above is the Lord of Justice.

So. I will wait, and watch events play out, before I cast my hope away.

No!—I have had a taste of justice at last!—and so I shall hold to my chosen course!

I will find the hope to have, or seek my death in finding it. I will share the hope I find, or seek my death in sharing it.

And now let us see what the future will bring.