

MR. SLINT'S FOREIGN AFFAIR

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Smashwords Edition

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Published by Kethrios Media on Smashwords

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The Jostla Incident, as I call it, could have been avoided if I had been able to resist my mother's constant nagging to "do something *important* for a change." She thought that I was wasting my life as a court stenographer, and kept suggesting that I put in an application to the Selkenian Diplomatic Corps. My grandfather and great-grandmother had been diplomats, and she wished for me to continue that tradition.

I had no interest in diplomacy or politics, and was quite content with my position. Still, I finally

gave in and did as she asked. To my great consternation, I was granted an interview. And despite the fact that I had no experience in diplomacy or politics whatsoever, I was accepted into the Corps. I later learned that my mother had used her web of friends and called in a number of favors to arrange for my acceptance.

I suppose I can't really blame her, though, for I was solely responsible for the actions that ended up altering my life. I could have simply done nothing, that day in the governor's throne room; but thinking back on it, what else could I have done?

Being a new member of the Diplomatic Corps, it was my job to undertake low-level tasks that none of the senior staff wanted. My first significant assignment was to deliver a bid to the government of Jostla, a Drevonian island nation, for the mining rights to a certain ore called kadlerite. I had thought I was going alone, but then a Corps agent named Sylas Hawkstone had been attached at the last minute, for reasons that weren't revealed to me.

The day of the Incident had begun uneventfully enough. Hawkstone and I arrived on the island early in the morning, disembarking from the steamship into the stifling humidity of Sahrnios, Jostla's main port city. We struggled through the teeming crowd that milled about the port area. The majority of the folks were Drevonians, mainly of the Von variety. Their bat-like wings and scaly bronze skin set them apart from their four-armed, green-scaled Slith cousins and the feather-headed Drewa.

What humans I saw were either travelers like Hawkstone and myself, or transport operators. As we reached the street, a stubble-faced man approached us and offered a ride in his pedicab. I desperately wanted to get to our hotel as quickly as possible, but Hawkstone brushed the driver aside. I started to protest, but Hawkstone cast me a withering look and said, "It's only a ten-minute walk from here. You have no objection to walking, do you?"

I understood what he meant, and fell in step behind him without complaint. Shortly after starting out on our journey to the island, I had hailed a taxi whose driver attempted to rob us. Hawkstone had disarmed the man with a quick shock of magic, and bloodied his face for good measure. Since then, we walked whenever possible.

By the time we arrived at the Hotel Ramuga, I was drenched with sweat. Hawkstone, in contrast, seemed unaffected by the heat. The desk clerk, a plump middle-aged woman, studied Hawkstone with a sly smile as he checked us in. I quietly scoffed; did she really find the man's beak of a nose and suspicious gaze attractive?

"There you are, Mr. Hawkstone," the desk clerk said, "room seven on the second floor. You and Mr. Slint have a good stay, yes?" She held out a key. Hawkstone accepted it and thanked her.

I followed him up to the room, which contained two narrow beds with thin, threadbare sheets. A

table and two chairs made up the rest of the furniture; the bathroom was barely large enough to hold one person at a time. Clearly, the traveling money from the Diplomatic Corps only covered the most basic of accommodations.

Hawkstone chose a bed without bothering to ask my preference. He dropped one of his bags onto the bed and stripped off his shirt. As he rummaged around in the bag, I couldn't help but glance at the three parallel scars on his back and wonder how he had acquired them.

After he had finished changing shirts, he pulled out a leather case, and from that he removed a needler pistol. I found this surprising, since needlers were generally known as an assassin's weapon. He checked the magazine, then tucked the weapon into the waistband of his pants, covering it with his shirt.

I wanted to inquire about the needler, but instead asked, "Are we going to see the ambassador now?"

He shook his head. "Later. There's some business I need to deal with, first."

I knew better than to ask *what business?* During the overland part of our trip from Selkwyth I had tried to make conversation, but his answers were usually short and vague, and he managed to find ways to avoid having to speak to me. He rarely explained anything beyond what was absolutely necessary, and I wondered if his official title--Special Consultant to the Foreign Secretary--was even genuine. I had heard talk that Hawkstone used to belong to some kind of secret military force that reported only to the Lord President. Others had whispered about his alleged involvement in operations against the Tannelni Imperium, and in border conflicts with various Drevonian factions. But whatever his true profession or identity, I was stuck with him for the duration of our assignment.

"Am I supposed to wait here until you return?" I asked.

Hawkstone shrugged. "Don't go too far from the hotel, and don't get into any trouble."

"Are you expecting any trouble, yourself?" I retorted, but he was already out the door and gone before I finished speaking.

I moved to the window and kept a watch on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. Hawkstone soon emerged and crossed the street, then turned left. I waited until he was out of sight, then went to the little bathroom and splashed some water on my face. Don't get into trouble, indeed!

I put on a fresh shirt, shoved my traveling bag under my bed, then picked up the room key from the table, where Hawkstone had left it. I exited the room and made sure the door was locked before heading downstairs. I had no real plan, I simply wanted to get outside for a while.

The desk clerk beckoned me over as soon as I reached the lobby.

"Whatcha up to, young man?" she asked with a grin. "You feel like company? I know some Drewa

girls who'd give you a bit of lick-and-giggle."

I politely declined. To change the subject, I asked about places to eat. She told me to try the local marketplace, located nearby.

I left the hotel, turning right down the street. A couple of minutes later I came upon the market; the aromas of spice, smoke and cooked food reached me well before I arrived. Vendors sold their goods from booths and tents, others piled their wares on large cloths spread out on the ground.

A wrinkled old Von female tried to sell me some kind of love totem, which appeared to be a desiccated dregazi bird wrapped with feathers and dried flowers. I shook my head and stepped around her; she flapped her leathery wings and hissed as I fled.

I retreated deeper into the marketplace, soon finding myself surrounded by racks of dried animal skins, insects preserved in jars, and bleached skulls of unknown origin. Feeling repulsed, I quickly sought to get away from the ghastly display.

In my haste, I lost my bearings and entered a dimly-lit area of wooden shop buildings. Through the doorway of one such shop, I observed a Slith female reclining on a couch, while four manicurists trimmed and painted the claws of her hands. I moved on with a slight shudder.

It's not that Drevonians frighten me; I've seen their kind many times back in Selkwyth. The difference, I suppose, is that the ones in the city are more or less assimilated. Here, in their native lands, they have an air about them that's more...primal.

I came to a brick wall and followed it, hoping it would lead me back to the central marketplace, or at least to a way out. Instead, I came out onto a blind alley. A shaft of sunlight came down through a hole in the roof of the alley and illuminated a patch of garbage at the far end. As I turned away, a sob erupted from somewhere. Then another. I turned back and looked closer, hearing a third sob. It seemed to be coming from the garbage. I cautiously moved over to it, and the garbage moved!

Taken aback for a moment, I saw that it was in fact a filth-encrusted blanket, with someone hidden beneath.

"Are you all right?" I asked. "Do you need help?"

A fold of the blanket slid aside, revealing the face of a Drewa girl. She moaned and pulled the blanket tighter around herself. "Please go," she whispered tearfully in perfect Imperial. "They'll find me."

"Who's after you?"

There was no response from the girl but quiet sobs and moans.

"My name is Slint," I said. "Jardeth Slint, actually. What's yours?"

"T-Taheerna," came the weepy reply.

"Do you need some help? I know someone who--"

Distantly, I heard a rough voice call out in the Von language. I spun around and spotted two Von males at the far end of the alley. Both wore armor harnesses. The larger of the pair had a tattered left wing, and carried a pole with a rope noose at one end. The other Von wielded a whip; a design painted on his left shoulder indicated that he was a soldier of the lowest rank. Both of them came down the alley to stand in front of me.

The soldier jabbed a finger in my face and said, in accented Imperial, "You leave. Say nothing."

I straightened up and tried to put on an officious demeanor. "I demand that you tell me what this is all about. What business do you have with the girl?"

The whip cracked into the wall beside me. Chips of masonry sprinkled my face and hair. I stood quite still.

The soldier bent down and ripped away the blanket, revealing the terrified Drewa girl. She was naked, save for a colorful waist wrap, and the feathers of her head-frill were streaked with dirt. Tatter-Wing looped the rope noose around her throat and pulled the loop tight. Taheerna got her hands in between the rope and her throat, preventing immediate suffocation. Tatter-Wing lifted the pole, forcing her to rise. The soldier yelled for her to hurry.

Once Taheerna was on her feet, the soldier lashed her between her wing-stubs. She gave a shriek of pain.

"Stop it!" I cried, but the soldier whipped her again. Taheerna whimpered, but did not cry out this time.

The two Von opened their mouths and made choppy hissing sounds, their equivalent of human laughter. Then Tatter-Wing shouldered the pole and began walking out of the alley, causing Taheerna to keep up with him or be strangled. The soldier stared at me and flicked out his tongue in a clearly threatening manner.

I stayed rooted where I was, until long after they had gone.

* * * * *

I hardly remember stumbling out of the marketplace and making it back to the hotel. The incident had left me shaken, not so much from fear as from shame. As I lay in my bed, I replayed the events over and over in my mind. Could I have done anything to save the Drewa girl? Should I have even tried? She was obviously an escaped slave, and the Von simply reclaimed her. Slavery was widely practiced in Drevonian lands, so I wouldn't have had any cause to involve the local authorities.

Now I thought of the girl herself. She was small of body, a little shorter than me, and had beautiful blue-scaled skin. The plumage of her head-frill was white, fading to down to blue near her face. And

like all Drewa slaves, her wings had been cut off.

Outrage grew within me as I recalled how cruelly the Von had treated her; it was like watching a flower being trampled and ground underfoot.

There came a knock at the door, then Hawkstone's voice announcing himself. I rose, unlocked the door and threw myself back down on the bed, not even bothering to acknowledge him. I heard him enter and shut the door, then there was the scrape of a chair on the floor.

"Have you eaten?" he asked at length.

"No," I murmured, my body turned away from him.

I felt something land on my bed at my back. I reached around behind me; my fingers detected an oblong shape. Turning over, I saw that it was a blue dhorix fruit. I looked up at Hawkstone, who was sitting at the table with a peeled fruit in his hand.

"You can't get them any fresher," he said, taking a bite.

A feeling of hunger overcame me. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast on the ship. I thanked Hawkstone and began peeling the fruit in earnest. He nodded, and I thought I saw a glimmer of a smile form on his lips.

* * * * *

We traveled to the Selkenian Embassy a short time later. Hawkstone didn't ask me what I had done in his absence, and I likewise failed to inquire about where he had gone. This was one time I was glad of his reluctance to make conversation.

The secretary showed us into the ambassador's office and said that the man would be along shortly. We took seats behind the ambassador's large desk. On the wall behind the desk was mounted the Selkenian Royal Crest. To the left of the crest there was a map of the island, while on the other side was a map of the continent of Mergidden. A little flag pin on the east coast indicated the location of Selkwyth, the capital of Selkenia; the sight of it brought on a pang of homesickness.

I glanced over at Hawkstone. He was tugging a cigarette case in and out of his vest pocket. When he noticed me watching him, he let the case fall back into the pocket and glared at me until I turned away.

The door opened and a short, barrel-shaped man trundled through. He smiled broadly at us, shook our hands, and introduced himself as Uriel Cabriest, the Selkenian ambassador to Jostla.

"So, gentlemen, welcome," Cabriest said as he hefted himself into the chair behind his desk. "How do you like the weather, eh? Feels just like back home."

I nodded politely. Although Selkwyth also had a tropical climate, it was nothing like the smothering heat of the island--which, according to the map, sat just below the equator.

Cabriest brushed crumbs out of his thick gray moustache and squinted at me. "Now, then, Mr. Jardeth Slint! You have something for me to see, yes?"

I handed over to him the sealed courier tube that I had carried in a concealed pocket of my traveling bag. The ambassador examined the tube for a few moments, then placed a thumb on the symbol of the Selkenian Diplomatic Corps that was engraved in the center. He murmured some arcane words; the tube glowed with a greenish light for a few seconds, and one end popped open.

Cabriest extracted a sheet of paper, on which was written the Selkenian government's bid for the kadlerite mining rights. He glanced over the paper, wrote something on it, then replaced it into the tube.

As the ambassador gave the tube back to me, I heard Hawkstone yawn.

"You have a more interesting activity you wish to attend to, Mr. Hawkstone?" Cabriest asked. "I haven't yet told you what time your appointment is." He consulted a book on his desk, then said that we were to be at the Governor's Palace at ten o'clock the following morning.

"Right, thanks," Hawkstone said, abruptly rising. I was about to stand as well, but a perverse desire to delay our departure seized me.

"Mr. Cabriest," I said, "something happened in the marketplace today."

As I related the events of my encounter with the Drewa girl and the Von, I saw Hawkstone slump back into his seat and put a hand over his face. When I finished, the ambassador nodded gravely.

"The best thing to do is not to interfere," he said. "You were fortunate that they chose to leave you alone."

"Can't anything be done, legally?" I asked. "Couldn't she apply for asylum, or something of that nature?"

Hawkstone snorted and shook his head. "You do know what the definition of a slave is, don't you?"

"He's right," Cabriest said. "They are considered property, nothing more. The Von often kill them on a whim, for the most trivial of reasons."

I found that to be horrible, and said as much.

"I'm afraid that's life among the Drevonians for you," Cabriest replied, shrugging. I was about to say something when the ambassador's eyebrows shot up.

"Oh! I nearly forgot!" He rummaged around in a drawer and lifted out a pair of small ceramic discs. He gave them to Hawkstone. "Your identification passes. Ah, and good luck to you, Mr. Slint!"

* * * * *

As Hawkstone and I descended the broad stone steps of the embassy building to the street, the

merciless heat of the day enfolded us. This time, Hawkstone didn't seem inclined to walk back to the hotel, and so we jumped aboard a public steambus that had slowed to drop off passengers. I claimed a pair of seats as he paid the attendant.

"Quite the adventure you had today," Hawkstone said, dropping down next to me. "Wonder why you didn't mention it?"

"You didn't tell me about your afternoon," I said, "so I suppose that makes us square."

"Look, Jardeth," he said, and this caught my attention; he usually addressed me by my last name. "I understand what you must have felt. I would have had the same reaction. But you're not here to do anything but what you've been assigned. Remember that."

I glanced across the aisle at the other passengers. They were all winged Drewa; their simple cloth wraps marked them as indentured workers of the lower class. While they would be considered impoverished by human standards, they were in a much better place than their enslaved fellows. Even so, any of them could one day wake up and find themselves in the clutches of unscrupulous Von slavers.

"Did you hear me?" Hawkstone asked, taking out his cigarette case. I made a sound of agreement. Privately, I wholeheartedly disagreed. He and the ambassador may be content to remain detached and uninvolved, but that was not in my nature. And yet, what could I do? The girl, as far as I knew, was back with her owner, and suffering for her attempt at freedom.

* * * * *

Hawkstone and I spent the rest of the day in either the hotel bar or the lobby, and shared an unappetizing meal in a drab little restaurant across the street. The following morning, I awoke to find a note on the table: Hawkstone had gone out again on his unspecified business, so I was to go on to the palace by myself. That was fine with me; the less I saw of him, the better.

I noticed, though, that there was only one identification disc on the table. Perhaps he meant to show up later? No matter, I thought. I resolved to complete my task and be back before Hawkstone had a chance to join me, if he was so inclined.

I traveled by pedicab, arriving thirty minutes early. I had, of course, seen pictures of the Jostlan Governor's Palace; it was the largest edifice in the city, gleaming with gold and white marble. I stood at the gates for a minute or so, admiring the building's multi-domed roof and intricately-detailed columns. A series of pools and small lagoons dotted the stone plaza that led up to the main entrance, which was flanked by a pair of huge statues in the shape of Von warriors.

I showed my identification disc to the guards and told them of my appointment. One of them vanished inside, returning a short time later with a brown-robed Von female. The medallion that hung

from her neck indicated that she was a minor secretary. She consulted a scroll and hissed something about my being too early. Nevertheless, she beckoned me to follow.

We entered the palace and crossed the entry hall, a large round room with doors and corridors set at regular intervals around the walls. The female escorted me to the large double doors at the opposite side of the hall, where she knocked and spoke to the guard who cracked open one of the doors. After a brief exchange in their language, the female departed without a word to me. The guard grunted and allowed me through.

I now found myself in the circular throne room of the palace. The air within the vast chamber was surprisingly cool. Pillars carved in the shape of serpents formed a colonnade around the room, while sinuous designs decorated the mosaic floor. Illumination came from sunlight shining down through a hole in the center of the domed ceiling, as well as through round windows high in the wall.

The guard directed me to a bench near the door, then resumed his post. I sat down, placing the courier tube on my lap. A trio of well-dressed humans on the next bench over glanced at me, then resumed their quiet conversation.

My gaze turned to the other occupants of the throne room. Von males dressed in simple robes lounged on cushions between the pillars, while Drewa slaves attended them. Some of the males were writing on parchment scrolls, others leafed through books, and a few chatted with each other in low voices. A handful of armed guards lazily strolled about, tongues flicking in boredom.

The governor's throne, which stood on a dais near the rear of the room, was empty. I queried one of the men on the other bench, and was informed that today's matters would be handled by the sub-governor, who would not be appearing until ten o'clock exactly.

I cursed inwardly; there was nothing to do but wait. I settled back, idly observing the courtiers. Nearby on my right, one particular male with a rounded belly was having a mid-morning meal. He was eating from a bowl held up by a young Drewa slave boy. I wasn't sure what was in the bowl, but when the male finished, he dismissed the boy with a flap of orange-stained fingers.

The slave boy disappeared through a shadowed doorway in the wall behind the fat courtier, who licked his fingers and wiped them on the front of his robe. Moments later, the slave boy emerged from the doorway, bearing a tray. It was only after he stepped into the light that I realized my error; it was not the boy, but Taheerna--the Drewa slave girl from the marketplace!

The tray she carried held a silver wine goblet. She walked toward the courtier with slumped shoulders, her eyes downcast. My pulse quickened as I remembered the other day in the alley, and I felt myself tense, like a coiled spring straining for release.

Taheerna stopped in front of the fat courtier and held out the tray. Her arms visibly trembled; the

tray tilted down, causing the goblet to slide and tip over. Wine splashed all over the Von male's face and chest.

In an instant he was up on his feet, hissing and cursing. His wings flapped violently as he slapped the tray out of Taheerna's hands. The girl cowered, reflexively throwing her arms up. The courtier struck her once, then reached down to his belt and pulled out a dagger.

It was at this point that my life turned aside from its ordinary course. Had I restrained myself, simply sat there and done nothing, I would likely have completed my assignment, returned home, and been given yet another mundane task from the Diplomatic Corps.

This is what happened instead: I leaped up, crossed to the courtier in two quick strides, and grabbed his wrist. I drove a knee into his gut; as he gasped in pain, I wrested the dagger from his slack fingers and thrust him away. He fell back over his cushion and toppled to the floor. I pulled Taheerna to me and got in front of her.

Only then did I stop and realize that all eyes in the throne room were upon me. The fat courtier wheezed and scabbled around on the floor, trying to reach his cushion. I held my breath, waiting for some explosive reaction from the others. To my surprise, the room erupted with the sound of Von laughter!

Some of the other courtiers pointed and shook their heads. Even the guards seemed amused. The humans, though, looked on with expressions of amazed consternation.

The fat courtier drew himself up and stabbed a chubby finger at me.

"Warriors! Kill this soft-thing immediately!" he screamed in Imperial.

A tall courtier in magenta robes said, "Gelkuan, you are but three steps away. Why not kill it yourself?"

Another male said, "It is a weak Von indeed that lets a soft-thing get the better of him."

Gelkuan's wings flapped together so hard that I felt a rush of air across my face. "Kill both of them! I demand it!" he yelled.

Behind me, Taheerna whimpered and pressed herself against my back. I held the dagger before me with both hands, closely watching the guards. They were creeping closer, hands on their weapons.

One of the humans, an olive-skinned Joppargan woman, said, "You must forgive this young man. He clearly acted out of concern for the girl, and meant no disrespect to the court. Isn't that correct?" She looked pointedly at me as she said this.

I should have agreed, dropped the dagger, and profusely apologized. But I shook my head and kept the dagger up. "No. We're both going to leave here. I don't want anyone to try to stop us." It was a poor bluff, but I had nothing else.

Two of the nearest guards now had blowguns in their hands and were loading them with darts. A chill raced through me; Von warriors were known for their skill and accuracy with such weapons, and certainly these guards would be no exception.

Gelkuan stamped his foot. "Death!" he shouted, saliva flicking from his tongue.

The guards raised the blowguns to their lips. Gelkuan saw this and moved away to afford them a clear field of fire. I knew the darts would be tipped with poison, and in seconds Taheerna and I would be dead.

My gaze fell on the courier tube, which had rolled away toward the center of the room. An idea immediately came to me.

"I wish to...to buy her!" I said.

Some of the courtiers laughed, but the tall one held up a hand to silence them. "What did you say?" he asked.

In a stronger voice, I repeated my offer to buy Taheerna. Gelkuan looked at the tall courtier with clear annoyance. "Khaavosk, he and the slave must die!"

"Your pride sometimes gets ahead of you," replied Khaavosk. He pointed to a slave near the entrance, spoke something in the Drewa language, then made a louder announcement to the whole room. The slave he had addressed immediately ran out, while the other slaves vanished through hidden doorways.

Gelkuan foamed with rage. "I will kill them myself, then!" He pawed at the guard nearest him, attempting to obtain the male's sword. The guard shoved him away and looked at Khaavosk.

"Do nothing until the sub-governor arrives," said Khaavosk. "We do not want to upset our brave human friend here." He favored me with a nod of his head as said that.

"You have no authority!" Gelkuan retorted. "By the Mother Above, I swear I will--"

"You will what?" came a voice from the entrance. I spared a quick glance in that direction and saw an elderly Von male come striding through. He wore maroon robes trimmed with gold, and clutched a long metal staff in one hand.

"Sub-governor Rhadagra!" cried Gelkuan. "I demand--"

"Quiet!" the sub-governor said. His gaze swept the room, briefly stopping on me and Taheerna. "What in the name of the Mother is happening here?"

Khaavosk glided over and spoke to Rhadagra in a low voice. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but soon they nodded to each other and straightened up.

Rhadagra thumped his staff on the floor three times. "Everyone out!" he commanded. "Now! I will handle this matter myself."

"My lord, please!" said Gelkuan. "This soft-thing has--"

"Guards," said the sub-governor, "please escort Minister Gelkuan to his quarters and see that he is not disturbed."

I began to relax a little as the warriors surrounded the sputtering Gelkuan and forced him to leave. Once the courtiers and humans had gone, Khaavosk closed the doors but remained inside the throne room.

"Now then," said Rhadagra as he turned to me, "perhaps you would like to put down your weapon and converse, yes?"

I stared at the metal staff in his hand. There was a small crystal embedded in the head of the staff, a focal point for whatever spells he knew. I took it as a good sign that he had not decided to use magic against me. Still, I kept the dagger at the ready.

Rhadagra seemed to sense my distrust. "Very well. We will just converse. May I know your name, at least?"

I told him. He nodded and gave a flutter of his wings. I was about to explain my assignment, but Khaavosk moved to the sub-governor's side and held out my courier tube. The tall courtier must have retrieved it while the room was clearing.

Rhadagra eyed the tube, then said to me, "You come from Selkenia, on a diplomatic matter, yes?"

I told him about the bid for the kadlerite mining rights. Rhadagra gestured to Khaavosk, who tucked the tube into a pocket of his robes. "We will consider that later. Your conduct here, however, is not appropriate."

"I apologize," I said, "but I couldn't let anything happen to this girl." I heard Taheerna sigh softly and felt her squeeze my shoulders.

"However," said Rhadagra, "we will also consider your offer to purchase her."

My eyebrows shot up, and I suppressed a bizarre desire to laugh. He was taking me seriously?

"Five hundred azuhuals, let us say?" the sub-governor continued. "That would be two thousand of your gold selkemars."

"Two thousand?" I echoed.

"You are accepting that price?" Rhadagra asked, a little too eagerly it seemed.

"No!" I exclaimed. "One thousand." It seemed reasonable to cut his offer in half, though I had no idea of what the going rate for a slave really was.

Rhadagra's wings quivered slightly. Khaavosk whispered something to him, whereupon Rhadagra said, "Well, she is a troublesome one. By the Mother Above, I should have had her slain for escaping. One thousand five hundred, and be grateful for my generosity."

"Agreed," I said quickly. I had no desire to haggle; I just wanted to escape with Taheerna.

"Good," said Rhadagra. "That price I find acceptable."

Khaavosk flicked his tongue in the Von manner of approval, then said, "Payable now, of course."

I gasped, feeling as though I had been struck in the gut. They wanted it now? Where and how could I get that kind of money? But I had little choice but to play along. "I need your written word first," I said. "Taheerna and I, we can go free and won't be harmed."

Rhadagra gave a flap of his wings. "The spoken word of the sub-governor of Jostla is not sufficient? You humans..."

Nevertheless, he instructed Khaavosk to write out a contract. When it was done, Rhadagra signed it. Khaavosk came near and held the paper up for me to read. I made sure that it guaranteed that Taheerna and I would be allowed to leave the palace alive.

"Satisfactory, human?" Rhadagra asked, with no small measure of contempt. I agreed, and slowly lowered my arms. Khaavosk handed the contract to me, and I let the dagger drop to the floor. I glanced back at Taheerna and flashed her a reassuring smile.

"Now, please, the payment," Khaavosk said.

I mumbled something about not having the entire amount with me, but that I had it back at my hotel. Rhadagra made a hiss of impatience.

"She stays here until you return," the sub-governor said. "You have one hour." He pointed to the throne room entrance. "Now, go!"

Khaavosk went ahead of me and opened the doors. I groaned inwardly; standing just outside, between a pair of guards, was Hawkstone!

Before he could speak, I took him out into entry hall and rapidly explained what had happened. His face turned a shade of red by the time I finished.

"Fool," he growled. He then turned to Khaavosk, who waited nearby. "What will happen if he doesn't pay?"

"He and the slave shall be executed, naturally," Khaavosk replied.

I cringed as Hawkstone's expression darkened. "I'll get the money," he said. "Have them ready to leave by the time I get back." With this, he spun around and briskly walked away.

In the throne room, I sat with Taheerna on Gelkuan's large cushion. She smiled shyly at me, but said nothing, occasionally glancing up at the two guards who stood next to us. I asked her if she needed to collect any personal belongings, but she simply shook her head. I read the contract several times before folding it up and tucking it into a pocket of my shirt.

Half an hour later, Hawkstone entered the throne room with Khaavosk and Rhadagra, who carried

a small box made of polished wood.

"Let's go," Hawkstone said to me with a curt jerk of his head. Rhadagra handed him the box and made a slight bow.

At Khaavosk's request, Hawkstone and I surrendered our identification discs. Then a group of warriors escorted Hawkstone, Taheerna and me out of the palace. We caught a three-man pedicab back to the hotel; Hawkstone was silent, but I could tell he was boiling on the inside. Taheerna, however, had a broad grin on her face, and constantly looked around as if seeing the world for the first time.

* * * * *

Soon we were back at the hotel and up in our room. Hawkstone firmly closed the door and locked it. He placed the wooden box on the table, then fixed me with a deadly stare. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, he turned to Taheerna and told her that she was free to use the bathroom to clean herself up. She looked at me for approval; I nodded.

"How much water may I use, *sajaiza*?" she asked, hands clasped in front of her.

"As much as you want," Hawkstone said impatiently.

Taheerna's eyes went wide. I nodded again; she bobbed her head, then retreated into the bathroom and shut the door.

Before I could even think of what to say, Hawkstone rushed over and grabbed the front of my shirt. He yanked me up to his face and said, "I had to use the Corps emergency fund. You had better convince me that it was necessary."

An unpleasant heat radiated from Hawkstone's hand, and I caught a whiff of smoke. He gave me a rough shake, then released me. I saw with dismay that the front of my shirt was scorched.

"He was going to kill her," I said, glancing at the bathroom door. "I couldn't let her be murdered, could I?"

"And how did you know that was going to happen?"

"It was obvious. He pulled the knife on her and--"

"You didn't know what he would have done. Maybe he was going to just cut her a little. Those Drewa, they heal incredibly fast."

"Yes, but...he was mad enough to kill. I wasn't going take that chance."

"And so the big hero saved the girl," Hawkstone said with a sneer. "Do you know what that cost me? My mission, that's what!"

"Your mission? You never told me what it was. I wasn't even sure you had one."

Hawkstone sighed heavily. "Let me tell you a little secret, Jardeth: you weren't necessary. See, I was already planning to come to the island, and could easily have delivered the bid to the palace

myself. But some brainless nib-scratcher in the Corps decided that you needed field experience, and made the crack-headed decision to combine our assignments."

He gestured to the bathroom. "And now we've got her to deal with."

"Leave Taheerna out of it. What's so important about your mission, anyway?"

Hawkstone clenched his fists. "It required a lot of money. What I brought with me wasn't enough, and I was planning on using the emergency fund to make up the difference. That plan's all scratched now, obviously.

"And the only reason I agreed to having you along, is that I thought I could keep you in line. Oh, I read your file, asked around about you. It all added up to someone that didn't want to be where he was, but had help getting there. Still, I figured you'd have enough basic discipline to follow orders." He shook his head. "Mistakes like that can cost a man his life."

"Are you suggesting that--" I broke off as the bathroom door opened. Taheerna stepped out, a towel draped around her shoulders. Her feathers were wet and water beads dotted the skin of her face and neck.

"I will clean the tub as soon as I am dry, *sajaiza*." Taheerna said. "Then I will assist you with your bath."

I felt a flush of embarrassment as I explained to her that I didn't want a bath, and that a chambermaid would be cleaning the room when we were gone.

"So what am I to do for you, *sajaiza*?" she asked.

As Hawkstone pulled his traveling bags out from beneath his bed, he said, "You can give him a lick-and-giggle, for all I care. I'm leaving."

That got to me. How dare he lay everything onto my shoulders!

"Mr. Hawkstone, maybe if you trusted me a little, or maybe if you didn't treat me like a nuisance, I would have had a better idea of what and what not to do. Did you ever think about that?"

Hawkstone slung a bag over his shoulder. "It's completely my fault. I should have fought it the moment I heard that you had to come with me. Yes, that one's my fault."

"So where are you going?"

"Home. There's no point in my staying any longer, thanks to you."

"But what about me--us?" I looked over at Taheerna, who wore a sadly confused expression.

"Your assignment's done, isn't it? As for her, that's your problem, not mine. You're on your own." He moved to the door.

"Mr. Hawkstone, wait!" I called. "You can't just--"

But he was already out of the room. The door slammed behind him.

My first thought was to go after him, but I discarded that notion. What would be the point? He clearly wasn't going to change his mind.

I sank down onto my bed and stared at the floor, mulling over my options. Had I followed Hawkstone home, I might yet have salvaged the situation. But then I felt her touch my knee; I raised my head and saw that she was kneeling in front of me.

"I have not properly thanked you, *sajaiza*," she said. "My life is yours. I now live to serve you."

"Please," I said, "just call me Jardeth."

"That would not be proper. You are my *sajaiza*." Her gaze flicked to the wooden box on the table.

Now I was curious as to what the box contained. I started to rise, but she stopped me. "I will fetch it for you, if you wish."

I agreed, and she brought the box to me. I opened it, and saw that it contained two things: a scroll, written in both Imperial and Von, that officially identified Taheerna as my property; and a ceramic disc inscribed with Von writing. I asked her about it, and in response she showed me the back of her neck, which had a tattoo with the same writing.

"It is my name, in the language of the masters," Taheerna said. "Whoever holds my disc, owns me."

I suddenly felt extremely uncomfortable. I had never approved of slavery, and now I found myself one of those very "masters" she spoke of.

"I'll give your disc to you," I said. "Then you can be free."

Taheerna stood and shrank back. "You...you would free me? Why?" Then in a softer voice she said, "Where would I go? What would I do?"

"You could go anywhere you wanted. Do you have any family, or friends you can stay with?"

She shook her head. "They are all slaves or servants."

Her sad expression made me regret my offer. Of course I couldn't free her while we were on the island; she would just end up back in the palace. So what to do?

I needed some time to think. The sight of the towel around her shoulders gave me an idea.

"You need some clothes," I said.

"Clothes?" she repeated. "I have no need--"

I rose from the bed and put the box back on the table. "Yes. If I have to take you home with me, we'll be traveling through places that are much colder than you're used to."

"Oh. You are too generous, *sajaiza*."

"I won't be long. Just stay in the room, and don't let anyone in but me. Or Mr. Hawkstone." I didn't really expect him to return, but there was always the possibility.

After leaving the room and locking it, I headed down to the bar. I was about to order a glass of the cheapest liquor, but changed my mind. I had to keep my thoughts clear.

I walked out the hotel entrance and stood on the sidewalk, feeling the hot sun begin to roast my skin. I took no notice of the people brushing past me, hoping that inspiration would strike. Nothing came to me, so I turned toward the marketplace. I figured I would at least get Taheerna the clothing I promised, in case I did end up having to take her with me.

I hadn't gone more than a few steps when three people stepped in front of me and blocked my way.

"Greetings, soft-thing!" hissed a voice. I tensed as I saw it was Gelkuan, flanked by the two Von that had captured Taheerna in the alley.

I tried to back away, but the tatter-winged Von moved behind me. His shorter soldier companion came up and grabbed my arm.

"What do you want?" I demanded of Gelkuan.

The Von courtier flicked his tongue from side to side. "Not so...courageous now, are you? How is your lovely slave?"

I tried to break away from the soldier, but his grip was too strong. Tatter-Wing thumped me on the back of my head.

"You leave her alone!" I shouted.

"Psah, soft-thing," Gelkuan said. "We not touch her...yet." He and the others laughed.

"Let me go!" I yelled, struggling to free myself from the soldier's grasp. I was about to punch him in the face when I felt a sharp sting on the back of my neck. I tried to look over my shoulder, but a great weakness came over me. Seconds later I went limp, and then everything went dark.

* * * * *

I awoke to find myself in a grassy field, which was littered with broken stone columns, large crumbling blocks, and other ruins. Trees surrounded us, some distance back from the center of the field. Wherever I was, it was definitely out of the city. My eyelids felt heavy, but I forced myself to keep them open.

Gelkuan squatted next to me. "Waking-time, soft-thing!"

"Where am I? What did you do to me?" I asked, pushing myself upright. A wave of weariness came over me, no doubt from whatever I had been drugged with.

"You still sleepy? Here, this will wake you." Gelkuan reached out and jabbed something into my neck. I flinched and cried out.

Gelkuan held up a long thorn that looked to be coated with a yellow substance. "Juice of the

levralic plant makes you sleep. Juice of the khatsalla wakens you, to hear my proposal." He tossed the thorn away over his shoulder.

I rubbed at the spot where he had jabbed me. "What proposal?"

"You wish to keep your lovely slave, I wish to see you dead for shaming me. So here is what we do: we duel."

I shook my head, trying to clear away the grogginess. "A duel?" I repeated. I now saw that Tatter-Wing and the soldier were joined by another Von, who wore robes of blue and purple. "Why not just kill me now?"

Gelkuan laughed. "It must be legal. If you win the duel, lovely slave is yours. If I win, she is mine."

"Duel to the death, you're saying?"

"Correct, soft-thing." Gelkuan rose to his feet.

I shakily stood up as well, and cursed myself for not thinking to bring a weapon. Of course, they would have taken such while I was unconscious. So the only thing I could possibly do was stall them long enough to think of a way to escape.

"Duelling is outlawed. Not legal," I said.

Gelkuan flapped his wings. "Maybe not in your lands, human. Here, it is legal."

"Look," I said, injecting anger into my voice. "you were going to murder Taheerna, and for what? Spilling wine on you?"

Gelkuan gave a hiss of annoyance. "Not kill her, you slosh-head! I would only scare the girl, teach her to be careful next time. She fears the blade, as all slaves should."

I felt deflated inside. Hawkstone had been right, after all, and I had interfered without knowing what I was getting in the way of.

"If you do not want to duel," continued Gelkuan, "another proposal is this: give me the slave. In return, you are allowed to live and go away." He flicked his tongue in what I thought was a self-satisfied manner.

In all truth, for a moment I was tempted to accept the offer. But I knew that if Taheerna went back to the palace, she would suffer even greater punishments, if not outright death, and I could not let that happen.

I refused the offer, whereupon Gelkuan's wings fluttered and he said, "Then you agree to duel?"

Reluctantly, I nodded. "Yes, I agree." I was starting to feel more alert, thankfully; the khatsalla juice was taking effect.

"Come," Gelkuan said to the Von in the blue and purple robes. "You heard?"

"Wait, who is he?" I asked.

"Zhumikhal, sub-archimandrax of the governor's court," answered Gelkuan. "Impartial witness." I didn't believe that for a second, but saw no point in protesting the point.

The sub-archimandrax came forward and bowed. "Challenge issued by Minister Gelkuan of the Court of Jostla. Challenge accepted by..."

I supplied my name to him. He continued, "...accepted by Jardeth Slint, of the Diplomatic Corps of Selkenia."

"Hold on," I said. "What kind of weapons will we be using? Guns?"

Gelkuan waved dismissively. "Nothing so crude! We use blades."

Zhumikhal said, "I have witnessed the challenge and acceptance of the terms." From beneath his robes he produced a short sword and handed it to me. It was, by the look of it, a standard combat sword used by the Von infantry.

Next, Zhumikhal went over to Tatter-Wing and his soldier friend, and also handed out swords to them.

"Just a moment!" I cried. "I thought I was going to duel him!" I pointed the sword at Gelkuan.

"You misunderstand, soft-thing," the fat courtier said. "They fight in my place. You had the same right to find others to battle for you."

"But I didn't...how I was I to..." As I stammered my indignation, the sub-archimandrax withdrew well back from us. It was clear that his impartiality only extended to those who could pay him.

Gelkuan moved away as the two Von warriors came forward. For a fleeting moment I thought about throwing down my weapon and fleeing, but such would be a cowardly act. I had, of course, gone through the basic military service required of all Selkenian citizens, but sword combat was not an area that I excelled in.

The Von soldier faced me, raised his sword and said, "I, Balovosh, duel for Gelkuan."

Tatter-Wing did the same thing, identifying himself as Lurvargo.

I wasn't sure if I was expected to make a similar declaration, but they both made no other moves. So I raised my sword and began to speak. That's when they charged at me!

I parried the blow from the soldier Balovosh and immediately deflected Lurvargo's attack. The power behind their strikes was frightening; I knew I wouldn't last against their combined assault. So I whirled and ran.

Gelkuan's choppy laughter followed me as I leaped over a toppled column and made for a high stone block. I had no plan or strategy, other than to somehow survive from one moment to the next.

I launched myself up onto the top of the block and spun around. As Balovosh began to climb after

me, I slashed my sword at his head. He hissed and threw himself back. I kicked out at Lurvargo's face, but he ducked.

"Very amusing, soft-thing!" Gelkuan called.

I ignored his gibe as I jumped off the other end of the block. I sprinted away the instant I hit the ground. Risking a glance over my shoulder, I saw that the two Von warriors had separated and were coming at me from different directions.

As I ran, I became aware that I wasn't feeling any tiredness. Quite the opposite, in fact; I was feeling strangely energized. Perhaps the khatsalla juice had more of a stimulant effect on humans than it did on Von.

I passed under an archway that led into a rectangular ruined building. The roof was gone, but the walls were mostly intact. I snatched up a chunk of stone and paused in the center of the building. Seconds later, Balovosh rushed in through the archway. I hurled the stone, which struck him square in the face. His head snapped back and he toppled to the ground.

I heard a hissing up and to my left. Lurvargo had scaled the wall and was preparing to jump down into the building. I dashed past Balovosh and out the archway just as Lurvargo came down.

Gelkuan made an angry hiss as I emerged from the building; I suppose he hadn't been expecting me to come out alive. I was very glad to disappoint him.

Balovosh came roaring out after me, blood streaming down his face. "Stop and fight us, human!" he bellowed.

I had no intention of doing so. The two warriors chased me around cracked pillars, over piles of rubble, and past headless statues. Even though I still didn't feel tired, I knew they would eventually catch me.

That moment came when I vaulted over a low wall and plummeted into a weed-choked pit, at least ten feet deep. As I hit the ground and rolled, I realized that it wasn't a pit but rather the basement of a building.

I didn't break my ankles or significantly hurt myself, so I thrashed around in the tall weeds, looking for a way out. I only succeeded in rousting a long brown snake, which hissed menacingly. With a quick stroke of my sword, I chopped the snake in half before it could strike. A dread came over me, for the creature's markings identified it as a jedyova, a common venomous snake.

Balovosh and Lurvargo arrived at the edge of the building foundation and spotted me. Lurvargo was about to jump in, but Balovosh held him back, instructing him to wait. Evidently I had hurt the soldier's pride, and now he wanted revenge.

I hurriedly backed away as Balovosh came crashing down. He slashed at the weeds, cutting a path

toward me. There were no stairs that I could see, so I just kept backing up as Balovosh approached. Blood oozed from a gash on his forehead, but he didn't seem to feel the wound. Mutters and hisses spewed from his mouth.

"Stand still, human!" he spat, punctuating each word with a slash of his sword.

I didn't answer, for I perceived that not all of the hissing I heard was coming from Balovosh. I stopped and turned, my blood turning to ice at what I glimpsed through the weeds: dozens of large brown jedyova snakes, slithering around behind me. I remained absolutely motionless.

Balovosh reached me and halted a few paces away, his wings quivering. He leveled his sword at my chest and said, "We may still duel, and you can die with a little honor."

I threw my sword aside and said nothing, keeping my focus on his sword arm. I had one desperate idea that required precise timing to work.

"No duel? Then just die!" Balovosh drew his sword arm back, then lunged forward, thrusting the blade.

I dropped into a crouch, kicked out and made contact with his leg. Balovosh stumbled over me and landed face-first in the nest of snakes.

I scuttled away on all fours. The Von soldier screamed. He rose up from the weeds, with snakes clamped onto his arms and neck, then fell back.

"Vargo!" he shouted. "Finish the human!"

I hastened to stand. My sword was nowhere to be seen. Now what was I going to do?

I pushed through the weeds, making for the nearest wall. Behind me, Balovosh's screams grew fainter, then ceased. I tried not to think about it.

A shadow fell over me. Looking up, I saw Lurvargo staring down from the top of the wall. As I turned to run, he jumped and thudded into the ground. After a few paces I glanced back, stopping when I saw that he wasn't pursuing me. He lay on his stomach, a bloody wound in his back.

I looked around, confused. Then I heard someone calling my name. It was Taheerna!

I shouted back. She appeared at the top of the wall, an expression of relief on her face. Two figures came up beside her, a pair of winged male Drewa that I didn't recognize. One of them tossed down a rope.

As soon as I was up on the surface, Taheerna wrapped her arms around me. "I thought you were dead, *sajaiza!*" she cried.

"So did I," I said.

Taheerna introduced the two Drewa as Vathreen and Pyalthor. Vathreen, who had greenish skin, held a blood-stained sword. He gestured for us to depart. I started to ask questions, but he waved for

me to be silent. The four of us dashed across the field and into the woods, stopping when we encountered two more male Drewa, who stood watchfully at the base of a tree. At their feet was a pile of huge fern leaves.

Taheerna said something to them in the Drewa language. They stepped aside. She then strode up to the fern pile and pulled one of the leaves off, uncovering the lifeless faces of Gelkuan and Zhumikal, the sub-archimandrax. Their throats had been slashed. Taheerna covered them back up.

The four of us continued on until we came to a dirt road that ran through the woods. Parked on the side of the road was an enclosed stridge-drawn carriage. The stridge's birdlike head swiveled toward us at our approach, and it emitted a cawing sound.

Pyalthor climbed up onto the driver's bench. Vathreen told Taheerna and me to get into the carriage, then sprang up to sit next to Pyalthor.

I opened the carriage door, helped Taheerna inside, then followed her. As soon as I closed the door, the carriage lurched into motion. I slid into the seat next to Taheerna, and let out a little gasp when I saw who was sitting across from us. It was Hawkstone!

"Glad you could join us, Mr. Slint," he said with a grin.

* * * * *

They took turns relating what had happened after I left the hotel. Taheerna, watching from the window, had witnessed my encounter with Gelkuan and the two Von warriors. After they had drugged me, they loaded me into a waiting taxicab and drove away. Even though Taheerna had wanted to do something to help, she remained in the room as I instructed.

A little later, Hawkstone returned, supposedly to make sure that I had enough money to complete my journey home. When Taheerna informed him of my kidnapping, Hawkstone contacted a Drewa man named Quopalgo, who worked at a local Drewa temple.

As it turned out, the man was a member of the Jostlan anti-slavery movement, something I had no idea existed. Hawkstone had once saved Quopalgo from being beaten by the Jostlan military, and so the man was glad to help.

Quopalgo's network of contacts soon provided them with the information that Gelkuan and the warriors had taken me to the field of ruins. Hawkstone and Taheerna then set out to rescue me, accompanied by the four Drewa warriors provided by Quopalgo. They caught Gelkuan and Zhumikal by surprise, quickly dispatching them. In Lurvargo's case, the Von warrior had been too preoccupied with watching Balovosh stalk me to notice Vathreen creeping up on him.

I thanked Hawkstone and Taheerna for coming to save me.

"It was only right that we do so, *sajaiza*," said Taheerna.

"Yes, it was," said Hawkstone. "After all, if you had died, it would have reflected very badly upon me."

"So what do we do now? I asked.

"We go straight home," Hawkstone replied. "Quopalgo's people will deal with Gelkuan and his friends." He leaned closer to me. "Of course, this means that you and I can never return to the island."

I looked over at Taheerna. "But what about her?"

"She'll have to come with us. There's no way she can stay, given the trouble you've caused."

Hawkstone pulled something out of his shirt pocket and flipped it at me.

I caught the object. It was Taheerna's ownership disc.

"Better take care of that," Hawkstone said. "Looks like she's all yours."

Taheerna smiled at me. I looked at the disc, then back up at her. How in the world was I going to explain this to my mother?

The End

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