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Opening extract from

Purple Emperor

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Published by

Bloomsbury

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One

Mr Fogarty's house was at the end of a short cul-de-sac. The front windows were partly boarded up, which gave it a deserted, derelict appearance. But Henry knew they'd been boarded up while Mr Fogarty still lived there, so the neighbours wouldn't notice any difference. And nobody with any sense would try to visit him. Mr Fogarty had broken his last visitor's arm with a cricket bat.

Henry had a full set of keys, but he avoided using the front door and walked around the back. It was gloomy there as always – Mr Fogarty had erected an enormously high fence to stop the neighbours spying on him – and there wasn't much to see: just a grey, mossy patch of lawn and the garden shed beside the buddleia bush where Henry had first met Pyrgus. He walked down to the bush – it was one of Hodge's favourite haunts – and called out, 'Hodge! Come on Hodgie, suppertime!'

Hodge must have been lurking in the undergrowth, because he emerged at once, tail up, and polished Henry's ankle. 'Hello, Hodge,' said Henry fondly. He sort of liked the old tomcat, even though he'd made the place a killing field for rats, mice, birds and rabbits.

Henry walked towards the back door, taking slow,

careful steps on account of Hodge making figures of eight between his feet. When he unlocked the door and pushed it open, Hodge ran in ahead of him, eager for his pouch of Whiskas. Mr Fogarty had always fed him some foul-smelling stuff that looked like puke and cost less than 25p a tin. Hodge ate it under protest, but liked pouch Whiskas better. He'd never smooched Mr Fogarty the way he smooched Henry.

Henry opened the cupboard, took out two pouches and Hodge's special tin plate.

'You're ruining that cat – you know that,' a voice growled from the shadows.

Henry was so startled he dropped the plate, which clattered loudly on the kitchen tiles. Hodge squawked in protest and bolted for the door.

Two

'Scaredy-cat!' sniffed Her Serene Highness, Princess Holly Blue.

'I'm not a scaredy-cat!' Pyrgus protested. 'I just want to see exactly what he'll be doing.' He leafed ostentatiously through the pattern book. Lavish animation spells caused the butterfly illustrations to writhe and stretch their wings.

'You *know* exactly what he'll be doing,' Blue said fiercely. 'They're traditional designs – they haven't changed in years! And you saw them often enough on Daddy.' Her eyes clouded. 'While he was alive.'

'I know, I know,' said Pyrgus. He turned another page.

'Well, what are you waiting for?'

Pyrgus mumbled something under his breath.

'What?' asked Blue sharply.

'Don't like needles,' Pyrgus mumbled just a little louder.

They were in the Emperor's private quarters – Pyrgus's private quarters now – in the Purple Palace. The Royal Herticord had been waiting outside for nearly an hour.

'I know you don't like needles,' Blue said, not unkindly. 'But you have to have it done. And you have

to have it done now, otherwise they'll still be itching at your Coronation. You can't have the new Purple Emperor scratching through the ceremony – people will think you have fleas.'

'I could use a healing spell,' Pyrgus said.

'You could pull yourself together,' Blue told him shortly. 'You've sent that poor man away twice already. Just grit your teeth and get it over with.'

'Oh, all right,' Pyrgus said with bad grace. He nodded to the footman standing like a statue by the door. 'Show him in.'

The footman swung the door open with a flourish. 'Sir Archibald Buff-Arches,' he announced loudly. 'The Royal Herticord.'

The man who strode in reminded Blue a little of her old enemy Jasper Chalkhill. He was overweight, and had a taste for extravagant clothing – he was wearing a shot-silk robe woven with illusion spells so that misty nymphs swam through its folds. But that's where the resemblance ended. His eyes showed he was no Faerie of the Night, and he walked with purpose. Two wiry helpers manoeuvred in a trolley spread with multi-coloured pots, several bottles and a tray that displayed Pyrgus's dreaded needles.

The Herticord bowed formally to Pyrgus. 'Your Imperial Majesty,' he acknowledged. He turned to Blue and made a lesser bow. 'Your Serene Highness.' She noticed he had very delicate hands. They were rather beautiful.

'My brother's ready for you,' Blue said quickly before Pyrgus could change his mind.

Pyrgus gave her a dirty look, but had obviously decided to go through with it. He turned to Buff-

Arches with exaggerated dignity. 'I'm in your hands, Herticord. Let's get it over with.'

The two helpers were busying themselves opening jars and bottles and laying out a range of gleaming instruments beside the needles. Blue saw Pyrgus turn a little green. The trolley looked as if they were preparing for major surgery.

'I expect His Majesty would like to know his options,' Buff-Arches said briskly.

Pyrgus stared at him and Blue's instincts told her that if her brother was going to chicken out at all, this would be the moment. But all he said was, 'Options? Yes, I'd like to know my options.'

'Traditionally,' said Buff-Arches, 'the tattoos are done without anaesthetic or magical intervention of any sort, save for a small transfusion should royal blood loss exceed two pints in any single hour –'

'Blood loss?' Pyrgus squeaked. 'Two pints an hour?'

'Oh, it seldom reaches anything approaching that amount,' Buff-Arches said easily. 'Unless, of course, one happens to sever an artery when preparing the Royal Transposition.'

'The Royal Transposition?' Pyrgus echoed. Blue moved nonchalantly a little closer in case he fainted.

'A deep tissue sample used to gauge the effect of the dyes. A safety precaution in case of allergic response. I tattoo the sample first – with a picture of a bee – then, if there is no reaction, we proceed with the formal illustration of Your Majesty's body. The tissue sample is normally taken from the royal buttocks.'

Blue fully expected Pyrgus to protest. *She* certainly would have – a tissue sample of that sort meant you couldn't sit down for a week. But all Pyrgus said was,

'Why a bee? Why do you tattoo the sample with a bee?'

'I haven't the slightest idea,' Buff-Arches said. 'It's simply the specified picture – specified by tradition, you understand.' He watched Pyrgus for a moment, as if expecting further questions, then said abruptly, 'But I was explaining your options. As I say, the traditional way involves no anaesthetic or magical intervention, but one of your illustrious ancestors, Emperor Scolitandes the Weedy, decreed that henceforth all Purple Emperors might elect to have their official tattoos carried out under general or local anaesthetic –' he gestured towards some bottles on the trolley '– these herbal tinctures here. Or, alternatively, that the candidate might light a spell cone that would render him temporarily immune to pain.' He paused expectantly, then added, 'Perhaps your Imperial Majesty would care to tell me the option of his choice?'

Pyrgus was staring at the tray. 'What are those instruments for?' he asked. 'The tissue sample?'

'Oh no, sire. Your Majesty will recall that my secondary duty as Herticord is to shave Your Majesty's head in the Royal Tonsure. The tools look a little off-putting, but that part of the procedure is quite painless, I assure you. Unless Your Majesty has a twitch, of course.'

'Do we have to do the shaving thing?' Pyrgus asked. He was a bit vain about his hair.

Buff-Arches nodded briefly. 'Yes, we do. Your Majesty is titular head of the Church of Light, so the tonsure is wholly appropriate. But if Your Majesty wishes, I can retain the shaven hair and have it made into a little wig for Your Majesty to wear when he is

not engaged in State occasions.'

'Yes,' Pyrgus said quickly. 'Yes, you do that.'

'And Your Majesty's options? The anaesthetics, the spell cone ... ?'

'What did my father do?' Pyrgus asked.

For the first time Buff-Arches's expression softened. 'Your father, sire, opted for the traditional approach – no spells, no anaesthetics. He didn't even require my assistants to hold him down.'

Blue felt herself tense. It was only weeks since their father was murdered – and murdered horribly with an Analogue World weapon that had destroyed most of his face. But Pyrgus and their father had seldom seen eye to eye. It had got so bad at one stage that Pyrgus had left home and lived in the city as a commoner. Would he follow his father's example now?

'Then I shall do the same,' said Pyrgus grandly. He began to unbutton his breeches.

Blue left discreetly. She was proud of her brother, delighted with his choice. But she had no desire to be there when they took the tissue sample from his bottom.

There were still a million things to do before the Coronation. Gold leaf for the Cathedral, spell candles for the nave, gifts for the congregation, musicians, the celebratory games, rabbits for the Official Distribution, the Honour Guard, the clerical bribes, the State Barge, the seven conjuration troupes, the Endolg Chorus, the Male Companion – Pyrgus wanted Henry for that and Blue wasn't even sure Gatekeeper Fogarty had contacted him yet – the Female Companion, which would be Blue herself, except she

still hadn't had her fitting for the dress, the Grand Salute, the new statue in the Great Square, the reception menu ... the list went on and on.

And all of it was down to Blue since Pyrgus wouldn't take it seriously.

She was hurrying towards her own rooms and the dreaded *To Do* list when she decided on impulse to get the fitting over with. She turned down a steep flight of narrow stairs that led to the servants' quarters. It wasn't an area of the palace she normally visited – when the Princess Royal needed something, servants came to *her* – but tradition had it that the gown worn by the Female Companion should be woven from the finest spinner silk *with no spell reinforcement.*

Ridiculous, but that was tradition for you. Everybody knew spinner silk was the most fragile substance in the world until it set. Afterwards, of course, it was the strongest. The trouble was, to get the astonishing form-fitting folds that made spinner dresses so desirable, you had to try the garment on before the fabric set. You had to try it on *carefully.* At least, you had to try it on carefully when you weren't allowed to use a stasis spell. If you were lucky, the whole thing didn't fall apart and you had the most wonderful gown in the realm. If you weren't, the Silk Mistresses made up another one (at hideous expense) and the whole process began again.

Most clients, even nobles, visited the Mistresses in their trading lodges above the spinner pits. It was only by a very special concession to the Princess Royal that her Coronation gown was being constructed in the palace itself. Blue would have been happy to give the Mistresses a state apartment, but they insisted on set-

ting up their workshop in the servants' quarters. Blue discovered the reason when she entered it.

'Why's it so cold in here?' she demanded, her breath frosting.

One of the Silk Mistresses glanced up from her bench. If she was impressed by the sudden appearance of the Princess Royal, she didn't show it. 'The fabric is unworkable at higher temperatures,' she said.

Blue shivered and hugged herself. 'I've come for the fitting,' she said shortly. 'Is everything ready?'

The Mistress stood up and walked towards her. She was a tall, elegant matron with waist-length hair and her own gown was divine. That was the great thing about spinner silk. It made any woman look wonderful; any woman who could afford it, that is.

'Of course, Serenity. Please follow me.'

Blue allowed herself to be led across the workshop. The Mistresses had moved their entire operation into the palace, to judge from the garments they were creating. Blue hoped they hadn't moved their spinners in as well. She liked arachnids – she even owned an illegal psychotronic – but silk spiders were the size of terriers, too large even for her.

The Mistress opened a door to a second room, smaller than the first and empty of workbenches. There was a stunning purple and gold gown draped over a wooden form and illuminated by a gentle glowglobe. The fabric shimmered as if enchanted.

Despite herself, Blue sucked in her breath. 'It's ... amazing.'

The Mistress smiled lightly. 'Indeed, Serenity.'

On impulse Blue said, 'What's your name, Silk Mistress?'

'Peach Blossom, Serenity.'

'It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Peach Blossom,' Blue said sincerely. She took a step closer to the garment. Although the temperature of this room was perhaps a degree or two higher than that in the workshop, her breath was still frosting. 'Do I have to undress to try it on?'

'Yes, Serenity. It will fit, of course, but your body heat will set the material to conform to your figure now and for ever. Assuming you don't tear it as you put it on.'

'I'll be careful,' Blue promised.

The material felt ... elusive. Not quite slippery, yet somehow distant, as if it belonged in another dimension. Blue desperately wanted to put it on quickly – the room was so cold she was already shivering – but forced her numbing fingers to move with slow deliberation. The gown slid over her head and down her body like a slick of perfumed oil. She felt warmer at once and sensed the catalytic process as the spinner threads began to set.

'Well, done, Serenity!' Peach Blossom said. 'You may move now – it's quite safe.'

Blue moved and the gown moved with her. She was suddenly energised, as if someone had lit a euphoria cone.

'You look wonderful, Your Highness,' Peach Blossom said. 'Please come through and show the other Mistresses.'

Although Blue had never thought much about her appearance, she thought about it now. She felt graceful. She felt beautiful. She felt as elegant as the Silk Mistress herself. Her movements were a dance. No

wonder the Mistresses could command such high prices for their designs: the effect of wearing one was quite extraordinary.

There was a burst of spontaneous applause as she walked back into the workroom. Several of the Silk Mistresses even stood up, smiling their delight. Blue smiled back in sincere appreciation, but at the moment of triumph an unexpected thought occurred: *Just wait until Henry Atherton sees me in this!*

Three

The man who stepped out of the shadows was tall, thin and wearing an ankle-length indigo toga embroidered with electrical and planetary symbols. He fixed Henry with a gimlet eye. 'You know they put dope in that stuff, don't you? Cat dope. Little twits get addicted and won't touch anything else. That's what makes it so expensive.'

Henry glanced at the pouch of Whiskas in his hand, then back at the scowling figure. 'Mr Fogarty! What are you doing here?'

'I live here,' Fogarty said sourly.

'No you don't,' Henry said. 'At least not this month.' There was a sudden excitement flowering in him. 'How's Pyrgus? How's the Realm?' He tried to sound nonchalant. 'How's, ah, Princess Blue?'

Fogarty bent down to open the cupboard underneath the sink. He extracted a tin and searched the kitchen drawer for an opener – the tin was so old it didn't even have a ring-pull. 'Pyrgus is a mess. Kid doesn't live in the real world, so how do you expect him to run an Empire? The Realm – well, that's what I want to talk to you about.' He caught Henry's expression and added, 'Your little girlfriend's fine.'

'She's not my girlfriend,' Henry said, flushing.

Fogarty ignored him. He took a small knife from the drawer and used it to transfer globules of grey slime from the tin into Hodge's metal dish. Hodge, now recovered from his fright, had returned to the kitchen and was watching with beady interest. Fogarty said, 'It's all fine on the surface. Nighters are generally behaving themselves. Hairstreak's gone quiet. There are rumours the Hael Realm's collapsed – don't believe it myself, but the portals are certainly closed, so the demons aren't giving any trouble. Lot of talk about hands of friendship, doves of peace, all that sort of crap. Trouble is, nothing's really changed.'

He set the dish on the floor and waited. Hodge trotted across, sniffed it once, then walked away and sat down with his back to them. 'What did I say?' Fogarty exclaimed triumphantly. 'That's an addiction! He won't touch normal food – he wants his fix.'

'Mr Fogarty, he doesn't *like* that cat food,' Henry said. 'It smells awful and it looks like –'

'Always ate it for me,' Fogarty cut in airily. ''Specially when he was hungry.' He stared intently at Henry and sniffed. 'Might as well give him the pouch now – you've turned him into a junkie.'

Henry decided he wasn't going to get into all this. He binned the puke food, rinsed the dish and squeezed pouch Whiskas into it. Hodge's tail went up and he began to eat at once.

Fogarty pulled out a chair and sat down at the kitchen table. 'Couple of things. Before I forget, Pyrgus wants you to translate for his Coronation.' Henry looked at him blankly, thinking of his last language exam, then remembered *translate* was the word Pyrgus used for travelling to the Faerie Realm. 'There's

something called "Male Companion",' Fogarty went on. 'Sort of like best man at a wedding. He wants you to be it. Involves dressing up like a prat.'

Henry glanced at Mr Fogarty's own attire, but said nothing. There was a grin spreading over his face. He wanted nothing more than an excuse to go back to the Faerie Realm. It was such a brilliant place to be. I mean, he was a sort of a hero in the Faerie Realm. He'd been on adventures, saved Pyrgus from Hell. Be nice to see Pyrgus again. And Blue. Especially Blue. Not in the bath, of course. Not like he'd come across her before. But it would only be polite to call on Blue. Male Companion, eh? Mr Fogarty's idea of dressing like a prat probably meant something colourful and heroic, so Blue would see him really at his best, not wearing the sort of rubbish he'd had on the last time they met.

'When is it – the Coronation?' he asked.

'Two weeks – it's a Saturday here. The celebrations last three days, but you'll need to come on the Friday for a rehearsal.'

Henry's excitement popped like a balloon. He might get away from his mum overnight, arrange with his friend Charlie to pretend he was staying there for the night, but four days was out of the question. 'I can't get away for four days.'

'You doing something, or just worried about your parents?'

'No, I'm not doing anything. I mean, if I was I'd put it off. It's my parents – well, just Mum, actually. I don't see that much of Dad.' He realised suddenly that with being away so much Mr Fogarty wouldn't know his circumstances. 'I'm just living with Mum now – Dad has his own place. She'd want to know where I was if

I disappeared for four days.'

Fogarty shrugged. 'No problem – we'll use a lethe.'

Henry blinked. 'What's a lethe?'

'Makes you forget. You just swan off when you need to, crack a cone under her nose and she won't even remember she *has* a son until you come back. Anybody else in the house?'

'My sister Aisling,' Henry said, his eyes wide. He'd seen spells worked in the Faerie Realm, but it had never occurred to him he might actually use one himself.

'I'll get you a box: never know when they come in handy. You'll have to use one for each of them. Just be sure to hold your breath until you're out of the room.'

'Thank you,' Henry said. There was a warm feeling in his stomach at the thought of hexing his sister.

'So I tell Pyrgus you're coming?'

Henry nodded enthusiastically. 'Yes.'

Fogarty said, 'OK. The second thing is, I've decided to stay on permanently.'

'Here?' Henry asked. He had mixed feelings, but overall it was mostly relief. Since Pyrgus had made Mr Fogarty Gatekeeper of the Faerie Realm – hard to believe that was only a few weeks ago – the old man had split his time between the Purple Palace and his own home. While he was away, Henry kept an eye on the house and fed Hodge. But lately, Mr Fogarty had taken to spending longer and longer periods in the Realm and Henry didn't know how he was going to manage when he went back to school in September. As it was, things were tricky enough: his mum didn't approve of Mr Fogarty.

Fogarty shook his head. 'No, in the Realm. Like I

said, everything's fine on the surface, but nothing's changed underneath. Hairstreak still has his own agenda, however much he talks about building bridges. Pyrgus isn't any good at politics – doesn't have the interest. And he's a trusting soul. Thinks if somebody tells him something it's usually the truth. If he's going to survive as Emperor, he needs me to look after him. Far as I can see, that's going to be a full-time job.'

'Yes ... ' Henry nodded thoughtfully. Mr Fogarty was probably right. Apart from anything else, Pyrgus was terribly young to be an Emperor – much the same age as Henry, in fact. Then he caught Mr Fogarty's expression and said, 'There's something else, isn't there?'

Fogarty sniffed. 'Not as stupid as you look, are you, Henry?' He sighed. 'Yes, there is. I'm not getting any younger. If it's really three score years and ten, I'm well past my sell-by date. I've arthritis in my knuckles and I couldn't run fifteen yards from a copper without getting winded these days. Been thinking I might last another five years, maybe ten if I'm lucky, but I found out they've got treatments in the Faerie Realm that could give me thirty – *and* get rid of the damn arthritis. Except they don't work if I keep popping back and forth. Differences in the two environments, or something. Thing is, once you start the treatments your tolerance to this world drops. I've started the treatments. Longer I'm here, the more dangerous it is for me. So, when I go back this time, I'm staying.'

Henry said, 'But what are you going to do about the house, Mr Fogarty?'

Fogarty looked thoughtful. 'That's what I came back to sort out.'

four

For some reason, the gown helped Blue put things in perspective. Although she'd taken it off now and was wearing her familiar blouse and britches, she was no longer feeling nearly so frantic about the Coronation arrangements. Admittedly there was still a lot to do, but there were still two weeks to do it in. And it wasn't really fair to say Pyrgus didn't care. It was just that the whole thing upset him. He'd never wanted to be Emperor and he didn't want to be Emperor now, so he avoided thinking about it. And maybe that was all to the good – Pyrgus was capable of making a mess of nearly anything. Better to leave the arrangements to her – she was good at organisation. It wasn't as if she didn't have as much help as she needed. There were –

She turned a corner of the corridor and walked into her half-brother, Comma. There was something on his lips, something he'd been eating, that had turned them bright scarlet. He'd put on weight quite noticeably since their father died.

'Sorry,' Comma muttered. He glanced behind him as if afraid he was being followed, then gave Blue a forced half-smile. 'You're in a hurry, Sweet Sister,' he said.

She hated it when he called her 'Sweet Sister' and her annoyance made her sharp. 'I've a lot to do.' Comma

had been no help at all with the arrangements, and while she was prepared to forgive Pyrgus, all Comma did was make her furious.

'There's somebody waiting for you in your bedroom,' Comma said.

Blue blinked. 'How do you know?' What she really wanted to ask was, *What were you doing in my bedroom?*

Comma shrugged infuriatingly and started to walk on.

'Who is it?' Blue demanded.

He waved to her without looking back. 'I expect it's one of your clever *spies*,' he said.

'What have you been eating?' Blue shouted. 'What were you doing in my –' But it was too late. He was already turning down a side corridor.

Seething, Blue stamped off towards her quarters.

There was no one in her bedroom except her cleaning maid. She turned to leave, swearing vengeance on Comma for wasting her time, when a tickling in her mind caused her to pause. Blue's eyes flickered round the room and a tingle of fear crawled down her spine. There was something wrong. For a moment she had no idea what, except it felt like something was out of place.

She mentally checked the furnishings. Nothing seemed to have been moved. She looked across at her dressing table. Everything was neatly in its place. Except for the jewel case that held her psychotronic spider which she'd slipped into a drawer, as she always did before the maid came in to clean – Princess Royal or not, psychotronic spiders were illegal, and fearfully dangerous. They could carry your mind so far from

your body that you never got it back again.

So nothing different about the dressing table. Blue let her gaze travel around the walls, checking the pictures, lingering on the portrait of her father, feeling the well-spring of sorrow as she looked into the painted eyes. But nothing had been moved. Nothing had changed at all.

And yet something was out of place ...

Suddenly she had it. The antique chair that sat beside her bed had disappeared. Blue stared for a moment, then said quietly to the maid, 'I'd like you to finish off some other time, Anna.'

'Yes, Your Royal Highness.' The girl dropped a curtsey and hurried out.

Blue moved cautiously towards her dressing table. There was a dagger in one of the drawers. Not that she was likely to need it. There were always guards close by in these troubled times. But close or not, they would take time to reach her and it was always as well to take responsibility for your own protection.

'You can show yourself now,' she said aloud.

There was a shimmering beyond the bed and Blue's chair reappeared. An extraordinary woman was sitting in it.

'Madame Cynthia!' Blue exclaimed.

'My deeah, you must forgive the invisibility – so ill-mannered of me. But I felt it best not to show myself while the servant remained.'

'Yes, of course,' Blue nodded. Cynthia Cardui, the Realm's famous Painted Lady, was a major contact in Blue's private espionage network, but it was astonishing to see her here in the palace. Madame Cynthia was elderly now, long retired from the stage, and seldom

ventured far from her Cheapside apartments. 'Are you alone?'

'I fear so. Kitterick is visiting his relatives, otherwise I might have entrusted him with the mission. He's back tomorrow, but I decided I must undertake it myself. The matter is urgent.'

'Urgent?' Blue echoed. She felt an uncomfortable chill.

'My deeah,' said Madame Cardui, 'you must steel yourself. There is a plot afoot.'

Blue walked across and sat on the edge of the bed. She trusted Madame Cardui more than almost anyone else in the world. The old woman was snobbish and eccentric, but her contacts were legendary and her loyalty absolute. If she said something was going on, Blue was prepared to believe it.

'A brutal conspiracy, my deeah,' Madame Cardui went on. 'One would imagine with Lord Hairstreak routed, Brimstone in hiding and that dreadful creature Chalkhill behind bars, one would have nothing to worry about.' She sighed theatrically. 'Alas, no. I have received information of a plan to kill a member of the royal household.'

The unease Blue had felt since she saw Madame Cardui flowered into chill fear. But she held her voice steady. 'Which member?' she asked.

A look of distress crossed the Painted Lady's face. 'That's the problem, I'm afraid – we don't know.'

Five

It was bone gruel again.

Brimstone stared into the cracked bowl and felt his lips dry out. The liquid had the consistency of dishwater, a thin, greyish fluid curdled with lumps of corpse-white gristle that smelled worse than the open sewer outside his window. He looked up at the toothless old crone and scowled.

'It's good for you,' Widow Mormo cackled. 'Keeps your strength up – my late husband swore by it.' She set a dirty spoon beside the bowl and a wedge of rough brown bread beside the spoon. A cockroach scuttled across the rickety table and Brimstone squashed it with his thumb.

'Your late husband probably died from it,' he muttered sourly.

'No need to be like that,' Widow Mormo said sharply. 'I'm a poor woman and I does the best I can on the pittance you pay me.'

Brimstone was paying her a groat a day, which was indeed a pittance, but meals were extra and bone gruel gave him diarrhoea. He'd planned to lay low in these miserable lodgings for at least six months, but now he was wondering if he could survive another six days. Even the threat of a demon prince paled beside Widow

Mormo's bone gruel.

The old sow muttered something he didn't catch. 'What?' Brimstone demanded crossly. 'What?' Without a spell to reinforce it, his hearing was going. But the spell he needed was one of the ones he'd been forced to leave behind and he didn't dare go out and buy another. A magical supply shop was the first place Beleth would think of looking for him. Probably had every one in the city staked out by now. A demon prince had huge resources.

The trouble was, it wouldn't end with loss of hearing. Brimstone was ninety-eight years old. Without magical reinforcement, his body would soon start to fall apart. Even with it, he knew he looked his age.

'I said there might be a way to make things a bit more comfortable for you,' Widow Mormo repeated slyly. 'Better food as well.'

'I'm not paying any more,' Brimstone told her promptly. These might be cheap lodgings, but most of his cash fortune had been stolen and all of his assets were beyond his reach. He had a substantial amount of gold about his person, but he'd no idea how long it might have to last. Demons had long memories. He might have to stay in hiding for years.

To his intense discomfort, the old bag pulled up a chair and sat beside him. He wrinkled his nose. She seemed to be wearing some hideous perfume, but she still smelled mainly of pee.

Brimstone shifted his own chair backwards. 'Widow Mormo –' he began.

'Maura,' said the old bag. 'Call me Maura.' She lowered her eyes. 'And I shall call you Silas.'

'You'll call me nothing of the sort,' Brimstone

snapped. Lower classes never knew their place when you were short of cash.

'What I was thinking of, Silas,' said Widow Mormo, not at all put out, 'was a little ... arrangement.'

'What sort of arrangement?' he asked suspiciously. Anything that got him better food without paying more had to be worth listening to. But she'd want *something* in return, of course – people always did. Probably his help with an illegal spell. He'd told her nothing, but he knew he had the scent of sulphur about him and she was as shrewd as she was hideous. Chances were she'd put him down for a sorcerer the minute he'd walked through the door. It'd be an illegal spell all right. But how bad could that be? He'd dealt with demons all his life and his last contract with Beleth had called for human sacrifice. Nothing the crone came up with was likely to be in the same league.

'I'm a widow woman, Silas,' she said softly. 'Have been since my Stanley died.'

'What's that got to do with me?' Brimstone snapped.

'Thought we might get married,' Widow Mormo told him coyly.

Brimstone stared at the old bat in astonishment. Even in her younger days she must have been the ugliest woman in the country. Now, without teeth, warty, wrinkled, rheumy, balding, smelly, dirty, badly-dressed and flatulent, she'd have been more appealing as a corpse.

'You want me to marry you?' he said.

'Get you out of here,' Widow Mormo sniffed. 'I got a place of my own in the woods – log cabin with mod cons, a full cabinet of spells and a nice comfortable double bed. Keep my money underneath the mattress.

Nobody ever goes there. Nobody even knows about it.' She smiled seductively and gummily. 'We could slip away for our honeymoon.'

Brimstone frowned. A nice isolated log cabin could be just the thing he needed. Not to mention Widow Mormo's money and the spells in her magic cabinet. He cracked a wintery smile. He could cut her throat when they got there and bury her body in the woods.

'Yes, all right,' he said brightly.

Six

The Great Keep of Asloght was an imposing sight as it rose against the stark backdrop of the Nikure Barrens, but most of its structure was actually underground. The eighteen-hundred-year-old fort was built with a warren of subterranean chambers for food storage. Now prisoners were the only things that rotted in the gloomy cells. For more than three centuries, Asloght had been the Realm's main jail for recalcitrant criminals and political dissidents.

Harold Dingy was having trouble with the Governor of the Keep.

'I'm not saying these papers aren't genuine,' the Governor said. 'I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying the sealing wax is red, and in my experience it should be pink.'

'Red ... pink ... what's the difference?' Dingy asked. He was a big man, not altogether used to being questioned. Especially the way he was dressed just now.

'Shade,' said the Governor. 'A shade of difference, you might say.' He looked up and smiled manically. 'And a shade of difference might make all the difference.'

Dingy didn't smile back. 'You know the prisoner these papers refer to?'

The Governor glanced at them again. 'Oh yes. Oh yes, indeed.'

'Scum, would you say?'

The Governor nodded. 'Of the lowest sort.'

'Deserving of the penalty the papers lay out?'

'Penalties are not my business,' the Governor said primly. 'My business is to detain – and where necessary torture a little – those placed in my charge. But since you ask, I believe this prisoner is deserving, very deserving, of the penalty laid out. Too good for him, in my view. Purely a personal opinion, of course.'

Dingy frowned. 'Too good for him? It's the ultimate penalty, isn't it? Can't get more ultimate than death.'

'Indeed not. But what *sort* of death? That's what I would ask.'

'What sort would you want?' asked Dingy, suddenly curious.

The Governor leaned back in his chair and made a steeple of his hands. He rolled his eyes heavenwards, or at least as heavenwards as the ceiling of his office allowed. 'Well, we could gradually starve him, or crush his feet and put him on a treadmill, bleed him to death, beat him to a pulp, feed him a slow-acting poison, remove his vital organs one by one, transplant his brain into the body of a rat, insert red-hot needles into his ears, nail his feet to the floor so he can't reach his food (which is starving him, I admit, but more stylishly), bake him in a slow oven, stampede a herd of elephants over him, force him to eat an endolg, staple his mouth and nose shut so he can't breathe, drown him in a cesspit, burn off his skin, drop an anvil on his head, stretch him between dray horses, feed him to hounds, electrocute him with an eel, drop him from a

high tower, inject him with soapsuds, have him eaten by mosquitoes, make him stab rocks with a Halek knife, change him into a mouse and bring in the cat, bury him in snow until the spring, send him to the ink mines, drill holes in his head and pour in acid –' He waved an airy hand. 'This warrant only specifies hanging.'

Dingy glanced at the papers. They did seem a bit unimaginative. 'How about I duff him up beforehand?'

'Be a help,' the Governor said.

'So what about the sealing wax?'

The Governor shrugged. 'Red ... pink ... what's the difference?' He stood up. 'Put your hood up. I'll get somebody to show you to his cell.'

The basic cell in Asloght was a twelve-foot cube with a run-off for the water that seeped down the stone-block walls. Furnishings were confined to a heap of damp straw in one corner and a bucket. There were no curtains at the windows because there were no windows. Prisoners were issued with one stubby candle per week.

Jasper Chalkhill's quarters were rather more luxurious, thanks to a small fortune spent on bribes. He had more space, for one thing, a pink carpet on the floor, a proper bed in one corner, glowglobes set into the ceiling, an easy chair, a dining chair, a bookcase, a table and a small refrigerator filled with sticky snacks and drinks. Even compared to prison staff, Chalkhill was probably the most comfortable man in Asloght.

But that didn't stop him complaining.

'It's not what I'm used to,' he told the orderly he'd hired at huge expense to be his valet. 'I do so miss my little spells. They won't allow me any magic here, you

know.' Which wasn't strictly true – a weekly absorbent spell took care of the damp – but there were certainly no magical luxuries.

The orderly, a patient Trinian named Clutterbuck, was engaged in light housework while Chalkhill reclined prostrate with boredom on the bed. 'I don't suppose I could tempt you to a little mahjong?' Chalkhill asked. 'We could play for sweeties. Anything to ease this dreadful *ennui*.' He drew the back of his hand theatrically across his forehead to give the suggestion emphasis, even though he suspected he knew the answer before he asked the question.

'Sorry, sir, don't know the game at all,' Clutterbuck told him briskly. 'Besides, sir, with respect, sir, gaming isn't in my contract. Just the basic Four Cs – cooking, cleaning, conversation and clothing. Four Cs, sir. Doesn't run to gaming, I'm afraid, on account of that being a G.' He began to set out the cutlery for Chalkhill's next meal.

'How would it be –' Chalkhill stopped. 'What's the matter?' The Trinian had moved abruptly to the door of the cell and was now pressed against the wall beside it, sniffing furiously.

'Danger, sir. Approaching us at walking pace.'

Chalkhill sat up in bed. 'How do you know?'

'Can smell it, sir – I had the training.'

Chalkhill swung his feet on to the floor. He was a fat man with a taste for flamboyant clothing, and although his opportunities to indulge it now were limited, he still managed a lime-green robe with jewelled pumps.

'Will you protect me?' he asked curiously. Then, before Clutterbuck could answer, echoed, 'Not in the

contract – I know, I know.' He stood up. 'My, my, danger coming – this *is* exciting!'

'That's one way of putting it, sir. Now, if there's nothing more you need me for, I'll leave you to face it.'

'No, you run along, Clutterbuck. Thank you.' Chalkhill's eyes were fixed on the door and he licked his lips in some anticipation. Almost anything would be better than the endless, dreadful *sameness* of his prison days.

Clutterbuck unlocked the door and opened it to slip out. As he did so, a tall figure slipped in. Chalkhill's pleasurable expectation drained through the soles of his feet. The creature wore a black robe with a hood that covered its entire face except for two glittering dark eyes. It carried the large, sharp scythe and ceremonial oakwood hour-glass of a State Executioner.

'My God,' said Chalkhill in sudden dread. 'They've sent you to kill me!'

Seven

The Executioner seemed in something of a hurry. He swept down the corridors of the Great Keep like a herald of doom, dragging Chalkhill behind him.

'Steady on,' gasped Chalkhill breathlessly. At this pace he'd be dead before the man could hang him.

The Governor was waiting for them at the main gates. 'Where exactly are you taking him?' he asked the Executioner.

'That's something you don't need to know,' the Executioner told him flatly. 'Let's just say it's somewhere nobody will see what I plan to do with him.'

'Excellent!' the Governor exclaimed. He gave a signal to the guards and the gates swung slowly open.

There was a black coach outside, drawn by four black horses. A hunchbacked coachman in a black cloak and black three-cornered hat gripped the reins with claw-like hands. To Chalkhill's surprise, there were no bars on the windows. The Executioner bundled him inside and, to Chalkhill's even greater surprise, climbed in beside him. The coach lurched off violently the moment the door closed.

Chalkhill watched through the window, wondering if he could safely jump. But the Executioner pushed the hood back to reveal a moon-shaped face that was