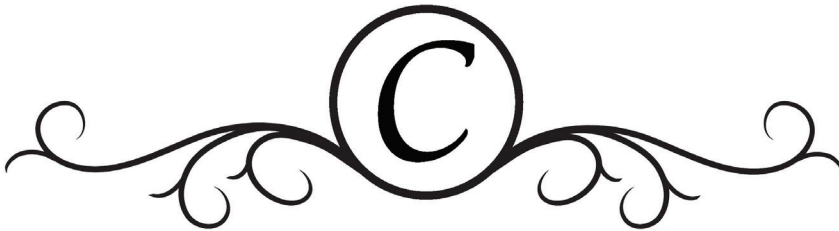


Chapter One
The Meal Prepared



Like all young girls of Dur, Corelle dreamed of love. In her dreams, she would arrive at a ball in a luxurious carriage drawn by four spirited white horses. She would step daintily from the carriage as though she floated on the very air itself, arrayed in a spectacular gown that had been fashioned for her by her father in his garment shop. The assembled revellers would gasp and swoon with envy as her lover descended from the carriage and swept her onto the dance floor. They would dance all night before they returned to their home and made love until the sunrise.

Unlike most young girls of Dur, the voice that moaned in the hot passionate nights of her dreams belonged to a woman. Her lover would invariably be tall and exquisitely beautiful, with a voluptuous figure and long blonde hair that spilled around Corelle's face like sunlight as they lay together in the sumptuous bed in their enormous house.

As her teenyears began, the dreams became nightmares. “I love you,” her lover would whisper, and blood would pump from a gash that appeared across her throat. As Corelle opened her mouth to scream, her lover’s blood poured into it and congealed. No sound could escape through the dense blood, and Corelle would wake wet with sweat and tears. Those three words had betrayed her and killed the woman she adored. She must never love, she told herself. She could not allow love to rob her of the woman of her dreams.

Corelle had no friends and had always been socially awkward. She had worked in her father’s shop since her earliest years, learned quickly, and became highly skilled at making: the work with needle, thread, and scissors that created the garments that the wealthy citizens of Ryl desired. Corelle’s most notable talent, however, lay in the design of elaborate dresses for the wealthy women of the city. Ryl had the smallest population of the Five Cities, but it boasted more than its fair share of wealthy residents, and those fortunate enough to possess vast quantities of coin were more than content to spend large sums of it on appearances. Corelle’s designs soon became the talk of the city, and her father’s shop attracted large numbers of clients with both wealth and taste.

Midway through her teenyears, the Portreeve himself visited Corelle’s father’s shop. In any town or city, the Portreeve, personally appointed by the Duke’s Bailiff, symbolised success. Rich and powerful, he controlled the commercial and legal heart of the city. Corelle’s father told her there could be no greater honour for his shop, but Corelle had no interest in the Portreeve. Men in Dur did not wear dresses, and Corelle only cared to make dresses. Whenever she created wescots or elaborate tunics

for men, she did so reluctantly and with none of the artistry that could be found in her dresses.

The Portreeve brought his wife with him, and she wished to try on a particularly intricate dress that Corelle had completed two days before. While Corelle's father and the Portreeve went into the office at the rear of the shop, Corelle and her mother busied themselves with the Portreeve's wife and the dress. The dress required very little adjustment to fit since her height and figure resembled Corelle's, and Corelle had crafted the dress in her own size.

The Portreeve's wife gazed at herself in the reflecting glass. The spectacular dress had highly detailed lacework on the bodice and a modest hoop skirt that stopped short of her ankles. Despite Corelle's concern that the Portreeve's wife might think the length of the dress improper, the woman clearly adored it. "Such a marvellous dress," she cooed to Corelle's mother as she spun before the glass and jealously drank in the woman reflected back at her. "The making is wonderful. You are extraordinarily talented, truly."

"My thanks," Corelle's mother replied. "I did not make the dress, however. It is my daughter Corelle's making, in truth."

The Portreeve's wife wore a look of disbelief as she turned to Corelle. "Can it be?" she asked. "You are barely in your teenyears, surely? To possess such skill so young is remarkable."

Corelle felt her cheeks turn red, the heat of embarrassment in them. She found herself uncomfortable with the compliment, although she could not understand why. "My thanks," she whispered, eyes downcast.

"I simply must have it," the Portreeve's wife went on. "Have it delivered to my residence as soon as may be arranged. I shall

wear it to the next Portreeve's Ball, and your little shop will be the talk of Ryl!"

Corelle's mother gushed over the Portreeve's wife's appearance in the dress and thanked her for her business. Corelle noticed that no payment for the dress had been offered, nor had the woman so much as said "please" or "my thanks." Her resentment at the fact that the Portreeve's wife had spoken of their shop with such condescension gnawed at her. "Little shop," she growled in her mind. "Not so little that you do not recognise the finest making in the city." She bit down on her disappointment that the woman had helped herself to the dress and swept away insistent visions of the Portreeve's wife as one of the covetous attendees who fawned at the feet of Corelle and her tall blonde lover at the ball in her dreams.

At dinner that night, she grumbled that the dress had been requisitioned rather than purchased. Her father appeared shocked at her churlish reaction. He felt certain that the Portreeve's wife would drive new business to the shop once she wore the dress among the most powerful and influential people in the city.

"Why did they even come here?" Corelle asked. Bitterness threatened to become anger.

"He invited me to contribute to the levies," her father replied. He looked like a cat that had been thrown a delectable fish. Nothing about the levies or the politics of Dur interested her, and try as she might, she could not quash her resentment about the woman's self-important attitude in the shop.

She stifled a bored yawn. "I do not care for these things. Why should I care if Ryl is a city or a village? I do not, and I do not care about the stupid levies."

“You must learn to care,” her mother replied. “One day you must take over the shop, when we are too old.”

Corelle spat out derisive laughter at the outrageous concept that a woman might be permitted to own a business in Dur. Her father attempted to persuade her that women could run shops or other businesses as successfully as a man, but she remained sceptical. She knew only one woman who did; Saboti, the old woman who owned a general shop across the road.

“There is no certainty that some handsome fellow will whisk you off and keep you in grand style,” her father told her.

“Good!” she shot back as the face of the woman from her dreams swam into her mind. “I do not desire such a thing and never will.”

Her mother smiled sadly at her, and her father stared at her, open-mouthed. Corelle had gone too far. Dreams such as hers found no acceptance in Dur, and few people would dare to mention them. She and her lover only danced in her dreams, and Corelle did not believe that she would ever enjoy such pleasures in her life. Anger had prompted her admission, and she changed the subject. “And what is the purpose of these levies?” she asked.

“The Portreeve uses the funds to maintain the city. Any balances are remitted to the Duke’s Bailiff. Those balances serve to retain the city charter.”

“What pompous nonsense,” Corelle responded, contemptuous of her father’s fascination with such a dull subject. “I am content to design and create my gowns. I shall leave such high affairs up to you, Father,” she said, and she excused herself from the table.

Corelle lay on her bed and cursed the fates that had been written for her. Bad enough to be born a woman in Dur, but to be born a woman who wished for the intimate company of other

women assured her of a life of dissatisfaction and frustration. She would be unlikely to ever meet another woman who felt as she did. She must bury her desires deep within herself where society could not see them for the remainder of her days. She cried at the unfairness of her fate.

Before she fell asleep, she recalled a girl who sometimes came to the shop with her mother, and whom Corelle had felt some attraction toward, although the girl had never shown any interest in her. When she closed her eyes tonight, she saw the girl again, and her hand drifted between her legs. Before she reached satisfaction, the girl had been replaced by the woman of her dreams.

When Corelle's moon cycle began, her mother took her to a local shop. A woman owned the shop, Orgel, and she sold a sweet, heady drink that helped relieve the cramps. "Why must women be so cursed?" Corelle wondered as she reflected on the injustice of the moon cycle. Every twenty-six days, eleven times a year, it came on her, and she could not guess why she deserved such an unfair life, or why it became more unfavourable at every turn. Corelle enjoyed the taste of the drink, however, and she visited the shop frequently thereafter, even outside her moon cycle.

Corelle's father had been correct about the impact on their business of their new-found popularity with the Portreeve and his wife's wealthy friends. One cold grey day when Corelle was seventeen years, she decided to visit Orgel's shop and take a cup of the drink as relief from a complex design she worked on as a commission from a friend of the Portreeve's wife. The unnecessarily complex making irritated her, and she uncharacteristically struggled to remain focused on the work.

She pulled her cloak about her, told her parents she would return soon, and headed off toward the shop.

She pushed the door of the shop open and came to an abrupt halt, open-mouthed. A tall blonde woman who sat alone at one of the tables turned and stared with bright blue eyes that pierced Corelle and brought a flutter to her heart. Long blonde hair hung in curls beyond her shoulders. Corelle had never seen a more beautiful woman—the woman from her dreams. So closely did the woman resemble the lover from her dreams that Corelle steadied herself on the door frame as light-headedness threatened to overcome her. As they stared at one another, Corelle longed to dive recklessly into the deep pools of those blue eyes, never to surface again.

Corelle ordered a cup of the drink, and casually gazed around the shop at the six other women there, seated in two groups of three at separate tables. They had all looked up when she had entered but their interest had returned to their own conversations. The lone blonde woman still watched Corelle, and the way in which those blue eyes drank in Corelle's body tantalised her. Corelle's stomach tensed as a need sprang to life inside her far beyond anything she had felt for the girl she had been attracted to at her father's shop.

Orgel handed her the drink, and Corelle left a groat on the counter and headed to the woman's table. "May I join you?" she asked.

"Please," the woman responded as she pointed at the vacant chair opposite her, her eyes fixed on Corelle's own.

Corelle instead chose to sit on a chair to the woman's left. "My name is Corelle," she said. The brazenness of her actions excited

her, and between her legs her sex tingled in a way she had not experienced before.

“Arella,” the other replied with a smile. Arella looked older than Corelle, although the citizens of Dur did not celebrate their birthday and reckoned their ages only roughly. She had full, moist lips and flawless skin, and her eyes captivated Corelle and took her breath away.

Corelle’s body shook with an excitement that she could not find words to describe, and as she gazed into Arella’s eyes, she felt certain that she saw there an invitation to a journey she had never taken but now longed for with every beat of her heart. They sipped their drinks in silence for a few moments until, as her heart raced so fast that she feared it might burst, Corelle found the courage to ask her, “Do you have rooms nearby?” Her voice trembled as she spoke but whether from fear or desire, she could not have said.

“That I do,” Arella responded. She had a clear, gentle voice, like a soft cloth that wiped a fevered brow.

Corelle laid a hand on Arella’s arm and stared pointedly into her eyes. “I greatly desire to see them,” she breathed.

The shameless invitation appeared to take Arella by surprise, and she glanced around until she seemed satisfied that none of the other women took any notice of them. “That might seem inappropriate to many,” she whispered.

“That it might, although not to me,” Corelle responded, and she squeezed the arm that her hand rested on. “Nor to you, I hope.”

Arella did not reply immediately. She appeared to consider the proposition, but her eyes betrayed her. They were full of desire, and Corelle knew that she had not missed her guess. At last,

Arella stood and leaned forward, her response spoken softly so that only Corelle might hear. “Please join me at my lodgings. I am certain that there are things we might...discuss there that would be pleasurable to us both.”

Arella turned and left the shop without a backward glance. Corelle waited five frantic heartbeats, impatient to fall into Arella’s arms and bring her dreams to fruition, then drained her cup and rose to follow as Arella walked slowly to a nearby house. At no time did she look behind her as she dawdled along the street, and Corelle silently urged her to walk faster, so that they might tear at each other’s clothes sooner. Arella stopped at a door and bent down to speak softly to a cat that sunned itself on the step outside the house.

“What delightful lodgings.” Corelle’s voice startled the cat, and it scampered off along the street. She followed the blonde-haired woman up the stairs, afraid to speak in case her voice chased the illusion away. As she watched Arella’s supple body move ahead of her, Corelle ached with desire, and the stairs seemed endless.

Arella satisfied Corelle countless times over the next two hours. Her tongue flicked at Corelle and drove the younger woman to heights of ecstasy that previously she had only dreamed of but were finally realised. Corelle cried out softly, her hands entwined in Arella’s blonde hair as she experienced pleasure she had not imagined could exist. By the time Arella had sated her, rivulets of sweat ran across her body, trickled between her breasts, and pooled in her navel. Corelle had never guessed that she could so abandon herself to the touch of another and be taken to such frenzied levels of excitement. She pulled Arella up the bed and lay next to her and traced the curve of the older woman’s back. Her hand dived between the blonde woman’s legs, and Corelle

thrust three fingers into her over and over until Arella's passion reached fever pitch, and she shook at the pleasure that surged through her.

They lay silent and content in each other's arms for some time. Corelle lay breathless, as happy as she had ever been. If this had been a dream, then she hoped never to wake from it. Arella kissed her forehead and ran her fingers around Corelle's nipple, which stood proud under her touch. Soon, Arella's hungry fingers once again began to tease her. Corelle buried her face in the mass of blonde curls as she tried to stifle the moans and cries that might otherwise draw unwanted attention from other rooms in the house.

"Where in the Five Cities did you come from?" Arella asked her as they lay winded and spent on the bed.

Corelle took the question at face value. "Here in Ryl," she replied.

Arella laughed, and Corelle laughed with her. "I did not mean my question so literally," Arella explained. "You appeared from nowhere and gathered me up like some object of your desire on a market stall."

Corelle smiled. "I desired you from the moment I opened the door of the shop. Can you tell me that you did not feel the same?"

"How did you know?"

"I simply knew. You knew, surely. I saw it in your eyes."

Arella seemed to grapple with the subtleties of this revelation for a moment. "I do not think that I have ever known, as you claim. But if you do know, then by the fates, I am grateful for it."

Corelle had lost track of how long they had been in the room together, but she could see the lights in the night sky through the small window set into one wall. "I should return to my home," she

said, reluctant to ever rise from the bed again. Arella kissed her long and hard, mayhap in hopes of further pleasures. “I could call again, if that would please you,” Corelle added finally.

“It would,” Arella gushed.

“Then I shall come to the shop in two days, three hours after the midday. If you are there...” Corelle smiled suggestively and did not finish the sentence. Arella’s sensual pout confirmed that she had not needed to complete it.

They met at the shop two days later and many times afterward, and the amount of time they spent together increased. Although Corelle found Arella to be easy company, the older woman became guarded whenever they shared tales of their past and spoke mostly about her life as a street urchin in Zhanghar. Corelle felt her own life seemed dull and repetitive in comparison, and while she shared stories of her father’s shop and her own making, she would rather hear stories of the vibrant city where Arella had been born.

Arella had travelled west by ship from Zhanghar to Ryl a year before Corelle met her. She had frequently fetched up over the rail while aboard the ship, and she dreaded the return journey, convinced that the swells of the Northern Ocean would distress her stomach again. No matter how Corelle pressed, Arella would not reveal the reason for her journey to Ryl. The older woman maintained that she would return to Zhanghar at some undetermined point, and it saddened Corelle that they might be parted.

The winter had been long and wet, but finally spring arrived. A large spring market took place in the city square, and Corelle and Arella wandered around it together. They came across a side stall that rewarded participants with sweet treats as a prize for

a feat of skill. A wooden board with a small circle drawn on it hung at the rear of the stall. The game required the player to throw a knife at the board, and if the knife became embedded in the board within the circle, the player won a handful of treats. They stopped to watch a man who tried to win some treats for a woman companion. The man's throw missed both the circle and the board, and the knife sailed past it and landed on the ground. The couple laughed and moved on.

"That circle is so small that it must be all but impossible to hit," Corelle said. "The game cheated that man of his entry fee."

Arella studied the board. "It looks simple enough to my eye," she replied.

Corelle clapped her hands together, thrilled by Arella's bold claim. "You say so? Then prove yourself."

For a heartbeat, Arella seemed annoyed, but a smile sprang to her lips in its place. "I hardly think that necessary," she replied. "If you desire sweet treats, I shall buy you some. Name your flavour."

"You seek to deflect me," Corelle said as she wagged a reproachful finger at Arella. "You have claimed it, and now you must prove it." She leaned close and whispered in Arella's ear. "If you want me tonight, then prove it."

Arella stared deeply into Corelle's green eyes. It seemed that she hesitated, caught between doubt and uncertainty, as the old phrase went. "Very well," she said at last. "I accept the challenge." With the faintest touch on Corelle's wrist, she leaned forward to whisper, and her hot breath on Corelle's ear aroused her. "If I make the throw, I will want you not just tonight. I will want you for the rest of my life."

Arella's words stunned Corelle, and she stared into her blue eyes for any hint of mockery. None could be found, and the

young woman took a deep breath as she weighed the unexpected response. Her dreams had been laid bare before her. This was the dream, become real. She had the chance to spend the rest of her life with Arella, and she could not spurn this one chance. Her heart pounded so hard that she felt it must burst out of her chest. "Then make the throw, I beg you," she breathed. "Make me yours."

Arella stepped up to the stall, but the man who ran it ignored her and called to the crowd for another player to take a chance at the game. "I will play," Arella said, and she moved to stand directly before the man so that he could not continue to ignore her. His eyes flicked to her, dressed in a silk dress with a simple boned bodice, and he drank her in like a fine wine. Mayhap he thought that her words had been a jest, and he did not move to take the goat that she proffered as her entry fee. "I will play," she said again, a determined tone in her voice.

He hesitated, then sneered. "Very well," he said as he took the goat. "The lady will play." Some of the onlookers gathered around the stall cheered ironically, and Corelle again clapped her hands excitedly, anxious for Arella to make the throw.

Arella took the knife from the stall operator and studied it. Corelle knew nothing about knives, but this one appeared to be a crude thing, with some frayed string wrapped around one end as a handle. Its point had partially bent back on itself, and it looked as though it would not stick in the board, even if the circle could be hit. Corelle felt that her initial assessment that players were cheated out of their entry fee had been accurate.

Arella stared at the board, the knife held by the tip, and her hand at her shoulder. She took a long, deep breath, half-closed her eyes and threw the knife. It flew true and straight at the board,

turned end over end in the air, and struck the exact centre of the small circle. It stuck in the board for one, then two heartbeats, then fell out. A gasp came from those assembled, who must have been shocked to see a woman throw a knife so competently. Arella's accurate throw left Corelle speechless, and she covered her mouth with a hand in astonishment.

The stall operator seemed as taken aback as any of those who watched, and he glanced at Arella as he recovered his composure. "Unlucky the lady," he cried as he clapped his hands in what Corelle took to be sympathy.

"I made the throw," Arella pointed out. Her tone had become flat, devoid of emotion.

"The knife did not stick," he reasoned.

Arella glowered at him. "I made the throw. The tip is so bent that it is a wonder that the knife pierced the board at all. I made the throw." He seemed to wilt under her fierce gaze, and he took half a step backward.

His smile seemed nervous, and his voice lacked conviction. "The knife did not stick." Some members of the crowd began to murmur as they debated the rights of the matter among themselves.

Arella appeared furious that the man had attempted to cheat at what seemed to Corelle no more than a loaded parlour game with only a few sweet treats at stake. Arella's face flushed, framed by the blonde curls as she folded her arms across her breasts, and her fingers slid into her bodice as though she reached for something hidden there. Corelle sensed that she must intervene and laid a hand on Arella's arm as she effected a jovial tone to her voice. "The knife did not stick," she shouted. "Though by the fates it would be difficult to imagine a finer effort." Some of the

crowd cheered and applauded. She pulled at Arella's arm and stared at her with wide eyes. "Let us away, for I greatly desire a cold beverage."

Arella tore her murderous gaze from the stall operator. "Then you shall have one," she smiled at Corelle. It seemed she had regained her self-control. With a final fierce glance at the clearly worried man, she walked away with Corelle a step behind her.

Once they were a safe distance from the stall, Corelle stretched out a hand and tugged on Arella's arm. "I would defy anybody to make that throw as well as you did. The odds were against you, but you made the throw. You may claim your prize."

Arella looked into her green eyes. "By the fates, I love you," she sighed.

Corelle's heart leaped in her breast. Her dreams had suggested that tragedy would strike whenever she heard those three words, but the dream must have been just that; a dream, no more. Blood did not pour from Arella's throat, and Corelle smiled at Arella in relief. "As I love you," she replied. "Now please tell me how you made that throw, then take me to your room and show me what you reached for in your bodice."

They returned to Arella's room and Corelle unbuttoned Arella's bodice, where she found only Arella's breasts. "What did you reach for, then?" she asked in confusion. Arella ignored the question and pushed Corelle onto the bed and made frantic love to her, their groans of joy mingled as their hands and tongues excited one another.

Afterward, Corelle could not shake the incident at the market from her head, and she pressed Arella to explain. Arella sighed and looked away for a heartbeat, then sat up on the bed next to Corelle. "What I have to tell you will be difficult for you to

hear,” she said. “It may even lead you to wish you had not met me, but these things can no longer lie unsaid between us if we are to make a life together. I offer you the chance now to know my secrets or not—you must decide. If you do not wish to hear it, I fear that we will drift apart from this moment. You might still learn these things at some later date and resent the fact that you did not know sooner.”

Corelle lay still and considered Arella’s words. Despite the implied menace in them she wished to understand what had happened at the market. “I will hear you,” she decided.

Arella took a sharp breath before she began. “I reached for a stiletto that I sometimes conceal in my bodice, but I did not find it there. I do not like to carry it when I am with you, and in my anger, I had forgotten that I had left it behind.” She paused, mayhap to gather her thoughts. “I am a killer who kills for money. Most people do not believe there is any serious crime in Dur, particularly violent crime. There is, and much of it exists in a clandestine organisation. Not all of it, of course. An intoxicated brawl gone wrong, a crime of passion; these things happen at times. This organisation calls itself the Guild, and I am a member of it. Our customers pay a fee, and we take a life.”

Corelle wanted to know who the customers were, but as she drew a breath to speak, Arella held up a hand for silence. “Hear me out, then ask questions, please. When I am commissioned to end somebody’s days, I do not concern myself with the ‘why’ of it. I simply kill them and receive my coin as reward. The training I received from the Guild is the reason I can throw as accurately as you saw.”

Corelle tried to concentrate on the tale as it unfolded rather than become mired in how she felt about it. Some explanation

must surely be provided at some point for Arella's involvement in this organisation. "I had been introduced to the Guild as a young woman, barely older than I reckon you to be now," Arella continued, sadness in her eyes. "I was a street urchin and had marked a man as a target whose pouch I intended to pilfer so that I might spend his coin. He read my intent and had a dagger at my ear before I could succeed. He had a foul temper that day, and my attempt to pick his pocket worsened it. 'Away with you, vagabond,' he said, and he knocked me into the gutter." She paused.

Corelle listened intently to Arella's words, anxious to hear the tale to its conclusion so that she could ask the countless questions that accumulated in her mind. "Go on," she urged.

"His name is Wilash, and he is a good man at heart. I believe that his goodness ate at him as soon as he struck me. He apologised and helped me to my feet. He invited me to take a drink with him at a nearby tavern. I misread his intentions and had no interest in that which I believed he sought, so I refused. He put away his dagger, begged me not to judge him too harshly, and insisted that I allow him to buy me a drink. Ale"—she pulled a face of disgust—"is horrible, truly. I took one sip of it and pushed it from me. We shared tales of our lives." A wistful look crossed her face. "Life had served us both poorly. He had been recruited to the Guild after his parents had died from the fevers. Wilash is a blacksmith and had become mired in debt as he tried to keep his late father's smithy in business. He told me that Styrrach, the leader of the Guild in Zhanghar, saved him from the Debtors' Gaol, and he joined the Guild."

"There is a Debtors' Gaol?" Corelle interrupted to ask her.

"Apparently, although I confess that I do not know where it is to be found. Styrrach did not mention the Guild's true nature, and

as young as Wilash was, the offer of a job seemed preferable to the Debtor's Gaol. Although he soon learned the true purpose of the Guild, he never killed anybody. They used him as a courier or to gather intelligence mostly, and the day I encountered him he had been ordered to take a position in the Portreeve's Office. That had frustrated him and turned his mood black. He felt that he had fallen from favour, and that Styrrach no longer wished him around the Guild building.

"The tale entranced me. By the end of the night, he had become so inebriated that he offered me a chance to join the Guild, mayhap as a jest. He now regrets that he did so, I think, as do I. The fates were written, however, and I joined. You doubtless ask why I would take such a loathsome occupation, as I have asked myself down the years. I lived a street urchin's life and saw no future for myself, despised by almost everybody I ever met. Nobody had ever respected me until that day. Well, mayhap one person..." She seemed to drift off somewhere in her memories until she snapped her head up and returned to the tale. "Wilash showed me respect and convinced me that others would respect me also. Other Guild members, anybody who learned that I served the Guild. It intoxicated me more than ale could ever have done."

She gave a snort of derision and shook her head, as though she had proffered excuses to herself rather than to Corelle. "I told myself that I would rarely have to kill. 'There is almost no violence in Dur,' I assured myself." Her eyes closed as she hesitated, and a tear ran down her cheek. When she spoke again, her voice had become so quiet that Corelle leaned forward so as not to miss her words. "I lied to myself. There is violence." Her train of thought seemed to drift off again, and Corelle waited for her to

return to the tale that had captivated her throughout. “There you have it. You thought you loved a sweet, blue-eyed woman. You love a monster.” She fell silent.

Corelle felt that an important element had been missed. “This happened in Zhanghar, you say, but that does not explain how you come to be in Ryl,” she said.

“A favour between Styrrach and the Guildmeister here. Guildmeister is what Styrrach calls himself, as does the man here, Krage. One of the Ryl members had been hanged by the Portreeve, and Styrrach loaned me out to Krage. I am a commodity, traded like a courtesan, it turns.”

Corelle lay on her back for long moments as she digested all that Arella had told her. She thought that she could now recall that a murderer had been hanged mayhap two years ago, after the death of a local man. There had been some outraged gossip from some of the customers in her father’s shop, as she recalled. Rumour had it that marital infidelity had been involved—a crime of passion. “Would you take my life if somebody paid the fee?” she asked.

“By the fates, I would not,” Arella replied without pause. “Rather I would take my own. I could not hurt you nor see you hurt. Not ever.”

Corelle could not guess how Arella might have imagined she would react to the tale, but it had not surprised her, in truth. There had always been an air of menace about Arella, she felt, and now she understood it. The woman in her dreams would surely have killed to protect Corelle’s honour or her life, and she imagined that the death that Arella spoke of must be little different. She felt none of the revulsion that Arella had seemed to expect when she had begun the tale. Arella’s confession had not changed her

love for this woman who had brought more purpose to her life in a few passes than she had enjoyed in all the years before they had met. In truth, it excited her to think that Arella might kill to save her from some horror.

The woman of her dreams had come to life. They loved one another, and Corelle felt now that the blood in the dreams had been the blood of others, spilled by Arella. Mayhap love would not betray her as she had once believed. She turned onto her stomach and raised herself up on her elbows, gazed into Arella's eyes, and found no hint of danger to herself despite all that had been disclosed. She kissed Arella's lips tenderly. "The prize is as we bargained," she breathed.

Tears pooled again in Arella's eyes. "Then we should seal the negotiation," she said breathily, as she reached for Corelle and pulled her mouth to her own.

Six more passes went by, and Arella reckoned that her time in Ryl had now come close to two years. They spent most nights together and rarely talked of Arella's deadly work. Corelle spent her days at her father's shop but did not sleep in her room above the shop often. Occasionally, Arella suggested that Corelle should spend the evening with her parents, and Corelle guessed that Guild business occupied her for the night. Corelle happily remained distant from Arella's deadly work and closed her mind to the consequences of Arella's actions on those nights.

The moment she had dreaded arrived at last as the wet season set in. "Letters came from Zhanghar today," Arella said from the bed the moment Corelle entered the room. "Styrrach calls me back to Zhanghar. I must take ship tomorrow."

Corelle slumped to the floor, devastated. She felt as though the words had ripped her heart from her breast and crushed it.

“Why? Why must you go? Can you not simply resign your position and stay here?”

Arella spoke through her tears. “My love. If only it could be that simple. I cannot leave the Guild, now or ever. My life would be forfeit. I might suffer Guild justice, and that I do not wish, for it would be terrible.”

“Guild justice?” Corelle asked, unable to comprehend.

“Nobody can leave the Guild. We all know too much of how it operates. We know where the Guild is based in Ryl, Zhanghar, Alcmouth, and Torric. We know the names of some of the members from other cities. This is knowledge that the Guild guards jealously. Guild justice awaits any who try to leave, and Guild justice means a slow, painful death. I do not wish it.” She shuddered as though she could imagine herself the victim of this so-called justice.

Corelle sat on the floor, disconsolate. The woman she loved and thought she would be with for the rest of her life would soon leave her for Zhanghar, and the news devastated her. Heartbeats passed, then moments and more moments, and no words came to either of them. Eventually Corelle gazed up at Arella. “Then I shall come with you.”

Arella gave a defiant shake of her head. “Your parents are here. Your friends are here. Your life is here. You cannot come with me.”

Corelle stood and took Arella’s chin in one hand to tilt her head upward as she spoke. “You are my life, and you will be in Zhanghar. My life is not here, truly. When do you leave?”

“I take ship first thing in the morning. By the fates, to be obliged again to ride that wretched wooden beast, even with my memories full of the time we have spent together, will be beyond me, truly. I would rather die.”